

Original Paper

## Cooper's Ideal in the New World: Conflict between Wilderness and Civilization

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### Abstract

James Fenimore Cooper is the first writer who grappled squarely with the problems which prevailed in American society at that time, in the novels of *The Leather Stocking Tales*. In these novels he dealt with the conflict between civilization and wilderness on matters of morality, law, and race which would turn out to have been the main social problems in the New World in those days. The characters in the novels probably reflect Cooper's ideas about those matters. Therefore, in this paper, I explore how Cooper creates and expresses the characters in the novels to indicate his idea of the problems of the New World and what conclusions he reached on the conflict or dilemma between civilization and wilderness to seek his ideal in the New World through *The Pioneers*, *The Last of Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer* in *The Leather Stocking Tales*.

### Introduction

In the history of American literature, it can be said that James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) is the first American novelist to write about American life as it actually was at that time. Most American writers in those days, such as Washington Irving and Charles Brockden Brown, imitated European literature, especially that of England. At the start, Cooper also imitated European literature and published *Precaution* (1820) which is a romance in imitation of the popular books of Jane Austen. But the American people demanded novels which were independent of Europe in culture as well as in politics and economy. In reply to that demand Cooper wrote *The Spy* (1821) which is the first American historical novel with a setting in America and his novel was well received. Then he published *The Pioneers* (1823) for the purpose of earning his livelihood following *The Spy*. That was the start of his writing the *Leather Stocking Tales*, the books that made Cooper rise to fame.

The *Leather Stocking Tales* consist of five long stories in serial: *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841). The central figure is Natty Bumppo who is a pioneer and a hunter with leather stockings on the frontier or in the woodland. That is why these novels are called *The Leather Stocking Tales*. Cooper is the first writer to grapple squarely in his novels with the problems which prevailed in American society. This is one of the reasons *The Leather Stocking Tales* are a very precious part of American literature. For example, in *The Pioneers* Cooper took up the conflict that arose on the frontiers of civilization between the civil law, that is the man-made laws of civilization, and the natural law in the forest and wilderness, describing the

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suffering from a conflict over a fear of miscegenation and a lack of respect for every race.

Cooper was born as the son of a wealthy landowner in New York State which was still on the frontier in those days. So he could understand the position of conservatives who wanted to keep the laws of civilization even on the frontier; but he also had a patrician love of natural beauty and the primitive forest where those laws did not extend. Cooper's mind seemed to swing like a pendulum between his respect for civilization and the wilderness. This dilemma of Cooper's may have created the character Natty Bumppo, who lives in the woodland with a "good" Indian Chingachgook, as a symbol of Cooper's ideal, despite Natty's being a white man and a pioneer. Thus, the characters in the novels reflect Cooper's ideas about morality, civil law and race which were leading problems in the New World in those days. In this paper, I explore how Cooper creates and expresses the characters in his novels to indicate his ideas about the problems of the New World and what conclusions he came to as to the conflict or dilemma between civilization and the wilderness to seek the ideal in the New World through *The Pioneers*, *The Last of Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer* among the Leather Stocking Tales.

### Morality

Cooper first sees the conflict between civilization and wilderness in terms of morality. In civilization, Cooper presents Christianity as an ideal moral system in the white world which should not allow killing people under any circumstances. Cooper illustrates his moral, religious, and philosophical ideas very clearly in the picture he draws of Hetty. Hetty in *The Deerslayer*, the younger daughter of Tom Hutter, is depicted as the ideal of a white civilized Christian. She is innocent, pure and literally believes in and accepts the Bible. She relies completely on the Bible for her conduct and ideas. Hetty's inability to engage in any complex discussion shows her to be a very literal believer in Biblical teachings. Hetty, representing simplicity, honesty, and innocence, is always the voice of morality who speaks out against violence and bloodshed. However, her father, Tom Hutter, takes the view that Hetty's Christianity is more appropriate in the wilderness where one does not necessarily need reason to believe in God than in the civilized world where there is more complexity. He says to Hetty, "Your heart is good, child, and fitter for the settlements than for the woods; while your reason is fitter for the woods than for the settlements" (73). Hetty's Christianity is too simple to fit in the civilized world. Hetty's accidental death shows that her innocence and credulity fail in a world devoted to action and violent confrontations, although she stands out as a symbol of goodness and exemplary conduct for all who have known her. Not all white people are like Hetty, who is pure and unmaterialist. Natty criticizes the two white men, Tom Hutter and Hurry Harry, who want to get scalps for bounties and satiate their greed and aggression. Some frontiersmen are greedy for material gain and money, and they expand their land by waging war against the Indians and nature. Cooper, for the sake of emphasizing the contrast between Hetty and the two greedy white men, Tom Hunter and Hurry Harry, thus characterizes and symbolizes the best and worst aspects of the white men's contribution to the New World.

On the other hand, morality in the wilderness among the Indians is represented by the notion of "Indian's gifts." This allows killing people and scalping with honor. Natty accepts their horrible practices as a person living in the wilderness. He knows the Indians have more regard for their natural surroundings and kill people for their honor in protecting their territories. The Indians do not kill people for money but for honor. Cooper describes the Indians' morality as simple and somewhat merciful. For example, in *The Deerslayer*, Hetty, who is feeble-minded and is treated unkindly in the civilized world, is treated respectfully or mercifully in the Indians' world. "In many tribes the mentally imbecile and the mad were held in a species of religious reverence, receiving from the untutored inhabitants of the forest respect and honors,

instead of the contumely and neglect that it is their fortune to meet with among the more pretending and sophisticated" (156). Cooper, however, describes most of the inhabitants of the forests as "bad" Indians, represented by the Mingos. These enemies of Natty provide the literary representation of the forces of evil and terror. At times, these savages are like denizens of a realm beyond human consciousness, and they are frequently described as devilish and diabolical in their appearance and action. They are cruel, blood-thirsty warriors who serve to foment thrilling, exciting, and dangerous adventures. Clearly these reprehensible beings, motivated by savagery, show us the extreme of Cooper's view of the wilderness. Cooper's inclusion of the "good" Indian, Chingachgook, in his novels and his remarks on the respect for morality in the wilderness may be a manifestation of Cooper's guilty conscience over the white men's pillage of Indians' land.

Natty's morality is different both from the usual white Christianity and from the Indians' code. We can see that Natty's Christian ethic in *The Deerslayer* is quite critical of the organized church or the institution of Christianity. For example, in the same novel, Natty says to Judith:

Neither forts nor churches make people happier of themselves. Moreover, all is contradiction in the settlements, while all is concord in the woods. Forts and churches almost always go together, and yet they're downright contradictions; churches being for peace, and forts for war. (238)

Natty's white Christianity is rooted not only in civilization but also in the wilderness. Natty's forest morality is different from the Indians' code as well. Natty says to Chingachgook in *The Deerslayer* that "he [a Mingo] fou't like a man of red gifts, and I fou't like a man with my own color. God gave me the victory; I couldn't fly in the face of his providence by forgetting my birth and natur'. White he made me, and white I shall live and die" (136). We could see that Cooper would devote much care to his depiction of the "first warpath" of the young Natty. He makes the young warrior face the necessity of resorting to violence, rather than be killed in combat. According to William P. Kelly, "Natty's synthesis of a Christian and a savage perspective in particular, defines an intermediate state of cultural development which has its roots in European exploration and settlement" (49). Natty's Christian ideals must be put to a trial in which both the white and the red "gifts" of men combine.

## Law

Cooper also deals with the issue of law and order governing his world. He must come to terms with European civilized law versus the natural law found in the wilderness. Cooper depicts this natural law through many splendid scenes of nature in the Leatherstocking novels, especially in *The Pioneers*. These ebullient descriptions of the American landscape allow us to feel the ideal life of the virgin wilderness. Cooper specifically states his desire to protest and defend the ways of nature when he puts these words of condemnation in Natty's mouth:

I eat of no man's waste ways. I strike my spear into the eels, or the trout, when I crave the creators, but I wouldn't be helping to such a sinful kind of fishing, for the best rifle that was ever brought out from the old countries. ... something might be said in favour of taking them by the thousands with your nets; but as God made them for man's food, and for no other disarnable reason, I call it sinful and wastey to catch more than can be eat. (*The Pioneers* 266)

The aged Natty in *The Pioneers* says to Judge Temple: "You may make your laws, but who will you

find to watch the mountains through the long summer days, or the lakes at night? Game is game, and he who finds may kill; that has been the law in these mountains for forty years, to my sartain knowledge” (160). This is Natty’s natural law. However, Cooper describes conditions in the wilderness like this: “some millions of pigeons were supposed to have already passed, that morning, over the valley of Templeton; but nothing like the flock that was now approaching had been seen before” (249). Cooper shows us how natural law is helpless to protect nature and to keep order in the wilderness, once it has been touched by civilization. Natural law can be applied only to untamed land in the wilderness. Natural law is based on individualism. Once individualism comes to an end by the encroachment of civilization, natural law becomes sinful in the wilderness.

On the other hand, man-made law in civilization can protect nature, although the necessity of the man-made law ironically comes along with civilization. Man-made law contributes not only to the protection of nature in the civilization, but also to the protection of white men’s lives from the Indians and to keep order in the white society. The Judge, who is the epitome of civilization, answers his daughter, Elizabeth: “Society cannot exist without wholesome restraints. Those restraints cannot be inflicted, without security and respect to the persons of those who administer them” (382). Owing to man-made law, “the expedients of the pioneers who first broke ground in the settlement of this country, are succeeded by the permanent improvements of the yeoman” (16).

However, this man-made law in civilization torments Natty, who lives with the natural law in the wilderness. Natty says to himself:

What would ye have with an old and helpless man? You’ve driven God’s creators from the wilderness, where his providence had put them for his own pleasure, and you’ve brought in the troubles and divilties of the law, where no man was ever known to disturb another. (356)

He regrets his fate under the conditions of man-made law. Natty has lived so long under the laws of nature that he is not only uncomfortable in the town of Templeton, where duty holds him temporarily, but he is completely bewildered by the man-made laws encountered there. Natty is portrayed as a moral being, whose value is determined by the natural law of the forest and not by the historically bound codes of either Europeans or the Indians (Kelly 55).

*The Pioneers* is an object lesson in the painful progress from noble savagery to stable civilization, a cultural journey which Natty is neither willing nor able to complete. Natty could have been Cooper’s ideal compromise, but the independence of the character will not allow it. Natty is the flesh-and-blood incarnation of the natural moral law. That is he stands above both savagery and civilization. He contains within himself the best of both. He can, for instance, see that justice is a constant and bigger principle than any man-made law, whatever good or bad society laws may spring from. Cooper always put Natty at the border of the frontier at the last stage of each novel to seek the free life without man-made law. That might be why Cooper still sought the ideal law in the unknown areas of the New World.

We might say that Cooper’s ideal life is in “a new world” comprising both wilderness and civilization, a world that does not belong either to Europe or to the Indians. In the last scene in *The Pioneers*, Natty flees to the west, indicating to us that Cooper hopes the world there will be something new and independent, with law which is advantageous to both the white men and the Indians. Natty’s law, supported by the love and joy of nature in harmony with God, is challenged by mankind. Men can either live harmoniously and appreciatively with nature, in Natty’s way, or they can exploit and ravage the landscape.

## Race

Cooper describes Chingachgook as a symbol of the highest qualities of the Indian race in the wilderness, proving thereby the innate worth of the natives of the North American continent. Chingachgook accepts friendship with the white men and attempts to live in peace with them. He often disagrees, though, with the beliefs of his white allies. He is not a subservient ally of the new masters and exploiters of the lands his people have ruled for centuries. He has his own "gifts", and he lives according to the characteristics of this code. Natty respects the Indians' "gifts" in which honor and loyalty are respected by both men, Natty and Chingachgook. Chingachgook is a "noble savage" in the wilderness. Both Chingachgook and Natty are points of contact between civilization and the wilderness.

The relationship between Natty and Chingachgook allows them to adhere to the same code and interpret events according to the respective "gifts" of the white and the Indian races. Despite the fact that Natty keeps speaking of the differences between the races in his code, there is nothing racist in his approach. He believes that white men and Indians can live closely in peace with each other and with nature if they only recognize and accept the differences in their respective races. Natty in *The Deerslayer* also expresses his idea about race: "neither redskin nor paleface, on the whole, calculates much on sleepin' forever; but both expect to live in another world. Each has his gifts, and will be judged by 'em" (101).

On the other hand, Cooper uses Magua in *The Last of the Mohicans* to illustrate the evil side of savagery in the wilderness. Each Mingo is an individual in his own right, pursuing his personal cruelty and desires. Cooper includes only a few good Indians in his works. Most Indians in the wilderness are described as "bad" Indians, who are savage, cruel, and love blood. Moreover, each Mingo is not merely an evil individual; he embodies the salient attributes of the savage. From the viewpoint of civilization, they are evil and terrible in their killing of people whatever reasons they may have. Cooper might be representing the terror of the unknown world, the wilderness, in the Mingo.

In Natty's civilized and natural Christianity, all humans are equal. Cooper writes, in *The Last of the Mohicans*, that there may be one Lord of all, and in the mind of God all men may be the same. When Hurry Harry in *The Deerslayer* proclaims the superiority of the white race over the black and red race, Natty replies simply that: "God made all three alike" (32). However, Cooper himself is not really in favor of mixed blood or miscegenation. Therefore, Uncas and Cora in *The Last of the Mohicans* cannot be united in this world. The result of a taint of mixed blood for Cora who is not pure white is her death. The further deaths of Magua and Uncas end the possibility of intermarriage between the novel's racial groups. Miscegenation to Cooper would be a physical manifestation of mixing wilderness with civilization.

Cooper's ideal in racial matters is seen in the relationship between Natty and Chingachgook. In spite of Natty's ideas about different "gifts" and against miscegenation, he reveres the concept of brotherhood. He believes in the differences between the races with respect to each other's different gifts. Especially in his symbolic grasping of hands with Chingachgook at the end of *The Last of the Mohicans*, Natty is described as a stalwart man, in whom the two convictions - difference and brotherhood - can survive side by side. We can see Cooper's ideal of race blended smoothly in Natty's character.

## Conclusion

When we think of the United States, we can not ignore the nature of the American Continent which is rich, powerful and beautiful. The great natural beauty of America must have given power to the people in America, who were seeking freedom and democracy, and may be the base of their philosophical ideas which were different from those in Europe. Cooper was not the only person in the New World to feel a

conflict between nature and civilization. But Cooper clarified the problems and gave others in the New World a hint as to an ideal for this new world. On many important issues including morality, law and race that were faced by the people of about 150 years ago, as well as by us today, Cooper nearly always posits the extremes. Only after dwelling at length on the radical portions of a notion could he synthesize the components and reach an acceptable compromise.

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