

Cooper, The Pioneers, a book report

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James Fenimore Cooper's historical novel is not purely an exercise in nostalgia, but rather the observation of a gradual unfolding. *The Pioneers* [Cooper93], first published in 1823, acknowledges that it is white settlers' manifest destiny to expand into the wild parts of the continent, supplanting native Americans as they do so. As one generation, personified by the reclusive semi-wild hunter, Nathaniel Bumppo, gives way to the next in the persons of lawgiver Marmaduke Temple and officious Richard Jones, civilization climbs a ladder of development, as envisioned by stadialists like Adam Ferguson¹. To be sure, the development is not complete, as the haphazard design and construction of the setting, the burg of Templeton, New York, betokens. Nevertheless, this measured ascent is inevitable, one of the patterns of life; thus it suggests Charles Bonnet's *scala naturae*, which placed all elements of creation on a single Great Chain of Being, with humans on the top rung [Mayr01, pp. 5-7]. As we mount the steps, Cooper's essay-as-fiction asks us to pause to remember the men who climbed before us.

The book takes place in 1793, 30 years in the past for Cooper's first readers. It is set in a fictionalized version of Cooperstown, New York (named for Cooper's own family), on the shores of Lake Otsego. After a lengthy expository section to introduce a good dozen characters and to acquaint us with the relatively primitive conditions of the town, Cooper delivers a conventional romance with minimal subplots but plenty of action sequences.

Precis

A young man calling himself Oliver Edwards arrives in town and takes up with the aged mountain man Bumppo and his companion, an ancient Delaware known as Indian John. Though Edwards is educated and well-spoken, his background is a mystery. He clearly holds some resentment towards the patriarch of the town, Judge Temple, who owns nearly all of it and its hinterland. Nevertheless, Temple befriends the hotheaded Edwards (it is rumored that the young man is of mixed Indian ancestry). Temple's daughter Elizabeth begins an Austenesque flirtation with the stormy Edwards.

Oliver, Natty, and John are opposed by Richard Jones -- meddling, greedy, barely competent, and newly appointed sheriff by his cousin Temple in a bit of frontier nepotism. Now, the backwoods trio are clearly concealing something in Natty's shack on the mountain, and Jones suspects a silver mine, a source of wealth that rightfully belongs to the judge.

At novel's end, we learn that Natty and Oliver are hiding a whom, not a what: Oliver's grandfather Effingham, whose Loyalist family entrusted their lands to Temple and then lost title to them in the fog of the American Revolution. The abrupt reconciliation of the two clans is sealed by the union of Oliver and Elizabeth, ending (as all comedies must) with a wedding.

¹ Per Robert Clark's introduction and George Dekker's essay [Cooper93, pp. xvi-xvii and 425-426].

Characters and Their Relations to the Natural World

Although Edwards is the hero of the novel, it is Natty Bumppo, also known as Leather-stocking, who sparked the public's imagination and subsequently appeared in more stories by Cooper. We are encouraged to think of Natty as the man in harmony with Nature, but what sort of harmony is it? For him, Nature is a source of food, and vertebrate at that. Partridge, turkey, and deer are killed for the eating, but nary a plant does he taste. Trees to him are a substrate or a fuel source. More accurately, we can say that Natty lives lightly on the land, and well out of the way of his fellows: a libertarian *avant la lettre*. To be sure, he has other admirable qualities: marksmanship, bravery, loyalty.

It is Natty, with his code of "eat what you kill," who deplores the "wasty ways" of Richard and his cronies. In a escalating series of three set pieces in the middle of the book, the town visits Billy Kirby's maple sugar works, engages in a massive fishing excursion on the lake with seine nets, and executes a mortifying slaughter of Passenger Pigeons with whatever arms are at hand, including an old cannon loaded with small shot. Most of the birds, killed only for the sport, fall to the ground and are abandoned.

To be sure, Temple likewise deplores the wasteful destruction of the birds and the sloppy means by which the maple trees are managed.

"It grieves me to witness the extravagance that pervades this country," said the Judge, "where the settlers trifle with the blessings they might enjoy, with the prodigality of successful adventurers. You are not exempt from the censure yourself, Kirby, for you make dreadful wounds in these trees, where a small incision would effect the same object. I earnestly beg you will remember, that they are the growth of centuries, and when once gone, none living will see their loss remedied." [Cooper93, p 195]

But the judge proves equally ineffectual at curbing the exploitation. Whereas Natty snipes from the sidelines, Temple has the authority (and perhaps the power) to bring it under control.

The character of the insufferable Richard Jones is a comic achievement, reminiscent of Polonius². He treats a neighbor's hogs for disease without asking permission; writes a song for Temple, saying "I'll sing you a verse or two, though I haven't really determined on the tune yet;" and imposes on the tiny settlement a rectilinear grid of streets (happily interrupted by the most popular tavern in town). And yet, in a metafictional outburst, Richard also, quite rightly, calls out the judge for his inconsistent approach to husbandry of the village's resources:

"But this is always the way with you, Marmaduke: first it's the trees, then it's the deer; after that it's the maple sugar, and so on to the end of the chapter. One day you talk of canals through a country where there's a river or a lake every half-mile, just because the

² Cooper is more than a little indebted to Shakespeare. "Cruel garters," indeed! (chap. 34)

water won't run the way you wish it to go³; and, the next, you say some thing about mines of coal..." (p. 224)

We are connected to Indian John, also known as John Mohegan (he was the first of the last of the Mohicans) or Chingachgook, through his hunting partner Leather-stocking as well as through Oliver Edwards – it is ultimately revealed that Oliver's Native American lineage is by adoption into John's tribe, not by birth. John is a powerful, positive figure in the book, albeit in eclipse; it is only a slight exaggeration to say that wherever the word "dignity" appears in the text, it is not far from his name. The ceding of his people's lands to the Europeans is already fading into the past for Otsego's inhabitants of 1793, and all the more so for Cooper's readers. Chingachgook wears his hair long and loose, "so as to convey the idea, to one who knew his present and former conditions, that he encouraged its abundance, as a willing veil, to hide the shame of a noble soul, mourning for glory once known." (p. 67) John is a hunter; he offers no curing medicine, although he does speak English steeped in cryptic metaphor. Perhaps he and his dispossession can be read as a symbol for the exploitation of New York's resources, but in his own words, he is more concerned about the violence that has washed over the state (p. 350).

It falls to Oliver Edwards, the relatively taciturn character among these chatty eighteenth-century denizens, to synthesize the worldviews of his forebears to whom he is connected in sundry ways:

- Major Effingham, connected by blood, the tradition of the Old World
- Indian John, connected by adoption, the ways of peace
- Natty Bumppo, connected by association, the skills of the hunter
- Mamaduke Temple, connected by marriage, the steward of resources

As Leather-stocking departs for the Great Lakes, in the vanguard of those "who are opening the way for the march of the nation across the continent," it is the mission of Oliver to husband both Elizabeth and the rich country that has become his legacy.

The Romance of the Rocks

It was Natty's mountains that thrilled Cooper's audiences and sold books⁴, a Nature harsh and dangerous, where wolves, mountain lions (chap. 28), and wildfires (chaps. 36-38) threaten. And yet it was also a Nature beautiful, whether glittering with snow and ice in a scene only Thomas Kinkade could paint (chap. 19), or rushing free and solitary as a mountain stream, in this eloquent passage:

"I have known the Otsego water for five-and-forty years," said Leather-stocking, "and I will say that for it, which is, that a cleaner spring or better fishing is not to be found in the land. Yes, yes; I had the place to myself once, and a cheerful time I had of it. The game

³ The Erie Canal was under construction at the time of the book's publication.

⁴ 3,500 copies sold on the first day of publication, per Leslie Fiedler [Cooper93, p. 411].

was plenty as heart could wish; and there was none to meddle with the ground, unless there might have been a hunting party of the Delawares crossing the hills....

"Why, there's a fall in the hills, where the water of two little ponds that lie near each other breaks out of their bounds, and runs over the rocks into the valley. The stream is, maybe, such a one as would turn a mill, if so useless thing was wanted in the wilderness. But the hand that made that 'Leap' never made a mill. There the water comes crooking and winding among the rocks; first so slow that a trout could swim in it, and then starting and running like a creature that wanted to make a far spring, till it gets to where the mountain divides, like the cleft hoof of a deer, leaving a deep hollow for the brook to tumble into. The first pitch is nigh two hundred feet, and the water looks like flakes of driven snow, afore it touches the bottom; and there the stream gathers itself together again for a new start, and maybe flutters over fifty feet of flat rock, before it falls for another hundred, when it jumps about from shelf to shelf, first turning this-away and then turning that-away, striving to get out of the hollow, till it finally comes to the plain." (pp. 251, 253)

References

[Cooper93] Cooper, James Fenimore, *The Pioneers*, edited by Robert Clark, Everyman, London, 1993 (first published 1823). The Project Gutenberg edition <<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2275>>, accessed 2 February 2012, was also helpful in the preparation of this report.

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