

The Leatherstocking Tales – early America’s Call to Action to protect our Environment

America has been in constant CRISIS, in one form or another, from the time of the pilgrims to the current day, month, and year of the calendar. If She hasn’t been thrust into a crisis or conflict of some sort, then She finds herself in constant internal struggles, from relenting of past identities, traditions and mores, to an influx of challenges from emerging technologies, societal needs and changes, and the evolution of the people themselves.

Within this context, there can be, in hindsight, historical place markers, Convergences if you will, of these CRISIS. James Fenimore Copper creates an escapist alter ego, Natty Bumppo, in his Leatherstocking Tales, that taps into the constantly evolving and ever-changing advancing American Society (Lawrence 39).

The first half of 19th Century America could be considered its third Convergence; the first being the founding of the American Colonies up to the mid-18th Century. The second convergence consisted of the two global conflicts of the latter half of the 18th Century. This second convergence was made of three distinct periods: begins with the French and Indian War (Seven Years War in Europe) 1754 – 1763; the direct impact and significance of the financial collapse of “peace” in North America and concludes in 1783 with American Independence from Great Britain.

The rapid onset of the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century, originating in Great Britain, was further fueled by the convergence of events in America, including the pursuit of Manifest Destiny and the westward migration of diverse populations. This period marked a significant shift from Jeffersonian Agrarianism to Jacksonian Industrialism, with America navigating uncharted territory and shaping its own path. This transformative era gave rise to

American Romanticism, exemplified by writers like James Fenimore Cooper, who captured the essence of transition, loss, and the quest for a brighter future in their works. Cooper's literature reflected the tumultuous yet hopeful spirit of a nation in flux, embodying the essence of American Romanticism.

“We tell stories, in order to live.” (Didion). Cooper was first a Sailor and then a Naval Midshipman. He was exposed to the timeless practice of the Sea Story. Usually told by older, more experienced sailors, they were stories, fictional or real, of tales of adventures, exploits, discoveries, drinking and mischief. It remains in practice in the Twenty-first Century United States Navy and Marine Corps. Cooper used his writing to explore his alter ego's role in the stories and reflect on the disappearing Native American plight, acknowledging their integral but often overlooked contribution to America's history (Peck 162).

The transition of a forested America to westward expansion becomes the focal point of one type of America dies, and another is born (Fields 94). To tell this story, Cooper would bring together three elements, Conflict, Romance and the Landscape of Nature, to be both integral and independent of each other.

The Leatherstocking series, set against the backdrop of the American wilderness, subtly addresses themes related to environmental conservation and the impact of human activities on nature. Cooper's vivid descriptions of the pristine landscapes and the characters' interactions with the environment highlight the fragile balance between civilization and the natural world. The series raises important questions about the consequences of human encroachment, resource exploitation, and the preservation of wilderness areas.

Romance is of little importance in his first book in the series, *The Pioneers*, serving more as a backdrop, which creates tension and purpose of why the couplings of people are present. The pigeon shoot becomes less about skill and more about braggadocio in order to impress the women of the town of who can be the better provider. “This is more about Natty and Chingachgook: two lonely men, one dark-skinned, one white...they have forsaken all others for the austere world of nature which they have preferred to civilization” (Fielder 192-96). They are, however, and throughout the series with one notable exception, the observers of love and romance. One could also surmise at the time of the publication, that Cooper was not anticipating the popularity of this book, as Chingachgook dies at the end of the book and Natty simply vanishes into the sunset (Ibid).

Natty Bumppo’s story arc ends where it begins with the fifth installment of the *Leatherstocking Tales*, *The Deerslayer*. Our Hero is at his youngest, inexperienced but confident, aided once again by his trusty companion, Chingachgook. While the story is more heavily reliant on the subject of morality, namely whites scalping Indians, there is also plenty of detail on the landscape and the encroachment of English settlements.

While the series as a whole focused on the conflict and romance of the five individual books, the approach to the landscape has two distinctive periods, the first three printed books before his travels to Europe and the last two upon his return. Whether by design or not, Cooper’s books become a celebration of the Transcendentalists led by Emerson. Landscape as a Metaphor in America. The imagery of the self-reliant Natty Bumppo, adventuring on the edges of the American frontier as that line continues to move west and romantic tales of impossible love. The *Pioneers* set the tone for the first three, “in that nothing is static or permanent in nature but that

everything is caught up in a cycle of incessant transformation. The only certainty in the natural world is the fact of change itself” (Philbrick 583-93).

He adroitly addresses the major contending views of both the Conservative and Frontier Expansionist Perspectives. Some critics argue that Cooper's portrayal of the wilderness in the Leatherstocking series emphasizes the need for conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. They believe that the series advocates for a harmonious relationship between humans and the environment, promoting stewardship and respect for nature. On the other hand, there are those who interpret the series as a celebration of westward expansion and the taming of the wilderness. This perspective views human intervention in nature as necessary for progress and economic development, often prioritizing resource extraction over environmental preservation (AskAI.)

In light of the contrasting views presented in the Leatherstocking series, I posit that Cooper's work ultimately underscores the importance of environmental stewardship and the preservation of natural landscapes. Through his depiction of characters like Natty Bumppo, who embodies a deep connection with the wilderness, Cooper advocates for a balanced coexistence between humans and nature. My position is rooted in the belief that the environmental themes in the series serve as a cautionary tale against unchecked exploitation of the natural world (Ibid).

Drawing upon specific passages from the Leatherstocking series, such as Natty Bumppo's reverence for the untouched forests and his disdain for wasteful hunting practices, I argue that Cooper's portrayal of the wilderness reflects an inherent value in preserving the environment. Additionally, historical context surrounding the environmental conservation movements of the 19th century further supports the interpretation of Cooper as an early advocate for conservation ethics (Ibid).

Veni, Vidi, Vici - "I came; I saw; I conquered" (Ando). Cooper writes the Leatherstocking Tales as a means of fulfilling his imaginative curiosity of what life may have been like had he been there participating in the actual story. His use of conflict gives a perspective of the timelines he composes to give his audience a reference point to relate to. In regard to the Native Americans, he attempts to portray the dispossession of land as tragic, but necessary (Peck 162). He introduces Romance as a means of connection to the characters, instilling a sense of hope, that in the end, the protagonists of the stories prevail. The use of landscape, "Coopers pastoral novels in this light is to regard them as an almost fortuitous, happy accidents that resulted from the need to find respite in the world of romance" (Peck 154).

Work Cited:

Ando, Clifford. "Veni, Vidi, Vici" ["I Came, I Saw, I Conquered"]. Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Apr. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veni,_vidi,_vici#cite_note-ando-1. Accessed 29 Apr. 2019.

AskAI. "Structuring your paper on the Leatherstocking Tales." AskAI, accessed 28 May 2024, <https://askaichat.app/chat/1716851066649>.

---. "Structuring your paper on the Leatherstocking Tales." AskAI, accessed 28 May 2024

---. "Structuring your paper on the Leatherstocking Tales." AskAI, accessed 28 May 2024

Didion, Joan. "The White Album." 1979. *The White Album*, by Didion, New York, Knoph, 2006. Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We_Tell_Ourselves_Stories_in_Order_to_Live. Accessed 21 Apr. 2019.

Fielder, Leslie A. "Love and Death in the American Novel." 1966, 1960. *James Fenimore Cooper: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Wayne Fields, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1979, pp. 53-57. *Twentieth Century Views* 7.

Fields, Wayne. "Beyond Definition: A Reading of *The Prairie*." 1979. *James Fenimore Cooper: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Fields, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1979, pp. 93-111. *Twentieth Century Views* 7.

---. "Introduction." 1979. *James Fenimore Cooper: A Collection of Critical Essays*, by Fields, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1979, pp. 4-11. *Twentieth Century Views* 7.

Lawrence, D. H. "Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Novels." *James Fenimore Cooper: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Wayne Fields, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall,

1979, pp. 37-52. *Twentieth Century Views* 7. Excerpt originally published in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, New York, The Viking Press, 1923, 1951.

Peck, H. Daniel. "Satanstoe: The Case for Permanence." *James Fenimore Cooper: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Wayne Fields, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1979, pp. 153-66. *Twentieth Century Views* 7. Excerpt originally published in *A World by Itself: The Pastoral Moment in Cooper's Fiction*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1977.

Philbrick, Thomas. "Cooper's *The Pioneers*: Origins and Structure." *James Fenimore Cooper: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Wayne Fields, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1979, pp. 58-79. *Twentieth Century Views* 7. Originally published in *Cooper's The Pioneers: Origins and Structure*, Modern Language Association of America, 1964, pp. 583-93. *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 79.