James Fenimore Cooper–the Historian Essay, Research Paper

James Fenimore Cooper–The Historian

James Fenimore Cooper is, in his own right, a

historian. Cooper is responsible for passing on views of

early America that will never be available to us again. He

helped many Americans view Indians and other ethnic groups

as people and not ?savages?. Historical events greatly

influenced Coopers writing. Time periods such as the

Revolutionary war and the American exploration of the West

were often the backgrounds for Coopers most successful

novels. Novels such as The Spy, The Pioneers, and The Last

of the Mohicans all possessed these qualities, and as a

result, were extremely successful.

The Spy was Coopers second novel and first success.

Many readers felt that The Spy possessed a quality of

realism that his first novel, Precaution, didn?t (Ringe13).

It was in this novel that Cooper first branched the topic of

a war theme. It took place in Westchester Country which was

neutral ground and also the scene of many battles between

the English and the American colonists. The novel makes

good use of it?s setting and revolves around the conflicts

of one family (the Whartons). The majority of the family

remain loyalists and support the English. However, the

youngest daughter favors the rebels and goes as far as to

become engaged to an American major (Long32-35). This

conflict in particular was one that many Americans could

relate to. Since many of Coopers readers had lived through

the Revolutionary war, they had often had experiences like

the ones in this book. Another important historical element

that Cooper enriched this novel was the use of actual

people as characters. Major Andre was mentioned several

times in this novel. In real life, Major Andre was a

revolutionary war spy for the British (Campbell1). Cooper

used vivid imagery to portray the realities of war. In the

beginning Chapter 8, he writes, ?With fire and sword the

country round was wasted far and wide; and many a childing

mother, then, and new-born infant died; but things like

these, you know, must be at every famous

victory.?(Campbell2). Cooper realized the source of this

novels success and continued to use an historical theme

throughout his later novels.

The Pioneers was Coopers next novel and although it had

a ?markedly different tone?(Ringe16), it was just as

successful as The Spy. Instead of using the war theme this

time, he dealt with something that was also familiar to most

Americans. He used the basic idea that ?the American

wilderness must be invaded and destroyed if civilization is

to spread across the continent?(Ringe16). The setting of

this novel was Coopers home town of Cooperstown, New York.

It centers around disputes between American Colonists and

the Native Americans. Another important asset to this book

is the use of imagery. ?Cooper depicts a landscape in the

process of change from the untouched wilderness hunted by

Leathingstocking and visited by Judge Temple when he came to

survey his possessions, to the placid domestic scene of

1823?(Ringe16). This novel starts out with Judge Temple,

Leathingstocking, and Oliver Edwards all shooting at the

same deer and then all of them trying to claim it.

Throughout the rest of the novel, hostilities rise. The

novel, overall, was one of the most important ones that

Cooper ever wrote. It was in this novel that Cooper first

introduced the character Leathingstocking. Leathingstocking

was used many times in Coopers novels.

The next novel, The Pilot, offered a change of pace to

Coopers readers. The novel took place on a ship that was

sailing in the waters surrounding England. This ship was

preparing for a raid on England. The books theme was that

for ?such a dangerous mission to succeed, strict obedience

to proper authority is absolutely necessary?(Ringe20). This

obviously presents a problem to the men fighting who had

?not only denied obedience to the authority of the king but

is actually in open rebellion against him?. This whole

novel lead many readers to realize just how ?deeply

committed to American democracy? Cooper was(Ringe22). It

was also another example of how successful Cooper?s

historical themes were.

The book that was responsible for making Cooper a

household name was The Last of the Mohicans. This novel was

the first one where Cooper used Indian romance (Long52).

Cooper knew that many Americans had no grasp on what real

Indian culture was like. So, in this novel, he offered an

introduction to explain the Indian way of life and to give

readers insight on Indian culture (Cooper1). Cooper also

knew that, despite the lack of education Americans had when

it came to Indians, this book would appeal to many different

types of readers. The book centers around the romance of

the chief of the Mohicans adopted son and his romance with

the daughter of an army general. This topic was one that

was new to many Americans. What was not new was Coopers

infallible description of the untouched wilderness of the

uninhibited Americas. This novels setting was in the

wilderness that is now upstate New York. He took many

readers back to an America that we will never see. Another

thing that made this novel successful was the use of

violence. In a world without television or radios, early

Americans had only books. Reading about fights between

Indians and Americans was something that most Americans only

heard about. With Coopers vivid writing, many readers felt

as if they were witnessing the battles themselves.

The Prairie differs from Coopers other books because

?The Prairie depicts a world that man cannot pretend to

master, for it is beyond his control?(Ringe28). The plot

again involved Indian tribes battling against each other as

in The Last of the Mohicans. In fact, Cooper was accused of

laziness in the writing of this book because the main

characters, Hard Heart and Mahtoree, are so much like The

Last of the Mohicans Uncas and Mangua (Ringe28). Despite

these weaknesses, The Prairie was still a success. Cooper

saw how much attention The Last of the Mohicans got and

modeled another book after it. The use of conflicts between

Indian tribes seemed to hold readers attention. Most were

unaware that this too was an important part of Americas

short history.

In writing The Spy, The Pilot, The Pioneers, The Last

of the Mohicans, and The Prairie, Cooper used the underlying

historical theme. This was because historical themes were a

great asset to Coopers already good writing. In all of his

most successful novels he used real events and explicit

imagery to relay history in an interesting, appealing

manner. Cooper?s career started off rocky and he was by no

means an overnight success. Cooper rose above other writers

of his time because he drew upon his life experience. He

knew that people liked to read about true stories and real

events. He used his many experiences along with historical

events to enhance his writing and to lay foundation for his

novels. This proved successful and made Cooper one of the

most popular novelists from the Romantism period of American

literature.

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