Chapter 2

COOPER’S INTERTEXTUAL ART

As it were, James Fenimore Cooper started his career by imitating others. Though he wrote many novelistic works in his career, he started his life as a writer by imitating writers such as Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott. The adaptation of the narrative formula and ideological assumption of the Waverley novels implicitly links Cooper with Sir Walter Scott. In his preface to The Leatherstocking Tales, Cooper says: “If anything from the pen of the writer of these is at all to outlive himself, it is unquestionably the series of the leather-stocking tales” (The Pathfinder vii). These lines were written by James Fenimore Cooper when he was combining all the five novels into a series. Significantly, he put in some American historical events and social circumstances with the intention to show the nature of American people and conditions of the region by using its history. In a sense, he was the first person who put America into fiction. He gave voice and meaning to the period in which he lived and wrote. In each novel, he focused on different historical episodes. The intention of the writer was to show the gradual growth in the maturity of the American people and changes in their life style and culture.

The Leatherstocking Tales reflect American modes of thinking and living as well as an admixture of civilizations which was a part and parcel of the country’s historical evolution. James Cooper was the son of a landlord, William Cooper, who wrote a book entitled A Guide in Wilderness (1897). Young Cooper was influenced by his childhood experiences with his family. He had a sister and a brother who were very wild and showed plainly and unabashedly that they had been bred in the woods. By contrast,
Cooper was destined to be a highly „civilized” writer who depicted his personal experiences of the early imagined frontier.

During the eighteenth century, Americans were engaged in a struggle for their lives and freedom. In *The Deerslayer* Cooper used the word “deer” “to indicate the race of life in the conflict-ridden American wilderness, and he used it as a metaphor for the race. In *The Deerslayer*, there is a conversion between Judith and Hawkeye, in which the latter says:

> See me in a coat fit for a lord! Well, Judith, if you wait till that day, you will wait until you see me beyond reason and memory. No-no-gal, my gifts are my gifts, and I”ll live and die in „em, though I never bring down another deer or spear another salmon. What have I done that you should wish to see me in such a flaunting coat, Judith? (Cooper, *The Deerslayer* 189)

From these lines we can understand that he might have used the word “deer,” as I mentioned above, as a metaphor for race. Cooper’s best subject was the western frontier, where American society might be conceived as passing from one set of principles to another in two directions at once. It is said of many novels that the landscape itself is a character therein. An instance is Thomas Hardy’s Wessex novels. But Cooper exceeds others in his grasp of geography and nature. He drew metaphors from the clouds, the birds, the seasons, and the beasts. As said earlier, *The Leatherstocking Tales* consists of five novels. Three of these were written in the 1820s and two in the 1840s. The development of the series is usually described as a movement from personal experiences to myth, and from hard facts of old age to the pleasing possibilities of youth. Perhaps this
is another of Cooper’s ways to dechronologize human development through time as well as historical evolution in its reverse version. Each of these descriptions is true, but it is more comprehensively true that Cooper increasingly generalized his materials.

The designation the Frontier is not a man himself in spirit or fact, but Cooper was indeed a product of the frontier conditions which became the inevitable and indispensable material for his novels. According to him, literature is an expression of opinions and imaginations in accord with the actual conditions. To him it meant geography and setting to a substantial degree. Cooper tried to bring awareness among the American people and introduce some principles which would help the people to achieve peace and harmony.

The last of the Mohicans is an important work of James Fenimore Cooper. He failed to get the attention of the readers in his first work Precaution, which was an imitation of Jane Austen’s The Persuasion. From this novel he got good material for his future novels. In The Spy he employed the narrative style of Sir Walter Scott. Cooper adapted Scott’s settings and imparted a different kind of attraction to his characters. He portrays the characters in his own style. He adopted the idea of “neutral ground” from Scott. He developed the idea of neutral ground in a thoroughly original manner, which helped him to create a hero for The Leatherstocking Tales. I am of course referring to Natty Bumppo.

The character of Natty Bumppo was developed from Harvey Birch, a character in The Spy. The intention of this novel was to foster “the mental independence of America” (William P. Kelly. Plotting American Past). Cooper derived most of the information for his novel from Heckewelder’s An Account of the History, Manner and Customs of the Indian Nation. Further, Cooper got the idea of pairing white and black from Scott. He was to put the device to effective use in many of his works.
2.1 Cooper’s Artistic Method

Cooper was one of the greatest artists in the area of romantic fiction, and he wrote many fictional and non-fictional works. He involves and interacts with the reader in all the novels of the series. He had a method of giving some idea about the chapter before he went in detail into the story. For example, consider the following passage: “the daughter to whom we have introduced the reader . . . we shall here close off this brief explanation of the history and of some of our personages leaving them in future to speak and act for themselves” (Cooper, *The Pioneers* 30). He makes the reader to think about and imagine the scenes. For instance, he says: “we shall leave the reader to imagine the restoration of Louisa’s scenes” (Cooper, *The Pioneers* 239). I could see epilogues for every chapter and find that Cooper had used the method to give some clue about the chapters. He was criticized by Mark Twain for violating the specifications concerning some literary rules. These rules require, among other things, that “the personages in the tale shall be alive, except in the case of corpses, and that always the reader shall be able to tell the corpses from the others. But this detail has been overlooked in The *Deerslayer.*” Between these two extremes, there have always been readers of Cooper who can enjoy him simply as a story-teller, a writer of romances and adventure tales, without worrying too much about literary transgressions. But of course American literature was evolving in freedom and creativity during Cooper’s period.

One reader who confesses to being able to read Cooper in this pleasurable way was D.H. Lawrence, and yet in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Lawrence went on to explain not only the pleasure he found in Cooper, but also the importance of Cooper as a kind of mythic demiurge of Homer of American literature. He saw in Natty
Bumppo, Chingachgook, and their associates in *The Leatherstocking Tales* a new product of the poetic imagination. He saw that although the “American Scott” was influenced by the Waverley novels, he was an original writer and that his real descendants were not American Bulwer-Lyttons and American Stevensons, but writers such as Melville. Lawrence’s ideas gained more credence because, without mentioning it, he clearly agreed with most of the allegations of Mark Twain’s essay. He said, in effect, “Yes, yes, that is all true, but observe that out of the welter of literary defects and absurdities there emerges an original conception of the life of man and its significance which will be mirrored again and again in the works of later American authors.”

He had some of the gifts of the true novelist and more of those of the romancer, and these gifts often served him well over the short run. Usually, his successes were scored in scenes of intense and violent action; he excelled in ambuscades, combats, flights, and pursuit, and all forms of forest melodrama. He was very good, too, at nocturnal terror and mystery. He was unsurpassed at rendering the panoramic effects suggested to him by the sea or by the American forest and prairie. Above all, of course, he could do magnificently with Natty Bumppo in the forest or on the lake or the prairie. All these indicate an awareness of America in contact with its new landscape and a literary tradition which it both inherited and with which it was struggling.

Cooper conceives of his duty as public and national figure and also, of course, because he was among the first on the scene. As a writer, he was able to formulate some of the principal attitudes and dilemmas of American fiction. We see these amply expressed not only in the novels, but also in the didactic cultural studies like *Notions of the Americans*. But for our purposes, these attitudes and dilemmas can best be brought
out by a consideration of two of Cooper’s most characteristic novels, *Satanstoe* and *The Prairie* – reserving *The Prairie* for the last (even though *The Prairie* appeared earlier and *Satanstoe* later). This is interesting because these were a part of the *Leatherstocking* series, for which Cooper was correct in thinking posterity would value him most highly.

According to D H Lawrence, *The Deerslayer* is „the most fascinating of the *Leatherstocking Tales.“ He observes:

I think he was right. Yet I shouldn’t wish to endorse Marius Bewley’s judgment that *The Deerslayer* is „probably the best thing Cooper ever wrote”? For the fascination of this novel is in some respects the fascination of a puzzle: how can a work of art, that is so often gauche, improbable, crowded, bigoted, puerile—how can such a work form, as I believe *The Deerslayer* does, an aesthetic whole which is intensely moving and convincing? Certainly *The Pathfinder* seems to be a much better novel, so far as artistic unity and design are concerned.

It is in *The Prairie* that the Leatherstocking attains his sainthood. We also realize that the very different materials of *The Pioneers* and *The Mohicans* are, however, improbably yoked together. I take this as a telling indication of Cooper’s intertextual freedom in composition. *The Pioneers* is a novel of manners and social analysis, whereas *The Mohicans* is a tale in which a narrative of adventure is used as a vehicle for social analysis. Though the latter is not so intellectually contemptible as has often been supposed, the former is one of Cooper’s most thoughtful and richly intellectual works. *The Prairie* is nearly as adventurous as *The Mohicans*; it is in some ways a novel of manners; and it is a good deal more intellectually pretentious than *The Pioneers*. This
sounds like an unlikely mixture, and it is highly improbable that anyone has ever claimed that *The Prairie* was a perfectly homogeneous work. Yet it has been claimed that *The Prairie* „has more inner coherence and unity of tone than the other books in the Leatherstocking series” is this so?

There is such a pattern of alternating repose and frenetic activity – and it is indeed a great improvement on the narrative pattern of *The Last of the Mohicans*, in which the action seems unrelenting over quite long stretches. However, Professor Chase’s, *The American Novel and its Tradition (1957)* discovery of a general thematic significance in this pattern does not accord with this researcher’s experience of the novel. Doubtless, the pattern helps to bring out the extraordinary soundness and vigour of the tireless old trapper, whose physical state is a manifestation of his moral and spiritual condition. In this way, it prepares us for the conclusion of the novel, when Leatherstocking is about to die.

2.2 Cooper’s Continual Plots

The connection between the return to nature motif in American fiction and the principles of the Declaration of Independence has been lost, at least partly because the works of James Fenimore Cooper have fallen into disrepute. Everyone recognizes that Cooper originated the return to the nature theme through his brilliant depiction of Natty Bumppo; and Cooper was very explicit about the didactic aims of his literary works. In *A Letter to His Countrymen*, Cooper described himself as “an American who wished to illustrate and enforce the peculiar principles of his own country by the agency of polite literature.” When he thought that his readers had misunderstood the political significance of his fiction, Cooper even stopped writing novels for a time and turned to a directly
argumentative explication of the Declaration of Independence, in The American Democrat. Appropriately understood, Cooper argued that the principles of the American Declaration of Independence are the principles of natural rights. Obviously, here Cooper draws upon a long tradition of natural rights political philosophy that extends from John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Tom Paine. Unfortunately, many of his compatriots did not understand those principles properly. It was to teach them the true meaning of the central propositions of the Declaration “by the agency of polite literature” that Cooper dramatized his understanding of the natural principles of justice in stories about the character of Nathaniel Bumppo.

Concerned more about the conception of natural rights, Natty represented the development of his character per se. Cooper did not present the tales of the Leatherstocking in the chronological order of the protagonist’s life. In The Pioneers, he introduced Natty as a crotchety old woodsman who not only raises questions about the justice of the American Revolution, but also expresses doubts about whether there may be a natural basis for law. Then, in The Last of the Mohicans, Cooper used his protagonist’s adventures as a scout in the French and Indian War to ask by what right the whites had displaced the original possessors of the land. And in The Prairie, he suggested that the future peace and prosperity of the American republic would depend on a popular acceptance of the kind of natural religion that Natty preached at his death. Thus, Natty Bumppo reveals the concealed and camouflaged contradictions inherent in the American political situation.

In The Prairie, Cooper had Natty articulate the meaning of the natural standard of justice which he embodied more explicitly than in the first two novels in the
Leatherstocking series. Remindful of the English materialist philosopher Thomas Hobbes, in the state of nature, force rules. The institution of law is necessary, therefore, to protect the weak and the vulnerable. Natty the old trapper maintained his independence from the law only by relinquishing all claims to property and, what is even more fundamental, by severing all family ties. His own solitary way of life would not be possible – nor, indeed, would it be desirable – for people in the future. Cooper emphasized in his fictional practice that human existence under the reign of natural necessity is both arduous and lonely. What is attractive about Natty is not so much his life as a hunter, but his character. Cooper did not depict the life of a man living essentially by himself in nature to celebrate that man’s freedom from all conventional restraints. He sought, rather, to demonstrate that free from the distorting manners and ambitions developed along with civil society, human beings are moved by two simple but good natural sentiments: an attachment to their own existence, or preservation; and a compassionate concern for the suffering of other sentient creatures. By contrasting Natty Bumppo with both the Indians and the other “more civilized” pioneers, Cooper showed that people who forget their nature in a competition for the external marks of distinction that society spawns do not attain happiness and peace. Laws – which reinstate Natty’s natural sentiments as standards of right in civil society – are not only advantageous, but also just.

In his five novels, Cooper depicted different historical events and periods, and through the characters of Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook he continued to unify them into a series. Though initially there was no plan to compose the work as a series, the response of the public gave hopes to the writer to continue with the same subject or
strategy. When he wrote *The Pioneers* he had not any plan to continue it. It is true that Cooper did not set out at the beginning to write a coherent legend of his hero in five volumes. He even said that *The Leatherstocking Tales* were written in a very desultory and inartificial manner. Yet he expressed the general intention which, in reading the series of tales and trying to account for their cumulative significance, one supposes him to have had. Speaking of *The Pioneers*, Cooper noted that he had been correct in calling it a “descriptive tale,” because it had an unusually large element of “literal fact.” He explained that this was because he had lived as a youth in the town which formed the setting for the book and so had absorbed much of its history and local colour.

Cooper however thought that excessive realism “destroys the charm of fiction.” Such self-reflexivity in fictional composition recalls the avant-garde modernist, and may be linked to the question of intertextually. He continued by saying that fiction succeeds better by delineations of principles, and of characters in their classes, than by a too fastidious attention to originals. In the later tales of the series he undertook to supply, particularly to the central figure, the generality and idealism missing from *The Pioneers*. In response to the question whether Natty Bumppo was based on a real man, Cooper said: “In a physical sense different individuals known to the writer in early life, certainly presented themselves as models; but in the moral sense, this man of the forest is purely a creation.” Not only is he conceived as a type and an ideal, but as Cooper made it explicit, he is to be accorded whatever significance that “can be obtained from a poetical view of the subject”(Recherd chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition* (1957) Not intended on the whole to be realistic novels, *The Leatherstocking Tales* “aspire to the elevation of
romance”. In order to justify the manner in which life is viewed in these tales, Cooper cites, not a novelist, but Homer, the first poet of the Occident.

2.3 Characterization in Cooper’s Works

James Fenimore Cooper was well aware of America and its history, particularly the lives of his fellow Americans in their new habitat. He planned to write about his country. With the ideas of nationality and the nation’s condition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Cooper wanted to draw a clear picture of the emerging American nation. On the basis of his received conceptions of a nation, he created his characters and characterized them in such a way that could show or mirror the nation’s condition. The character of Natty Bumppo is a neutral character and balances both the Indian and the white characters. Natty Bumppo was bound to both the cultures and was a critic of these. He stood for the natural law. The character of Cora is emblematic of multicultural America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The characterization of Judge Temple condenses Cooper and De Lancy history in order to provide the Cooper family with imaginary origins within the established ruling classes of colonial New York 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 all the progress of the United States in the nineteenth century. This applies even to the concept of the American character. Much of the action of The Pioneers and many of the moral debates between the characters can be seen as thoroughly conditioned by Cooper.
Thus, as in *The Pioneers*, so also in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Natty embodied the prudent 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 virtually eradicated by social convention, especially through an attachment 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. These sentiments 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 when, in *The Prairie*, he has Natty preach a natural and tolerant religion that emphasised the limits of all human achievement.

Cooper accented the unconventional character of Natty Bumppo’s existence within the state of nature in the first two *Leatherstocking Tales* by showing him living with his Indian friend, Chingachgook. In *The Prairie*, the author stressed the fundamentally solitary character of life outside civil society by showing Natty facing death entirely alone. It may also be noted that James Fenimore Cooper was also influenced by William Shakespeare. He also borrowed some ideas of the Bard-of-Avon in plotting, characterization, and myth making. Cooper’s first novel, *The Pioneers*, was a property based novel, where matters that matter make their presence felt. He also maintains a Shakespearean objectivity with regard to his characters.