

ANALYSIS

The Prairie (1827)



James Fenimore Cooper

(1789-1851)

The Prairie was Cooper's favorite in his Leatherstocking series, he spent more time on it than on any other book in the *Saga*, it is the most rich and complex--his best--and it brings his vision into the closest relation to modern America, as in his concern for preserving the natural environment. This allegorical romance is the finale in the chronology of Natty Bumppo's life, as he personifies the best spirit of the westward movement confronting the worst to come as represented by Ishmael Bush. The tone is elegiac, leading to the death of Leatherstocking.

The book opens with a quotation from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* that parallels Natty to Christ, implying a spiritual allegory and casting him as the pastoral "good shepherd": "I pray thee, shepherd, if that love, or gold, / Can in this desert place buy entertainment, / Bring us where we may rest ourselves and feed." Many critics such as Mark Twain and Bret Harte have ridiculed Cooper for not being a Realist, as if he could or should have had an entirely different education, life experience, sensibility and outlook--as if he could or should have ignored his own reality and his Victorian audience and written according to aesthetic principles that evolved and governed literary fiction long after his death.

Cooper's quotation from Shakespeare indicates that he is writing a romance, just as suggested by critic Leslie Fiedler: "In all [his] magic woods (sometimes more like those of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* than any native forest)..." [*Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) 201] "He treats the portion of the Plains in which the action takes place as if it were an Elizabethan stage, a neutral space where any character may be brought at a moment's notice without arousing in the audience a desire to have the entrance accounted for." [Henry Nash Smith, Introduction to *The Prairie* (1962)] The refusal by Realists to respect Cooper's romances, even when he parallels Shakespeare, is comparable to the illiterate vulgarity of the Duke and the King in their representation of Shakespeare. Of course Cooper himself, though a great writer, is far from measuring up to Shakespeare. His qualities transcend his faults, but his faults are fun to laugh at:

COMIC RELIEF

1. Unnecessary exposition and wordiness: “It is necessary, in order that the thread of the narrative should not be spun to a length which might fatigue the reader [!], that he should imagine a week to have intervened between the scene with which the preceding chapter closed and the events with which it is our intention to resume its relation in this.” (opening sentence, Chapter 8)

“Having made the reader acquainted with the manner in which Ishmael Bush had disposed of his family, under circumstances that might have proved so embarrassing to most other men, we shall again shift the scene a few short miles from the place last described, preserving, however, the due and natural succession of time.” (opening sentence, Chapter 9)
2. Absurd exposition, as Cooper establishes family relationships in one outburst from Ellen Wade: “You mean Ishmael Bush, my father’s brother’s widow’s husband...” (end Chapter 11)
3. Incredible coincidence, or mental telepathy: “‘Have I a man among my children?’ demanded Esther... ‘Stay, mother,’ exclaimed Abner *and* Enoch; ‘if you will see the creature’ let us drive it into view’.” (Italics added, end Chapter 12) The boys are like half a barbershop quartet.
4. Ridiculous deafness of Bush family during Indian raid: “His voice was, however, lost, or rather unheeded, in the midst of the shrieks, shouts, and yells that were, by this time, bursting from fifty mouths on every side of him....They tossed their arms wildly in the air, leaping up and down more like exulting children than sober men, and continued to utter the most frantic cries. In the midst of this tumultuous disorder a rushing sound was heard, similar to that which might be expected to precede the passage of a flight of buffaloes, and then came the flocks and cattle of Ishmael in one confused and frightened drove...all eyes were directed to the passing whirlwind of men and beasts...The wild animals snorted with joy and terror, and tearing the earth with their heels, they dashed away into the broad prairies, in a dozen different directions....‘The family is stirring,’ cried Ellen...” (Chapter 5)
5. In Chapter 14, out on the prairie, the Bush family takes refuge on a rock that is about 200 feet high. Characters on the ground engage in long conversations with characters high above them at a distance of 200 feet! On the ground, Dr. Battius poses a question to Ellen Wade high over his head: “‘I know not the meaning of all you wish to say, Dr. Battius,’ she quietly replied.”
6. Elsewhere, also, Dr. Battius and Natty engage in philosophical discourse--Natty on his horse and Dr. Batty on his ass--while at full gallop hotly pursued by hostile Indians!

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Cooper inherited his view of social evolution from the Enlightenment of the previous century, in particular from the French Encyclopedists and their successors, mainly Condorcet: All human societies pass through a series of stages, beginning with (1) the solitary hunter in the forest (Natty Bumppo); (2) followed by “patriarchal” migratory tribes (Ishmael Bush & family); (3) the beginnings of pastoral agriculture, the stage of Crèvecoeur and Thomas Jefferson, Cooper himself and Middleton in *The Prairie*; (4) and on through ever more artificial forms of social organization (Dr. Battius).

THE PRAIRIE AS A METAPHOR

1. The prairie is a metaphor of life: “The world was, in truth, no better than a desert, and...there was but one hand [Christ/Moses/Natty] that could lead the most learned man [Dr. Battius] through all its crooked windings.” (Chapter 8)
2. The prairie of Natty is analogous to the Biblical desert of Moses: “...remarkable for its barrenness...”; “‘It is true; but Egypt--nay much of Africa furnishes still more striking proofs of this exhaustion of nature’.” (Chapter 22)

3. The prairie is a symbolic warning that makes this book the first work of environmentalism in American literature. In Chapter 2, when Natty observes the Bush pioneers overcutting trees, Cooper expresses his ambivalence with a pun, questioning their form of “progress.” Then Natty “turned away muttering to himself with a bitter smile, like one who disdained giving a more audible utterance to his discontent.” (Chapter 2)

“What will the Yankee choppers say, when they 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 the rank smell of their own footsteps will show them the madness of their waste.” (Chapter 7) This passage prefigures the plot, as in the end Ishmael Bush turns back on his tracks.

4. The prairie is a prophecy of the literal and spiritual wastelands to come if the values of Natty die with him, anticipating “The Waste Land” (1922) by T. S. Eliot, the most influential poem of the 20th century: “It will not be long before an accursed band of choppers and loggers will be following on their heels, to humble the wilderness which lies so broad and rich on the western banks of the Mississippi, and then the land will be a peopled desert, from the shores of the main sea to the foot of the Rocky Mountains; filled with all the abominations and craft of man, and stript of the comforts and loveliness it received from the hands of the Lord!” (Chapter 18)

FAITH AND MANIFEST DESTINY

Chapter 6 opens with an essay applauding the early New England Puritans for their virtues, but Cooper, like Hawthorne, thinks Calvinism is a destructive ideology in the long term and sees later generations of New Englanders as degenerate exploiters. Though lately from Tennessee, Ishmael Bush is called a “Yankee chopper.” His character, biblical name, and religious practice identify him with the Calvinistic tradition.

Cooper goes on to affirm independence, democracy, the march of civilization westward, and Manifest Destiny as divine Providence. In Chapter 15 he expresses his Christian faith, then accommodates the prevailing deism of intellectuals during the Enlightenment, affirming “Providence--or if that imposing word is too just to be classical, fate...” In Chapter 15 he accuses Catholics of suppressing knowledge to maintain control of the believers and contrasts the faith of young Middleton, a model of the civilized man just as Natty is a model of the frontiersman: “Educated himself under the dominion of a simple and rational faith, in which nothing is attempted to be concealed from the believers...” His “rational faith” is implicitly Protestant in contrast to Catholic, and also in contrast to the primitive Calvinism of Ishmael Bush.

THE GARDEN OF THE WEST

At the end of Chapter 10, a reference is made to the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804, placing the narrative in historical time with poetic license as to dates: “Lewis is making his way up the river, some hundreds of miles from this.” On the second page of the book, Cooper alludes indirectly to Daniel Boone, the principal model for Natty: “This adventurous and venerable patriarch was now seen making his last remove.” In historical fact, Boone moved to Missouri in 1799, not 1804. Cooper also drops a footnote saying that “Colonel Boon” was “in his ninety-second year.” In fact, Boone was 65 in 1804. Taking poetic license, Cooper makes him much older, enhancing his legend as a wise old man.

Pioneers are inspired by the myth of the Garden, “emigrants seeking for the Eldorado of the West.” (third page) Calling the West an Eldorado, a source of gold, characterizes the values of pioneers such as Ishmael Bush, the “Yankee chopper.” In contrast, Natty identifies with the natural world before the coming of civilization: “The garden of the Lord was the forest then, and is the forest now, where the fruits do grow and the birds do sing, according to his own wise ordering.” The rhyme conveys the poetic sensibility of Natty and his harmony with nature. The opening quotation from Shakespeare postulates “love, or gold,” setting up the polarity of spiritual or materialistic--Natty or Ishmael Bush and Dr. Battius. Whose values will prevail in the westward movement of America?

Natty is not an agrarian himself, he embodies the transition from wilderness to civilization, serving as a scout and spiritual guide.

“With each surge of the westward movement a new community came into being...They plowed the virgin land and put in crops, and the great Interior Valley was transformed into a garden: for the imagination, the Garden of the World. The image of this vast and constantly growing agricultural society in the interior of the continent became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth-century American society--a collective representation, a poetic idea ...that defined the promise of American life...the image of an agricultural paradise in the West, embodying group memories of an earlier, a simpler and, it was believed, a happier state of society, long survived as a force in American thought and politics. So powerful and vivid was the image that down to the very end of the nineteenth century it continued to seem a representation, in Whitman's words, of the core of the nation, ‘the real genuine America.’” Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Vintage 1959) 138-39

LEATHERSTOCKING

Unlike Cooper the social democrat, Natty Bumppo is a libertarian, even an anarchist in the tradition of Anne Hutchinson and, later, Henry Thoreau: “A busy and a troublesome arm [the law] often proves to be here in this land of America; where, as they say, man is left greatly to the following of his own wishes, compared to other countries; and happier, ay, and more manly and more honest too, is he for the privilege!” (Chapter 21)

When in Chapter 3 young Paul suggests they ambush some Indians, Natty will not, saying, “I’m not altogether strong in the opinion it would be lawful as they have done us no harm.” He adapts to the wilderness, as when the Indians steal horses: “I do not call them robbers, for it is the usage of their people, and what may be called the prairie law.” In Chapter 10 Cooper goes so far as to suggest that “the whites had a common enemy to dread, in the ancient and *perhaps more lawful* occupants of the country” (italics added). The Leatherstocking in him was able to transcend his own race and culture, while at the same time he also sees whites (civilization) as superior to the Indians (barbarism): “...because it’s reason ag’in instinct. Poor reason, I allow; but still there is a great deal of the man in an Indian. Ah’s me! Your Delawares were the red-skins of which America might boast; but few and scattered is that mighty people, now!” (Chapter 5) In Cooper, Indians represent universal human nature at a primitive stage of development, personifying both the best and the worst.

Paradoxically, as well as being anarchistic with an independent moral sense, Natty is also the original Boy Scout, with all the virtues affirmed in their creed except obedient: trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly courteous, kind, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent. He also epitomizes self-reliance, and is supremely competent, masculine, strong, plainspoken, modest, pious and noble. Later, in various pop culture manifestations from westerns to war movies, he was played by Joel McCrae, Gary Cooper, Jimmy Stewart, Glenn Ford, Henry Fonda and John Wayne.

In *The Prairie* Natty is an old man, wiser than ever and a symbol of a growing America: “I have seen the waters of the two seas! On one of them was I born, and raised to be a lad... America has grown, my men, since the days of my youth, to be a country larger than I once had thought the world itself to be.” (Chapter 7) Old Leatherstocking is now a trapper, identifying him with the first whites in the far West. As he says above, in 1804, he got to the west coast before Lewis and Clark.

His first appearance is like the advent of a deity in “the centre of this flood of fiery light...The figure was colossal; the attitude musing and melancholy; and the situation directly in the route of the travelers.” Natty, representing moral ideals, stands in the way of the destructive pioneer Ishmael Bush in an allegory of Good and Evil: However, “A frame that had endured the hardships of more than eighty seasons was not qualified to awaken apprehension in the breast of one as powerful as the emigrant.” Natty is melancholy because he is weakening and soon will be gone, leaving the West open to exploiters like Ishmael Bush.

“Brilliantly, Cooper has captured the situation of the myth. Only in the setting sun of the western prairie does Leatherstocking promise to be larger than life. And when the family comes to see the reality as the sun sets and shadows creep across the prairie, all they find is a withered, almost mummified, old man...But he can warn those who would attempt to flee from civilization to turn back to accept their human responsibility. He can demonstrate, in the withering of his own body, the fallacy of the American belief in the unrestricted possibilities for men in the unbounded spaciousness of nature. There is no escape from the cycle of life and death...” David W. Noble, *The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden* (1968)

At the end of the first chapter, old Natty speaks to his dog Hector, a name that associates him with heroes in the epics of Homer. And he “led the way” like a Moses. At the beginning of Chapter 4 the Sioux are called “the Ishmaelites of the American deserts” and the Bush family are called the “tribe of wandering Ishmael,” equating these whites with Indians as primitives equally “treacherous and dangerous.”

ISHMAEL BUSH

Bush and Battius represent the two main threats to the values of Natty and Cooper. Bush is a lawless low-class squatter, as his name implies. Cooper spent much of his life trying to force squatters off his estate and sees Bush as a threat to property rights, social order, justice and freedom: “As the wife of the squatter concluded, she raised a hollow, taunting laugh, that was echoed from the mouths of several juvenile imitators, whom she was training to a life as shiftless and lawless as her own...” (Chapter 11) Ishmael Bush is introduced in a vivid description that calls attention to his “wild” clothing, ornaments and accessories, which characterize him as a primitive mixture of the barely civilized and the savage.

In *Genesis*, Ishmael is the son of Abraham by a slave, who is sent forth into the wilderness with his mother because Abraham’s wife is jealous on behalf of her own son Isaac. In accord with the prophecy of an angel, Ishmael becomes the patriarch of a vast nation, but he and his descendants are visited by a fate included in the prophecy: “And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him.” In *The Prairie* the exile Ishmael Bush is a patriarch whose hand is against every man, inspired in part by his Calvinist belief in total depravity. As a wild man, he has an egocentric inclination to act as if he is his own God. Natty tells him he has “followed the instinct of the beasts, rather than the principle which ought to belong to his kind...Bush had no respect for any learning...because he was ignorant of the application of any other intelligence than such as met the senses.” (Chapter 5) Education, his wife says, is a “sin of wasted l’arning.” (Chapter 13)

Bush disregards the property rights of others while claiming them for himself, condemning the Indians as robbers for stealing his livestock while he occupies their land, just as he squatted on the land of whites when he lived back in the settlements. Having set an example of insubordination to his children, he pays the price: “The spirit of insubordination...had spread...and the squatter had been made painfully to remember the time when, in the wantonness of his youth and vigor, he had, reversing the order of the brutes, cast off his own aged and failing parents, to enter into the world unshackled and free.” (Chapter 13)

DR. BATTIUS

Dr. Battius the scientist is a product of New England culture at the opposite end of spectrums from Bush--privileged not poor, cultivated not primitive, educated not unschooled, rationalistic to excess not instinctive. They are also opposites on the political spectrum. Again the opposite of Bush who believes that everyone is depraved, Battius is a liberal who believes in his own perfection:

“Man may be degraded to the very margin of the line which separates him from the brute [Bush], by ignorance; or he may be elevated to a communion with the great Master-spirit of all, by knowledge [Battius]; nay, I know not, if time and opportunity were given him, but he might become the master of all learning, and consequently equal to the great moving principle’.” (Chapter 17)

Battius, like Bush, feels superior. As a liberal he inflates his estimate of himself to near equality with God! Like Bush, he plays God. In Chapter 11, he claims to represent a tradition of wisdom and foresight, like a global warming researcher who claims infallibility and scriptural authority: "I am neither Asa, nor Absalom, nor any of the Hebrew prophets, but Obed, the root and stock of them all."

Dr. Battius is a naturalist in the 18th-century school of Buffon, as evident in Chapter 7 when he declares to Natty that "classification is the very soul of the natural sciences." The joke is that Battius has no soul, he is all head--and a biased head at that. His own tablets are his "book of reference," not the *Bible* and not Nature. When Natty suggests intermarriage between whites and Indians, the classifications of Battius prove to be racist: "'Impossible!' exclaimed the startled naturalist. 'I am indisposed to matrimony in general, and more especially to all admixture of the varieties of *species*, which only tend to tarnish the beauty and to interrupt the harmony of nature.'" (Chapter 21)

Battius is a rationalist so dissociated from Nature that he cannot see what is obvious to everyone else: "All hours and all seasons are alike, my good Ellen, to the genuine lover of nature." (Chapter 6) The academic is as blind as a bat, as Natty suggests in Chapter 9: "Your notions are a little blinded with reading too many books." When he cites Buffon as his supreme authority, Natty replies, "Then was your buffoon a fool to my Hector!" His dog knows more about nature than the professor of natural sciences. As in Chapter 6 when, blundering about in the dark, the professor gets excited for awhile thinking that he has discovered a strange new species out on the prairie--the terrifying *vespertilio horribilis!* "'It is your own ass,' cried Ellen."

Later he concludes that Inez (the captive maiden hidden in the tent who represents Christian ideals) is a "caged beast"! Battius is a ridiculous expert, a mock Moses: "The naturalist raised his tablets to the heavens." Says Natty, the true Moses: "Why, man, you are further from the truth than you are from the settlements, with all your bookish larning and hard words..." (Chapter 9) Natty and Battius: "one was so purely practical and the other so much given to theory." (Chapter 7) Americans are notoriously practical and distrusting of abstract theory, as epitomized by Benjamin Franklin in one century and Natty Bumppo in the next.

Before it is revealed that the beautiful girl is not a monster, Dr. Battius makes blind leaps of deduction and Natty asks him, "You have seen the creature?" "Not with the organs of sight; but with much more infallible instruments of vision: the conclusions of reason and the deductions of scientific premises." (Chapter 9) The exposure of Battius as a pretentious fraud reaches a climax when an exhilarated young Paul Hover "seized the Doctor by the hair, which instantly revealed its artificial formation by cleaving to his hand." (Chapter 10) Cooper had a popular target in the batty professor. It is no surprise that, over the years, professors have pronounced his satire of the professor not funny.

SUMMARY OF EVILS

Ishmael Bush personifies (1) *egocentric individualism*, a selfish independence fostered by the decadent Calvinistic tradition, which leads to lawlessness, irresponsible anarchism and injustice. Battius personifies (2) *reductive scientific materialism*, fostered by the 18th-century Enlightenment, an excess of rationalism out of touch with Nature and reality, which leads to godlessness and folly. Recalling that Cooper got expelled from Yale, one might see Dr. Battius as a cartoon drawn from his memory of his professors, comparable to Irving's Ichabod Crane.

MYTHIC DIMENSIONS

Cooper believed New Englanders were arrogant like Bush and Battius, considering themselves superior, still energized by the early Puritan myth of themselves as a chosen people--Neo-Israelites, whose manifest destiny it was to hack their way to the Promised Land beyond the prairie and the mountains in the West.

Since the New England culture Natty opposes originated in the Moses myth of a "chosen people," Cooper parallels Natty to the hero of that myth--to Moses. Natty refers to Adam in the Garden, who, likewise, is much like himself after the Fall into knowledge. "That is certainly the Mosaic account of the

event,” said the Doctor; “though your reading is by far too literal!” (Chapter 19) In fact, to review, Cooper evokes Adam, Moses, Jesus and Daniel Boone as parallels to Leatherstocking, making *The Prairie* a multiple *analogue*--a literary narrative that is analogous to some previous narrative or narratives. Hence the romance is also a multiple allegory--which should not be taken too literally. That is, the parallels can only be pushed so far. Despite its faults, *The Prairie* is not only Cooper’s greatest work, it is an intellectual achievement comparable in complexity to the multiple allegories of Hawthorne and Melville.

PARALLELS BETWEEN MOSES AND NATTY

1. Moses is born on the shore of the Nile and withdraws into the wilderness in self-imposed exile after he kills a man, an act society judges criminal, though Moses believes he had sufficient good cause. Natty is born on the shore of the Atlantic and withdraws into the wilderness in self-imposed exile after he kills a deer (in *The Pioneers*), an act society judges criminal, though Natty believes he had sufficient good cause.
2. After long sojourns in the wilderness, Moses and Natty, both in their 80s, reluctantly assume leadership of their respective peoples, Moses after God speaks to him from a burning bush, Natty after being urged by Ishmael Bush.
3. Moses appears before the Israelites transfigured with light, and brings to them the word of God revealed on Mount Sinai, which at first they will not heed. Natty appears before the Ishmaelites on a mound transfigured with light, and brings to them the wisdom of God revealed in Nature, which they will not heed.
4. The materialistic Israelites worship a false God, and Moses is so angered that he smashes God’s tablets, then regrets casting them down. The materialistic Dr. Battius worships the false god of science, and Natty approves when the tablets of this god are symbolically cast down in Chapter 23.
5. The chosen people led by Moses carry the mysterious ark of their covenant with God. The unholy people led by Natty carry the mysterious cage of their covenant with Abiram White, the devil who has kidnapped Inez, an incarnation of Christian ideals.
6. In the wilderness, Moses calls forth for his people a spring from a rock, and feeds them heavenly manna. Natty leads the Bush family to a spring gushing from a slope, and teaches them how to prepare buffalo meat, one of “the gifts of the creator.”
7. Moses and the Israelites are pursued by Pharaoh and his armies, who are enraged by the deaths of Egypt’s firstborn sons. Natty and the Ishmaelites are pursued by Mahtoree and his warriors, and by the Bush family, who are enraged by the death of their firstborn son Asa.
8. A pillar of fire delays Pharaoh, and Moses saves his followers by dividing the Red Sea and leading them across. Natty saves his followers by dividing a black sea of stampeding buffalo—“a living torrent”--by raising his arms in the posture of a Moses, and then by setting a prairie fire that delays Mahtoree while he helps his people make a river crossing.
9. Like Moses, Natty dies without seeing his followers enter the Promised Land beyond the mountains.

adapted from John J. McAleer
“Biblical Analogy in the Leatherstocking Tales”
Nineteenth-Century Fiction XVII
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CONCLUSION

The plot of *The Prairie* extends the Medieval tradition of romance with conventional elements: Ishmael Bush is the ignobleman whose associate Abiram White kidnaps and holds the maiden Inez captive in their

“castle”--a fortress on top of a high rock on the prairie. She is rescued by a knight (Natty Bumppo) on behalf of a Christian gentleman worthy of her (Middleton), with a fool or court jester tagging along (Battius).

At the same time Cooper is current, liberal and egalitarian by naming the worst villain White, giving an anti-racist dimension to the moral allegory of saving the Christian ideals represented by the virginal maiden in distress. The threat to those ideals comes from whites rather than from the pagan Indians or other racial minorities. Cooper also transcends an ethnocentric literary convention by making his “fair” lady not only dark in a literal sense, but Catholic! He gives her symbolic complexity that transcends common prejudices. Also contrary to gender role stereotype, he portrays the opposite of Inez in Mrs. Bush, the rugged matriarch who represents many thousands of tough pioneer women.

The plot affirms upward mobility in America and fulfills Cooper’s vision of an ideal society. Paul Hover evolves from a nomadic bee hunter into an agrarian: “He soon became a landholder, then a prosperous cultivator of the soil, and shortly after a town-officer. By that progressive change in fortunes, which in the republic is often seen to be so singularly accompanied by a corresponding improvement in knowledge and self-respect, he went on, from step to step, until his wife enjoyed the maternal delight of seeing her children placed far beyond the danger of returning to that state from which both their parents had issued. Paul is actually at this moment a member of the lower branch of the legislature of the state where he has long resided.”

Figuratively speaking, Paul is a Congressman, whereas Middleton is a Senator: “Middleton, who fills, with a credit better suited to the difference in their education, a seat in a far higher branch of legislative authority, is the source from which we have derived most of the intelligence necessary to compose our legend.” Education rather than wealth or amount of property determines status in Cooper’s ideal social hierarchy, though it is important to remember that he ridicules university education as represented by Dr. Battius while affirming practical education, the “improvement in knowledge” such as Paul acquires by cultivating the soil, managing a farm and serving as a town-officer.

Old Leatherstocking dies among Indians in the wilderness, preceded in death by his dog Hector. In passing his spiritual legacy on to Middleton, he prevails over Bush and Battius, for the present. He dies at dusk, looking west, in “the glorious tints of an American sunset. The hour--the calm beauty of the season--the occasion, all conspired to fill the spectators with solemn awe. Suddenly, while musing on the remarkable position in which he was placed, Middleton felt the hand which he held grasp his own with incredible power, and the old man, supported on either side by his friends, rose upright to his feet.” To the last he expresses his powerful spirit, Christian humility and harmony with Nature, by answering the call of death willingly, not as a hero, but like a pupil in the eye of God: *"Here!"*

Michael Hollister (2014)

MORE ANALYSIS

“An analysis of the structure of *The Prairie* reveals that Cooper works from one to another of a series of sharp visual images conceived as if they were paintings lacking the dimension of time. These moments of stasis are interlarded with spurts of violent action (pursuit, capture, the buffalo stampede, the prairie fire, the fight between Sioux and Pawnees, the single combat of Mahtoree and Hard-Heart on the sand of the island in the river) and with long debates between Leatherstocking and Obed Bat, or among the parliamentary orators of the Sioux council.

Several of the tableaux in *The Prairie* are among the most effective passages in Cooper. The first appearance of Leatherstocking to the astonished Ishmael Bush, a dark figure towering against the sunset sky, and the scene of his death at the end of the story have been praised by the critics, but they are no more remarkable than the first appearance of Hard-Heart or the carefully drawn landscape which serves as a backdrop for Ishmael Bush’s primitive court of justice after the defeat of the Sioux by the Pawnees. One of the best examples is the ‘wild and striking’ scene which Cooper pauses to establish when the Bush family comes to the thicket that conceals the body of Ishmael’s murdered son....

The depth and power of Cooper's characterization of Leatherstocking is due to his capacity to respond to this anarchic inference from the ideal of forest freedom despite his own commitment to the ideal of an ordered, stratified society based on the secure ownership of land by a leisure class. The same covert response to the theme of subversive protest against social order enables Cooper to make of Ishmael Bush something more than a mere villain like Abiram White....

Since the basic image of Leatherstocking was too old for the purposes of romance, the novelist doubled the character to produce a young hunter sharing the old man's habits, tastes, skills, and, to some extent, his virtues...The Paul Haver...type of hero, a young and handsome denizen of the wilderness, following the gentler calling of bee hunter and thus free from even the justifiable taint of bloodshed involved in Leatherstocking's vocation...The young hero has none of the theoretical hostility to civilization that is so conspicuous in Leatherstocking. [Such] changes made it technically possible for a wild Westerner to be a hero of romance, but they destroy the subversive overtones that had given Leatherstocking so much of his emotional depth."

Henry Nash Smith
Introduction, *The Prairie*
(Holt 1950, 1962) ix, xviii, 76

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