Untitled Essay, Research Paper

James Fenimore Cooper was born on September 15, 1789 in Burlington, New Jersey.

He was the son of William and Elizabeth (Fenimore) Cooper, the twelfth of

thirteen children (Long, p. 9). Cooper is known as one of the first great

American novelists, in many ways because he was the first American writer

to gain international followers of his writing. In addition, he was perhaps

the first novelist to “demonstrate…that native materials could inspire

significant imaginative writing” (p. 13). In addition his writing, specifically

The Deerslayer, present a unique view of the Native American’s experiences

and situation. Many critics, for example, argue that The Deerslayer presents

a moral opinion about what occurred in the lives of the American Indians.

Marius Bewley has said that the book shows moral values

throughout the context of it. He says that from the very beginning, this

is symbolically made clear. The plot is a platform for the development of

moral themes. The first contact the reader has with people in the book is

in the passage in which the two hunters find each other. “The calls were

in different tones, evidently proceeding from two men who had lost their

way, and were searching in different directions for their path” (Cooper,

p. 5). Bewley states that this meeting is symbolic of losing one’s way morally,

and then attempting to find it again through different paths. Says Bewley,

“when the two men emerge from the forest into the little clearing we are

face to face with… two opposing moral visions of life which are embodied

in these two woodsmen” (cited in Long, p. 121).

Critic Donald Davie, however, disagrees. His contention

is that the plot is poorly developed. “It does not hang together; has no

internal logic; one incident does not rise out of another” (cited in Long,

p. 121). But according to Robert Long, Bewley has a better grasp of the meaning

and presentation of ideas throughout the book. According to Long, although

the plot development may not be “strictly linear,” it is still certainly

coherent and makes sense. In addition, Long feels that, as Bewley states,

the novel is a way in and through which Cooper presents moral ideas about

the plight of the Native Americans (p. 121).

The story of The Deerslayer is simple. It is novel which

tells the events which occur in the travels of a frontiersman. His name is

Natty, and he is a young man at only twenty years old. Coming from New York

of the eighteenth century, he is unprepared in many ways for what he encounters

in the frontier. But he survives, escapes, and learns many things over the

course of his adventures.

The two characters of Natty and Hurry are contrasted in

such as way that Cooper presents his view of the Native Americans through

them. As earlier indicated, they symbolize two men with differing moral

aptitudes. Throughout the novel, the differences between the two show Cooper’s

feelings about morality as it relates to the American Indians. As Long states,

“The voices of the two men calling to one another at the beginning introduces

the idea of a world that has lost its coherence, is already reduced to

disjunction and fragmentation. Natty and Hurry search for a point of contact

yet move in different directions” (p. 122).

Cooper’s descriptions of Natty and Hurry early in the

novel make it obvious that they stand for opposite moral values. Hurry, for

example, is described by Cooper as having “a dashing, reckless, off-hand

manner, and physical restlessness” (Cooper, p. 6). In fact, it is these

characteristics of him that gave him his nickname by which he is called -

Hurry Scurry, although his real name is Henry March. He is described as tall

and muscular, the “grandeur that pervaded such a noble physique” being the

only thing that kept him from looking “altogether vulgar” (p. 6). The

Deerslayer’s appearance, on the other hand, contrasts with Hurry’s significantly.

Cooper indicates that not only were the two men different in appearance,

but also “in character” (p. 6). A little shorter than Hurry, he was also

leaner. In addition, he was not handsome like Hurry and, says Cooper, he

would not have anything exceptional about his looks had it not been for “an

expression that seldom failed to win upon those who had leisure to examine

it, and to yield to the feelings of confidence it created. This expression

was simply that of guileless truth, sustained by an earnestness of purpose,

and a sincerity of feeling” (p. 6).

Cooper contrasts these two characters early in the story

so that it is evident that they will provide examples of contrasting behavior

as well. It is made clear early on that the later actions of both Hurry and

the Deerslayer will contrast in such a way that the moral issues with which

Cooper was concerned would come to light.

Glimmerglass as the setting of the novel allows the contrast

between the two men to be seen even more strongly. As William P. Kelly (1983)

states, the setting created by Cooper allows the story to have a certain

myth-like quality, a quality which makes the teaching of a lesson by Cooper

all that much more acceptable. “Cooper does not locate his narrative within

the flux of history, but evokes a sense of timelessness consistent with the

world of myth. For example, the setting is of “the earliest days of colonial

history,” a “remote and obscure” period, lost in the “mists of time.” In

setting the backdrop of the story in this way, the events become less important

in regards to historical value and accuracy – their importance is derived

from their ability to teach one lessons about morality.

Within this setting, then, the contrasts between Natty and Hurry are brought

across even clearer. But it is another character, Tom Hutter, who also plays

an important role in Cooper’s presentation of the Indians. Hutter’s significance

first involves where he lives. His house is located directly in the center

of Glimmerglass. This suggests, symbolically at least, that he is involved

in the center of activities, whether moral or immoral, within Glimmerglass.

In addition, more than living in the center of the land, Hutter has also

laid claim, however unofficial, to the land. Early on in the novel the reader

learns that this is the case. Shortly after Natty and Hurry meet up, they

are canoeing down the water. Natty comments that the land is so beautiful,

and asks Hurry, “Do you say, Hurry, that there is no man who calls himself

lawful owner of all these glories?’ (p. 22). To this Hurry responds, “None

but the King….but he has gone so far away that his claim will never trouble

old Tom Hutter, who has got possession, and is like to keep it as long as

his life lasts” (p. 22).

In having the characters of Natty and Hurry speak of Hutter like this, referring

to him in an almost mythological sense as though he is a legend, Cooper is

setting the stage for the development of Hutter’s character, also in contrast

to Natty’s. It is in Tom Hutter’s home, when Natty and Hurry first arrive

in the beginning of the book, that they begin to talk about hunting and the

killing of both animals and men. Natty comments that he has the reputation

as being the only man “who had shed so much blood of animals that had not

shed the blood of man” (p. 28). He says this with pride, obviously not looking

with high regard upon the savage slaughter of other men. But Hurry’s response

shows that he looks at this in a totally different perspective. He says that

he is afraid that people will think that Natty is “chicken-hearted.” Then

he goes on to comment that “For my part I account game, a redskin, and a

Frenchman as pretty much the same thing…one has no need to be over-scrupulous

when it’s the right time to show the flint” (p. 28).

Cooper presents this dialogue between Natty and Hurry in order to obviously

contrast their moral characters. First, he has Natty speak, with apparent

pride, about the fact that in all the land, he has the reputation for killing

more deer than anyone else, while never having taken one single human life.

But Hurry’s response to this is that Natty is a “chicken-hearted” individual.

In Natty’s point of view, animals, Indians, and Frenchman are all the same,

and killing one is the same as killing another.

In this, Cooper is clearly presenting a view about the worth of Indians within

the society of this time. Natty’s view that killing other men should be avoided

is the correct and “right” view. He sets Natty up as a moral character,

specifically in comparison to Hurry to which he compares Natty often. Hurry,

then, blatantly states that he thinks that there is nothing which separates

the killing of a deer from the killing of a man. Cooper presents this view

in order to show what he feels is the correct way. It is obvious that Cooper

wants Natty to present Cooper’s view of the Native Americans. Natty’s inability

to look at them as mere animals shows that he believes that they are good

people, just the same as anyone else. In fact, Hurry is depicted more as

the villain, while Natty is presented as the hero.

As their conversation continues, Natty asks Hurry if the lake has a name.

When Hurry tells him that it, in fact, does not, Natty thinks of this as

positive. “I’m glad it has no name, or, at least, no paleface name; for their

christenings always foretell waste and destruction” (p. 30). Here, we can

see Natty’s thoughts on the significance of whether an Indian or a white

man has named the water. He comments that he would mind if a white man had

named it. He believes that white men traditionally bring with them environmental

damage – they would have ruined the natural beauty of it. The Indians, on

the other hand, treated land with much more respect. Cooper makes it apparent

that this is the way he feels in having Natty comment on the land as such.

Hurry, however, responds in a different way. He tells Natty that the Indian

name for it is “Glimmerglass.” Then he goes on to state that the white men

decided to keep this name, at least unofficially. “I am glad they’ve been

compelled to keep the redmen’s name, for it would be too hard to rob them

of both land and name!” (p. 30).

In other words, Hurry is stating the obvious fact that everything will eventually

be taken away from the Native Americans. Any land that they might value and

care for today will be confiscated and fought for by the white men tomorrow.

But the exclamation point at the end of the sentence suggests that, rather

than a sad comment accepting the inevitable, Hurry says this with glee and

excitement. To him it is like a joke, that the Indians will be allowed to

keep the name for the land but lose the land itself.

Cooper, in the above dialogue between Natty and Hurry, is presenting a view

of the immorality involved in the interactions between the Native Americans

and the white men. In Cooper’s mind, the Native Americans respected and cared

for the land much more than the white men did. This is apparent in his quote

from Hurry, that white men always brought “waste and destruction” to land.

Secondly, Cooper also thought that the constant fighting, oppression, and

killing of the American Indians was wrong. To Cooper, Natty represented the

good and moral point of view on this issue, while Hurry represented the immoral

and cruel side, laughing about the horrible truths of the land.

All throughout the book The Deerslayer, Cooper contrasts the characters of

Hurry and Natty in order to present his views of Native Americans. With Hurry

as the one who has a racist attitude, believing that the deaths of Indians

are deaths which do not matter, Natty is the moral one. The contrast between

these two characters allows Cooper to show the contrast between morality

and immorality. Hurry goes around killing Indians, believing that their deaths

are insignificant. Natty, killing his first Indian in a matter of self-defense,

holds the man in his arms as he dies feeling a sense of bonding and brotherhood

with the dying Indian. Throughout the book, Natty is shown learning many

different things, such as woodcraft, and increasing in moral stature. Hurry,

on the other hand, is presented as becoming more and more selfish, until

his comments by themselves reveal his ignorance and he loses credibility

as a character.

The book The Deerslayer is a story in which James Fenimore Cooper presents

a view of the Native Americans. His idea is that they were natural owners

to the land, being there first. In addition, they loved, valued and respected

the land in a way that was not common to most white men. Finally, he believed

that they were human beings, entitled to live their lives freely just as

anyone else. In showing the two sides of opinion on this issue – Hurry and

Natty – Cooper sets the book up as a story of good and evil, right and wrong.

His ideas, through the thoughts and actions of Hurry and Natty, are clearly

presented.

Works Cited

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