Published in 1827, shortly after Cooper went to France, *The Prairie* has special significance for this study since it was the last of the *Leatherstocking Tales* to be written before Indian warfare became a brutal fact. Although *The Prairie* presents a later stage in the history of Natty Bumppo, and of American development, than does *The Pioneers*, it depicts a frontier in an earlier stage of development than does the 1823 novel. In *The Pioneers*, the problem of Indian-white relationships has been solved—by the disappearance of the Indian. In *The Prairie*, the frontier has shifted westward and a new cycle of Indian-white relations has begun. This shift corresponds to American history which presents a series of continually advancing frontiers. Important also is the fact that this novel deals with Indian-white relations during a period of history which is closer in time to Cooper's writing than that of any of the other *Leatherstocking novels*.

The question of land use and ownership plays an important part in this novel, with five distinctive points of view represented by various Indians. The Sioux Indians wish to keep the land to themselves and to drive out any encroaching whites. The Pawnee Indians see the necessity of accommodating themselves to the westward expansion of American civilization. The Trapper, Natty Bumppo, wishes to leave the land undisturbed as a refuge from the uncongenial ways of the settlements. Ishmael Bush, the squatter, wants to occupy good tracts of land with no concern for legal title. and Captain Middleton represents the authority of the United States over the newly
acquired Louisiana Territory. A rather implausible plot brings these five viewpoints into contact with each other. Thus, in *The Prairie* Cooper had a major opportunity to deal with different and conflicting views of a frontier land.

As in the other *Leatherstocking Tales*, Natty Bumppo thinks of Indians as good or bad and relates this goodness or badness to their tribal affiliations. The Sioux are identified as bad Indians from their first appearance when the Trapper speaks of "a bloody band of accursed Sioux" and goes on to refer to them as "miscreants," "thieves," "reptiles," "knaves," "devils," and "imps" (*TP*, 34-37). The Trapper's attitude is also that of the book as a whole. The raiding party is described as "a band of beings, who resembled demons rather than men, sporting in their nightly revels across the bleak plain" (*TP*, 34). In another editorial passage, Cooper, speaks of the Sioux as:

> The Ishmaelites of the American deserts," implicitly links them to Ishmael Bush and his kind: From time immemorial the hands of the Sioux had been turned against their neighbours of the prairies, and even at this day, when the influence and authority of a civilized government are beginning to be felt around them, they are considered as a treacherous and dangerous race. At the period of our tale, the case was far worse; few white men trusting themselves in the remote and unprotected regions where so false a tribe was known to dwell. (*TP*, 39)

The reason for regarding the Sioux as "bad Indians" lay in their opposition to the westward movement of American settlement. Thus, although full sentimental play to the idea of aboriginal title to the land is given, only the Sioux have a will to carry this idea beyond the limits of sentimentality. Old Le Balafre scornfully attacks the white man's insatiable appetite for land: "Why cannot his people see everything, since they
crave all?" (TP, 366). The Sioux chief, Mahtoree, proposes that the Pawnee and the Sioux should no longer fight each other but rather should act together to prevent further white encroachment on Indian land:

"Does the wolf destroy the wolf, or the rattler strike his brother? You know they do not; therefore, Teton, are you wrong to go on a path that leads to the village of a Red-skin, with a tomahawk in your hand" .... (TP, 366)

"The redman can never want an enemy: they are plentier than the leaves on the trees, the birds in the heavens, or the buffaloes on the prairies. Let my brother open his eyes wide: does he nowhere see an enemy he would strike?

"Now, let not the mind of my brother go on a crooked path. If a redskin strikes a redskin forever, who will be masters of the prairies, when no warriors are left to say, 'They are mine?' Hear the voices of the old men. They tell us that in their days many Indians have come out of the woods under the rising sun, and that they have filled the prairies with their complaints of the robberies of the Long-Knives. Where a Pale-face comes, a redman cannot stay. The land is too small. They are always hungry. See, they are here already!" (TP, 390-391)

By locating the action in Pawnee rather than Sioux territory, the right of trespassing Sioux to condemn similar trespasses by the Americans is denied effectively. As the Trapper points out to Weucha, if the land is Pawnee territory, then the whites are no more trespassers than the Sioux. Like the Sioux, the Pawnees do not like white usurpation of their lands. Hard-Heart, the Pawnee-chief, shows his abused sense of justice at the manner in which France has sold the Louisianna Territory to the United States; he asks, "Where were the chiefs of the Pawnee-Loups when this bargain was made? ... Is a nation to be sold like the skin of a beaver?" (TP, 215).
In spite of this grievance the Pawnees are firm friends of Captain Middleton and his men. Repeated emphasis on the might of the American people gives an air of inevitability to the westward movement so that Hard-Heart appears to be the voice of reason as well as of honour to friends, and hospitality to strangers. Yet, however reasonable, honourable, and hospitable Hard-Heart may have been, D.H. Lawrence's comment is most appropriate in this context: "The Red Man and the White Man are not blood-brothers: even when they are most friendly. When they are most friendly, it is as a rule the one betraying his race-spirit to the other." Aware of this betrayal it reveals it in one of the most pathetic statements in the novel. As the victorious Pawnee are escorts their white friends to the Pawnee village, Cooper says:

"The victors seemed to have lost every trace of ferocity with their success, and appeared disposed to consult the most trifling of the wants of that engrossing people who were daily encroaching on their rights and reducing the redman of the West from their state of proud independence to the condition of fugitives and wanderers." (TP, 428)

Already, in his relations with his own tribe, Hard-Heart has reduced himself to the role of a puppet apologist for the white man:

He compared their countless numbers to the flights of migratory birds in the season of blossoms, or in the fall of the year. With a delicacy that none knew better how to practice than an Indian warrior, he made no direct mention of the rapacious tempers that so many of them had betrayed, in their dealings with the redmen. Feeling that the sentiment of distrust was strongly engrafted in the
tempers of his tribe, he rather endeavoured to soothe any just resentment they
might entertain, by indirect excuses and apologies. (TP, 430)

Thus, although *The Prairie* ends with a picture of the victorious Pawnees at
peace with the white men, there is no doubt that Hard-Heart and his tribesmen have
nothing to which they can look forward except the crusade of the Indians against
diminution.

Richard Chase has pointed out The autumnal mood of *The Prairie* and The
elegiac tone which this mood engenders relates most directly to the final death of
Natty Bumppo and to the unrealized dream, which he symboliz'ed, of white men
living in harmony with nature and with the Indians. In addition to its relation to Natty
Bumppo, however, this tone also relates to the Indians and to *the Prairie* which begins
to see as the last locale in which these Indians could be seen in some of their original
heroic grandeur. The Trapper has no desire for either ownership or possession of more
land than is needed for his grave. As he says to Le Balafre, when the old Indian had

"I understand you, chief; nor will I gainsay the justice of your words, seeing
that they are too much founded in truth. But though born of the race you love
so little, my worst enemy, not even a lying Mingo, would dare to say ... that I
ever coveted more ground than the Lord has intended each man to fill." (TP
366)

In his ten years on the prairie, the Trapper does not upset either the ecological or
the societal balance of the area. The arrival of Ishmael Bush and his family signals a
decisive change in this balance— with their axes as the symbols and agents of this
change. As the sons of Ishmael quickly cut down a small grove of trees, the Trapper
casts his eyes upwards at the vacancies they leave in the heavens, with a melancholy
gaze, and finally turns away, muttering to himself, with a bitter smile, like one who disdains giving a more audible utterance to his discontent. To escape this kind of destruction, the Trapper leaves the state of New York:

They scourge the very earth with their axes. Such hills and hunting-grounds as I have seen stripped of the gifts of the Lord, without remorse or shame! I tarried till the mouths of my hounds were deafened by the blows of the chopper, and then I came West in search of quiet. It was a grievous journey that I made, a grievous toil to pass through falling timber, and to breathe the thick air of smoky clearings, week after week, as I did. "Tis a far country too, that state of York from this!" (TP, 80)

The trapper has hoped that the prairie desert would deter further expansion of the frontier but now wonders if anything can stay the march of the "choppers". He does not love the prairie as he had once loved the forest, but he does take a grim delight in looking at the desolation of the landscape as a sign of God's judgement on human waste:

"I often think the Lord has placed this barren belt of prairie behind the states, to warn men to what their folly may yet bring the land! Ay! weeks, if not months, may you journey in these open fields, in which there is neither dwelling nor habitation for man or beast. Even the savage animals travel miles on miles to seek their dens: and yet the wind seldom blows from the east, but I conceive the sound of axes, and the crash of falling trees, are in my ears." (TP, 19)

"What will the Yankee choppers say, when they have cut their path from the eastern to the western waters, and find that a hand, which can lay the earth bare at a blow, has been here and swept the country, in very mockery of their
wickedness. They will turn on their tracks like a fox that doubles, and then the rank smell of their own footsteps will show them the madness of their waste."

(TP, 81)

The Trapper's attitude to the land does not represent a political option as do the other viewpoints expressed in The Prairie. In opposition to Ishmael Bush, who recognizes no ownership but that of possession, the Trapper constantly affirms that the Indians are the rightful owners of the country. In spite of this view, he does agree that Bush should fight rather than retreat from the Sioux and he directs Bush to a rock which could be turned into a fort. In spite of the Trapper's opposition to the western movement of American civilization, he is, in the final analysis, on the side of that civilization. He shows much less hesitation to fight the Sioux than he does to fight Ishmael. Although he bewails the fact that "color, and property, and tongue, and l'arning should make so wide a difference in those who, after all, are but the children of one father!" (TP, 60), the Trapper is not disposed to argue with Ishmael Bush's statement that "color should be something, when Christians meet in such a place as this" (TP, 64).

The Trapper's basic allegiance to the cause of the advancing whites is shown by the fact that he has joined the army of "Mad Anthony" Wayne and helps to defeat the Indians of the Old Northwest.

"I was passing from the states on the sea-shore into these far regions, when I crossed the trail of his army, and I fell in, on his rear, just as a looker-on; but when they got to blows, the crack of my rifle was heard among the rest, though to my shame it may be said, I never knew the right of the quarrel, as well as a man of threescore and ten should know the reason of his acts afore he takes mortal life which is a gift he never can return!" (TP, 66)
The "right of the quarrel", which Bumppo does not bother to investigate, concerns the rights of Indians to possession of their lands—rights which had been set forth in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 but never enforced by the American government. Following the Revolutionary war, settlers had moved into Indian lands north of the Ohio river. In the face of Indian opposition the Government sent in expeditions to protect the settlers. Under General Anthony Wayne, the Indians were defeated on August 20, 1794 and subsequently forced to recede almost two-thirds of the present state of Ohio as well as part of Indiana. Apart from superficial similarities such as having served with "Mad Anthony" and a dislike of law courts, Ishmael Bush and Natty Bumppo have nothing in common. Ishmael Bush and his family are portrayed as dull, rough, ignorant, and lawless frontiersmen. Although Bush is lawless, he is not an advocate of chaos. One of his main concerns is to maintain order within his own family (TP, 100). But while he recognized the need for domestic order, he is not aware of any larger social unit which could make similar claims upon his liberty. Ishmael Bush has no use for a legal system which is in opposition to his own desires. When a dispute arises between Abiram White and Ishmael's son, Asa, Ishmael promises justice according to the "law of nature":

"When the law of the land is weak, it is right the law of nature should be strong. You understand me, Asa; and you know me. As for you, Abiram, the child has done you wrong, and it is my place to see you righted. Remember; I tell you justice shall be done; it is enough. But you have said hard things against me and my family. If the hounds of the law have put their bills on the trees and stumps of the clearings, it was for no act of dishonesty, as you know, but because we maintain the rule that 'arth is common property." (TP, 101)
Similarly, in an early dialogue with the Trapper, Bush asserts his attitude to land ownership:

"I am as rightful an owner of the land I stand on, as any governor of the States! Can you tell me, stranger, where the law or the reason is to be found, which says that one man shall have a section, or a town, or perhaps a county to his use, and another have to beg for earth to make his grave in?" (TP, 63-64)

Again, in an argument with his son, Ishmael refers to this lawless attitude in terms of a noble legacy:

"The world is wide, my gallant boy, and there's many a noble plantation on it, without a tenant. Go; you have title deeds sign'd and seal'd to your hand. Few fathers portion their children better than Ishmael Bush." (TP, 99)

Basing his claim on occupancy, Ishmael makes a powerful appeal to the law of nature. His squatter's mentality already involves him in trouble with the law in more settled regions. Now it involves him in conflict with Indians. He is, therefore, a representative of those frontiersmen who so often bring American frontier society into bloody conflict with Indian people and make necessary government intervention in the form of both military force and land purchase.

At the end Bush and his family is given a certain tragic grandeur as Ishmael dispenses justice, purges himself of the evil influence of Abiram, and makes his way back to the moving edge of the agricultural frontier. Hope for the future is suggested in the last reference to the family where some of Bush's descendants "were reclaimed from their lawless and semi-barbarous lives" (TP, 427). It is believed that, in another generation, the times will be right for these descendants to take possession of the prairie.
The general character of the American frontiersman is further redeemed by the portrayal of the honest, open, and generous Paul Hover. Thus, although there might be occasional men like Abiram White on the frontier, men who find the due reward for their misdeeds, the total picture of the frontiersman in *The Prairie* is not unfavorable. In an editorial passage, Cooper speaks of the frontier and of frontiersmen as necessary forerunners of the coming American civilization:

Here, and here only, is to be found that widely spread though far from numerous class which may be at all likened to those who have paved the way for the intellectual progress of nations, in the Old World. The resemblance between the American borderer and his European prototype is singular, though not always uniform. Both might be called without restraint; the one being above, the other beyond the reach of the law—brave, because they were inured to danger—proud, because they were independent, and vindictive, because each was the avenger of his own wrongs. It would be unjust to the borderer to pursue the parallel much farther. He is irreligious, because he has inherited the knowledge that religion does not exist in forms, and his reason rejects mockery. (TP, 66)

The final point of view with respect to ownership of the land is that of Captain Middleton. As the symbolic representative of the government of the United States, Middleton has an importance in *The Prairie* which goes far beyond his insignificant role. Far from being an effective force for the establishment of law and order, Middleton shows less initiative than any other character in the novel. At different times he is prisoner of the Sioux and of Ishmael Bush. At other times Hard-Heart or the Trapper rescue him from difficulties. His most active quality is distrust, distrust even of allies like Hard-Heart.
Middleton shows the deep roots of this distrust and the ease with which it comes to the surface when, in his official capacity as an American soldier, he makes a friendly return visit to the Pawnee village. Because no welcoming party has been sent to meet him, he becomes suspicious and orders his men to be ready for trouble:

"There is something remarkable in all this, . . . yonder boy has heard of our approach, or he would not fail to notify his tribe; and yet he scarcely deigns to favour us with a glance. Look to your arms, men; it may be necessary to let these savages feel our strength." (TP, 443)

In spite of the assurances of Paul Hover, the Captain retains his suspicion even after his friendly but reserved meeting with Hard-Heart. Finding the whole village—including women and children—assemble in an open space in the town, Middleton becomes even more suspicious and concerned. The reason for the Pawnee failure to provide a suitable welcome is, of course, the impending death of their friend, the Trapper. Considering that the Pawnee horses have all been left in the care of one young boy, and that the entire tribe have assembled in the open to meet a company of armed soldiers, Middleton's apprehension is a little ridiculous. In spite of "the consummate manner in which a savage could conceal his designs," (TP, 430) there is little in the situation to suggest violence. Middleton, however, cannot be considered a ridiculous character as, he is the symbolic representative of the American government and also of culture, education, and good breeding. His distrust of even friendly Indians must be regarded as having an importance which was appropriate to his symbolic role.

Middleton makes no direct statements about the land, or about land ownership, but his return to the prairie in 1806 indicates the government's desire to establish its authority over the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase. One of the major threats to that
authority is the influence of French-Canadian fur traders, who usually had better relations with the Indians than did the Americans. This influence has already been mentioned as a corrupting influence on Mahtoree’s character and cause Middleton additional concern in his meeting with Hard-Heart:

The meeting was friendly, though a little restrained on both sides. Middleton, jealous of his own consideration, no less than of the authority of his government, suspected some undue influence on the part of the agents of the Canadas; and, as he was determined to maintain the authority of which he was the representative, he felt himself constrained to manifest a hauteur that he was far from feeling. (TP, 443-44)

The novel itself looks favourably at American ownership and settlement of the prairie. The opening paragraph of the novel speaks of the wisdom of the Louisiana Purchase:

While nature had placed a barrier of desert to the extension of our population in the West, the measure had made us the masters of a belt of fertile country, which, in the revolutions of the day, might have become the property of a rival nation. It gave us the sole command of the great thoroughfare of the interior, and placed the countless tribes of savages, who lay along our borders, entirely within our control; it reconciled conflicting rights, and quieted national distrusts; it opened a thousand avenues to the inland trade, and to the waters of the Pacific; and, if ever time or necessity shall require a peaceful division of this vast empire, it assures us of a neighbor that would possess our language, our religion, our institutions, and, it is also to be hoped, our sense of political justice. (TP, I)
Although the Trapper's judgemental comments about the "choppers" advancing across the continent, his basic commitment in *The Prairie* is to the great task of building a nation, and to the potential greatness of that nation and its institutions. This commitment can be seen in an editorial passage where he extolls the noble ancestry of the American, outlines the need for agricultural development before the fuller attainments of civilization can be reached, and then speaks of "those distant, and ever-receding borders which mark the skirts and announce the approach of the nation, as moving mists precede the signs of day" (TP, 69). If, in those "moving mists," some values are lost, it can be presumed that in the light of the new day they would not be missed. Several other features in *The Prairie* need to be noted in addition to the attitudes towards land and land ownership. These are, the Trapper's function as a bridge between the two races, his scornful rejection of education, the novel's double standard for describing "good" and "bad" Indians, and the concern for racial purity.

Throughout *The Prairie*, the Trapper functions as a bridge between the Indian and the white man. In large measure, however, this bridge carries traffic in only one direction. That is, the Trapper serves to place the Indian in a context which can be understood by the white characters—and by white readers. He does not perform the similar service of interpreting the whites to the Indians.

The whites do not feel any need to explain themselves to the Indians. White American culture is taken as normal and requires no explanation or justification. The burden of accommodation between the two races is placed entirely on the Indian who, through the mediation of the Trapper, is explained to the white. The Trapper makes no explicit comments about the possibility of educating the Indians so that they could have a place in American civilization. However, his comments on the limitations of
education indicate his belief that nothing can change nature which becomes the major cause of their diminution:

"That, for your education! The time has been when I have thought it possible to make a companion of a beast. Many are the cubs, and many are the speckled fawns that I have reared with these old hands, until I have even fancied them rational and altered beings—but what did it amount to? The bear would bite, and the deer would run, notwithstanding my wicked conceit in fancying I could change a temper that the Lord himself had seen fit to bestow." (TP, 278)

Lacking education himself, and yet being aware of his own worth, the Trapper has a great respect for what he called "nature". He looked askance at any attempt to change what he thinks is the basic order of nature. The novel contains statements which equate Indians with wild beasts, the Trapper's comment about his unsuccessful attempts to change the nature of beasts into "rational and altered beings" as an implied criticism of similar attempts to educate Indians.

Cooper maintains the artificial distinction between "good" and "bad" Indians partly through his use of language. Thus, in the Sioux encampment, the scene is dominated by "the withered and remorseless crones of the band ... in readiness to lend their fell voices, if needed, to aid in exciting their descendants to an exhibition, which their depraved tastes coveted" (TP, 315-16).

Among the Sioux, Cooper records long demagogic speeches, details their methods of torture, and describes Swooping Eagle's exploit when he beheads his fellow Sioux to prevent him from being scalped by the Pawnees:

A few strokes of the tomahawk, with a circling gash of the knife, sufficed to sever the head from the less valued trunk. The Teton mounted again, just in
season to escape a flight of arrows which came from his eager and 

disappointed pursuers. Flourishing the grim and bloody visage, he darted away 

from the spot with a shout of triumph, and was seen scouring the plains, as if he were actually borne along on the wings of the powerful bird from whose 

qualities he had received his flattering name. (TP, 397)

In contrast, there is the description of the Pawnee village when Hard-Heart and 

his men return after their victory over the Sioux. Whereas he had described specific 

persons and vivid scenes in his treatment of the Sioux encampment, in generalities 

and euphemisms are dealt. There are no old crones exulting in bloody vengeance, no 
vain-glorious speeches recounting the bloody deeds of the Pawnee. The whole scene 
is described in favourable terms:

The exultation of the tribe was proportioned to its previous despondency. 

Mothers boasted of the honourable deaths of their sons; wives proclaimed the 

honour and pointed to the scars of their husbands; and Indian girls rewarded 
the young braves with songs of triumph. The trophies of their fallen enemies 

were exhibited, as conquered standards are displayed in more civilized 

regions. The deeds of former warriors were recounted by the aged men, and 

declared to be eclipsed by the glory of this victory. While Hard-Heart himself, 

so distinguished for his exploits from boyhood to that hour, was unanimously 

proclaimed and re-proclaimed the worthiest chief and the stoutest brave that 
the Wahcondah had ever bestowed on his most favoured children, the Pawnees 
of the Loups. (TP, 428)

By speaking of "The trophies of their fallen enemies" and comparing these to 
captured flags, the fact that these trophies are scalps are blurred. The fact is that apart 
from Hard-Heart himself, any of the individual Pawnees are not portrayed. The
Pawnees share with the Sioux a common attitude to such practices as torture and scalping, but this could not be shown—except in the battle scene—without destroying the dichotomy between good and bad Indians.

The novel *The Prairie*, like *The Last of the Mohicans*, emphasizes the need for racial purity which can be their crusade against diminution. Some situations, involving white men and Indian women, place the question in a comic perspective. Others, involving the attraction of male Indians for white women, are treated more seriously. Thus, when the Trapper jocosely suggests that Battius, because of his powers as a medicine man, would be married to one or more of the Sioux women, the scientist states his opposition "to all admixture of the varieties of species, which only tend to tarnish the beauty and to interrupt the harmony of nature" (TP, 256). Esther Bush faces her husband with the same question after he has cast a fond eye on Mahtoree's discarded wife, Tachechana: "Would ye disgrace color, and family, and nation, by mixing white blood with red, and would ye be the parent of a race of mules!" (TP, 346). At several points in the novel, Cooper mentions the attraction that the Indians, especially Mahtoree and Hard-Heart, had for Inez.

In spite of the comic relief, miscegenation remains a dreaded possibility in *The Prairie*. The two races must be kept apart from one another. Ishmael Bush has come to the prairie to escape the restrictions of settlements, its indefinite nature having drawn him out of the Kentucky forests:

“I have come …. Into these districts,” he declares, “because I found the law setting too tight upon me…” Later he elaborates, “I have come five hundred miles to find a place where no man can ding the words of the law in my ears…” Though he is alluding to a particular conflict with authority, he is also
speaking, more abstractly, of all the restraints imposed by the communities he has left behind. “Why,” he asks,
do not the surveyors of the States set their compasses and run their lines over our heads as well as beneath our feet? Why do they not cover their shinning sheep-skins with big words, giving to the land-holder, or perhaps he should be called air holder, so many rods of heaven, with the use of such a star for a boundary-mark, and such a cloud to turn a mill?
Assuming that Leatherstocking is a kindred spirit, Ishmael adds, “neither of us, I reckon has ever had much to do with title-deeds, or country clerks, or blazed trees; therefore we will not waste words on fooleries.” (TP, 344)
While Ishmael is emphatic in his contempt for civil authority, he has an obsessive preoccupation with law. His conversations turn again and again to talk to courts and justice. Confident of his moral as well as his physical strength, he has, in fact, come to the prairie not to live without law but to be the law. After his oldest son strikes Abiram, his brother-in-law, Ishmael declares, “When the law of the land is weak, it is right the law of nature should be strong.” He then says to the man who has just insulted him and his son, “As for you, Abiram, the child has done you wrong, and it is my place to see you righted. Remember; I tell you justice shall be done; it is enough.” (TP, 243) In the patriarchy that now governs that Bush clan, Ishmael is the law, but in his exchange with Abiram he claims that this power will not be used arbitrarily; that it will be guided by an innate knowledge of right and wrong. For Ishmael the simplicity of his system of governance is the basis for his superiority over statutes and courts, whose very complexity he sees as corrupting.
For the most part, Ishmael leads his family through their desert trials with awesome success. Whole Indian tribes do not frighten them, and, even horseless, they
seem capable adversaries for the Sioux war party. Tough in mind and body, they
never give in to confusion or doubt and, on occasions, rise nearly to the level of a
natural nobility. But for all the American innovations they bring to their roles, and
despite Ishmael’s arrogant assumption that he has found a new path in a new world,
they cast in an old drama and finally must act out a familiar dilemma. Their
movement away from settlements does not enable them to transcend society governed
by a different law. Their movement is, in fact, one of regression to a stage of social
development inherently limited by what Ishmael thinks its greatest strength: the
reliance upon tribe or family. They are not ready to give up. Their crusade continues.

The land has become a “wild pasture” supporting “vast herds” while, ironically,
“endless flocks of aquatic birds” fly overhead. Like all other life on the prairie, the
flocks and herds are migratory, but for the moment they are present in abundance. In
the darkening evening Ishmael and his sons, laden with game, return from the hunt
and gather round the fire for the evening meal. Cooper then provides the first in a
series of powerful scenes that endow the family with primitive grandeur:

The reader will remember that the citadel of Ishmael stood insulated, lofty,
ragged, and nearly inaccessible. A bright, flashing fire that was burning on the
centre of its summit, and around which the busy group was clustered, lent it
the appearance of some tall Pharos placed in the centre of the deserts, to light
such adventurers as wandered through their broad wastes. The flashing flame
gleamed from one sun-burnt countenance to another, exhibiting every variety
of expression, from the juvenile simplicity of the children, mingled, as it was,
with a shade of the wildness peculiar to their semi-barbarous lives, to the dull
and immovable apathy that dwelt on the features of the squatter when
unexcited. Occasionally a gust of wind would fan the embers; and, as a
brighter light shot upwards, the light solitary tent was seen as it were suspended in the gloom of upper air. All beyond was enveloped, as usual at that hour, in an impenetrable body of darkness. (TP, 325)

A desert comes to life with herds and flocks, not that a pastoral might be enacted, but so its antithesis will be all the more striking and ironic. It is not as easy to order either the physical or the moral realms as Ishmael has assumed. Light and darkness, life and death do not stay neatly in place but swirl up, confounding the boundaries assigned to them. For Ishmael to have expected otherwise testifies to his ignorance of both history and human nature. That in his bewilderment he has been pushed aside by his wife indicates the enormity of his presumption in coming to the prairie. Cooper’s description, filled with portentous signs, reverberate with the cadences of older stories about the insufficiency of tribal law.

As long as Ishmael believes Leatherstocking to be the killer, he is able, despite his personal grief, to deal with the trauma of death, even murder, within the context of his tribal system. Together with his surviving sons he awaits a time of retribution. But when at last he discovers that the murderer is a kinsman rather than a stranger, the principles upon which he has ordered his wilderness life are negated. Families are bound to revenge blood with blood, but they are equally bound not to shed familial blood. The cord works only as long as family members sustain one another and when that internal loyalty breaks down, the code fails; the “we” and “they” upon which it depends become indistinguishable. Orestes was urged by a god to avenge his dead father, then was pursued by the Furies for taking the life of his mother. When Natty identifies the murderer, declaring it “a shame and a disgrace…that he is of the blood and family of the dead,” Abiram threatens his brother-in-law with the very taboo he has violated: “I’ll call on God to curse ye if you touch me!” (TP, 45)
At last all those who heading westward turn back to the settlements and to the guidance and imposed restraint of civil authority. There Middleton exercises the civic virtue that republican governments require. There Hover grows from the boyish enthusiast on the prairie to the respected legislator he eventually becomes. The arrogant claim that the new breed of humanity spawned in America lives independent of such restraints—either as individuals or as tribes—is refuted, but with the consolation that laws can be enlightened and communities dynamic in this newer world.

Which the body of Asa is discovered and when the identity of his killer is revealed (nearly a third of novel), Ishmael and his family cease to dominate the action, and conflict between Pawnee and Sioux displaces conflict between whites. The whites are merely observers Middleton and Hover lie bound on one fringe of the action while the Bush family, once more “inert,” lounge on the other. The Indians who dominate these pages are familiar enough to Cooper’s readers. There is a clear distinction between good Indians and bad Indians. The Mingoes of the East, still contaminated by contact with the Catholic French of Canada, have become the Sioux of the west, and the Pawnees of this novel are so like the Delaware of Leatherstocking’s earlier life that Natty thinks Hard-Heart surely a relative of Uncas. Even as Middleton is interchangeable with his grandfather (*Last of the Mohicans*) or with Oliver Effingham (*The Pioneers*), so the Indians of *The Prairie* are those of the earlier tales with new names. Yet the drama they enact, familiar as it is in most respects, is subtly changed when it is played against the setting and as an interlude for the Bush family’s drama.

In the encounter between Pawnee and Sioux people who belong on the prairie, who, like the other forces sweep across its surface, and are native expressions of this landscape. They seek neither to order nor to subdue but rather crusade against
diminution and struggle to bring their own lives into harmony with the world around them. They live by a tribal law not unlike that to which Ishmael aspires, and, as the whites look on, the basis of that law is tested by a people for whom is a natural principle of social order.

The Sioux-Pawnee action is another vengeance and another trial, but this trial involves a different kind of testing than those over which Ishmael presides. It is a taunting, a complex effort to humiliate an old enemy, where abstract notions of justice of the sort Ishmael indulges are totally alien. Here captor and captive are bound together in a symbolic relationship that tries the character of all participants and in which the vanquished can be noble and the conqueror ignoble. Hard-Heart’s trial is a ritual of barbaric simplicity that cannot be translated into terms appropriate to the world of settlements. Inasmuch as it adheres to the Indians’ tribal code, this revenge ritual exposes, by contrast, the odd mixture of incompatible values that Ishmael’s law represents and thereby suggests the ultimate absurdity of his efforts to pursue justice and revenge simultaneously.

Ishmael’s regression is by contrasting a “natural” tribal society with his own peculiar creation. They also reinforce the inevitability of his downfall through the contrasting characterizations of Mahtoree and Hard-Heart. Mahtoree, the undisputed leader of Sioux, is an awesome warrior, but his nobility has been lost:

We have everywhere endeavored to show that while Mahtoree was in all essentials a warrior of the prairies, he was much in advance of his people in those acquirements which announce the dawns of civilization. He had held frequent communion with the traders and troops of the Canadas, and the intercourse had unsettled many of those wild opinions which were his birthright, without perhaps substituting any others of a nature sufficiently
definite to be profitable. His reasoning was rather subtle than true, and his philosophy far more audacious than profound. Like thousands of more enlightened beings who fancy they are able to go through the trials of human existence without any other support than their own resolutions, his morals were accommodating and his motives selfish. (TP, 147)

Though he still is the acknowledged leader of his tribe, he does not bend his own will to serve the interests of his people. Rather, he manipulates his followers in the service of his own desires. Like the whites whose excesses Natty continually decries, he is without self-restraint. His speech before the council lacks the natural dignity (even borders on the obscene) of the oratory delivered by the noblest of Cooper’s Indians. Like Ishmael, he is a man who stands between two stages of civilization, a man “unsettled” because he has abandoned one system of order without substituting another “sufficiently definite to be profitable.” He is “one of those bold spirits who over-step the limits which use and education fix to the opinions of man in every state of society,” and his failings as a man as well as a leader result from the presumptuous claim that he, “like thousands of more enlightened beings,” makes of being “able to go through the trials of human existence without any other support than their own resolution…” That presumption brings his death and the destruction of his tribe which means the crusade has no end.

His Pawnee antagonist, Hard-Heart, has had little contact with whites and, by holding to the principles of his people, achieves the nobility of a true tribal leader. First described as “Apollo like,” he is, the narrator declares, a fit model for the art of an Allston or a Greenough. “The outlines of his lineaments were strikingly noble, and nearly approaching to Roman…” Although carrying, like a warrior from antiquity, a shield emblazoned with “some daring exploit,” he disdains artifice. Whereas
Mahtoree speaks “in the haughty tones of absolute power” combined with an affected humility, Hard-Heart speaks simply and openly; he is always the leader who serves rather than is served. Like the Sioux chief, he too is attracted to Inez, yet he does not yield to that attraction and instead, subordinates his own desires to the dignity of his office.

The opposite of Middleton in many ways, Hard-Heart shares with him an unshakable commitment to the established laws of his culture and is never tempted, as are Mahtoree and Ishmael, into the role of moral entrepreneur. His strength, like that of his white counterpart, lies in his unswerving loyalty to the principles of order that have evolved among his people. In the trials of his captivity, it is not Hard-Heart but Mahtoree who falters, falters because he steps out of the role defined by custom and begins to improvise for his own corrupt purposes. Neither he nor Ishmael can redefine his world out of his own character: Both can only use such talk as camouflage for morals that are “accommodating” and motives that are “selfish.”

The point of Ishmael’s story—and of Hover’s and Middleton’s—is that people cannot live without boundaries and laws. And, as the story of Hard-Heart and Mahtoree makes clear, even individuals in more primitive stages of social development require the external definition of social customs and values if they are to lead worthwhile lives. Leatherstocking says early in the novel, “The Law—‘tis bad to have it, but I sometimes think it is worse to be entirely without it…Yes—yes, the law is needed when such as have not the gifts of strength and wisdom are to be taken care of.” (TP, 211)

A child of the woods and the mountains, Leatherstocking has come to a flat, barren land to die, all the time believing “trees…are to the ‘arth, as fruits are to a garden; without them nothing can be pleasant, or thoroughly useful.” The sound of the
ax has driven him out of his native hills: “I came west in search of quiet.” Yet he walks into this novel moving in the opposite direction. He has been west-incredibly, since Lewis and Clark are, by the time the novel opens, just beyond the Great Divide-all the way west, so that he can now declare, “I have seen the waters of the two seas.” Thus the Leatherstocking who comes to the prairie so outstripped the choppers that he reached the Pacific at least a decade before Jefferson’s party of exploration managed the same feat. He has crossed the Rockies, whose western slope was, in 1805, still beyond the territorial claims of the United States, and yet we are to believe that he has left the pristine forests of that west to return to a landscape he abhors.

Leatherstocking has followed the path that American settlement was eventually to follow: After years of preparation in the East Americans surged west, stopping only when the West itself stopped, and then at last returned to the prairies. But Natty is enacting more than a migratory pattern. In the unyielding light of this land, more is revealed than the final point of national settlement. This is terminus also as judgment. The prairie is the spiritual fate toward which America is tending. As he approaches his own death, content with the life he brings to this ultimate reckoning, Natty warns of the judgment that awaits an unrestrained America. The exploiters, “when they have cut their path from the eastern to the western waters,” will “find that a hand, which can lay the ‘arth bare at a blow, has been here and swept the country, in very mockery of their wickedness. They will turn on their tracks like a fox that doubles, and then rank smell of their own footsteps will show them the madness of their waste.” Then will they all face the judgment awaiting Ishmael: “The very stumps of Kentucky and Tennessee cry out yet again ye.” (TP, 81)

Here is where an explanation of Leatherstocking’s presence in this place returns us to the theme of order, for Natty’s Jeremaid is not simply a conservationist’s
complaint. Just as the indefiniteness of the prairie judges the inadequacy of individuals, so it judges a society that promotes wantonness rather than restraint and panders to avarice rather than cultivates reason. This desert, Natty argues, is a moral as well as a natural phenomenon. Obed Bat tells Leatherstocking that the monuments in the Egyptian desert prove the “former greatness” of those lands “now that they lie stripped of their fertility.” The absence of similar ruins on the prairie a place without a past. But Natty remembers a Moravian teaching about the Biblical world, “that the Blessed Land was once as fertile as the bottoms of the Mississippi, and groaning with its stores of grain and fruits; but that the judgment has since fallen upon it, and that it is now more remarkable for its barrenness than any qualities to boast of.” Desert he concludes, is judgment, the consequence of “wickedness,” “pride,” and “waste.” Therefore, it must follow that a great civilization once inhabited these regions, but so devastating was the judgment upon it, that no evidence of its existence endures. Though he speaks of what has been but is no more, his words provide a prophetic warning of what might lie ahead.

After the prairie fire has passed, Leatherstocking looks out across the burned-over landscape, and, when the others ask him what he sees, answers:

What the world of America is coming to, and where the machinations and inventions of its people are to have an end, the Lord, he only knows. I have seen, in my day, the chief who, in his time, had beheld the first Christian that placed his wicked foot in the regions of York! How much has the beauty of the wilderness been deformed in two short lives! (TP, 73)

What the world of America is coming to is the prairie. Even as the novel’s events are taking place, Lewis and Clark are systematically enclosing the wilderness, naming and mapping as they make their surveying way west. Ishmael is already
here, and though he strives to place himself above those who live in the settlements, he comes with ax slung over his shoulder to cut down tree that miraculously stands in these wastes. He cries out against the property claims of those he left behind and yet, with incredible appetite, declares this vast district his own. He aspires to be self-sufficient bit is too voracious to do more than plunder.

Only Leatherstocking has the self-possession to live in the prairie. In the midst of lethargy he alone is awake—and not just because he perceives what Hover and Middleton cannot discern. For Natty, man is to be awake in a profounder sense; he has been created in the image of God inasmuch as he has been given reason, and he is most fully human when he sets aside his bestial passions to live a disciplined life in which he possesses nothing but himself. When the prairie fire and buffalo stampede panic Hover and Middleton, it is Natty who, at the right moment, causes those vast irrational forces to flow around him. When the others would rush to certain death, he uses buffalo to divide the herd and fire to deprive the larger fire of fuel. When captured, Hover and Middleton are made helpless by despair; Natty, though resigned to an almost certain death, remains watchful.

In the Dacotah camp, where the strengths and weaknesses of all the central characters are revealed, Natty stands apart even as he moves, aiding and comforting, among the others. When we see him in the council beside Obed Bat—that parody of reason here decorated so that he is also a parody of man—he is described “musing on the course he should now adopt, with the singular mixture of decision and resignation that proceeded from his habits and his humility, and which united to form a character, in which excessive energy, and the most meek submission to the will of Providence, were oddly enough combined.” Only Natty has, as Joel Porte suggests, “through great strength and purity of intention…seemingly redeemed himself from Adam’s curse,
thereby wholly and singly meriting the great unspoiled land that is his bride.” He is the center of this novel both because, as Hard-Heart declares, he has “seen all that bis to be seen in this country” and because, as Middleton says, he is “endowed with the choicest and perhaps rarest gift of nature: that of distinguishing good from evil.” (TP,141)

Leatherstocking alone realizes the alternative to being defined by external boundaries: to be definitive in one’s own being, like Wallace Stevens’s jar in Tennessee od Thoreau at Walden, the point from which all else is measured. He is that man, more profoundly liberated than Ishmael could imagine, around whom the landscape radiates and is itself defined. The ultimate American hero, he enters a wilderness chaos and not only keeps his own identity intact but also gives order to the surrounding landscape without use of courtroom or surveyor’s transit. It is this role that Obed Bat’s presence underscores by contrast. The arrogant bungles who wants so desperately to be Adamic-the namer-Bat cannot deal with direct experience but must continually locate things in rigid, scholastic systems. He settles for apparent coherence by glibly categorizing all that he encounters and, consequently, is forever missing the essential in a dedication to the superfluous.

Letherstocking is not a representative man, nor does he exemplify the American of the future. Although he is presented as the ultimate wilderness hero whose presence is the moral and aesthetic center of this novel, there is a sense in which he is also strangely absent. This is a novel about.-among other things-vacancies. We are made to see this landscape, as often as not, in terms of what it lacks, as though emptiness has become palpable. Natty, too, as crucial as his presence in the novel is, is also an indicator of something absent. Eventually the vacancy will be that which in death he leaves between Hard-Heart and Middleton and the cultures they represent. But there is
more. He enters the novel as a shadow, and when he is first described, it is in terms-“emaciated,” “shrunken,” “withered”- of what is missing rather than of what remains. After a career as “Deerslayer,” “Pathfinder,” “Hawkeye,” “The Long Rifle,” he is at last only an old tapper, a title that, together with the withered body, mockingly reminds the reader of what has been lost.

Having given us a hero who seems sp like the new men Emerson and Thoreau celebrate, Cooper does not claim, as do the transcendentalists, that we are to become such heroes ourselves. He is never so optimistic about human nature as to suggest that we can live with such freedom or such responsibility. Our kinship with the novel’s other whites is much stronger than our resemblance to Leatherstocking, and, like them, we require the ordering influence of an enlightened community. If, by comparison with grander claims America and Americans, this seems unduly pessimistic, there is affirmation as well. True, the Bush family, leveled and chastened, returns to the settlements; and Ellen and Hover can hope for no greater purpose than to follow the leadership of Middleton and Inez; and Middleton, in all his well-intentioned stuffiness, returns to the world of regiments; yet something is reclaimed. I do not mean the recovery of Inez (and, allegorically, Louisiana) from both Spanish Catholicism and her kidnappers, nor do I mean the displacement of Ishmael’s wantonness by the enlightened leadership of Middleton-though both are accomplishments not to be underestimated. Rather, I mean that even though Leatherstocking is not presented as an example of what we can be and though he does not vindicate the deepest myth of American individualism, still as an ideal, a figure so self-contained and true that out of his very humanity he orders the chaos around him, he provides us with a perspective from which to view both a new world and those of us who have come to inhabit it.
In *The Prairie*, the third volume of *the Leatherstocking Tales*, Cooper evades this narrative difficulty by abandoning metaphor for abstraction. Rather than bracketing an arbitrary period of American time to suggest the range of national experience, he engages the absolute limits of that history. Although *The Prairie*, which is set in 1805, describes a period of American life posterior to the events of *The Pioneers* and *Mohicans*, the point of cultural origin Cooper defines in this novel is considerably more remote than those of the first two Tales. His central characters, the Bush family, are nomadic squatters, precursors of the settlers of Templeton and the European and colonial officers of *Mohicans*. Their patriarchal government predates the more complex social order of Templeton; their perspective is uninformed by the restrictive heritage which shapes the conduct of *Mohicans*’ characters. Unlike the forests of the first two Tales, which bear the marks of prior events, the Great Plains—against which *The Prairie*’s adventures unfold—is a black slate, devoid of “historical recollections.” Only a few trappers and explorers have penetrated its boundaries. The Pawnee and Sioux, who hunt the buffalo there, are roving bands whose encampments are transitory. When, in the novel’s opening scene, Ishmael Bush leads his clan across the Mississippi and into the prairie’s vacant landscape, we stand at the very beginnings of cultural life.

The primal origin which Cooper invokes in *The Prairie* is balanced by an equally absolute sense of an ending. The first two volumes of the Tales looked forward to the western advance of American settlement. Natty’s role in these novels, as Cooper describes it in *The Pioneers*, is that of an advance guard, “the foremost of that band of pioneers who are opening the way for the march of the nation across the continent.” The “thriving villages” and “valetudinarian” retreats which grace the contemporary settings of *The Pioneers* and *Mohicans* testify to the success of that
progressive process. But in *The Prairie*, Cooper neither affirms nor anticipates such development. Although he does note the formation of communities in the trans-Mississippi West and accords a “magical rapidity to settlement there,” he observes that “by far the greater portion” of western immigrants have established “themselves along the margins of the larger water-courses” and have not pressed beyond the riverbanks into the plains. (TP, 3)

Cooper’s extension of his historical frame to the absolute beginning and end of American development is reinforced by the relationship he establishes between *The Prairie* and the first two volumes of the Tales. Cooper did not anticipate his return to the series in *The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer* and assumed that *The Prairie* would conclude his saga. With that sense of closure in his mind, he recalls, through Natty’s reminiscence, the major events of the first two Tales, places them in chronological order, and completes the series by describing Natty’s death. This process of summary and conclusion is, Cooper tells us in his preface, a major concern of the novel. “It is quote probable,” he writes,

that the narrator of these simple events has deceived himself as to the importance they may have in the eyes of other people. But he has seen, or thought he has seen, something sufficiently instructive and touching in the life of a veteran of the forests, who have commenced his career near the Atlantic, had been drawn by the increasing and unparalleled advance of population to seek a final refuge against society in the broad and tenantless plains of the west, to induce him to hazard the experiment of publication. That the changes which might have drawn a man so constituted to such a single life, is a matter of undeniable history; that they did produce such an effect on the Scout of *Mohicans*, the Leatherstocking of *the Pioneers* and the Trapper of *the Prairie*
rests on an authority no less imposing than these veritable pages from which
the reader shall no longer be detained. (TP, 83)

Natty’s life, Cooper maintains, epitomizes the history of the American people.
By tracing the course of his adventures, as he does in *The Prairie*, he recovers the
totality of national experience and contains it within the scope of his narrative. Less
an historical novel than a metahistorical romance, *The Prairie* is a work of self-
conscious review. It is the capstone not only of Natty’s career and of the first three
volumes of the *Leatherstocking Tales* but also of Cooper’s investigation of New
World experience.

Cooper’s interests in writing *The Prairie*, however, are not directed primarily
toward fictive coherence or plausibility but toward a comprehensive survey of the
variety of American experience. Cooper announce that intention very early in the
novel when he remarks that

the march of civilization with us, has a strong analogy to that of all coming
events, which are known to cast their shadows before. The gradations of
society, from that state which is called refined to that which approaches as
near barbarity as connexion with an intelligent people will readily allow, are to
be traced from the bosom of the states, where wealth, luxury and the arts are
beginning to seat themselves, to those distant, and ever-receding borders
which mark the skirts and announce the approach of the nation, as morning
mists precede the signs of the day. (TP, 69)

He than illustrates that evolutionary process by assembling in *The Prairie* types
of each of these “gradations of society.” Ishmael Bush is, for example, not merely a
restless nomad, but as his name suggests, he is the quintessential squatter, the
personification of what Kay Seymour House has called “the great American
nightmare of the early nineteenth century.” A man of “prodigious power” and the “terrible strength of the elephant,” he crosses the prairie “in the same sluggish manner [of] an over fatted beast.” The “inferior lineaments of his countenance,” Cooper observes, “were coarse, extended, and vacant; while the superior, or those nobler points which are thought to affect the intelligent being, were low, receding, and mean.” (TP, 4-5)

Bush recognizes no authority but his own and has a mortal hatred of the law. “I have come into these districts,” he tells Natty, “because I have found the law sitting too tight upon me, and am not over fond of neighbors who can’t settle a dispute without troubling a justice and twelve men.” (TP, 63) He boasts “that he had never dwelt where he might not safely fell every tree he could view from his own threshold; that the law had rarely been known to enter his clearing; and that his ears had never willingly admitted the sound of a church bell” (TP, 70) His primary assumption is “the rule that the ‘arth is common property.” The “air, the water, and the ground, are free gifts to man” he argues “and no one has the power to portion them out in parcels” (TP, 84) Bush’s family is as harrowing as their patriarch. His sons have inherited his strength and his anarchic proclivities. His wife, Esther, whom Copper calls “the Amazon,” is a thoroughly imposing figure capable of defending the families’ interest against any threat. Even Ishmael’s youngest children recoil from the very word “law” and prompt natty to exclaim that “it is a solemn sight to witness how much human nature’ is inclined to evil, in one so young” (TP, 176)

The subsequent adventures of the Bush family advance this initial image of their fearsome and lawless potency. Robbed of their cattle by the marauding Sioux, they set off on foot to recover their livestock. More than an equal match for their savage adversaries, they forge an alliance with the Sioux, and when the Indians refuse to
return their property, route the mounted tribesmen to reclaim their possessions. Natty, Middleton, and Hover are similarly powerless against the will of Ishmael Bush. They do release Inez and Ellen while Bush is away from his camp, but they are unable to prevail against his strength.

Clearly, Cooper identifies Inez and her cultural heritage as a threat to Middleton, who, as the grandson of Duncan Heyward, bears the responsibility for Cooper, as it did for his contemporaries, the full force of European absolutism. Its authoritarian character and insistence on blind faith stood in diametric opposition to America’s commitment to the liberty of thought and the integrity of private judgment. Cooper emphasizes the repressive spirit of the Church by describing Father Ignatius’s efforts to insulate his community against the arrival of American officers in the Louisiana territories.

The reckless freedom of such among them as thought only of this life, and the consistent and tempered piety of others, caused the honest priest to look about him in concern. The influence of example on one hand, and the contamination of too free an intercourse on the other, began to manifest themselves even in that portion of his own flock which he has supposed to be too thoroughly folded in spiritual government ever to stray. It was time to turn his thoughts from the offensive, and to prepare his followers to resist the lawless deluge of opinion which threatened to break down the barriers of their faith. Like a wise commander who finds he has occupied too much ground for the amount of his force, he began to curtail his outworks. The relics were concealed from profane eyes; his people were admonished not to speak of miracles before a race that not only denied their existence, but who the desperate hardihood to challenge their proofs; and even the Bible itself was once more prohibited with
terrible denunciations, for the triumphant reason that it was liable to be misinterpreted. (TP, 181)

The danger Inez poses for Middleton does not involve religious conversion. Cooper no more anticipates the revival of Catholicism in America than he foresees the return of European hegemony. His concern is directed toward the potential decay of democratic government. As ominous as the leveling impulses of the Bush family, the subservience Cooper associates with Inez suggests the betrayal of national principles and the duplication of Old World tyranny. Inez’s religion becomes in The Prairie a symbol of the oligarchic restraint of progress, the imprisonment of the present by the past. The opposite pole of the continuum the Bush family begins, she is as frightening an image of an American future as are Ishmael and primal horde.

Although Natty’s role in The Prairie is similar to those he enacted in The Pioneers and Mohicans, his character has undergone a transformation. That change is most apparent in the tempering of his perspective. No longer a hunter or an Indian scout, he is now a subsistence trapper. “At my time of life,” he tells Ishmael, “food and clothing be all that is needed; and I have little occasion for what you call plunder, unless it may be now and then to barter for a horn of powder or a bar of lead” (TP, 17) Resignation and humility have become the hallmarks of his identity. He dismisses as “vain boasting” accounts of his former adventures and maintains that “it is not with me now as it used to be some forty years ago, when warfare and bloodshed were my calling and my gifts” (TP,220) He has, he says, “seen too much mortal blood poured out in empty quarrels to wish ever to hear an angry rifle again. Ten weary years have I sojourned alone on these naked plains, waiting for my hour, and not a blow have I struck a’gin an enemy more humanized than the grizzly bear” (TP, 85)
Natty still refers to settlements as “abominations” and recalls with undiminished rancour his imprisonment in the stocks of Templeton, but he insists nonetheless that civil authority “is needed when such as have not the gifts of strength and wisdom are to be taken care of” (TP, 22) The law, he tells Ellen Wade, is “a friend… always bound to look to the young and feeble like yourself.” More significantly, is one of the novel’s concluding episodes, Natty counsels Paul Hover to abandon the solitary life of the wilderness for the comforts and security of the settlements. “Come hither lad,” he tells Hover,

Much has passed atween us on the pleasures and respectableness of a life in the woods or on the border. I do not now mean to say that all you have heard is not true; but different tempers call for different employments. You have taken to your bosom, there a good and kind child, and it has become your duty to consider her, as well as yourself, in setting forth in life. You are a little given to skirting the settlements; but to my poor judgement the girl would be more like a flourishing flower in the sun of a clearing, than in the winds of a prairie. Therefore forget anything like you may have heard from me, which is nevertheless true, and turn your mind on the ways of the inner country. (TP, 437)

Although Cooper explains Natty’s distorted scale as an optical illusion, he continues to stress his superhuman status throughout the novel. When Hover first encounters the trapper, he asks him, “From what cloud have you fallen, my good old man?” Natty’s response-“I have been long on earth, and never I hope nigher to heaven than I am at this moment”-establishes not just his advanced age but his impending sainthood (TP, 25)

Cooper’s abstract approach to characterization in The Prairie is also evident in his subsidiary figures. Obed Bat is a caricature of the rationalist. His name, like
Ishmael’s and Duncan Uncas Middleton’s, is an index to his perspective. Blinded by hubris, he extends the ideals of the Enlightenment to a ludicrous extreme. He attempts to impose absolute order on nature through scientific classification, an effort which he names, in honor of himself, Verspetilio Horribilis Americanus. Bat regret’s nature’s failings and argues that were he entrusted with his design he could improve the quadruped species by substituting wheels or levers for “two of the inferior limbs.” Though such an alteration is he admits, “hopeless-at least for the present,” he anticipates that the expansion of human reason will someday bring such glory within his grasp by making man “the master of all learing, and consequently equal to the great moving principle” (TP, 206) The butt of Cooper’s clumsy humor, Bat is not just a stock comic character on the lines of Dickon Jones in *The Pioneers* or David Gamut in *Mohicans*, but another link in Cooper’s great chain of national being.

The Pawnee and Sioux tribesman of the novel, and more particularly their chieftains, hard-Heart and Mahtoree, are idealized versions of good and bad Indians. They too are ironic rather than individualized figures, but they differ in one extent from the rest of Cooper’s cast. Rather than expanding the scales of analogous characters from the first two Tales, they duplicated the features of Cooper’s other Indians. Mahtoree reenacts the role of Mauga; Hard-Heart is identified as Pawnee version of Uncas. The constancy of Cooper’s Indians does not, however, represent a departure from his narrative strategy in *The Prairie*, but suggests his ethnocentrism. Like the majority of his contemporaries, cooper was incapable of conceptualizing Indians in anything other than stereotypic terms. Either as romantic figures who evoked melancholy meditation on the mutability of time or as personifications of evil and human depravity, his Mohicans and Hurons, his Pawnees and Sioux, are consistently realized as beings larger than life.
Cooper’s purpose in abstracting the characters of *The Prairie* parallels his intention in pressing the novel’s historical frame to the absolute beginning and end of American development. On the level, emblematic characters advance Cooper’s desire to portray the full range of national experience. By assembling representatives of every level of social evolution in a single level, he offers a comprehensive survey of American life. In so doing, he strengthens his claim for national particularity. As Henry Nash Smith suggested, Americans of Cooper’s generation argued while other nations had experienced the same process of cultural development which *The Prairie* describes, only in America were types of each phase of that process simultaneously present.

More important, Cooper characters forwards his efforts to define the shape of American history in a schematic fashion. In *The Prairie* Cooper does not advance his historiographic perspective by crafting particular examples which illustrate general principles of development. Ishmael Bush and Inez de Certavallos are not simply metaphors for two forms of social organization; they are the literal embodiment of radial originality and submissive derivation. Their confrontation in the novel is a form of symbolic logic; its resolution carries the force of theorem rather than an illustration. Cooper has reserved the strategies of the first two Tales. Rather than offering examples to support his overarching version of American history, he frames an abstraction which may than be applied to particular periods of national life.

Despite their diametric opposition, both Inez and the Bush family are bound by limits of a patriarchal system. Inez conforms to the wishes of both Don Augustin, his natural father, and Father Ignatius, her spiritual guide. Her decisions are determined by their judgments; her character has been shaped by their perspectives. She does not declare her freedom from their authority by marrying Middleton but because, instead,
a missionary for their cause. The primitive form of government than unifies the Bush family is also predicated upon a submission of individual will to paternal power. Having rejected civil and religious sanctions, Bush adopts brute force to impose familial discipline. He caws his sons with his strength and demands absolute obedience to his commands. The most frightening of Cooper’s many father figures, he crushes the initiative of his sons to ensure that “disorder don’t spread” (TP, 110).

When Asa, Ishmael’s firstborn, is mysteriously murdered shortly after he has contested Bush’s leadership, the two events acquire a casual connection. Although Ishmael is innocent of that crime and ultimately avenges his son’s murder, Asa’s death, as William Wasserstrom has observed is closely linked with his rebellion against his father.

The historiographic assumptions Cooper derives from his schematic investigation of American civilization are resolutely meliorist. Telescoping the course of cultural evolution, he offers his readers a model of national development. That growth begins with the violent repudiation of the past, a phase of cultural life Cooper personifies in the Bush family. Their murder of deputy sheriff and their contempt for institutional restraints document their rejection of the historical process which has yielded civil order. Although their militant originality results in anarchy, they are nonetheless the progenitors of American independence. The Bush family’s abduction of Inez is a lamentable act of brigandry, but it is also a blow against European inscription. By kidnapping a character Cooper has identified as both cultural and religious icon, they deny the authority of the Old World.

The second stage of American evolution, which Paul Hover and Ellen Wade suggest, redresses the savagery of the squatters by combining a commitment to personal freedom with a rudimentary respect of law and tradition. Hover synthesizes
the social orders of the Bush family and Spanish Catholicism and advances the cause of social growth, but his sensibility lacks stability and refinement. It remains for Duncan Middleton to complete the dialectical process which the yeoman class begins. Middleton’s role as a mediator is broadly defined: his marriage reconciles European and American culture; his opposition to both Ishmael Bush and Father Ignatius balances anarchy and despotism; his decision to take up residence in New Orleans secures the expansion of American culture and the preservation of a western boundary. Middleton’s relationship with Duncan Heyward—and ultimately with Colonel Munro—establishes America’s link to the European’s past, while his figurative kinship with Natty Bumppo reaffirms the nation’s independence from that tradition.

From one perspective, then, *The Prairie* is a remarkably coherent novel. By assembling representatives of every phase of American life and by bringing their worldviews into conflict, Cooper is able to trace the development of American history in a highly focused manner. Moreover, his historical perspective is not subject to the revisions of the future because the Great Plains have effectively blocked western expansion and rendered the authority of Duncan Middleton’s class immune to challenge. America’s past has been ordered and his future made secure. With a resounding sense of closure, Cooper brings the Leatherstocking series to completion.

Middleton’s dealings with Don Augustin and Father Ignatius are brought to a similarly unsatisfactory conclusion. Seeking to turn Inez’s abduction “to some account in the impending warfare to the faith,” Father Ignatius tells his congregation that because of her unfortunate alliance with a heretic she has “been translated to heaven” (TP, 185-86) Her return to New Orleans and Middleton’s account of kidnapping and rescue dispel that claim and embarrass Ignatius. His credibility is undermined among all but the most superstitious of his flock, who preserve their
belief “with that species of sublimated and solitary gratification that a miser finds in
gazing at his growing, but useless hoard” (TP, 440). On the strength of his rather
fragile blow against the monolith of Spanish Catholicism. Cooper announces the
collapse of opposition to Middleton’s religion and political principles. No longer will
he be called upon Ignatius’s humiliation not only to suggest a cultural repudiation of
Old World example but to defuse the oligarchic potential of American democracy,
Middleton’s mastery of the priest is grossly overburdened. Cooper again predicates
his historical perspective on a resolution which is both contrived and disproportionate
to its thematic function.

Natty defends deterministic view of human history by arguing that the emptiness
of the Great Plains is itself a testament to human folly. Maintaining that a great
civilization had once occupied the prairie, he asks Bat “where are the multitudes that
once peopled these prairies; the kings and palaces; the richness and mightiness of this
desert.” When Bat demands that Natty locate the monuments which might “prove the
truth of so vague a theory,” Natty tells him that the erosions of time have displaced
them even more thoroughly than the ruins of ancient Egypt and Rome.

They are gone. Time has lasted too long for them. For why? Time was made
by the Lord, and they were made by men. This very spot of reeds and grass, on
which you now sit, may once have been the garden of some mighty king. It is
the fate of all things to ripen, and then decay. The trees blossoms, and bears its
fruits, which falls, rots, withers, and even the seed is lost! Go, count the rings
of the oak and of the sycamore; they lie in circles, one about another, until the
eye is blinded in striving to make out their numbers; and yet a full change of
the seasons comes round while the stem is winding one of these little lines
about itself, like the buffalo is changing his coat, or the buck his horns; and what does it all amount to? (TP, 279)

A contradiction involves Cooper’s treatment of his Indian characters. Like Jefferson and Madison, who during their presidential tenures advocated the removal of eastern tribes to Louisiana territories, and like his contemporaries who defended their removal as a means of protecting the endangered tribes and of opening new lands for settlements and exploitation, Cooper hoped that the tribes might peacefully relocated in the Great Plains. That resettlement would, he believed, resolve the nagging question of Indian rights and bring an end of two centuries of national dishonor. In The Prairie, he imaginatively realizes that desire by returning his white characters to the Mississippi’s eastern bank. The Pawnee and the Sioux retain the possession of their hunting grounds; the troubling dispossessions of The Pioneers and Mohicans are avoided. Cooper’s efforts to bring a sense of closure to the nation’s history encompasses, then, even the loose ends of the Indian Wars. The long history of tribal betrayal is resolved, and a new era of race is launched. Hard-Heart, the Uncas figure of The Prairie, becomes the figurative son of Natty and brother of Duncan Middleton. The cultural harmony unavailable to Cooper in Mohicans is achieved in what Cooper assumed would be the saga’s final volume.

But like Middleton’s ascendency over Ishmael Bush and Father Ignatius, Cooper’s projector of racial harmony conflicts with The Prairie’s trajectory. By describing Hard-Heart’s confrontation with Mahtoree as an almost identical reenactment of Uncas’s struggle with Magua, Cooper implies—as Donald Ringe has argued—that “the process that began on the eastern seaboard with the dislocation of the Dewlawares and the settling of the forest wilderness now moves into its final stage.” When Hard-Heart rejects Mahtoree’s argument that the tribes should resolve their
enimities to unite against the white invaders, and then in single combat kills and
scalps him, the ironies of Mohicans are repeated with renewed intensity. The price of
being a good Indian is, in Cooper’s terms, a compromising alliance with white
characters who will ultimately displace all of the tribes. Cooper attempts to resolve
the paradox by permitting Hard-Heart to survive the novel’s conflicts, but as the
Indian chieftain stands beside the dying Natty in the novel’s final chapter, his fate,
despite Cooper’s assurances that American expansion will end at the prairies, seem
inexorably aligned with that of the trapper. Just as Natty has been the agent of his own
dispossession, the virtuous Hard-Heart has sealed his doom by refusing Mahtoree’s
proffered alliance. One need not cite the Trial of Tears, the massacre at Tippecanoe,
or the expansion of John Jacob Astor’s trading empire in the Rockies to discredit
Cooper’s conception of an Indian homeland as an illusion. The lengthy shadow of the
Bush family and the echoes of Mohicans are sufficient for that purpose. Cooper’s
final image of Hard-Heart’s isolation on the plains is as wistful as his account of
Bush’s return to the Mississippi. Strained desires, they remain inconsistent with The
Prairie’s narrative force.

During the Era of Good Feelings which followed the war, regional rivalry
abated to some degree, but an illusive quest for a lasting synthesis continued to
dominate the nation’s agenda. Americans universally defended the cause of national
union but remained skeptical about its prospects. Thomas Jefferson, for example,
held of the sacred character of the union but wrote from retirement that the Missouri
Compromise of 1820 had “like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with
terror…I considered it at once as the death knell of the union.” John Quincy Adams,
whose presidential tenure would be devoted to balancing sectional interests, agreed
with Jefferson’s gloomy appraisal. “I take it for granted,” he argued, “that the present
question is mere preamble…a title page to a great tragic volume.” The partisan spirit of the elections of 1824 and 1828 confirmed the legitimacy of those fears, but the coming of Jacksonian democracy only dramatized the regional and class differences which had by then become unmistakable.

By setting *The Prairie* in the New West, Cooper necessarily predicated the novel’s dialectical structure on faith rather than extrapolation. At a time in which the specter of national disruption loomed very large indeed, he reaffirms his vision of American history and assures his readers of the constancy of national tradition. But like Jefferson, Cooper too heard a fireball in the night. He tells us in *The Prairie’s* concluding sentence that Natty’s tombstone reads, “May no wanton hand ever disturb his remains!” Cooper’s “may” speaks less as a command than as a longing. As much as exercise in wish-fulfillment as his announcement of the closing of the frontier, Natty’s epitaph is an injunction whose very wording questions its authority.