

OVERVIEW

The Leatherstocking Saga (1823-41)

James Fenimore Cooper

(1789-1851)

The Saga is a Romantic celebration of independence, democratic ideals, divine Nature and the heroism of the lowly--Natty Bumppo and his Indian friends. It dramatizes the virtues embodied in Leatherstocking, who is half natty (civilized) and half bumpo (bumpkin). The name "Natty" is actually a joke, since he wears buckskin. He is "civilized" mainly in being Christian, having been educated by missionaries. He is comparable to Dirk Peters in Poe's *Pym* except he is the opposite of racist, and he became the prototype of American literary adventure heroes who journey into the wilderness with companions of a different race, from Ishmael and Huck Finn to Nick Adams, Ike McCaslin and Henderson the Rain King.

The series is like a romantic opera in five parts, with this historical chronology, following Natty from youth to old age: *The Deerslayer* (1841), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1823), *The Pathfinder* (1840), *The Pioneers* (1823) and *The Prairie* (1827). The settings, plots and Indian characters are inherently romantic in the popular sense. D. H. Lawrence saw the series as exhibiting in order of publication "a decrescendo of reality, a crescendo of beauty." The last written, *The Deerslayer*, is the most Romantic in its evocation of Edenic wilderness and the idealism of youth.

During a period when many people were immigrating westward, Cooper relied upon research and imagination. He never went out west himself, but he grew up in the frontier wilderness of western New York, which at that time was much the same. Natty is thought to have been modeled on real trappers, explorers and Indian fighters, including Nat Foster, Nick Stoner and Daniel Boone. The series was abridged by Allan Nevins in a single volume called *The Leatherstocking Saga* (1954). In this case, most readers today welcome an abridged edition, finding Cooper too longwinded, redundant and unrealistic, agreeing with the satire of Cooper by Mark Twain.

Nonetheless, we do not go to a romantic opera for realistic characters, dialogue or plot. We go for the music. In the *Saga* the music is Cooper's vision of early America. No other writer of that time saw so much. Only Hawthorne and Faulkner compare for historical range and mythic resonance. Cooper's writing is full of cultural information. He shares the political views of the Founding Fathers and his descriptions evoke Romantic western painters including Frederick Remington and Charles Russell.

Cooper's depiction of Indians is allegorical. The best Indians represent the very best in human nature--the ideal--bad Indians the worst, making his plots morality plays of Good versus Evil. Although Natty was educated to be a Christian, his feelings in nature are almost pantheistic. Cooper is Romantic in consistently demonstrating that Natty's experience and intuition, shared with his Indian companions, are superior to the reductive rationalism he identifies with civilized New Englanders, as exemplified by his Dr. Battius (blind as a bat) in *The Prairie*, who is comparable to Ichabod Crane by Irving his fellow New Yorker.

Natty is doing God's work, sometimes breaking man's law, comparable to Thoreau in "Civil Disobedience." Ideal Indians are essentially "christian" by nature and Cooper clearly prefers them to the white New Englanders he portrays. As put by James Russell Lowell, "His Indians, with proper respect be it said, Are just Natty Bumppo, daubed over with red." That is why he lets Uncas and Cora fall in love in *The Last of the Mohicans*, challenging a racist taboo, though he kills them off to avoid upsetting white readers.

Though he was a conservative democrat, Cooper was in some respects liberal--an egalitarian and the first environmentalist in American literature, as in *The Prairie* when Natty criticizes some pioneers with names evoking Puritan New England, for cutting down too many trees.

Michael Hollister (2014)

The Deerslayer (1841)

“In *The Deerslayer* we have the best of Cooper’s plots, an exciting scheme of action with no major element of the improbable from beginning to end. Its mainspring is the bold conception of a refugee from law-abiding society, Old Tom Hutter, his lake castle in the deep forest, and his two motherless daughters; just the group about whom a struggle of Indians and whites would rage. When the kidnapping of the beautiful Wah-ta-Wah by hostile savages brings Leatherstocking and Chingachgook on the scene, we are prepared for thrilling events. The conflict on the lake shore, the battle inside the castle, the capture of Leatherstocking himself, the peril of Judith, all follow naturally. It is a little too bad that the plot has to be given its denouement by the arrival of a British detachment--but that, too, is logical.”

The Pathfinder (1840)

“Nor is the plot of *The Pathfinder* much inferior. Leatherstocking in love seems out of his proper element: his true devotion is to the wilderness. Every part of the action, however, has verisimilitude. It was natural that the British garrison at Oswego should send a force to the Thousand Islands to capture French supply boats venturing down the St. Lawrence to Lake Ontario; natural even that the commander of the little force involved should take his daughter along. Once more the stage has been well set for battle, siege, peril, and rescue. It was a feat to combine plausibly in one novel two such diverse scenes of danger as the storm on the lake, and the French and Indian attack on the blockhouse in the Thousand Islands--scenes each of which Cooper made stirring by his special magic of nautical lore and woodcraft.”

The Last of the Mohicans (1826)

“By contrast, the plot of *The Last of the Mohicans* abounds in improbabilities. Why should so shrewd and farsighted a soldier as Colonel Munro, passionately devoted to his daughters, wish them to leave the safety of Fort Edward for the dangers of Fort William Henry, about to be captured by Montcalm’s army? Why should so sensible an officer as Major Heyward, the maidens’ escort, leave the protection of a column of troops marching to William Henry, and take a devious path through woods besprinkled with war parties of Indians? The unscathed emergence of Cora and Alice from their headlong journey as captives of the Hurons is also difficult to credit. The two heroines had no handbag or toilet case on that long arduous trip through woods, swamps, and thickets; they dropped gloves, veil, and other fragments of clothing to mark their route; and as Parkman commented, they must have looked more like scarecrows when rescued than Cooper’s ‘lovely beings.’ But Parkman also noted that Longfellow did even worse than Cooper, carrying Evangeline through two thousand miles of forest pilgrimage, in the course of which she eluded half a dozen tribes of warring savages!”

The Pioneers (1823)

“Cooper is not a realist; he is a romancer. The fable on which the canvas of *The Pioneers* is stretched--the story of the lost Colonel Effingham, loyalist, and his estate--is too creakily unconvincing to detain the reader’s attention.”

The Prairie (1827)

“*The Prairie* fortunately has almost no plot at all, being merely a string of episodes; but the long arm of coincidence was never stretched further than in Leatherstocking’s meeting, on the boundless plains swept by Sioux and Pawnee, with the grandson of the Major Duncan Heyward of *The Last of the Mohicans*. These flaws, singly and collectively, matter almost as little as Shakespeare’s gift of a seacoast to Bohemia.

Nor does it greatly matter that Mark Twain could throw just ridicule upon Cooper’s management of the episode in which the hostile Indians in *The Deerslayer* tried to waylay Hutter’s ark as it emerged from the Susquehanna upon Lake Otsego; or that Stewart Edward White could call into just question some of Leatherstocking’s alleged feats of marksmanship. What does matter is the grand imaginative sweep which Cooper imparts to all the Leatherstocking series, and the skill with which he knits thrilling episodes into a large panoramic drama.”

Allan Nevins
Introduction

The Leatherstocking Saga, condensed edition
(Modern Library 1954, 1966) 6-7

