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# James Fenimore Cooper

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James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) published his first novel in 1820, and his last, thirty-second novel in 1850. During most of his three-decade career he was among the world's most famous and, particularly in the 1820s, widely read writers. By the twentieth century he was best known as the author of The Leather-Stocking Tales, five novels about Natty Bumppo, a hunter, woodsman, and frontier warrior whose closest friendship is with Chingachgook, a chief of the dispossessed Delaware tribe. Variously called Leather-stocking, Hawkeye, Pathfinder, and Deerslayer, Natty has often been cited as the first quintessentially American literary hero, and the Tales, set against historical contexts that range from the pre-Revolutionary fighting between England and France to the Lewis and Clark Expedition, have struck many as a kind of prose epic of early American life. Natty's adventures in the woods are often drenched in violence and suspense. Cooper's own heroism is harder to see, especially so long after the fact. We are used to thinking of the United States as the world's great superpower, but when Cooper began writing the nation was still struggling with its status as a former colony of Great Britain, the superpower of that era. Cooper was the first American author to earn a living writing fiction, yet his work also reveals how much a postcolonial culture has to contend with in its quest for nationality.

Cooper's first Leather-Stocking Tale was his third novel, *The Pioneers*, published in 1823. The story it tells begins on Christmas Eve, that moment on which for Christians human history pivots from the old world defined by Adam's fall and Mosaic law to the new one brought forth by the birth of a savior who opens up the possibility of redemption. The setting is an upstate New York village called Templeton, which is based very closely on Cooperstown, the settlement founded by the novelist's father in the 1780s and the scene of his own childhood. Natty appears in the book's first chapter. This initial appearance gives little hint of the role he ended up playing in either Cooper's career or American literature: he is an old man who soon disappears into the woods, while the narrative moves forward into

the town where "the pioneers" are busy civilizing the wilderness. The story of that process is the one Cooper initially tells, as readers are taken past the stumps of the trees that have recently been cut down to make room for fields, buildings, and roads and introduced to the various characters who inhabit a new settlement, from the landlord in his "Mansion House" to the shiftless Yankee emigrant to the Episcopalian minister who preaches a Christmas Eve sermon in the village's one-room schoolhouse to Baptists and Presbyterians and Chingachgook, here the aged remnant of a vanished tribe whom the settlers call Indian John. The town already has two taverns, but the pioneers are still building a church, and its unfinished state is a reminder that in this new world "civilization" is very much a work in progress.

Cooper describes Templeton in elaborate detail, but his tone is more satiric than nostalgic. Take his account of Judge Temple's mansion, the town's most imposing building. Designed from models found in books of European architecture, it has a "portico" complete with columns, but the frosts of a frontier winter have shifted the base so that the columns are now being held up by the roof they are supposed to support. This pattern of incongruities is repeated, both symbolically and literally, inside the house, where the decor in the main hall includes imported wallpaper "that represented Britannia weeping over the tomb of Wolfe."[1] General Wolfe, of course, was the hero of the 1759 British victory over the French at Quebec, but so ineptly have the rolls of wallpaper been installed that over and over again around the room his arm is cut off from the rest of his body. What we see in both examples is how slavishly and badly the pioneers are trying to construct a new world civilization out of the misaligned pieces of old world culture. Even as the settlers clear-cut the woods, Temple ornaments his grounds with "poplars brought from Europe" (45) – trees are carried across an ocean and into the American forest because, according to old world standards, manor houses must be equipped with Lombardy poplars as well as columns.

Cooper's narrative also reckons the moral implications of the way "civilization" is being imposed on the American environment. Here the most powerful instance is the extermination of the Indians, who the narrator reminds us were "the original owners of the soil" (83). Except for Chingachgook, the Indians are already gone by the time Cooper's story begins, but when in a later chapter he describes the settlers waging war, with rifles and even a cannon, on a "feathered tribe" of pigeons they are determined to drive away from their cultivated fields (246), readers get a glimpse of the violence that underlies the march of progress across the continent. These birds are in fact passenger pigeons, the first native species that was made extinct by overhunting. Unlike Henry Thoreau, Cooper is not often associated with environmentalism, but *The Pioneers* speaks directly to the concerns of modern

ecocritics. Another scene in the novel describes the settlers overfishing the lake. The forest fire that almost claims the novel's heroine's life at the book's climax was started by the same settlers' carelessness and exacerbated by the wasteful way they harvest fuel from the woods. Late in the novel the sheriff of Templeton arrests a "gang of counterfeiters that had … buried themselves in the woods, to manufacture their base coin" (347). By that point the ironies have piled up sufficiently to suggest that "American civilization" itself is a kind of counterfeit, a base imitation of a European original that, like the real counterfeiters' fake money, "circulated from one end of the Union to the other."

*The Pioneers* brilliantly dramatizes the cultural inferiority complex that, far more than local circumstances or the possibilities of a new world, provides the blueprint for the society the pioneers are building in the woods. At the same time, as a novel it displays advanced symptoms of the same postcolonial malaise. While the setting and subject are American, most of the novel's formal properties derive from the same place Temple got the plans for his house: English books. Cooper knew that American readers, who had as yet had few chances to read American novels, were conditioned to defer to the authority of British literature. His first novel, *Precaution* (1820), was set in England, depicted exclusively English characters, and was reviewed as the work of an English author. To determine that book's length, Cooper computed the number of words in one of Sir Walter Scott's books and wrote to that limit. By setting his second novel, *The Spy* (1821), in the midst of the American Revolution, even including George Washington as a character, Cooper sought to reclaim his American identity, but as a historical romance *The Spy* is heavily indebted to the conventions of Scott's Waverley novels, the best-selling fictions of that time in the United States as well as in England. Throughout his career Cooper was frequently referred to as "the American Scott." One reason for his success with the American reading public was his ability to combine the "novel" with the familiar, to develop stories about American settings and subjects using the kinds of character and narrative archetypes his audience had learned to expect from reading imported books. In *The Pioneers*, for example, Oliver is very much one of Scott's "wavering" heroes, just as Ben Pump, a member of Temple's household staff, is one of Scott's "bores." As the hero, Oliver is matched by Elizabeth Temple as the heroine, and contemporary readers would have been extremely surprised, and displeased, if these two characters did not marry in the book's last chapter. As in Scott, each of Cooper's novel's forty-one chapters begins with an epigraph from a work of poetry, and nearly all of the quoted authors are British – Shakespeare, Goldsmith, Scott himself, and so on. While various characters speak colloquially, the narrator's own voice is similarly derived

from foreign models; it is formal and literary and often deploys words like "swain" or "wight," words, that is, that one would never hear in American speech but could only find in British books.

The two other most acclaimed pioneers of American literature in the 1820s – Washington Irving in prose and William Cullen Bryant in poetry – succeeded by performing the same kind of cultural cross-dressing act: clothing American materials in British literary conventions. Although *The Pioneers* doesn't subject its own imported aesthetics to the same ironic scrutiny that it bestows on Templeton's neocolonial posturing, it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore the inauthenticity of this practice. The book's only American epigraph appears in chapter 7, which focuses on Chingachgook, the book's only Native American character. The quotation – from Philip Freneau's "Indian Student" – refers to its Native American protagonist as "the shepherd of the forest" (83). There is no reality in which that description could make any sense, for Indians had no herds of sheep, and sheep in any case would starve in a forest for lack of food. Behind Freneau's trope is the classical European genre of the pastoral, where shepherds are the symbol for a life in harmony with nature. Freneau's concern to fit his work and his hero into that old world tradition carries his art away from its new world source. Like Wolfe's "severed" arm on the walls of Temple's house, European forms and American experience fail to connect.

This can bring us back to the fact that *The Pioneers* begins on Christmas Eve, for both the counterfeit society it depicts and the imitative art it uses to render that society seem very much in need of redemption. As the novel goes on, moving through almost a year in the life of a frontier settlement, a potential savior appears, though he seems at first a very unlikely candidate for the role. In his first narrative appearances, Natty Bumppo is, as even his name suggests, more a comic than a heroic figure, a grumpy relic of the days before settlers entered the woods. One of the most fascinating sights in American literary history is watching how over the course of the narrative Natty's character commandeers more and more of Cooper's attention. His grumpiness, for example, is transformed into a kind of prophetic wrath against what he calls "the wicked and wasty ways" of civilization (356). When he is put on trial by society for breaking one of its laws, the reader has no trouble seeing how the proceeding actually exposes the guilt of a community that lives by legal forms rather than the spirit of justice, or (as Natty puts it) "what's right between man and man" (202). He even takes over the job of the romance hero, twice rescuing the heroine from death. Natty has absolutely no conventional credentials for the role of hero: he is old, unmarriageable, propertyless, illiterate. When the novel arrives at its structurally predestined conclusion, the wedding of Oliver and Elizabeth as

the promise of more enlightened national future, there is no narrative place for Natty. But when the book ends with him disappearing one last time into the woods, leaving the newlyweds in, of all symbolical places, a cemetery, he takes the reader's sympathy with him. In 1823 there were no literary historical precedents for novelistic sequels, any more than for novelistic heroes who looked, talked, and acted like Natty, but given the power Natty has acquired by that ending, it might have been predicted that Cooper's imagination would soon have to return to this character.

He turned back to Natty four times, twice in the 1820s and then twice more in the early 1840s. The next Leather-Stocking Tale written was *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), in which Natty and Chingachgook are young warriors fighting for the British in the French and Indian War. Against this historical backdrop Cooper writes a tale of relentless gothic terror and violent action. *Mohicans* was one of the nineteenth century's very best-selling novels, and of all Cooper's stories the one that has had the longest popular life in its television and movie adaptations. Some critics cite the book as his masterpiece. Certainly anyone interested in how Cooper's fiction helped his culture construct its ideas about race – red, black, and white – and an idea of American nationhood that excluded all but the last of those three colors should read the novel, but to me it lacks the thematic richness of *The Pioneers*. Natty dies of old age at the end of *The Prairie* (1827) but is again young in the last-written tales, *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841). To D. H. Lawrence, the twentieth-century British modernist, the antichronological sequence of the five Tales, "from old age to golden youth," is why they constitute "the true myth of America," the "sloughing of the old skin."[2] Lawrence's phrase helps link Cooper to Ralph Waldo Emerson, the transcendentalist who began his first book, *Nature* (1836), by also going into the woods, where, he wrote, is "perpetual youth," where "a man casts off his years, as a snake his slough."[3] Emerson took a much more explicit stance against the authority of British literature, protesting that the "American Scholar" has "listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe" in his 1837 address at Harvard that the American poet Oliver Wendell Holmes called "our intellectual Declaration of Independence."[4] But while the Leather-Stocking himself can defy the forms of civilization to inhabit a world that seems perpetually fresh, it was much harder for Cooper to make American literature new. In those last two Tales, for example, he pushes a bit against fictional conventions by involving Natty directly in the novels' romantic plots. He loves in *The Pathfinder* and is beloved in *The Deerslayer*. But while Natty never marries, his creator's imagination remains wedded to such conventional elements as those romantic plots. Cooper's cultural insecurities led him to

try revising Natty's possible role in the narrative, rather than recreating novelistic narrative to develop Natty's possibilities.

Thus as an American hero, Natty is a subversive rather than a transformative figure. He exposes the vitiating effect of the derivative formal gestures by which both society and literature in the new world organize themselves but cannot himself reconstruct either. Cooper left it to Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) to become the book that, according to Ernest Hemingway, makes "all modern American literature" possible.[5] Hemingway is referring mainly to the voice of Twain's novel, which is Huck's unmistakably American voice, a colloquial, un-"literary" voice that remains in direct contact with American reality. While obviously an overgeneralization, there is some truth to Hemingway's claim. But if it is clear that Cooper's narrator, like Huck's friend Tom Sawyer, has read too many European books, or at least defers too much to them, it's equally clear how much Huck's own character owes to Natty, and not just in the fact that both "light out for the Territory"[6] or have their most meaningful friendships with nonwhite characters. As *The Pioneers* goes on, Cooper discovers more and more eloquence in Natty's vernacular voice. When the novel's narrator describes the beauty of Elizabeth's "Grecian" nose, "spotless" forehead, and cheeks "burning with roses," we hear the echo of those courtly muses (66). Even when he praises her dark hair, "shining like the raven's wing," we are likely to think more about other raven-haired heroines in books than birds in nature. However, when Natty elsewhere says of Elizabeth that "I won't mistrust the gal; she has an eye like a full-grown buck" (336), he points the way toward Huck, whose diction is similarly drawn from his own life, from American experience.

And as a subversive figure, even today Natty has power that can still transcend the dated formal elements of the texts that tell his story. In some respects, he actually seems to thrive on the tension between his stubbornly inviolable selfhood and the compromised social and aesthetic settings in which he finds himself. He is one of the great No-sayers in literature. Literally, his first words in *The Pioneers* are "No–no–Judge" (21), and a great many of his speeches begin with that one word, usually repeated for emphasis. Thematically, morally, and even emotionally, Natty's rejection of just about every way in which American society pursues happiness – wealth, status, marriage, education, this list could go on for a long time – becomes the point of view from which American society itself is judged and found wanting. The wilderness that Natty keeps disappearing into in that novel, a much newer world than the one the settlers are making in the village, becomes a place of radical renunciation and fulfillment. One contemporary reader reported to Cooper that as he watched Natty walk away from society, "I longed to go

with him."[7] Natty has had a lot of company out there, beyond culture, and not just the many generations of American readers who have gone vicariously with him into the woods. Many of the most memorable characters in American literature can be seen as descended from his unflinchingly autonomous stance: Herman Melville's eponymous "Bartleby" (1853), Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) persona, Huck of course (1884), Kate Chopin's Edna in *The Awakening* (1899), William Faulkner's Ike McCaslin in "The Bear" (1942). If the Templeton pioneers represent "sivilization," as Huck calls it, these figures are its most intransigent "discontents."

Many of Cooper's other twenty-seven novels describe, and in various ways interrogate, the project of creating the new nation. Eight of them are set in new settlements, from colonial New England (*The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*, 1829) to the Old Northwest, as the Upper Midwest used to be called (*The Oak Openings*, 1848); to a volcanic atoll in the Pacific Ocean (*The Crater*, 1847). None of these books contains a character as original as Natty, but all raise the same question posed by his very existence: how sustaining and sustainable are the social structures that Americans are building in this new world? Early in his career, even as Natty absented himself from the scene of American progress, Cooper himself mainly celebrated his country's achievements. Flush with the popularity of novels like *The Spy* and *The Pioneers*, he even planned a series of thirteen novels, one for each of the colonies, set during the Revolution. When the first of these, *Lionel Lincoln* (1825), was not a commercial success, he abandoned that scheme, but not his posture as a patriot. In 1826, like Irving before him and many American authors afterward, Cooper moved to Europe, but the novels he wrote on that side of the Atlantic were still more overtly committed to republican values like freedom and representative government. On the other hand, his later writings put satiric and often bitter quotation marks around the idea of "American progress." *Home As Found* (1838) returns to the site of Cooper's own life, "Templeton." The village is forty years older than in *The Pioneers*. The evil it now suffers from has nothing to do with a postcolonial deference to European culture, but rather is a rampant case of American egalitarianism; at the end of this later novel, it is the descendants of Oliver and Elizabeth who are planning to light out for a different territory, and this time that territory is Europe. At the end of *The Crater*, the settlement that American colonists have created on the atoll has an apocalyptic end: the eruption that erases it from the face of the earth is treated, by implication at least, as a righteous and divine judgment against the sins of government by the mob that calls itself "the people."

By the time he wrote *Home As Found*, Cooper had returned from Europe and was living in Cooperstown. But as that novel makes clear, Cooper's

homecoming had been anything but triumphant. The first text he published after his return, *A Letter to His Countrymen* (1834), was intended to be the last he ever published. In this pamphlet he declares his independence from the people by announcing his retirement from writing. He was "lay[ing] aside the pen," he told his audience, because he was convinced that no American writer could count on the support of the American reading public.[8] Behind this action were two different sets of events: when he shifted the setting of his fiction to European history in three novels published 1831–3, his American sales suffered, though not drastically, and as one of the country's most prominent figures, he was often the target of partisan attacks in the fiercely political American press. His feeling of betrayal by his country was clearly an overreaction, but while it says a lot about the thinness of Cooper's own skin, it also helps us remember how vulnerable and exposed early American writers could feel as they explored that new frontier called American literature. Charles Brockden Brown in the previous generation and Herman Melville in the following one were among the other American novelists who quit writing fiction when it seemed to them that their audience had let them down.

Cooper's announcement, it turned out fairly soon, was premature. Economic realities, as well as a psychic need to keep talking to "his countrymen" – which he rationalized as the belief that his countrymen needed a stern talking-to – soon compelled him to pick up the pen again. Eighteen of his novels, along with eleven other books, were published after his "retirement," and among them were some of his best: not just the final two Leather-Stocking Tales, but, for instance, *Satanstoe* (1845), a thoroughly charming story of the colonial Dutch, in "New Amsterdam" (as New York City was originally called), in Albany, and in the wilderness not far from Cooperstown. This is the first volume of The Littlepage Manuscripts, a trilogy in which Cooper takes a last long look at the process of introducing civilization to the new world. The final volume in that series, *The Redskins* (1845), which advances the story of America up to the present in which Cooper is writing, is probably the angriest book he ever wrote. The "Redskins" are not the Native Americans who had to be dispossessed from the land, but the modern American rabble, who are possessed with a grasping populism that threatens to make society more savage than the wilderness ever was.

Cooper has other claims on students of literature than the ones we have considered here. He is generally considered the creator of the genre known as "sea fiction." This began with his fourth novel, *The Pilot* (1824), which characteristically had *its* origins in a Walter Scott novel, *The Pirate* (1822). Cooper, who had served in the U.S. Navy a dozen years earlier, became impatient with the praise he heard heaped on Scott for *The Pirate*'s nautical

elements and decided to show the world a more accurate representation of ships and seafaring. The success of that novel led to nine additional tales of the sea. These include *The Red Rover* (1828), probably second among his fictions in international popularity, though more for its Byronic hero than for the realism of its nautical details, and *The Sea Lions* (1849), about a cruise toward the South Pole in quest of furs that, by the time the Antarctic winter sets in, anticipates the symbolist uses to which Melville puts ocean voyaging in *Moby-Dick* (1851). Both Melville and Joseph Conrad, the two great masters of the genre, acknowledged Cooper's own mastery of it. To make his fictions marketable, Cooper provided them all with marriage plots; love, however, never inspired his imagination as profoundly as the vast settings of ocean and wilderness.

That first sea fiction suggests how throughout his career Cooper's artistic motivations intermixed the personal, the professional, and the patriotic: the "Pilot" is John Paul Jones, the hero of the Revolutionary War who also took on the might of Great Britain and, against long odds, won. The story of Cooper's three decades as a novelist is larger and possibly more dramatic than any of the stories he tells in those thirty-two novels. It is the story of an American author writing in the long shadow cast by European culture, wrestling with America itself – as both his subject matter and his audience. That story has both its comic and its tragic aspects, but in the end, as both a popular and an unpopular figure, Cooper emerges as one of the founders of that complexly begotten thing we call American culture. When he died, in Cooperstown in 1851, his "countrymen" – and women – were probably relieved as well as saddened. Yet they were also grateful and proud for all he had done to put that new world called "American fiction" on the map.

## FURTHER READING

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## NOTES

1 James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* (New York, Penguin, 1988), p. 64; additional references to this novel will be cited in parentheses in the text.
2 D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923; rpt. New York, Viking, 1964), p. 54.
3 Emerson, *Nature*, in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York, Library of America, 1983), p. 10.
4 Emerson, "American Scholar Oration," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York, Library of America, 1983), p. 70; Holmes, qtd. in Wilson Sullivan, *New England Men of Letters* (New York, Macmillan, 1972), p. 235.
5 Ernest Hemingway, *The Green Hills of Africa* (New York, Scribners, 1935), p. 22.
6 Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Stephen Railton (Peterborough, Broadview Press, 2011), p. 365.
7 Richard Henry Dana, letter to Cooper, qtd. in Marcel Clavel, *Fenimore Cooper and His Critics: American, British and French Criticisms of the Novelist's Early Work* (Aix-en Provence, Imprimerie Universitaire de Provence, 1938), p. 149.
8 Cooper, *A Letter to His Countrymen* (1834), qtd. in Stephen Railton, *Fenimore Cooper: A Study of His Life and Imagination* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 142–3.