CHAPTER 5

THE HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF COOPER’S WRITING

5.1 American Development and the Unique Theme of Cooper’s Writing

Most of the nineteenth-century works of American fiction are based on the political and socio-economical condition of America obtaining at that time. The American writers have had their own style. Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville were the major writers of the nineteenth century, who had a clear understanding of how the modern world is constructed and expressed. They had given their attention to unifying the nation’s culture which could help in forging the nineteenth-century nation state. They were convinced that the sense of nationhood depended upon the characteristics and ideas of the people of the country and that would differentiate their culture from that of other countries.

Cooper transformed the history into romance and ideology into myth. He projected his family story into his major works of fiction, thus problematizing history itself. He put his childhood experience in *The Pioneers*. He created a character, Natty Bumppo, without any intention of giving him a perfectly planned chronology. He imitated Walter Scott in his creation of plots and characters. He was influenced by the techniques of Walter Scott and Washington Irving.

*The Pioneers* involved different creations, of which the first was that of Templeton, which was a half-finished structure, built in a forest. It was only gradually
that the cabin of Natty Bumppo and Indian John began to symbolise an alternative relation to the land, standing for the wasteful ways and arbitrary laws of the pioneer community. The cabin was situated on the other side of the lake which became the symbol of a way of life opposed to that of „civilization.” Thus, Cooper began with the binary opposition, rather a mythological dichotomy that was produced during the writing in order to resolve the problem that the act of writing engenders.

Central to these problems was the attempt to combine various characteristics of Cooper’s father and father-in-law into the portrait of an ideal founder and patriarch of a pioneer community, a man whose merits will provide an imaginary origin and legitimacy for the colonization of Indian lands, and a man whose learning and culture will be more in keeping with the social needs of the son, than that of the untutored father, who actually established Cooperstown. The project failed because the history that the biographical modeling brings along with it consistently ruptures the bonds of the projected ideals, thereby widening the problem it was intended to foreclose. It was, therefore, necessary to split off the ideal from the character who was supposed to bear it and attach it to a person of no status, virtually an absence, the antiquated faithful servant, Nathaniel Bumppo. By the end of the novel this improbable creature had become the hero of nature and innocence and stood in sharp contrast with the Judge who had hypocritically abused the very law that was supposed to mark the white man out as superior to the savage. Cooper transformed Judge William Cooper into Judge Marmaduke Temple to give the real life position of Judge Cooper. In the second step, he transformed Cooper into Temple to make the Temple dynasty originate in the seventeenth century.
Cooper derived most of his knowledge about Indians from John G. Heckewelder’s *An Account of the History, Manner and Custom of the Indian Nation*. Cooper discovered the paradigmatic opposition of noble Delaware and ignoble Iroquois, which structured the four novels of *The Leatherstocking Tales*, which he set in New York State. Heckewelder was a Morovian missionary who had lived with the Delaware between 1762 and 1786 and held them in high regard. For this reason, his history represents the Indian experience from the Delaware point of view. Cooper followed Heckewelder till President Bill Clinton’s authoritative knowledge became available to Cooper. Since then, his confidence in Heckewelder was not due to any compulsion, but a conscious choice, determined by the desire to transpose historical experience into Heckewelder’s inverted mythological frame. Cooper’s notion of using history in his novels should be true to its historical material as the transformation of history into myth could only be achieved by violating the historical records.

As far as the Indian history is concerned, Cooper was not so careful, because he maintained that the Delaware were good and the Iroquois were bad. He tried to give the impression that Montcalm was supported at Fort William Henry by the Hurons and the Iroquois. This representation ran counter to the historical facts, as reported by some historians of the eighteenth century. However, Heckewelder and De Witt Clinton agreed that the Iroquois were either pro-British, or neutral, throughout the eighteenth century.

Cooper’s *The Pioneers* was the first of *The Leatherstocking Tales*, and it is also Called “A Descriptive Tale”. It drew its meaning basically from the depiction of the society and the relation of that society to the natural environment. The American
wilderness had to be destroyed if civilization had to spread across the continent. In the setting of *The Pioneers* scene at Otsego Lake (Cooperstown) in 1793-94, Cooper described the society which was just past the frontier stage, and the settlement no longer faced the risk of harassment from the Indians. The most important citizens had begun to pay some attention to the refinements of life. The gap between the social classes, however, had not yet become so wide so as to set them completely apart from the rest of the villagers; for, although there was some pretension among the common people, all men could still meet in the tavern without undue restraint on Christmas Eve for a pleasant celebration. Indeed, Cooper presented a kind of pastoral idyll; taking the reader through the entire year from Christmas Eve to October. He described a series of rural pastimes, like a shooting match for the turkey in the winter, or the night-fishing on the lake in summer. He depicted the scenes with the fair mixture of realism and evocative longing that lend the book its dominant mood.

According to Cooper, the white Christians were able to settle in greater numbers, because their mores tended to make them more pacific than the Indians. Whereas conflict among tribes or nations was the inevitable result of Indian morality, it was not a necessary product of Christianity, although Christian precepts alone would not prevent men (and women) from fighting. As Cooper showed in *The Pioneers*, through the reconciliation of British and American heirs in marriage, peace was possible, if and when people(s) were willing to recognise the inherent equality, desire for dignity, and independence – the “rights,” so to speak, or claims – of others. In this respect, Christian civilization seemed to be superior to the apparently more purely natural morality of the Indians–both ethically and effectively. In teaching the limits of one's claims on personal
honor (or pride) and of justice as revenge, Christianity seemed to be both more conducive to the preservation of human life and more compassionate. But of course the inherited ethos and mores were to be put to test in the American wilderness.

In order to be the source of an effective personal and political morality, however, Christian precepts must be built on a natural foundation. As the novelist indicated in the contrast between Natty Bumppo and David Gamut, Christianity can sometimes make men (and women) pacific, at the expense of their ability to defend themselves. Gamut gives the Biblical precept “Thou shall not kill” a very literal reading. Therefore, he was a pacifist. Like the New Testament lilies of the field, he depended upon Providence to take care of him. In fact, as Cooper put it, Gamut is preserved as a result of the non-pacific endeavors of his associates and the compassion of the Indians.

By contrasting Natty with Gamut, Cooper portrayed natural morality as working, where bookish learning did not. Unlike the psalmist, the scout based his faith on experience and reflection, not on the mere human authority of the printed word. When Gamut demanded that Natty cite chapter and verse to support his religious convictions, the scout responded that he had read the only book and worshipped in the only temple made directly by God’s hand: the book and the temple of nature. He himself was a creation of God and worthy of being preserved. He killed only to preserve life, but he did kill. It is necessary to use force against those who would use violence to achieve their own selfish ends. This necessity, as Cooper repeatedly demonstrated, constituted the natural foundation and justification for government, particularly in the American context. Like Gamut, those who depend solely on Providence, without acting or taking responsibility for their own actions, are not only ineffective. Ironically, by refusing to
take responsibility themselves pacifists like Gamut allowed force, rather than the right to determine what happens.

Just as Cooper used the contrast between Gamut and Natty to show that Christianity can constitute an effective foundation for personal and political morality only when its precepts are combined with a recognition of natural necessity, so he used the contrast between the scout and the Indians to show that compassion can be the sole and truly natural source of morality only when it results from the same merger of natural sentiment with Scriptural teaching (Natty’s Christian “gifts”). Perhaps sensing his own imperfections and limitations, Cooper suggested that such a “naturalized Christian” would be tolerant of both the different ways and the defects of others. Like Natty, he or she would see that there were red gifts as well as white; like Natty, he or she would be compassionate, and even merciful. Cooper’s emphasis is at least partly on difference of gifts. Rather than test the mettle of an enemy’s self-discipline, like the Indians, by prolonging his death through torture he would like Natty “waste” the precious ammunition that he needed for his own defence in order to put an enemy out of his misery. Unlike the Indians, Natty never attempted to prove his superiority. They respected him for his prowess as a warrior, that is, insofar as he met their norms. He respected them for serving their own notions of justice – even when he did not share those notions. As a popular image of natural virtue, Natty thus represented the superiority of toleration to sectarianism a vice much more prevalent among Cooper’s Christian country folk than among the Indians, and a vice that Cooper thought was particularly inimical to the preservation of both personal liberty and democracy.
As I showed earlier, the characterization of Judge Temple condenses Cooper and De Lancy’s history in order to provide the Cooper family with imaginary origins in the established ruling class of colonial New York and with which Cooper had connected every activity of Temple. Several scholars have shown that the mythological opposition of savagery to civilization was essential for explaining the progress of the United States progress in the nineteenth century and even to the concept of American character. Much of the action of *The Pioneers* and many of the moral debates between the characters can be seen as conditioned by Cooper. Natty Bumppo, in *The Pioneers*, and also in *The Last of the Mohicans*, embodied the practical standard of natural rights. As Cooper recognized in his depiction of Indian mores, one's natural attachment to self-preservation, as well as one’s compassion for others, can be practically eradicated by social principles, especially through a connection to honor. If civil society would be based on natural standards of right and justice, people must rediscover the goodness of their own natural inclinations. They do not act on such sentiments automatically, however. They have to be taught. Cooper left the moral teaching that Natty represented more or less implicit within his character and deeds in the first two *Leatherstocking Tales*. Then, in the third, he moved the old hunter to articulate an explicit doctrine. Cooper may have hoped to counteract the concern for reputation and status that caused so much conflict among the Indians, as well as the European settlers in the New World. In *The Prairie*, he preached a natural and open-minded religion that emphasizes the limits of all human achievement.

*The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer* represent Cooper’s recovery of the fine creative gifts that had been largely dissipated in the frustrating years since *The Bravo*. Once again, he had managed to draw his physical backgrounds with a convincing degree
of verisimilitude and, more importantly, he was able to generate a significant theme from
the realities among which his characters moved. That the themes which he developed in
the second decade of his authorship were in many ways more fundamental than those he
had previously treated bespeaks most clearly his intellectual and artistic development, for
the best work of this second decade is superior to that of the first. A more sophisticated
Cooper was a good more skillful artist who composed The Deerslayer and then The
Pioneers. Cooper had truly found himself during this long and difficult period. To be
sure, he would sometimes err and write weak novels in the years ahead. But the moral
theme that he had developed in The Deerslayer was to become increasingly important in
the tales that immediately followed.

Yet it is neither the description itself nor the main plot that revealed the true
meaning of the novel. The return of the lost heir, Oliver Effingham, to claim the
inheritance that he mistakenly believes Judge Temple has wrongfully appropriated is
obviously a stock element and may be dismissed as a concession to the popular taste of
the times. More important is the secondary plot in the book: the conflict between Judge
Temple and Natty Bumppo, here called the Leatherstocking. This conflict arises naturally
from the realities of the physical environment, and it not only posed a true moral problem
for the judge, but also suggested an important theme about the westward march of
American civilization. The land on which Templeton, the judge's settlement, was built
had been occupied for some forty years by the Leatherstocking, who still maintained his
cabin on a nearby mountain with his friend John Mohegan. He had befriended Temple
when the latter had first come to survey his lands, and the judge, out of gratitude, had
allowed Leatherstocking to hunt on his estate.
Stated this simply, the relationship between the two men would seem to be idyllic; as indeed it would be time to stop and all further change in the landscape be halted. The process that the judge began, however, moved forward with a force of its own; and, as Templeton developed, the judge and his old friend come inevitably into conflict. The change that civilization brings to the wilderness marks the area where they must inevitably clash. When the story opens, much of the natural landscape is still untouched. Virgin forests stretched uncut all around the town, pigeons on their annual migrations darkened the sky as they flew past by the millions, and fish could be drawn in untold numbers from the lake. But the first ominous note of change had already been sounded. The larger games, particularly deer, were becoming scarce; the people were making inroads on the forests of sugar maples, which they would cut and waste for firewood. The Leatherstocking and his Indian friend observed the change and lamented about it for the process entails a moral wrong that the former could not tolerate.

The hunter maintained a moral view of nature. He regarded the bounty around him as provided by a beneficent God for man’s use. A man is justified, he believes, in using whatever part of nature he truly needs; but he is not free to destroy at will. When he saw the settlers drawing in their scenes with hundreds of fish, most of which would be left to rot on the shore, he could only lament on the folly of men who could be so lawless in their relation to the natural surroundings and he was completely disgusted by the wholesale destruction of wildlife and by the cutting of trees. That the Leatherstocking was fundamentally right in his view is abundantly demonstrated by the numerous scenes of irrational destruction that Cooper included in the novel. Billy Kirby, an expert axe-man who delighted in cutting trees, urged the destruction of thousands of pigeons and
shot wildly into the flock in a frenzy of killing (270). Richard Jones, the judge’s cousin and sheriff, actually brought out a swivel gun and lined up his men to fire volleys into the cloud of birds that was passing overhead (268-74). Wherever we read in the novel, there were scenes of senseless destruction or of settlers laughing at the idea that game or wood should ever become scarce.

Judge Temple himself clearly saw that such destruction was morally wrong and he was certainly opposed to it. The problem he faced, however, was how to control the waste without curtailing the advance of civilization. The judge's recourse was to civil law, the law of society, which he hoped would be in accord with the moral law that the Leatherstocking was following in his relations with nature. He was pleased to see the state legislature establishing seasons for the taking of game, and he hoped eventually to make it a crime to cut trees wantonly. He enforced the law for the protection of deer with unswerving rigidity, and he demanded that the norms of society be respected even though the law was administered for selfish aims by unworthy officers. Thus, when the Leatherstocking killed a deer out of season and resisted arrest by Hiram Doolittle, who tried to use the law to satisfy his curiosity about what was in Leatherstocking's cabin, the judge insisted that the law be rigidly enforced. Judge Temple's position is made doubly difficult in that the Leatherstocking had recently saved his daughter, Elizabeth, by shooting a mountain lion which was ready to attack her. But he stuck to his decision. The Leatherstocking was sentenced to the stocks and publicly humiliated.

The judge's argument in defending his actions was a good one. As he told his daughter, “Society cannot exist without wholesome restraints. Those restraints cannot be inflicted without security and respect to the persons of those who administer them; and it
would sound ill indeed to report, that a judge had extended favour to a convicted
criminal, because he had saved the life of his child” (Cooper, *The Pioneers* 293-294). The
judge’s logic is unimpeachable if men must have discipline imposed on them by external
authority, and Marmaduke Temple has seen enough of the men in his settlement to that
most will act from selfish motives, or be influenced by their overpowering passions,
before they will exert the kind of self-control that would make the laws of society
unnecessary. That Leatherstocking could resist most of the selfish impulses of men made
him only the exception that proves the rule. From his long life in the wilderness, he had
learned his true relation to nature and acquired the humility he needed to discipline
himself in the moral code taught him by the Moravian missionaries. But there is no
reason to assume that all men will be able to perceive and follow such a system of belief.
Human experience, indeed, seems to suggest just the opposite; most men react like
Richard Jones, Billy Kirby, or Hiram Doolittle when no longer restrained by civil law.

Society demands, therefore, that the just man be punished that justice may
prevail. To be sure, there is strong irony in the fact that the Leatherstocking was
persecuted for killing one deer out of season when the people of Templeton had
slaughtered and chopped with complete impunity merely because they violated no man-
made law. But Cooper wasted no sentimental tears on the Leatherstocking’s fate; for,
although the hunter was caught in a cycle of change over which he had no control, he
played a vital part in the process which was ultimately working for the good. In the last
lines of the novel, Cooper comments on the role that the Leatherstocking played in the
American drama. Of his own free will, he left the settlement and disappeared into the
woods: “He had gone far towards the setting sun,—the foremost in that band of pioneers
who are opening the way for the march of the nation across the continent" (Cooper, *The Pioneers*, 350) The social man is free from the restraint except for those moral imperatives that bind men in all times and places, and flees sometimes the unjust restraints of a civilized society. But his flight did him no good; it merely began the cycle anew and made it all the easier for those social injunctions to catch up with him. He became, therefore, the inevitable herald of the civilization he most wanted to avoid.

The end result of this process was, of course, the good society of Templeton. But it need not be brought about, Cooper insisted, at a price of the rape of the wilderness, the indiscriminate destruction of nature. Men like Richard Jones could learn from the Leatherstocking to take the long view and conserve the bounty that has been lavished upon the American settler. If they did not do so, these were the implications that were not fully developed until the later tales in the series. The nation itself must eventually suffer the consequences of an exhausted earth. It was in Judge Temple’s view, therefore, that the best compromise was to be found. Clearly he was bringing the values of Christian civilization to the wilderness and laying the foundation for a good society. Although he was willing to sacrifice much of nature to the social order, he recognized the values that were being lost and tried, to some extent, to curb at least part of the wanton destruction. The judge was certainly superior to his cousin and the other wasteful settlers, none of whom could be trusted to discipline themselves as Leatherstocking had. And, indeed, he was superior to the hunter too in the social values that he always acknowledged. Judge Temple was, therefore, the first of Cooper’s long series of Christian gentlemen upon whom he placed his faith for the establishment and maintenance of the good life.

It was fortunate indeed that Cooper turned away from this plan, for instead, he
composed *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Prairie*, which rank among his acknowledged masterpieces and in which he further developed the character of the Leatherstocking, a mythic figure worth any number of such artificial tales as *Lionel Lincoln*. He returned, moreover, in both these frontier stories to the kind of material that had proved so useful in his previous successes – the natural landscape and its relation to the men and women who move through it. In *The Last of the Mohicans* he described the untouched wilderness by which the Lake George was surrounded during 1757. In this novel, the protagonist was called Hawkeye, who was at his young age. In *The Prairie*, the writer wrote about the Great Plains in about 1805. This novel introduced the Leatherstocking, as “the trapper,” and the protagonist was at the age of eighty. In both these tales, the writer picked up the same thematic pattern, already revealed to us in *The Pioneers*. Here Cooper implicated the march of civilization in which the Leatherstocking was seen as an initiative, but finally it destroyed him.

This theme was less perceptible in *The Last of the Mohicans* than in the other Leatherstocking tales, and most critics have been happy to dismiss the book as nearly pure adventure with slight social import. It is true; certainly, that the tale said little unambiguously about the problem. But when we come upon it from *The Pioneers* this is the way it should be approached. We can easily recognize its relation to the earlier novel if we consider the mode of development that Cooper uses in each book. *The Pioneers*, fundamentally descriptive, is essentially spatial in its development. The tone of protected repose that dominated the tale suggests the relatively secure life that the settlers had achieved at Templeton now that they had been pushed back into the wilderness, driven off the hunter and the Indian, and achieved a degree of civilized life. The narrative mode
of *The Last of the Mohicans*, on the other hand, is the pattern of chase, escape, and battle, suggests the fundamental insecurity of the whites when they broke through the virgin wilderness for the first time and became dependent upon the Indians, like Hawkeye, for survival.

In *The Last of the Mohicans*, everything was dominated by the virgin forest. The moment Duncan Heyward led the girls, Alice and Cora Munro, off the main road between Forts Edward and William Henry, he lost control over his environment and became an easy prey to the machinations of the evil Magua. From this point, to the end of the novel, all the white characters, with the exception of Hawkeye, were at the mercy of the wilderness and its natural, red inhabitants. Even Montcalm and the victorious French cannot completely govern their Huron allies after the evacuation of the fort, and the French commander himself muse about the dangers of setting in motion a process which they could not control. In the massacre at Fort William Henry, the Indians clearly dominated the whites who had invaded their lands. Indeed, even the English characters that finally succeed in recovering the abducted Alice from the Hurons had to rely upon their Indian friends, the Delaware, to escape from being totally destroyed by the wilderness they had penetrated. Without Chingachgook and Uncas, the capable Hawkeye himself could have done little.

Even the scale of events was determined by the untouched wilderness. Whole armies were swallowed up in the living mass of dense vegetation only to emerge as broken and scattered remnants and the entire struggle between the British and French troops, with their white loyalties to distant kings, seemed trivial when viewed in relation to the immense forest that surrounded them. Cooper deliberately drew his landscape on
an immense canvas. The vast panorama he pauses to describe when the little party led by Hawkeye approached the fort for the first time deliberately suggests the immensity of the space that surrounded the little fort they saw below. The white men, dwarfed by their hostile environment, were incapable of handling it; for the civilized principles they imported were of little value here. Overconfident in himself from the very beginning, Duncan Heyward constantly made errors in judgment until Hawkeye tersely warned him: “If you judge of Indian cunning by the rules you find in books, or by white sagacity, they will lead you astray, if not to your death” (Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 220).

Indeed, the massacre at William Henry speaks eloquently of the irrelevance of the white man's code of honorable surrender in the depths of the forest.

Only Hawkeye, of all the whites, was competent to survive, mainly because the experience in the woods had instilled in him the humility he needed to understand the Indians and to interpret the white and red man to each other. Superstitious, ignorant, and prejudiced though he may be, the qualities critics have tended to ignore in him, he perceived as no other white character his true relation to the immensity of the nature that surrounded him; and his humility lets him see good even in his enemies. He alone saw virtue and justice among the Indians, as well as among those of his own color; and, although he always remained true to his race and consistently maintained the superiority of the Christian view, he did not make the mistake of completely scorning the heathen. He was willing to learn from them, and his knowledge ensured his survival. Yet, if Hawkeye's balanced view enabled him to cope with his environment and save the other whites from certain destruction, it also set in motion the chain of events that eventually led to his degradation in *The Pioneers*. For the whites, hunted and insecure as they were
in this tale of suspense and violence, had already taken the first steps towards complete 
mastery of the continent. The great tribe of the Delaware had been scattered by the 
settlers, and their enlistment in the white man's struggle against the Hurons foreshadowed 
the eventual destruction of both. Magua was certainly right in asking the Delaware chiefs 
why Huron and Delaware should “brighten their tomahawks, and sharpen their knives 
against each other? Are not the pale-faces thicker than the swallows in the season of 
flowers?” (364). This question, repeated by Mahtoree in terms of Sioux and Pawnee in 
The Prairie (415), should, of course, provide a rallying point for the tribes. That it does 
not was most fortunate for the whites and helped in the ultimate conquest of the continent 
in the name of Christian civilization. That it also involved the death of Uncas, son of 
Chingachgook and beloved foster son of Hawkeye, was not foreseen by these compatriots 
of the woods any more than is their own ultimate degradation. Only Tamenund, in the 
last pages of the book, could foresee the inevitable: “The pale-faces are masters of the 
earth, and the time of the red-men has not yet come again” (Cooper, The Last of the 
Mohicans 396).

The Prairie shows the end towards which events are tending and brings the series 
to its logical point of repose in the great death-scene of the trapper in the final pages of 
the book. Given the weakest of the three early Leatherstocking Tales on the plot level, the 
kidnapping of Inez and the transporting of her to the trans-Mississippi west were most 
implausible. The Prairie is probably the richest thematically, and also the most complex 
intellectually. The relation of man to nature introduced in the two earlier books was 
进一步 developed in terms of the immensity of the treeless waste of the Great Plains; the 
rape of the wilderness is described in less equivocal terms than in The Pioneers; and the
moral view of nature is reaffirmed in the eloquent speeches of the aged trapper. In addition, Cooper goes out of his way to assemble a group of characters who run the whole gamut of American life from the “semi-barbarous” squatter, Ishmael Bush, to the refined Inez and Middleton, with Paul Hover and Ellen Wade forming the intermediate stages. Indeed, Cooper even included a scientist, Dr. Obed Bat, who, although actually a caricature, must be taken seriously because he introduced a new attitude towards nature, one as much opposed to the old trapper’s view as that of the lawless squatter.

As in the previous books, the relation of man to nature is fundamental to the tale, but the landscape is described as even more vast and sublime so that the characters seem all but completely dwarfed and overpowered by the immensity of grass and sky that stretched in every direction. Cooper had never seen the plains. He relied on books to give him the sense of a scene he did not personally know, and the authenticity of his description has been questioned. But authentic or not, the setting of *The Prairie* serves the perfect aesthetic function in the book. Unlike *The Pioneers*, *The Prairie* depicts a world that man cannot pretend to master, for it is completely beyond his control; and unlike *The Last of the Mohicans*, it presents a gaunt, bare, hostile nature that leaves man naked to the elements. It is clearly a harsher world than that of the two previous volumes in the series.

But in many ways, the book directly complements *The Last of the Mohicans* and completes the cycle begun in it and sometimes in precisely the same terms. The process that began on the eastern seaboard with the dislocation of the Delawares and the settling of the forest wilderness now moves into its final phase. As in *The Last of the Mohicans*, there is little law, but might; and, although many of the whites are now more capable of
coping with their environment, fundamentally they must still play one Indian tribe against another to attain their ends. Cooper has been accused of “laziness in paralleling Hard Heart and Mahtoree with Uncas and Magua, yet the repetition may well have been intentional. If Pawnee against Sioux recapitulates Mohican against Huron, the lesson is unmistakable: only the whites can win. And when the honest Hard Heart refuses to listen to the treacherous Mahtoree, just as the Delawares had ignored Magua’s similar plea, he, like them, will be rewarded for his virtue with the extinction of his people. Even the trapper, who always lamented the grievous wrong done, the red man never realizes the part he himself plays in bringing about his friends’ destruction when he opens the path for the exploiters who follow.

The exploiters in this book, however, were not the settlers of The Pioneers who were building homes in the wilderness but their advance guard: Ishmael Bush and his tribe of lawless squatters who accepted no authority over themselves, who were anti-social wanderers whose function in the settling of the country was to skim "the cream from the face of the earth" and get "the very honey of nature" (311). If the trapper represented the natural man who had disciplined himself as a result of his moral view of nature and thereby earned his right to freedom, Ishmael Bush was the more usual type who had confused liberty with license, who took the law into his own hands – as witness his execution of his brother-in-law, Abiram White – and who asserted his own mighty ego as the sole basis for all he did. Completely selfish, Bush and his tribe attacked the physical landscape with their axes in much the same way as did the settlers in Templeton, but without their justification of bringing civilization to the wilderness. In effect, they confirmed the opinion of Marmaduke Temple that civil law is necessary to keep men in
check, for the implication of *The Prairie* was so strong that men without civil law are more likely to resemble Ishmael Bush than the trapper. The wasted earth they left behind them was indication to their moral state.

A more complicated exploiter, but one equally worrying for the future, was Dr. Obed Bat, the satirized physical scientist who accompanied Bush and who was in his own way as self-centered as the squatter. In his assumption of the scientific view toward nature, Dr. Bat believed that all knowledge and power will one day be within the reach of "reasoning, learned, scientific, triumphant man" (129). He also anticipated the time when science will enable man to "become the master of all learning, and, consequently, equal to the great moving principle" (223-24). Though certainly superior to Bush in education and alteration of character, Dr. Bat, whose name suggested his unintelligence, was remarkably like him in the statement of his own ego and in the assumption that his mind would represent the standard for judging the universe. He was similar to the squatter also in that the removal of civil and religious restraints had encouraged the development of selfish desires, for Dr. Bat was much more interested in garnering personal fame than in modestly increasing human knowledge.

Cooper denies the legitimate aims of freedom and knowledge in his portrayal of Bush and Bat, since all the evidence of his life and works clearly indicated his devotion to freedom and his respect for true science. What he attacked was the arrogance to both physical and intellectual aspects of existence on the part of disobedient men. Through the character of the trapper, he revealed the basis for its control. In *The Prairie*, the trapper was more specifically religious than he had been in the previous books. In *The Pioneers*, he had turned away from the Reverend Mr. Grant’s church but his moral view of the
world remained unchanged. His experience in the untamed wilderness had convinced him of his smallness in relation to God’s universe, had developed in him a deep spirit of humility, and endowed him with a true sense of his own limitations. Like Bush, he wanted no unnecessary laws – the fewer the better – for he knew how men could distort the injunctions of God for their own willful ends. But unlike Bush, he desired his freedom, not to gratify his own passionate wishes, but to exert willingly that principle of self-discipline and self-government which lies at the heart of both true religion and true democracy.

By the end of *The Prairie*, the problem that Leatherstocking has had to face is abundantly clear. Distrustful of the social and civil law, on the one hand, he detested the aberrations, on the other. He had achieved the self-discipline he needed to lead a free and a social life, but he had also learnt that few others could attain by themselves the same desirable end. He had sought the woods to lead the kind of life he loved, but every step he took westward opened a path for the exploiters who followed him. At last, driven to the Great Plains "by a species of desperate resignation" (viii-ix), he died physically defeated; but intellectually and morally he still maintained his deeply-felt philosophy. That the attitude toward the universe which the trapper affirmed ought to animate the lives of those who follow him is clearly the meaning of the three books. That human nature being what it is, men will not follow the moral path is equally certain. If they do not, however, men face a serious question of whether or not a free society can survive on a selfishly despoiled and wasted continent. In his three early tales of the wilderness, therefore, Cooper penetrated the heart of the American experience and raised questions that were to disturb him for the greater part of his career.
Cooper was not at his best when writing true historical romance. He was always much more successful when dealing with a kind of symbolic history, a fact which is easily substantiated by turning from the dull Mercedes to the last two *Leatherstocking Tales*, which precede and follow it in the Cooper canon: *The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer*. These two tales, concerning as they do the career of the Leatherstocking thirteen years after Cooper had laid him to rest on the prairie, present the critic with a double problem. Obviously, these are related to the three tales that had already been written in the series. But these must always be seen too in the immediate context of Cooper's work. The relation to the three early Leatherstocking tales is clear enough, not only in the reappearance of the characters of Natty Bumppo (here called Pathfinder) and Chingachgook, but also in Cooper’s return to the natural landscape to dominate the tone of his book. Repeatedly stressing the sublimity of both the forest and the lake, he clearly makes the point that the power of God, revealed in each, should teach the lesson of humility to all who see themselves in relation to the natural wilderness. The themes of the American waste of nature, of the unjust displacement of the red men, of the march of civilization across the continent, and of the insecurity of the white man in the virgin wilderness were present in *The Pathfinder* as they were in *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Prairie*.

The themes however, are soft in *The Pathfinder*. The fundamental purpose of the book is something far closer to the central issue in the “Home” volumes than to anything in the early wilderness tales. The real problem of the book is not social, but in the “manners” connotation of that word. This primary interest is somewhat obscured in wilderness material and by the relatively low social position of the characters: they are
much below the level of Effingham. Nevertheless, their problem is similar. Cooper insists that social station is important at all levels of society since the class lines exist everywhere, although they are not rigidly fixed. They are not to be crossed with impunity. Of course classes are never purely hereditary with Cooper for although one tends to belong to the class of his father, people can rise above or fall below the station into which they were born. Cooper stresses the fact that each person has his appropriate gifts and special knowledge, and that to overstep the limits thus placed on everyone will usually lead to disaster. For example, Cap was a salt-water sailor who could not command successfully on Lake Ontario, for his knowledge and experience were not equal to the task. When he tried to command the Scud in place of Jasper Western, a Great Lakes sailor, he almost ran the ship aground. It is saved only when Jasper assumes command. In the practical world, each must act in accordance with his talents, knowledge, and experience. In the less tangible world of social relations, the same truth is equally manifest. Lieutenant Muir, the uxorious quartermaster, fell below his proper station because of his numerous marriages and his less formal liaisons with women; Mabel Dunham, the sergeant’s daughter, had been educated beyond the point that would make her a suitable match for a common soldier, but she had not attained sufficient knowledge and sophistication to be an officer's lady (115-16). Her problem, therefore, was a difficult one; for in the military garrison, there were few eligible suitors for her hand. Hence, the central theme of the book is a peculiarly social one – the proper marriage for the heroine; but the problem is set against a highly unusual background. In the wilderness outpost, of course, Mabel became the centre of attention of a wide variety of men. Arrowhead, a Tuscarora chief, was attracted to her, Lieutenant Muir became her
suitor; and Pathfinder and Jasper Western became rivals for her hand. The former two were obviously unsuitable, and the sergeant, totally unaware of the position his daughter has achieved (307-8), and judging suitability solely by his own masculine standards, encouraged the suit of Pathfinder. The simple woodsman, for the first time called Adam-like at the very moment that Cooper tries to humanize him (143), so far forgets himself as to let the sergeant persuade him to hope for Mabel's love.

Cooper’s use of Leatherstocking in such a social context has been much commented upon by the critics. Zoellner, in particular, has pointed out that The Pathfinder really does not fit in the overall pattern of the Leatherstocking series (413). Everything that Cooper had written of his character certainly indicated that his forest life, his deep friendship with his male companions, and his function as the symbolic embodiment of the American consciousness forbade his settling down in a cabin with his wife and children. Yet Cooper manages to make his attraction to Mabel believable, mainly because, despite his desire, he seems himself somehow reluctant to win her and his grotesque half-laughter, half-weeping when he is refused convincingly presents the conflict between the two elements – the social and the asocial – in his character. On purely material grounds, the match is unsuitable, for it is beyond belief that Pathfinder could adopt the ways of the settlements for very long. Although the sergeant almost extracts from the couple a promise that they will marry, Pathfinder learns that Mabel and Jasper are in love, gives up his suit, and sees them happily settled in a cabin on the lake. He supposed the truth about himself – that he is born to celibacy in the wilderness and could never hope to reach the level of civilization that Mabel and Jasper represent. His "gifts" forbid that he could ever be content with it.
In the context of the order of Cooper's novels, *The Pathfinder* has less to say about American expansionism than about American social democracy. Cooper insisted upon class lines, but he also maintained that they had nothing to do with political democracy, or the inherent value of men. Jasper Western was better educated and more refined than Pathfinder and, as such, is a better match for Mabel. But he was not necessarily a better man. Jasper and Pathfinder were equal in virtue, though different in talent and experience; both were morally superior to Lieutenant Muir, who had many material advantages in life. Men are different, are are unequal. Cooper argues that each should organise his life with a clear understanding of both his talents and his deficiencies. Jasper was superior on fresh water, Cap on salt, and Pathfinder in the woods. If each but stoops to what he knows and can do, in humble submission to the will of God revealed in the sublimity of forest and sea, all will be well. If men fall into the natural classes determined by the function they can fulfill in life, a just society will result. Indeed, some will rise, just as Japer and Mabel eventually move into the merchant class in New York (515). These ideas might sound a little conservative, but Cooper is prudent and idealist enough to delineate the subtleties involved. It will not be a leveling democracy, however, or one where Steadfast Dodge can operate; it will be truly democratic so long as each is free to find his proper station because of merit alone.

Cooper’s choice of the familiar wilderness materials to present his social concepts was a particularly happy one. It removed the issue from the contemporary scene where the sensibilities of his audience were likely to be bruised. Yet it really did not change the point he was trying to make. It is likely, of course, that many among his audience missed the theme completely, it might also be said of *The Deerslayer* for it too was concerned
less with the march of American values. The last of *The Leatherstocking Tales* to be written, though the first in the chronology of the hero’s life, *The Deerslayer* is perhaps the best of the series in the complexity of its meaning and in its affirmation of value in American life. Like *The Pathfinder*, it concentrates on lowly characters, and is concerned with matters of considerable social import; but it places much more stress upon moral meaning. The book has a strongly religious tone which provides the series with its final note of affirmation.

The setting of the tale is similar to that of *The Prairie* in its almost perfect wilderness state, but the natural landscape is not nearly so harsh and forbidding. In contrast to the absolute desolation of the earlier book, the Glimmerglass (Otsego Lake) shines like a jewel in the wilderness of trees that stretches west from the Hudson River halfway across the continent. The dominant mood is peace and serenity; and Cooper pauses frequently to stress the quiet of forest and lake at night, at dawn, at high noon—indeed whenever its place is not shattered by the crack of a rifle or the shrieks of passionate men. It is a landscape “altogether soothing, and of a character to lull the passions into a species of holy calm” (83). It ought to fill all who perceive it with the feeling of reverence and awe for its Creator that, Cooper writes in the preface, had been the dominant influence on the character of Deerslayer; but unfortunately it does not. As he puts it, "I have only studied the hand of God, as it is seen in the hills and the valleys, the mountain-tops, the streams, the forest, and the springs,” the woodsman once tells Hetty Hutter (267). But he had learnt more from such tuition than have most of the other white characters. Like most Americans, they accepted, as a matter of course, whatever was familiar to them and seldom gave it a second thought. The only man-made objects to
be seen on the lake were the ark, a large boat, and the castle of Tom Hutter, a house built on piles out on the water. Cooper makes the castle a kind of microcosm of the moral states possible to men in such a setting. At the bottom of the scale were Tom Hutter and Hurry Harry (Harry March, the former, an ex-pirate; and the latter, a woodsman.) Hurry, in particular, illustrated a number of the most unattractive American traits. He took great pride in his good looks and physical strength, justified to himself whatever he wanted to do, and threw tantrums when dissatisfied. He was endlessly restless, as his nickname implied, and he considered members of other races “all to be animals” (Cooper, *The Deerslayer* 24). He thus represented an unpleasant side of the American character that is still with us.

Moreover, Hurry and Hutter were as financially motivated as any of Cooper's European villains. Since the only value they respected was money, they would do anything to get it, even go to the extent of killing women and children to collect the bounty placed on Indian scalps. They were literally in business for all they can get out of it; and in the first attack on the Huron camp they almost scalped Hist, Chingachgook's fiancée, who was a prisoner of the Hurons. Judith, too, Tom's older daughter, was a creature who worshipped the physical, both in her own beauty and in the glitter of the British officers who sometimes visit the lake. Thus, in a setting that should convince all men of the vanity of their selfish motives, all three characters are determined upon their own willful ends.

Opposed to the above view was the affirmation of the Delawares, Deerslayer, and Hetty, Tom's younger daughter. The Indians, of course, lived in close communion with nature and followed their own red "gifts" to lead a satisfactory life, but one necessarily far below the Christian ideal that Cooper holds up for his readers. Still, the Indians were
morally superior to Tom and Hurry. They scalped for glory; but, since they knew no better, they could not really be blamed. Deerslayer and Hetty, however, affirmed a higher good. Both were curiously alike in being unreasoning creatures – Deerslayer was simply an uneducated and generally an unthinking man; Hetty, simple-minded from birth. Both were frequently described as child-like, and one cannot escape the impression that they both had achieved the happy state (they have become as little children) that the Gospel of St. Luke describes as the passport to Heaven. Both were removed from the sophisticated temptations of civilized life, and both were somewhat deficient (Deerslayer is physically unattractive; Hetty, simple-minded) in qualities most frequently praised among men. Despite these handicaps—or perhaps because of them—both tried to live their lives in accordance with Christian morality and ethics. As Brady has noted, there is a Dostoevskian quality in these marred, but moral, beings.

That the completely Christian life which Hetty in particular affirmed was all but impossible in a fallen world would seem to be part of the meaning of the book, but the converse is equally true. The totally unchristian life is in complete chaos. To illustrate his point, Cooper sends Hetty into the Huron camp to plead for the lives of her father and Hurry, both captured in their scalping expedition against the Indians. Hetty accepts the injunctions of Christ to forgive one's enemies and to turn the other cheek as literal guides to life, and she preaches them to the Indians. She is utterly confounded, however, when Rivenoak, the Huron chief, asks her why the whites do not follow these themselves – a question that a Christian apologist intellectually stronger than Hetty might have trouble in answering. But if Hetty's course was impractical, her words clearly illustrate how far below the Christian ideal her father has fallen, and how richly he deserves the fate that
the Indians, rendering simple justice, finally mete out to him. They scalp him alive and leave him to suffer and die.

Between these extremes stands Deerslayer, whose practical experience keeps him from trying to live by the ideal ethics that Hetty preaches, but whose Christian training at the hands of the Moravians prevents him from engaging in the ghastly occupation of Tom and Hurry. Rather, he follows, as he tells the Indians, the law of nature (rather than the law of God) "to do, lest you should be done by" (538). Deerslayer is on his first warpath and as his name implies, he has heretofore been a hunter, not a warrior. Now, in a beautifully written passage that Winters justly praises as among Cooper's best (36-37), Deerslayer confronts his first enemy, graciously offers him a chance for his life, and by the quickness of his eye (the dying Indian names him Hawkeye) shoots his first human being. In killing him and a second Indian, however, Deerslayer is not the aggressor. To be sure, his actions are something less than the Christ-like turning of the other cheek that Hetty tries to preach to the Hurons. But his actions are certainly practical – and these have the universal justification of self-defense.

In this practical world, of course, Hetty could not survive; for, although she bore a charmed life among the Indians, she was totally incompetent to live in normal society; and the man she loved, Hurry Harry, hardly realised that she existed; so attracted was he to the beautiful Judith. It is appropriate, therefore, that she be killed accidentally in the final fight, just as it is essentially right that the lovely, but stained, Judith be discarded by Deerslayer when she offers him her love. But if Hetty's principles were unreasonable, it is equally true that civilized society cannot survive with the standards of Tom and Hurry. The worship of the physical, to the detriment of the spiritual (the love of things, as
opposed to the love of principle, which Cooper saw everywhere in American life), and
the economic motivation that will condone all acts which bring a profit are both wrong
attitudes that can only lead to disaster. Tom and Hurry are the New World counterparts of
the Abbot Bonifacius, Count Enrich, and Heinrich Frey. Here *The Deerslayer* is as
eloquent a warning against the subversion of principle for profit as was *The Heidenmauer*
or *The Monikins*, or, for that matter, the two novels of contemporary manners that he had
completed just three years before.

A practical compromise between the best and the worst in men was certainly
Deerslayer, who was imperfect and fallible but also, in Brady's words, “an embodied
conscience for America” (95). He was a man who saw the moral values of the American
landscape and who had absorbed enough from the Moravian missionaries to give that
perception a definitely Christian tone. He represented a kind of competent humility,
uns selfish and unconcerned with the impediments of American things; and he affirmed the
American principle by calmly and quietly going his way almost instinctively doing what
was right. Uneducated and unreasoning, he clearly showed that virtue does not depend on
qualities of the mind, but may well be corrupted by these. Being physically unattractive,
he illustrated that a beautiful reality may exist behind an unprepossessing exterior
appearance. He lacked, of course, the civilizing qualities of Judge Temple in *The
Pioneers*, and one cannot escape the conclusion that the ideal American would somehow
combine characteristics of the two. Nevertheless, in this final volume of *The
Leatherstocking Tales*, Cooper developed a character who criticized in all he said and did
the evil realities present in American life.

And yet, *The Deerslayer* did not end on a truly optimistic note. To be sure, the
Glimmerglass returned to its naturally beautiful state, the selfish characters retired to the fort, and Deerslayer and his Indian friends melt into the wilderness. But the reader of the tale knows what is going to happen: the ideas that Deerslayer affirms here and reaffirms in *The Pathfinder* and *The Last of the Mohicans* will be ignored by his fellow Americans. The struggle between white man and red will be re-enacted for over a century. The settlers will come with axes and gun to chop the trees and slaughter the game in *The Pioneers*, and the earth at last will belong to its despoilers. Ishmael Bush is implicit in the characters of Hurry Harry and Tom Hutter, for they are a constant factor in the American scene and become increasingly important as the wilderness is opened. It is with a kind of nostalgia for what might have been that we see Deerslayer, Chingachgook, and Uncas pass into the wilderness at the end of *The Deerslayer*; for this has been the first stage of the struggle, not only between the whites and Indians, but between the values of Deerslayer and those of Harry March. And we know the result of that conflict: the Harry Marches win.

If we read in these terms, *The Deerslayer* is a much more significant book than Mark Twain's criticism would have us believe. Indeed, it may well be considered Cooper's masterpiece, for it unites, in one well-executed whole, the dual streams that had been developing in his work: the sense of the American past, in both its temporal and spatial aspects, and the question of values as they were developing in the contemporary American life. *The Deerslayer* was the logical culmination of the Leatherstocking series. It affirmed a set of values that were always implicit in the earlier tales; and, with *The Pathfinder*, it applied these by implication for the contemporary American scene. The fully developed religious view everywhere apparent in the book was thoroughly
consistent with that expressed in the best of Cooper’s previous novels. Further, the financial motivation, criticised in the characters of Hurry Harry and Tom Hutter, was the same that the author had attacked in *The Bravo, The Heidenmauer*, and *The Monikins*. To be sure, Cooper had thrown the scene of the story a century down the past and thus escaped the kind of criticism leveled against the inferior novels that had attempted to describe contemporary manners. But his theme remained the same.

With *The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer*, Cooper’s work had come full circle. He returned to the material with which he had won his first great success; but the intervening years, difficult and unsuccessful as they certainly had been, were by no means wasted. Cooper's residence in Europe had given a new direction to his thought and world view, and provided him with a point of reference from which to judge the changes he saw taking place in American life. The inability of his countrymen to understand or accept his conclusions forced him to organise these in a coherent pattern and to experiment with means for their expression. Surely, we can, in part, thank the difficulties that Cooper experienced in the mid-1830s for that fine little volume of political theory, *The American Democrat*. And his persistence in seeking a form for the presentation of his ideas, though it led him to compose several bad novels such as *Homeward Bound* and *Home as Found*, also induced him to experiment once again with his wilderness settings. The result was the last two Leatherstocking tales, the one a thoroughly competent social novel, the other a true masterpiece.

*The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer* thus represent Cooper's recovery of the fine creative gifts that had been largely dissipated in the frustrating years since *The Bravo*. Once again, he had managed to draw his physical backgrounds with a convincing degree
of verisimilitude; and, more importantly, he was able to generate a significant theme from the realities among which his characters move. That the themes he developed in the second decade of his authorship were in many ways more fundamental than those he had previously treated bespeaks most clearly his intellectual and artistic development, for the best work of this second decade was superior to that of the first. A more sophisticated Cooper wrote *The Bravo*, and then *The Spy*; a more skillful artist composed *The Deerslayer*, then created *The Pioneers*. As I have endeavoured to show throughout in my analysis of his works, Cooper had truly found himself during this long and difficult period. To be sure, he would sometimes err and write weak novels in the years ahead. But the moral theme he had developed in *The Deerslayer* gave an added dimension to his work – one that was to become increasingly important in the tales that immediately followed.

The first of *The Leatherstocking Tales*, and it is also Called “A Descriptive Tale,” drew its meaning fundamentally from the depiction of the society and the relation of that society to the natural environment. The American wilderness had to be destroyed, if civilization was to be spread across the continent. In his five late novels, therefore, Cooper gives full expression to a line of thought, which, although it had been developing for many years in his works, had become a major theme only since his return to serious fiction in the early 1840s. Certainly such characters as Harvey Birch and Leatherstocking had expressed a religious view of life, and *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* had given this theme a full, rich, and sublimated expression. The social aspects of Cooper’s thought, however, had dominated his work in the 1830s; and, although *Home as Found* does discuss the question of democracy in moral terms, the religious theme did not generally
assume major proportions again until the last of the Leatherstocking tales. Combined with the growth of this theme is the development of Cooper’s view of the world as a moral chaos. The conflict of appearance and reality, a theme which was developed first in *Precaution* and *The Spy*, but not especially important, immediately thereafter, comes into full expression in these later novels, which allow much less room for disinterested virtue than did Cooper’s first work. The world darkened to Cooper’s view as he grew older; and, although he is still most careful to affirm a standard of value even in the somber *Wyandotte*, it is not one that is easily found or maintained.

Cooper never allowed his characters to escape into the facile acceptance of an easy faith. Miles Wallingford's own acceptance comes as the result of the most trying circumstances when he measured himself against the forces of the universe and finds himself wanting, a process which reminds one of the Leatherstocking's experience deep in the wilderness and which has much the same result. Nor does Cooper promise his believers any easy success in life. Although Miles prospers from the providential ordering of the universe, Cooper does not make his success the specific reward for his faith. Indeed, the action in these late novels would seem to imply that success in the world comes more usually from connivance with evil. Ithuel Bolt prospers as much as Miles Wallingford does, and the Willoughby family remains the classic example of the apparent injustice with which material reward is meted out in this world. Cooper was obviously as fascinated by the mystery of good and evil as Melville was later to become; and, although he never stood in open rebellion against the universe and found his affirmative value much sooner than did the later romancer, he saw it still as the profound mystery of life.
Cooper, of course, did not find so all-encompassing a symbol as did Melville for the expression of his theme, but he did manage to give it a satisfying artistic form in each of these tales. The open conflict expressed in *The Two Admirals* and *The Wing-and-Wing* may at first seem too simple for many modern tastes; but, as is usual with Cooper, the surface simplicity veils a rich complexity beneath. The thematic relation between the main plot and the subplots in the former book, and the ambiguity of its conclusion, provide a depth of meaning not immediately obvious in the tale. The complex motivations of the characters in the later book make it difficult to assign the tags of "good" or "evil" to any of them. And in *Wyandotte* the frontier settlement – recalling as it does similar islands of civilization deep in the wilderness in *The Pioneers*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*, and *The Deerslayer* – illustrates very well the thematic use to which Cooper could put the realistic details of his settings. In each novel, the fort or town serves a symbolic purpose central to the meaning of the work. The Hutted Knoll in *Wyandotte*, for instance, is as much a microcosm as are the ships in Melville or Conrad.

Finally, in *Afloat and Ashore* and *Miles Wallingford*, Cooper found an original means for developing his theme. The use of the parallel incidents on shipboard and shore gave him both narrative variety and freedom of thematic development. What happens in *Afloat and Ashore* illuminates life on land, and the two together create an imaginatively convincing view of the nature of reality. His characters, like his incidents (except perhaps for the sentimentalised death of Grace), are true to life; but they fulfill, at the same time, an important thematic function. As in his earliest work, Cooper was able to create in these novels a convincing background and action that formed the basis for a significant
moral theme. That the meaning of the action is likely to be acceptable to twentieth-century readers, who are apt to adopt as dark a view of the world as Cooper presents here, bespeaks the truth that Cooper still has something of importance to say to modern Americans. And that his themes are as well-expressed, through plot, setting, and character as they showed unmistakably that Cooper had never really lost the artistry of his first serious fiction. Regarded in these terms, the much-neglected later novels deserve more serious consideration from modern critics than they have yet received. To be sure, they were somewhat different from Cooper’s early, more popular work, but they are by no means inferior.

5.2 Historical Development and Narrative Continuity

Cooper brought out the problematic aspects of the American conquest of the frontier in *The Pioneers*, by combining magnificent descriptions of the upstate New York landscape with serious questions about the legitimacy of private appropriation of the land. He organized the plot of *The Pioneers* around two different disputes concerning property; and both disputes raised questions about the meaning of the principles of the American Declaration of Independence.

The first conflict that Cooper described involved young Oliver “Edwards” challenging the right of Judge Marmaduke Temple to appropriate the estate of the young man's pre-revolutionary British patron and friend, Maj. Oliver Effingham (Edwards’s grandfather). This dispute was asserted in the Declaration. Since King George and the British Parliament legally ruled the colonies, there had been no appeal in law, ultimately, against their authority, because they declared what the law was. The colonists had
appealed, therefore, to “the law of nature and nature's God” in order to maintain the justice of their cause. By declaring and then fighting for their independence, however, the colonists had in effect seized the land from the British. Did the American War for Independence merely constitute robbery of the British landlord? Did it represent a mere exercise of might, cloaked with doctrines of "natural right"? Natty Bumppo thought so. Early in *The Pioneers*, he complained, “Might often makes right, here as well as in the old world” (22); and later, “Might makes right, and the law is stronger than an old man” (135).

According to the Declaration of Independence, governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed.” Natty had never consented to the institution of government at Templeton, however, because he did not believe that settlements and property were either desirable, or necessary. If all human beings were to take only what they needed from nature, he argued, government would not be necessary to secure anyone's rights. By what right, then, did Judge Temple enforce the law against him? Thus, the second conflict in the novel – between Judge Temple and Natty – raises the same question posed by the revolutionary struggle, but at a broader or more general level: By what right does any person or people claim a part of the earth for their exclusive use? In *The Pioneers*, Cooper concentrated on the question of the legitimacy of the American settlement of land previously held by the British. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, he then took up an even more fundamental question: By what right had the European whites seized the lands of the original inhabitants?

By presenting Judge Temple rather sympathetically, Cooper suggested that not only the Americans had declared their independence as a matter of right (not merely self-
interest), but also that the institution of law had been necessary to secure the rights for which the Americans fought. Temple based his law on the very natural foundation or morality of self-restraint (“no waste”) that Natty himself embodied. When Natty bemoaned the waste and destruction resulting from a massive haul of fish engineered by the judge’s cousin, Richard Jones, Temple generously responded: “Your reasoning is mine: for once, old hunter, we agree in opinion; and I heartily wish we could make a convert of the sheriff. A net of half the size of this would supply the whole village with fish for a week at one haul.” Natty, however, refused to be drawn into an alliance with the representative of law and organised society. “No, no; we are not much of one mind, Judge, or you'd never turn good hunting grounds into stumpy pastures” (Cooper, *The Pioneers*, 205).

5.3 Conclusion

To conclude, I have traced the subtleties and complexities of James Fenimore Cooper’s intertextual literary art in my dissertation. My particular focus has been on the concept and practice of interfigurality. I have presented my argument concerning these in terms of Cooper’s engagement of the historical reality of his time. I have discussed the fecund cross connections of his magnum opus, *The Leatherstocking Tales*, in relation to themes of history, race, genre, and political engagement. It is my belief that this work will contribute to a critically nuanced understanding of Cooper’s work, particularly against the background of contemporary socio-political, literary-critical, and theoretical concerns which despite the passage of time can be discerned in this eighteenth-century writer’s oeuvre. It is also my hope that these concerns will resonate across historical epochs and with increasing critical sophistication in dealing with literary texts.