THE EPIC QUALITIES OF THE EARLY AMERICAN FRONTIER NOVEL: COOPER'S LEATHERSTOCKING TALES

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

The Epic Qualities of the Early American Frontier Novel: Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales. (August 1968)

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James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851), born in Burlington, New Jersey, received a primarily classical education. After four years of naval service, he turned to writing. Of the thirty-two novels written before his death, his Leatherstocking Tales are probably most important. Since D. H. Lawrence's comments on these five novels in Studies in Classic American Literature (1923), these Tales have been considered expressive of American ideals and values; these considerations are basic to a national epic. This thesis considers the Leatherstocking Tales as an American epic.

Five great national epics--The Epic of Gilgamesh, the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Aeneid, and Paradise Lost--all have basic common features. Each contains a hero who is a man of his time; this hero embarks on a quest of national concern; the epic author maintains an objective view of the struggle; and the effect of the epic is usually tragic, but may point to a happier future.

An American epic would use these four features in a way dictated by American history and national values. The hero would be hard, isolated, stoic, and a pious killer. His quest would be the civilizing of America from East to West by displacing the Indian.

The author would project an objective view by showing the Indian as a worthy opponent. Tragedy would accompany the epic because the hero would himself be destroyed by the white civilization. The epic could be written as a novelistic romance since the romance, which deals with legend, myth, and beauty is well suited to express epic ideas. Virgil's Aeneid, dealing with the displacement of a native people in the name of civilization, could be used as a model for the American epic.

Natty Bumppo, hero of the Leatherstocking Tales, is shown to be a pious killer, a believer in Providence, and devoted to bringing civilization to America. Natty encounters two types of Indians during his quest. One type, that represented by Chingachgook, is resigned to the white man's conquest and plans to wait until the Indian's time comes again. The type of Indian represented by Magua opposes the quest by force, in war. Civilization ruins both. Magua is corrupted by rum and killed in battle; Chingachgook falls prey to rum, is Christianized, and dies in shame.

The Deerslayer, written in 1841, describes the early career of Natty Bumppo. In it he kills his first human being, an Indian, and receives his weapon, the rifle Killdeer. At the end of the book he makes his symbolic choice of heading into the woods instead of turning to the settlements. The Last of the Mohicans, written in 1826, shows the symbolic dispossession of the Indian. Uncas, Chingachgook's son, the hope of the Delawares, is killed by Magua,

the Indian corrupted by civilization. Magua is killed by Natty Bumppo. So the Indian has two choices: to wait or to fight. He cannot win.

The Pathfinder (1840), shows Natty in love; he rejects the love to follow his quest. The Pioneers, composed in 1823, begins Natty's own tragedy. He is made a victim of the law he helped to bring, being arrested for shooting a deer. He leaves for the West, and in The Prairie, written in 1827, Natty sees law brought to the far West. His own time past, Natty dies, as did Chingachgook, facing the sunset, both out of place in a civilized world. Thus Cooper, creating a past meaningful to all Americans while employing basic epic qualities, created an American epic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) was born in Burlington, New Jersey, the son of William and Elizabeth Cooper. In 1790 the family moved to Cooperstown, New York, on Otsego Lake, a frontier town founded by and named for William Cooper.

In 1801 James Cooper entered an Episcopal preparatory school in Albany, New York, where "the curriculum was weighted heavily toward the classics, especially Vergil."[1] Because of this preparation when Cooper entered Yale, in 1803, he had a more advanced understanding of Latin and Latin literature than had most of the students. Not challenged by his courses, he began playing pranks and was expelled from Yale in 1805.[2] Cooper's formal education, ending in 1805, had been primarily a classical one. It "seem[s] probable that [he] . . . had a better classical education than almost any other American novelist."[3]

In 1806 James Cooper went to sea as an ordinary seaman aboard

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The citations on the following pages follow the style of the MMLA.

[1] Warren S. Walker, James Fenimore Cooper: An Introduction and Interpretation (New York, 1962), p. 4.

[2] Walker, Cooper: An Introduction, p. 4.

[3] Arvid Shulenberger, Cooper's Theory of Fiction: His Prefaces and Their Relation to His Novels (Lawrence, Kansas, 1955), p. 9.

the Stirling and in 1808 became a midshipman in the United States Navy. In 1810, after the death of his father, Cooper left the Navy for good. He married in 1811 and became head of his entire family when the last of his five elder brothers died in 1809.

Thus, by the year 1820 James Fenimore Cooper had lived in a frontier village, Cooperstown, had received a primarily classical education, and had spent four years at sea. In 1820, on a dare from his wife, he turned to novel writing. Like most novice writers Cooper failed to make use of his own experience and his first novel, Precaution, an English society novel, failed. But he did turn to the native scene in his next novel, The Spy, published in 1821. This tale of the American Revolution was distinctively American and was a great success. Cooper then began his series of the Leather-stocking Tales, publishing The Pioneers in 1823, The Last of the Mohicans in 1826, The Prairie in 1827, The Pathfinder in 1840, and The Deerslayer in 1841. During his novel-writing career Cooper published a total of thirty-two novels, the last in 1850, one year before his death.

Cooper himself felt that the Leatherstocking Tales were his best novels, saying, "If anything from the pen of these romances is at all to outlive himself, it is, unquestionably, the series of The Leatherstocking Tales."[4] Cooper was correct: interest in

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[4] James Fenimore Cooper, "Introduction," The Deerslayer (New York, 1962), p. ii.

the Leatherstocking Tales was high during his lifetime and for fifty years after his death; by 1900 he was locked on as one of the great writers of American literature. After 1900 critics began a more intensive study of Cooper's other novels, evaluating Cooper as a critic of his times. However, in 1923, with D. H. Lawrence's comments on the Leatherstocking Tales in Studies in Classic American Literature (New York, 1923) Cooper and Leatherstocking criticism took up a new field: the mythopoeic function of Cooper's novels. According to Warren S. Walker this criticism attempts to answer these questions: "In what ways did his [Cooper's] art crystallize into permanent images the ideas, the attitudes, and the moods of life along the American frontier? . . . What unarticulated psychic need of the American people--perhaps of readers everywhere--did, and do, Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales satisfy?"[5]

Cooper, then, might be looked on as a mythmaker, and his Tales as a myth appealing to some basic need of the American people. And it is this combination of myth and national feeling that is basic to the epic. In Cooper's time no epic expressive of America had been written, although there were attempts. "The burning desire to celebrate the nation in epic poem had lured Barlow

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[5] Warren S. Walker, "Introduction," Leatherstocking and The Critics, ed. W. S. Walker (Dallas, 1965), p. iv.

and Dwight to their ultimate ruin in morasses of heroic couplets."[6]

While there has been no lengthy study of the Leatherstocking Tales as an American epic, there have been scattered references to James Fenimore Cooper as a mythmaker, to the Tales as an epic, and to their hero, Natty Bumppo, as an American epic hero.

Warren S. Walker feels that the Leatherstocking Tales "are a saga of the roughhewing of America. By his imaginative treatment of the conquering of the wilderness--his re-creation of the generations of men and women who established civilization, or were destroyed by it, in the New World--Cooper was serving as mythmaker."[7] Quentin Anderson saw this same myth in The Deerslayer: "Leatherstocking . . . assumes the hero's role in a myth about the right and wrong ways of taking possession of the vast new continent."[8] David Brion Davis also saw that Cooper was creating a myth appealing to the American people when he wrote that Cooper "did invent a beautiful myth which embodied American fears, ideals, and values."[9]

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[6] Alexander Cowie, The Rise of the American Novel (New York, 1951), p. 115.

[7] Walker, Cooper: An Introduction, p. 31.

[8] Quentin Anderson, "Introduction," The Deerslayer (New York, 1962), p. 5.

[9] David Brion Davis, "The Deerslayer, a Democratic Knight of the Wilderness: Cooper, 1841," Leatherstocking and the Critics, ed. W. S. Walker (Dallas, 1965), p. 95.

Cooper's Indians were an essential part of this myth. "There is agreement . . . that the . . . medley of fact, fabrication, and folklore [surrounding Cooper's Indians] created one of the major nineteenth-century myths about America. . . . let the average reader suspend his disbelief for a moment only, and he is swept into a mythical world with its own set of values and its own inner reality."[10]

Cooper's myth of the frontier "with its steadily advancing white settlers and its forever retreating red men"[11] needed, besides Indians, a hero. Cooper created him in the character of Natty Bumppo. It is in this character that critics are most able to see something of an American epic, for Natty seems comparable to the heroes of the Greek and Roman epics. In 1841 an Englishman wrote Cooper that "I am happy to tell you that you have succeeded in making the Leatherstocking as great a Hero as Homer has Achilles, or Virgil, Aeneas."[12] Alexander Cowie saw Natty as epical in The Pioneers: "Natty is pardoned and invited to settle down in village security and comfort. But Natty, intuitively aware of what is expected of an epic hero, declines the offer and turns westward to

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[10] Walker, Cooper: An Introduction, pp. 46-47.

[11] Walker, Cooper: An Introduction, p. 31.

[12] "From an Unknown Englishman," Correspondence of James Fenimore Cooper, ed. James Fenimore Cooper (New Haven, 1922), II, 449.

the woods."[13] Kay Seymour House saw Natty as an epic figure in The Last of the Mohicans, saying, "Like Achilles, he is well aware of how much his withdrawal from the warring forces is worth."[14] Quentin Anderson, in his introduction to The Deerslayer goes into more detail in comparing Natty with older epic heroes, particularly Achilles:

> It is true of this book as of the Iliad that the hero proves himself in the ritual of single combat. . . . The claim of a whole culture to exist and prevail is made with a spear--or in Deerslayer's case with a rifle. His God approves him by allowing this to happen. In Achilles' case what has been approved is much plainer. Achilles bears a shield on which are engraved scenes epitomizing the whole complex life of the culture; lacking such a shield, Deerslayer must do a great deal of talking to explain how the white people ought to use the victory he has won for them. Achilles' fellows are ranged behind him in admiring ranks when he slays Hector; Deerslayer's countrymen must be argued into his view of their new obligations. Cooper is proposing Deerslayer as the hero of the American epic.[15]

Anderson saw Natty Bumppo, the Deerslayer, in the context of an American epic; other critics have also remarked on the Leatherstocking Tales as being of epic proportions. Lucy Lockwood Hazard remarked that after reading the Leatherstocking Tales,"You come back to the glibly critical world of twentieth century with a

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[13] Cowie, p. 126.

[14] Kay Seymour House, Cooper's Americans (Columbus, Ohio, 1965), p. 291.

[15] Anderson, pp. 5-6.

start, realizing, Here--here in poor, old-fashioned, much ridiculed Cooper is, in part at least, that much talked of, elusive desideratum, the American epic."[16]

Other critics have remarked on Cooper's use of the frontier as an epic theme. Hazard saw that Cooper's plots were not unique:

> . . . the fate of a thousand is not tragic; the fate of one may be. The carnage goes on for ten years around Ilium and we remain unmoved; but the beloved Patroclus is slain, and we watch with poignant suspense the combat between the valiant Hector and the avenging Achilles. Plots the frontier offered in abundance; they were sterile until Cooper breathed the breath of life into a frontier character.[17]

Cooper, Hazard continues, took the frontier and, realizing its significance, made it "the basis of an American epic."[18]

David Brion Davis felt that Cooper was consciously attempting to create an epic:

> In the Leatherstocking series Fenimore Cooper hoped to create the Great American Epic. Like Cotton Mather and Joel Barlow in earlier generations, he was convinced that American history offered a theme equal, if not superior, to the themes of Homer and Virgil.[19]

Alexander Cowie felt that those who condemned Cooper as a novelist in the Leatherstocking Tales did not realize that it was meant to be an American epic:

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[16] Lucy Lockwood Hazard, "Hunter and Trapper," Leatherstocking and the Critics, ed. W. S. Walker (Dallas, 1965), p. 45.

[17] Hazard, pp. 48-49.

[18] Hazard, p. 47.

[19] Davis, p. 83.

> The greatest error in estimating Cooper is to apply the wrong set of principles to his epic of America. To test an epic hero by laboratory devices is as palpably unfair as it is naive. One does not measure the Beowulf by its conformity to physical laws governing cause and effect. One does not scrutinize the Iliad for lapses from logic. Longfellow's Hiawatha is not the less valuable for being poetic rather than realistic. So with the Leatherstocking Series. . . . Read in this fashion [as a myth] Cooper's tales, too, take on epic proportions. Their faults are for the moment lost in that larger view which lends national significance to individual deeds.[20]

In summary, there has been some critical notice that Cooper took the American frontier, a great source for many writers, and gave it national significance. He was "one of the few writers whose imagination gave form to American ideals, and whose plots . . . dealt directly with problems basic to the American experience."[21]

Also, in writing about the frontier experience in the Leatherstocking Tales, Cooper created a hero, Natty Bumppo, who some critics have compared to the epic heroes of Greece and Rome, and traced him "from the first test of manhood to the noble exploits of an aged Odysseus on the American prairies."[22]

However, the references to the Leatherstocking Tales as an epic and to Natty Bumppo as an epic hero have been scattered and short; there has been no attempt to see how well the Tales fit the

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[20] Cowie, p. 164.

[21] Davis, p. 84.

[22] Davis, p. 84.

established mold of the epic, both mechanically and thematically, and how the gap between poetry, the language of the first epics, and prose, the language of the frontier novel of Cooper, could be bridged. Also, there has been no attempt to define the particularly American appeals that would be a part of an American epic, appeals to be found in the Leatherstocking Tales. Thus the trend of modern criticism, the mythopoeic study of Cooper, and isolated observations on those Tales and their hero have prompted the examination of the Leatherstocking Tales as an American epic, which this thesis will undertake.

CHAPTER II

THE ELEMENTS OF THE EPIC

Man, since the dawn of civilization, has attempted to explore, in various literary forms, his abilities and limitations. These abilities and limitations have been most clearly expressed in the epic, in which a man of great power uses his abilities in some quest, such as a search for glory, the establishment of a nation, or a way to circumvent death. Besides dealing with these questions, which interest men of all times, the epic also projects a picture of the society that produced it, presenting an idea of the life of the time, such as agrarian, military, or nomadic, and depicts, through the hero, the kind of man most esteemed in that era.

The best surviving epic poem composed before the time of the Greeks is The Epic of Gilgamesh, the story dealing with the quest of the part-god part-man Sumerian hero, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, for the secret of everlasting life. The quest is doomed to failure; Gilgamesh finds that he, like all men, must die. Most of the parts of this epic were written down about 2000 B.C. The most complete edition was assembled in the seventh century B.C. by Assurbanipal, the antiquary and last great king of the Assyrian Empire.

Probably the two best known epics in world literature are the Iliad and the Odyssey of Homer. Written down from oral versions near the eighth century B.C., they use the Trojan War for the background for two types of quests and show two different types of

heroes. In the Iliad the hero, Achilles, seeks glory; he had chosen glory and death over long life and obscurity. Achilles finds glory in the epic, and his death, while not covered in the poem, is implicit. Another hero, Hector, does die in the epic and, while he does not receive the glory of Achilles, he is esteemed for defending his city, a cause he feels is lost. Thus the heroes of the Iliad fight on in spite of approaching death, covering themselves with glory.

Odysseus, a subordinate figure in the Iliad, is the hero of a different type of quest in the Odyssey, and he becomes a different type of hero. His quest is to reach his home in spite of years of struggle against obstacles that present themselves during his striving. Odysseus does not wish for public glory; much of the time he is alone and he reaches his home first dressed, not as a king and conquering hero, but as a beggar. Odysseus, with his stoicism and private suffering, is at an opposite pole from Achilles and Hector; he has no city to defend and receives no glory or public acclaim during his quest to reach home. Odysseus is, perhaps, the other side of the Greek personality. His contrast with the heroic Achilles is clearly made when, upon meeting the ghost of Achilles in the underworld, Achilles laments his fate, wishing to be a serf of a landless man rather than a king of the dead. Odysseus returns to his home as a beggar in rags. Unlike the Iliad, there is an end to suffering in the Odyssey. Odysseus finds that

he will die old and beloved.

Virgil's Aeneid also centers on a quest: the founding of the Roman state. Aeneas must fight to gain this end, but to him the victories have no glory. He kills, not for honor, but because he must, and he realizes the suffering of the losing side. He will, like Odysseus, live to an old age, but it will not be a glorious one; the glory is reserved for the future, when Rome will become powerful. Aeneas is a transition between a Grecian past and a Roman future. His tragedy is that he can partake in neither. He must do his duty. This is the essential Roman idea of a man's function brought out by Virgil.

John Milton's Paradise Lost differs from other epics in having as its setting the Heaven, Hell, and Earth of the Bible. The hero is man, and his quest is redemption for his original sin. Satan, in this epic, is much like the hero of Greek tragedy. He falls because of his undying pride; however, he is no true hero because he has no worthy goal for which to strive. Man does, and Milton points out both his suffering through time and his ultimate redemption. Milton was writing, unlike the writers of previous epics, for men of all times. His epic was based, however, on the religious beliefs of his own time.

These, then, are the best known literary epics, composed over a span of approximately 3,500 years representing four different peoples and composed in four different languages. Yet they all fit

the general form of the epic; it will be the purpose of this chapter to formulate a set of characteristics with which a work may be evaluated as an epic.

C. M. Bowra has defined the general form and content of an epic:

> An epic poem is by common consent a narrative of some length and deals with events which have a certain grandeur and importance and come from a life of action, especially of violent action such as war. It gives a special pleasure because its events and persons enhance our belief in the worth of human achievement and in the dignity and nobility of man.[1]

Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales could be classed as an epic using this definition; however, it is necessary to explore more deeply the qualities of earlier epics before making a detailed examination of the Tales to discover those specific elements which correspond to epic form.

An epic includes, basically, four qualities: it must have a subject of great scope, it must contain an epic hero, it must express a definite viewpoint of the author, and it must give a definite overall effect.

An epic must, first of all, "deal with a single action, like Homer."[2] This action or subject has, for its background, war:

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[1] C. M. Bowra, "Some Characteristics of Literary Epics," Virgil: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Steele Commager (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), p. 53.

[2] C. S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost (New York, 1953), p. 86.

> . . . the heroic type of epic exists . . . upon a foundation of historic wars of migration, in which the civilization destroyed is regarded across a period of rehabilitation, whose temporal extension enlarges the historical setting by removing it to the sphere of legend. The immediate subject is thus isolated as a drama enacted by a few individuals, and the wide background is made symbolic of these actions, revealing their depth within its space.[3]

As the war is not the most important factor, no one really wins it; "the antagonists are fellow-men, often kinsmen, and of the same quality of heroism. Their battles are therefore mutually destructive. . . . This gives grandeur to the human drama which is the actual subject of such poems. . . . The supreme example [of the epic poem of warfare] is the Iliad."[4]

The "human drama" which is the subject of the epic can be divided into two sub-categories: the primary epic and the secondary epic. The primary epic, such as the Iliad, has a very limited subject. "The Trojan war is not the subject of the Iliad. It is merely the background to a purely personal story--that of Achilles' wrath, suffering, repentance, and killing of Hector."[5]

But the primary epic, which had oral beginnings, became superseded as society became more complex:

> The fundamental difference between literary and oral epic is in the circumstances of origin. The writers of literary epic

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[3] G. R. Levy, The Sword from the Rock (New York, 1953), p. 86.

[4] Levy, pp. 15-16.

[5] Lewis, p. 28.

> lived in highly organised societies where unfettered individualism had no place. . . . Man had changed his place in the universe. His life was no longer a short span of light in the encompassing darkness, his duty no longer towards himself.[6]

In short, the literary epic has "a different conception of heroism and of human greatness and come from societies which cannot really be called heroic."[7]

This change in man's place in society dictated a new type of epic subject, one no longer completely personal. The individual became tied to his nation, producing what C. S. Lewis calls a "great national subject" which "enters the epic with Virgil."[8] In Virgil's Aeneid there is still the background of war and migration and the hero Aeneas has his personal problems; however, these elements are subjugated to the quest, the founding of the Roman state. It is apparent that these elements--war, migration, heroic problems, and the quest are also found in the Leatherstocking Tales. However, their general resemblance to the Aeneid will be reserved for more detailed treatment in a later chapter.

The hero of the epic is always a reflection of his time. In the Iliad he symbolized the heroic ideal of the pursuit of honor, seen in the past, as almost all nations see their heroic age. "The

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[6] Bowra, "Characteristics of Literary Epics," p. 59.

[7] Bowra, "Characteristics of Literary Epics," p. 57.

[8] Lewis, p. 27.

Greeks of the eighth century B.C., and for ever afterwards, saw something splendid and super-human about what they supposed to be their lost past. This seemed to them filled with superb figures living for renown, and pursuing it with competitive vigour. . . . [The hero made] honour his paramount code, and glory the driving force and aim of his existence."[9] Virgil, too, "looked to the past for inspiration, but his work was inevitably shaped by the present."[10] Achilles, the hero of the primary epic, personified the Greek emphasis on pride; Aeneas, the hero of the secondary epic, personified the Roman emphasis on duty. And an American epic hero would create "his own world within the conditions of an actual community recognized and depicted by the poets."[11]

Another characteristic of the epic hero is his extraordinary ability. "A hero differs from other men in the degree of his powers. In most heroic poetry these are specifically human, even though they are carried beyond the ordinary limitations of humanity."[12] This super-human being, "thought to be almost comparable to gods,"[13] was needed "when people were on the move, as the Greeks

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[9] Michael Grant, Myths of the Greeks and Romans (New York, 1962), p. 45.

[10] Bowra, "Characteristics of Literary Epics," p. 58.

[11] Levy, p. 89.

[12] C. M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry (London, 1952), p. 91.

[13] Bowra, "Characteristics of Literary Epics," p. 57.

were in the dawn of their history or the Angles and Saxons were when they came to England from their continental homes. In such times the hero, the superman, is the leader who inspires and commands others in the work of war which precedes the establishment of a new order."[14]

The hero, then, is motivated by two interlocking desires--the pursuit of glory, and the working for a cause that enables him to find his glory. If death comes in this pursuit it may bring more honor. "It is because they are ready to make this last annihilating sacrifice [death] that heroes are honoured. Compared with this even their courage and prowess are of secondary importance."[15] This willingness of the great man to die gloriously in the pursuit of a goal explains much of the hero's lasting appeal. "The great hero . . . appeals to two deep impulses of the human heart, the desire for glory and the respect for sacrifice. Through the second the first is satisfied; the hero sacrifices his life and wins thereby an immortal glory."[16]

The cause itself may not be well defined, one "which does not immediately concern his personal interest but attracts him because it gives him a chance to show his worth. This cause need not be

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[14] Bowra, "Characteristics of Literary Epics," pp. 57-58.

[15] Bowra, "Characteristics of Literary Epics," p. 58.

[16] Bowra, "Characteristics of Literary Epics," p. 60.

very concrete."[17] In the Iliad Achilles' pursuit of glory overshadowed the Greek quest, the destruction of Troy. In Hector the cause is more powerful than the pursuit of glory. "In him love of country is the driving motive, but through it he realises a destiny which is certainly heroic."[18] In the Aeneid the cause, or quest, completely overshadows any pursuit of glory. Rome must be first established; the glory would come in the future, as Aeneas is told in his visit to the underworld.

The epic hero, powerful, unafraid of death, pursuing glory, and directing those under him in some cause, serves to tell man something about himself.

> He gives dignity to the human race by showing of what feats it is capable; he extends the bounds of experience for others and enhances their appreciation of life by the example of his abundant vitality. However much ordinary men feel themselves to fall short of such an ideal, they none the less respect it because it opens up possibilities of adventure and excitement and glory which appeal even to the most modest and most humble. The admiration for great doings lies deep in the human heart. . . .[19]

The author of an epic uses historical material as a basis for his narrative but the author does not try to give historical truth, for he is attempting to tell a truth about men, not events. In the epic "we have no right to approach heroic poetry as if it were a

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[17] Bowra, Heroic Poetry, p. 102.

[18] Bowra, Heroic Poetry, p. 112.

[19] Bowra, Heroic Poetry, p. 4.

record of fact. Its materials are largely historical, but its arrangement and adaptation of them are not. But of course it has a great relevance to history in a different way. It does not record truthfully what happened, but it shows what men believed and felt."[20]

However, the events themselves in an epic may be believed to be true, for the "authority [of heroic poetry] is in the first place tradition. . . . In heroic poetry it is commonly assumed that age confers dignity on a story, and that what has been long preserved is likely to be true."[21] Thus, one could believe everything in the Iliad, for "There was nothing new about sieges in the ancient world, nor were they new to near eastern storytellers."[22] But belief makes no difference: "There is no use in disputing whether any episode [in Homer's poetry] could really have happened. We have seen it happen--and there seemed to be no poet mediating between us and the event."[23]

There seems to be no poet because the poet is expressing no biased viewpoint. The epic poet attempts to be objective. This objectivity, as an example, is well expressed in the Iliad:

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[20] Bowra, Heroic Poetry, p. 535.

[21] Bowra, Heroic Poetry, p. 40.

[22] Grant, pp. 29-30.

[23] Lewis, p. 23.

> There is . . . [in the Iliad] no question . . . of Greeks against barbarians. . . . The Trojans are more civilized because theirs is a settled community contrasted with the camp conditions of invading armies. . . . It is essential . . . that the opponents should be not only equal in power, but alike in nature. This places the poet outside his creation, which thus assumes its own life in the world of art.[24]

The objectivity, entering with the Iliad, brought a new view of conflict and death. Since the Trojans were not "regarded, either for better or for worse, as being a different kind of people from the Greeks,"[25] no death could be taken lightly. "It is hardly possible to overestimate the importance for Western literature of the Iliad's demonstration that the fall of an enemy, no less than of a friend or leader, is tragic and not comic."[26] This "objective and disinterested element"[27] in the poet's vision of human life gave poetry a new authority based "on the vision of nature as an impersonal order."[28] Man became important; nature became his background.

The poet's objective viewpoint brought both reality and tragedy to the epic. The reality of life, well expressed in the Iliad and the Aeneid, leads to tragedy because the hero sees sorrow and defeat in store for him.

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[24] Levy, p. 92.

[25] Lewis, p. 29.

[26] Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, 1957), p. 319.

[27] Frye, p. 319.

[28] Frye, p. 319.

Homer employs pathos that "strikes hard precisely because it seems unintended and inevitable like the pathos of real life."[29] The Iliad "frankly admits the stubborn, mysterious inconsistencies of life. . . . [Life was] . . . a stark realism, bordering on hopelessness, in which the hero needed all the enduring self-reliance that he could muster. With its aid, he faced the world boldly and proudly, accepting whatever fate might bring."[30] In the Iliad neither side triumphs: "The Trojan War . . . ended, as Homer makes it end, disastrously for the conquerors as for the conquered."[31]

But, even in defeat, the hero is meaningful. "When this [defeat] happens, the story gains greatly in depth and strength, since the hero who comes to such an end seems in his last hours to be more truly himself and to make his greatest efforts."[32] The defeat is made more tragic in the Iliad by the futility of life, the "pathos and war weariness"[33] and the "gravity that goes with 'true tragedy.'"[34]

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[29] Lewis, p. 24.

[30] Grant, p. 61.

[31] Levy, p. 83.

[32] Bowra, Heroic Poetry, p. 118.

[33] Grant, p. 49.

[34] Lewis, p. 16.

However, the hero can be tragic without suffering death. Hector and Achilles both know that each will die before the war is over, yet they struggle and fight heroically; in the Aeneid Aeneas lives at the end of the epic, yet is still tragic, for he sees that even victory is sad. Virgil was "the poet who, more than any other, expresses the bitter sweetness of mortal triumphs--seeing that they mean the sorrow of another."[35] Aeneas' defeat of his enemy, Turnus, brings no joy. ". . . in the closing of the poem, when Aeneas faces Turnus in a mortal duel, there is little suggestion of triumph, and certainly none of personal triumph. It is fated that Turnus shall fall."[36] Aeneas is tragic, not through death, but because he must inflict defeat on others for the cause he serves.

The epic, then, is a type of narration having many variations; these variations are due to the abiding concerns of the people and the poet which existed at the time and place of the composition. The varying national concerns, from Gilgamesh's search for everlasting life to Aeneas' duty toward the state, all find their expression within the basic form of the epic.

Because the form is more-or-less static there are points of similarity between epics. All of them deal with a subject having a historical basis but the epic does not claim to tell history; it

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[35] Grant, p. 294.

[36] Wendell Clausen, "An Interpretation of the Aeneid," Virgil: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Steele Commager (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), pp. 84-85.

attempts to tell a truth about man.

This truth is brought out most effectively by the hero of the epic, a man who is superior to the ordinary man and who comes to a tragic end either through an early death or through long suffering. This hero also reflects the quality that can be termed the national character of the hero's people.

The author of the epic wishes to convey reality in order to make his hero, the hero's quest, and the tragic effect of the epic more powerful; by removing himself from the narrative and by giving an objective view of the conflict the writer helps create the reality.

The effect of the epic is usually one of pathos, defeat, and tragedy. This effect may come about for several reasons. Gilgamesh is tragic because, after his search for everlasting life, he finds that man, even a man who is two-thirds god, must die. Achilles is tragic because he knows he must die to obtain glory, and that little lies beyond the grave. Hector is tragic because he fights for his city hoping for glory and success while feeling he will be defeated, the city will fall, and all will be lost. Odysseus is tragic for he must arrive at his own home a beggar and so changed by his years away that the quest becomes as important as its conclusion. Aeneas is tragic because he must kill to conclude his quest. He cannot feel triumphant because he also realizes the suffering he must inflict as he follows his duty. But this tragedy

is not all-inclusive; the epic may, like the Aeneid, point toward a happier future.

CHAPTER III

THE QUALITIES OF AN AMERICAN EPIC

Americans, like most other peoples in civilized societies, like to think that there has been a time in their past when man was not so restrained by the conventions of society. The more restraint enforced by everyday life, the more most Americans turn to the past, a past in which a man seemingly could act upon his inner desire for a more violent life, one that was more demanding yet offered more personal satisfaction. Billy the Kid and Davy Crockett received more glory and demonstrated more personal power and ability than would be possible for the average American of today.

This longing for the past began after the closing of the American frontier. "As it ended, there arose an inevitable nostalgia for those free and easy days when individual men could pit their strength against the resistant world and emerge triumphant."[1]

The frontier had long excited Americans, even before it closed, for it seemed to open new possibilities to man. "From the time of William Bradford's History, Americans have felt their national experience as a separation from the Old World and a new

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[1] Ernest E. Leisy, The American Historical Novel (Norman, 1950), pp. 178-179.

chance for mankind."[2] This view of the frontier as a national separation was apparent to writers of the early nineteenth century, who wrote while the frontier was still moving. They dreamed of a new golden age; "yet they could not quite locate that age in time. A few placed it in the past, but even more of them, encouraged by the opening of the west, saw it just ahead."[3] Thus, the time of the frontier became America's golden age, one that offered man great opportunities.

But the frontier also affected the individual. Just as America seemed cut off from the old, so did the frontier isolate the individual from society; this isolation excited the American imagination.[4] Also appealing was the violence of the frontier, violence that was, primarily "the result of social change: new, transplanted populations, new sources of wealth, new elites struggling for power."[5]

The frontier, then, came to have great meaning to Americans. It symbolized a breaking away from the old; its movement from

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[2] Kay Seymour House, Cooper's Americans (Columbus, Ohio, 1965), p. 234.

[3] House, pp. 233-234.

[4] Richard Chase, The American Novel and its Tradition (New York, 1957), p. 11.

[5] "Violence in America," Time, July 28, 1967, p. 18.

East to West marked "the progress of the race mind";[6] and it offered an opportunity, amid violent action and movement, for man to assert himself in the isolated frontier world. The popular imagination, aroused by the frontier, "transformed the facts of the westward movement in accordance with the requirements of myth."[7] When the settling and movement of the frontier began passing into myth, one having national significance, it also took on a literary significance, providing America with the subject for an epic. The American epic subject is "without question the winning of the West."[8] The "heroic age in America is indisputably the age of the frontier."[9]

When the frontier became myth any writer who wished to create an epic about the frontier was freed from telling historical truth. The real past would be used as a background for a legendary tale of man. Like the epic, legends of the American West "commonly [incorporate] . . . exploits, traits, and evaluations which are inflated. . . . These legends appeal to the human imagination; if the deeds they exploit didn't occur, they should have occurred.

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[6] John Erskine, Leading American Novelists (New York, 1910), p. 120.

[7] Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1950), p. 102.

[8] Leisey, p. 114.

[9] Joe B. Frantz and Julian E. Choate, Jr., The American Cowboy: The Myth and the Reality (Norman, 1955), p. 9.

These heroic narratives are valuable as a record of American aspirations and traditions."[10]

While using this background of legend or myth about the frontier, the writer of an American epic would also need to appeal to the basic traits of the American people. One of these general traits, already mentioned, is a liking for violence; the American folklore of violence is worshipped all over the world "as epic entertainment and as safe refuge for dreams of lawless freedom."[11] Another trait is "the . . . [one] valued above all others in American culture: freedom."[12] These traits, and others, would be brought out most clearly by the hero of the epic.

Heroes have occurred during many ages. "Achilles and the rest have been needed, at many epochs, to investigate men's perceptions of their own surroundings."[13] The hero springs up in a time of stress and tells man something about himself. "The personification of predominating ideals, the hero emerges at a moment when men's emotions are deeply stirred, and appeals to both the imagination

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[10] Kent L. Steckmesser, The Western Hero in History and Legend (Norman, 1965), p. 252.

[11] "Violence in America," p. 18.

[12] Marshall Fishwick, American Heroes: Myth and Reality (Washington, 1954), p. 203.

[13] Grant, p. 51.

and the reason."[14] And Americans, just as people of other times and other countries, also have need of heroes, men who will stir up the average man's blood with memories of his race or nation or the acts of his fellows.[15] In America, as in ancient Greece or Rome, "The heroic ideal is still being met. . . . Our, too, is the land of the hero."[16]

An epic hero of the American frontier would fit both the established general outline for an epic hero and would also bring out features peculiar to his time. He would, "Like most of the world's heroes, . . . [be] physically attractive, strong, and fearless."[17] He would also lead a violent life more or less free from society. And he would express something about the American soul, just as Aeneas and Achilles expressed something about the Roman and Greek souls. D. H. Lawrence felt he saw the basic American soul in reading Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales: "there you have the myth of the essential white America. All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and

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[14] Fishwick, p. 3.

[15] Dixon Wecter, The Hero in America (New York, 1941), p. 4.

[16] Fishwick, p. 6.

[17] Fishwick, p. 226.

a killer. It has never yet melted."[18] This, then, is the archetypal American: a man isolated and hardened by the frontier, which allows freedom with its isolation; a man able to accept, alone, the demands made of him; and a man who is a man of violence, a killer. Richard Chase amends this last quality slightly, bringing the American hero more in line with Aeneas than with the Greek heroes: "The ideal American image is of a man who is a killer but nevertheless has natural piety."[19] The American hero can kill, but cannot plunder or kill in hate.

It is this last quality, that of a pious killer, that brings the American hero into the realm of tragedy. The American hero "cannot display the arrogance of victory; but rather must be attuned to the still sad music of humanity."[20] For all his power the hero is always partly human and he must, to be meaningful, have human experiences. In America "the crowd loves victory, but it also likes the salty sacrificial taste of disappointment and tragedy, which from its own life it knows so well. There is a subconscious wish that the hero should not in every way appear to be strong, resourceful, lucky, and invincible. The crowd is thus

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[18] D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (New York, 1923), p. 92.

[19] Chase, p. 63.

[20] Wecter, p. 16.

able to achieve closer kinship between him and themselves."[21]

The isolation of the hero serves to emphasize any defeat or tragedy. "Americans are impressed not so much by the greatness of achievement as by the ability or will of these heroes to be different and follow the solitary path. . . . The pathos of aloneness explains the appeal of many heroes of literature and life who stand, fight, succeed--or, it may be, fail and die--alone."[22]

America, then, despite its short history, does have a national subject suitable for an American epic. The frontier, moving from East to West across a wilderness populated by ancient and savage peoples, caught hold of the imagination of the average American whether he was living in the civilized Eastern society during the movement of the frontier or after its passage. The frontier, set off as it was from the civilized cities existing on the same continent, was much like the ancient world of the Greeks in which men fought, with few restraints, for ends they felt worthy.

This frontier world helped to shape a particular type of hero, one that expressed the basic American soul. The frontier cut man off from civilization and from other men, forcing him to strive alone. As the frontier world was violent, the hero, to survive, had to be a killer, but he did not kill from hate or a love of

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[21] Wecter, p. 14.

[22] Orrin E. Klapp, Heroes, Villains, and Fools (Englewood Cliffs, 1962), pp. 43-44.

plunder. And the isolated, violent frontier world demanded a stoic hero, one who would accept all required of him by his end or quest; he might have to kill or forego personal happiness to fulfill it.

The quest in an American epic would be the civilizing of the American continent, symbolized by the moving frontier. Conflict would arise when the original people, the Indians, are constantly pushed westward, their lands constantly diminishing, while the civilized area behind the frontier constantly grows until all the land is civilized. The hero's duty would be to bring this civilization, even though it would require the killing of the Indian. The civilizing of America has many parallels with the founding of the Roman state in Virgil's Aeneid; these parallels will be discussed in a later chapter.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROMANCE AS EPIC

Just as the subject and hero of the epic are products of the time in which the epic was written, so is its basic written form, although through much of its long history only poetry was used for epic expression.

Poetry, for thousands of years, seemed to be the natural form for the expression of great thoughts. Prose was not considered really literary enough for such a serious work as an epic, perhaps because of the oral beginnings of that literary form; skill in composition was expected and was evident through the epic's polished metrical form. Skillful wording and phrasing made memorization and quotation easier. From The Epic of Gilgamesh through Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, Virgil's Aeneid, and Milton's Paradise Lost, a span of about four thousand years, the epic vehicle was poetry; it could be said that this period of time was the world's age of poetry.

During this long time the general population was, for the most part, illiterate. This fact had two related effects on the epics written until the eighteenth century.

The oral epic, such as Homer's, was particularly national. It was composed in Greek and recited to Greeks who would have been unable to read it. As it was, at first, unwritten, non-Greek people would have almost no touch with such early epics, and only

Homer's writing of the Iliad and Odyssey prevented their possible loss or change.

The oral epic, whose form was greatly dictated by the necessity for recitation, came to be used by later poets as a model for written epics; thus, great attention was still given to compact, musical, easily remembered lines. Virgil's Aeneid used Homer's Iliad and Odyssey and Appolonius of Rhodes' The Voyage of Argo as sources for parts of his epic which was, none-the-less, a national epic in Latin.

But the impression made by these two writers on later writers was great: Latin and Greek came to be stressed as the languages for all composition, and it was felt that a poet must work in the tradition of his forerunners. The vehicle for an epic was thought to be poetry only, and the epic, after Virgil, largely ceased to be national.

The loss of nationality in the epic was due to the method used for communication of literature. The oral epic was composed in the tongue of the particular poet; written works, from approximately the fourth century A.D. until the fourteenth century, were copied, usually in Latin; this was the universal means of preserving, communicating and disseminating thought.[1] Literature became international in scope, with Greek and Latin having such prestige

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[1] Robert Escarpit, The Book Revolution (London, 1966), p. 20.

that they became a basic part of a learned man's education.

However, the common people came to want, again, a literature of their own:

> No matter how ingeniously it was organized . . . hand copying had its limits. From the fourteenth century onwards, new strata of society took up reading, which had until then been the clerk's preserve. These new readers--nobles and bourgeois, merchants and magistrates--had little use for latinizing in everyday life: they wanted traditional works, it is true, but also books to entertain them, works of imagination, written in the vulgar tongue. Thus in the Romance dialects was born the "romance", the ancestor of the novel. . . .[2]

Then, after the fourteenth century, the printing of books came into being and started the decline of the latinate literature. The first printers printed those works most likely to sell well: ". . . religious works, novels, collections of anecdotes, technical manuals and recipe books. . . ."[3] But as printing was at first slow and readers were few, even in the eighteenth century "the readers of books represented a small aristocracy of written culture, or of 'literature', as it was then called."[4] Literature was still international; "Five or six major languages shared the literary universe; never has the sense of the world community of the literate been keener than during the eighteenth century."[5]

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[2] Escarpit, p. 20.

[3] Escarpit, p. 21.

[4] Escarpit, p. 22.

[5] Escarpit, p. 22.

So, by the eighteenth century, literature and the epic had gone through two stages. The oral epics were national, being restricted to the language of the poet and his listeners. Then, with the writing down of Homer's epics and Virgil's composition of the Latin Aeneid, written epics became restricted in form to poetry, and Latin, along with Greek, became the recognized literary languages. Men of many countries could both read and write in these languages and literature ceased to be national. Printing did away with hand copying, but into the eighteenth century, when printing became more rapid and the general populace more educated, literature remained, essentially, international. From the time of Virgil until Milton's Paradise Lost the influence of latinate language smothered any national epic. Milton, himself a scholar of Greek and Latin, felt that he must break with his time and write his epic in English; he knew from his study of both Homer and Virgil that the epic must use one's native tongue.

Milton is perhaps a transition point; he wrote in Latin but put his epic in English. In the eighteenth century the masses wanted writings in their own tongue; rapid printing and a mass audience less literary-minded made the novel the new vehicle of expression for national thought. E. M. W. Tillyard holds "that in the eighteenth century the epic impulse left poetry for the novel."[6]

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[6] E. M. W. Tillyard, The English Epic and Its Background (New York, 1966), p. 14.

Tillyard feels that Defoe started the change: "Looking back on the subsequent history of the novel we can see that Defoe began the transfer of the true epic instinct from the verse narrative, once its proper medium, to the middle-class prose romance."[7] This change came about as literature again became national:

> Just as the fourteenth--and fifteenth--century bourgeois had made the clerkly Latin book give place to the use of the vulgar tongue, so the new readers of the nineteenth century made the cosmopolitan book of the literate give place to the use of national languages. Large printings thus both required and facilitated the splintering of literary languages, leading to independent national literatures.[8]

So, in the nineteenth century "the real course of the epic had forsaken the traditional verse form for the novel."[9] In America the novel form used for epic expression is the historical romance, which seems well suited as the vehicle for a modern epic.

The subject matter of the historical romance is much like that of the epic. According to Alexander Cowie a historical romance is, essentially, "a tale of high adventure set in the past, centering in a situation crucial in the life of a nation or a people, involving persons, places and actions partly invented and partly historical."[10] This tale of high adventure, as in the epic,

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[7] Tillyard, p. 496.

[8] Escarpit, pp. 23-24.

[9] Tillyard, p. 531.

[10] Alexander Cowie, The Rise of the American Novel (New York, 1951), p. 116.

involves conflict and a quest, brought out, according to Northrop Frye, in a dialectical form: "everything is focussed on a conflict between the hero and his enemy, and all the reader's values are bound up with the hero."[11] As there is a definite division of characters in the romance "subtlety and complexity are not much favored. Characters tend to be either for or against the quest."[12]

The romance, like the epic, does not intend to convey historical truth. Richard Chase emphasizes this fact in contrasting the romance with the novel:

> . . . the romance, following distantly the medieval example, feels free to render reality in less volume and detail. It tends to prefer action to character, and action will be freer in a romance than in a novel, encountering, as it were, less resistance from reality. . . . Being less committed to the immediate rendition of reality than the novel, the romance will more freely veer toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms.[13]

Because the romance does not tell history, it is free to both enlarge its characters and to express a truth about human achievement. Frye, in speaking of the larger-than-life protagonist and antagonist in the romance, says, "The enemy may be an ordinary human being, but the nearer the romance is to myth, the more attributes of divinity will cling to the hero and the more the enemy

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[11] Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, 1957), p. 187.

[12] Frye, p. 195.

[13] Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (New York, 1957), p. 13.

will take on demonic mythical qualities."[14] Thus the hero and his opponent will stand out as almost superhuman.

The romance is also free to express a different sort of truth: "Beauty and truth are both aspects of human experience, but beauty is preferred. There is something cold and abstract about truth. . . . Romance and legend . . . are warm and colorful, representing the ideal in human aspirations."[15]

The romance can, then, deal with the subject of the epic, a quest accompanied by conflict. As it does not deal with truth, but myth and legend, it is free to tell a fictional story with a historical background containing symbolic characters who are superhuman, with the objective being the telling of a truth about human aspirations.

William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870) saw the resemblance between the epic and the romance and compared them in his 1853 letter to Samuel Henry Dickson, a preface to Simms' romance The Yemassee (1835). Simms felt the epic had evolved: "The modern Romance is the substitute which the people of the present day offer for the ancient epic. The form is changed; the matter is very much the same; at all events, it differs much more seriously from the English

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[14] Frye, p. 187.

[15] Kent D. Steckmesser, The Western Hero in History and Legend (Norman, 1965), p. 249.

novel than it does from the epic and the drama."[16]

Simms also saw that the romance need not confine itself to truth, as the epic did not:

> The standards of the Romance . . . are very much those of the epic. It invests individuals with an absorbing interest--it hurries them rapidly through crowding and exacting events, in a narrow space of time--it requires the same unities of plan, of purpose, and harmony of parts, and it seeks for its adventures among the wild and the wonderful. It does not confine itself to what is known, or even what is probable. It grasps at the possible. . . .[17]

Simms saw the Indian as the subject matter for epic song in America: "With the future Homer, the thousand barbarian tribes by which these woods and wilds were traversed before the coming of our ancestors . . . will, like those of Greece, be made immortal on the lips of eternal song."[18]

Simms also saw no difficulty in using prose as the vehicle for a modern epic. He felt that the poet was the man who spoke, not from custom, but for his time: "Whether the poet shall frame his song according to custom, or according to the peculiar nature and the need for those for whom it is made, is, in other words, to ask whether he shall be a poet at all or not."[19]

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[16] William Gilmore Simms, The Yemassee, ed. Hugh Holman (Boston, 1961), p. 5.

[17] Simms, The Yemassee, p. 6.

[18] William Gilmore Simms, Views and Reviews in American Literature, History, and Fiction, ed. Hugh Holman (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1962), pp. 84-85.

[19] Simms, Views and Reviews, p. 13.

Simms thought that a work could be epic and poetic without verse or rhyme. He felt the differences between the epic and romance "depend on the material employed, rather than upon the particular mode in which it is used. The Romance is of loftier origin than the Novel. It approximates the poem. It may be described as an amalgam of the two. It is only with those who are apt to insist upon poetry as verse, and to confound rhyme with poetry, that the resemblance is unapparent."[20]

Richard Chase agrees with Simms, pointing out that "American fiction has been notable for its poetic quality, which is not the poetry of verse nor yet the domestic or naturalistic poetry of the novel but the poetry of romance."[21]

Arvid Shulenberger, in studying James Fenimore Cooper's theory of fiction, says that Cooper also saw the romance as poetry: "In his references to his own and others' works, Cooper preserved in the terms 'novel' and 'romance' something of the Aristotelian distinction between history and poetry. He was clearly aware of this classic distinction."

If the main point of the epic is to express something basic about a people, then the romance would seem to be a suitable form

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[20] Simms, The Yemassee, p. 6.

[21] Chase, p. 17.

[22] Arvid Shulenberger, Cooper's Theory of Fiction: His Prefaces and Their Relation to His Novels (Lawrence, 1955), p. 9.

for an American epic. It is poetic in that it sings of a hero of the people and a quest meaningful to them; it can use myth and legend instead of historical truth in telling this story, although it will probably have a basis in history; and American writers of the nineteenth century, particularly William Gilmore Simms and James Fenimore Cooper, both writers of romances and aware of the connection between romance and poetry, saw that America had an epic subject: the civilizing of the continent, from East to West, a process that doomed the Indian.

CHAPTER V

THE AENEID AS A PATTERN FOR THE LEATHERSTOCKING TALES

Virgil's Latin epic, the Aeneid, contains the qualities common to all epics: it features a half-man, half-god hero, Aeneas, whose mother was Aphrodite; there is a quest, the founding of Rome and the Roman State by Aeneas; and the effect of the poem is tragic, resulting from the almost unique demands the quest puts on the hero. But the Aeneid also differs from all preceding epics because it depicts a world different from those of the past, a world in which the individual is viewed as a part of the state, a world still existing today.

The quest of the Aeneid is more complex than that of any preceding epic, for it involves the displacement of an entire people. When Virgil wrote his epic he combined legend and truth, using a historical background for legendary characters, a practice common to most epics. One of the historical facts he incorporated was the existence of a native people in Italy, a people subjugated by the early Romans in much the same way the native American, the Indian, was subjugated by the American settler.

> To Virgil this people [the Marsi] represented the original Italian stock. His feeling for them had something in common with what Americans have felt for the American Indian. They were somehow more Italian than the Romans themselves. Proud, independent, with local traditions hallowed by the names they had given to the countryside, they succumbed inevitably

to the expansion of Roman power.[1]

A quest involving the elimination of a people that a national destiny might be fulfilled was, to Virgil, a sad thing. But because he lived in a new type of society, one in which the people's duties were to the state rather than to the individual, he knew that the old Homeric personal quests would not suit the Roman people:

> Virgil abandons the scheme of life by which the hero lives and dies for his own glory, and replaces a personal by a social ideal. The old concept of a man's honour is merged in a scheme of morality where duties are laid down with precision and must be fulfilled if the god's will is to be done. . . . With him the epic becomes national. . . .[2]

Because the quest is national, it affects the hero in a way new to epics: human feelings, once uppermost, must now be subordinated. ". . . human freedom, love, personal loyalty, all the qualities which the heroes of Homer represent, are lost in the service of what is grand, monumental and impersonal: the Roman State."[3]

As the quest is not personal, Aeneas is, at first, reluctant to take it up; he wishes to stay in Troy and die with the city.

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[1] Adam Parry, "The Two Voices of Virgil's Aeneid," Virgil: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Steele Commager (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), pp. 109-110.

[2] C. M. Bowra, "Some Characteristics of Literary Epic," Virgil: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Steele Commager (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), p. 61.

[3] Parry, pp. 120-121.

But the quest to found Rome begins to draw him on, becoming a combination of desire and duty, "a thing that calls or beckons, that calls inexorably, yet you must strain your ears to catch the voice, that insists on being sought, yet refuses to be found."[4]

The quest begins to exert its power when Aeneas is forced to leave Carthage and Queen Dido; it is here that he must first put human feelings below his duty. In Carthage he is primarily Trojan; however, his trip to the Underworld in Book Six, taken after leaving Dido, marks his acceptance of his duty and the putting away of human desires: before hearing of Rome's glorious future Aeneas tells Dido, who refuses to speak to him, that "It was not of my own will, Dido, I left your land."[5]

As Aeneas accepts his duty he is not only dehumanized but is also gradually isolated, particularly from elements of his past. And, while he must break with the old, he cannot become a part of the new because Rome, for Aeneas, exists only as a prophecy just as Troy is only a part of the dead past. Aeneas becomes a middle-aged widower, ". . . bound to pursue his reluctant way from Troy to Italy, from a past he has lost to a future he will never possess."[6]

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[4] C. S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost (New York, 1961), p. 38.

[5] The Aeneid of Virgil, trans. C. Day Lewis (New York, 1952), VI, 460.

[6] Wendell Clausen, "An Interpretation of the Aeneid," Virgil: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Steele Commager (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), p. 77.

The break with the past, enforcing Aeneas' isolation, takes place most notably in his family. "He loses his wife, his father, even his nurse Caieta; the only human relationship he is allowed is with his son."[7] His son, Ascanius, remains because he is the tie to Rome's future. He is "destined to succeed him [Aeneas] and inherit the fateful fields of Italy."[8] Aeneas is, then, a "dispossessed wanderer,"[9] a link between the old and the new, but a part of neither: "he is simply one of the casualties of civilization."[10]

The Aeneid is, then, the story of a man of great feeling who, forced to kill and inflict pain for his quest, is isolated, saddened, and suffers. His ". . . suffering comes from what is noblest in him, his humanity--from sympathy with the pain and sorrow which his divine, murderous, patriotic destiny must inflict upon others."[11]

And Aeneas' tragedy is only a part: "If . . . the Aeneid is a story of success, it is also a story of what success costs: the

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[7] Steele Commager, "Introduction," Virgil: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Steele Commager (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), p. 11.

[8] Clausen, p. 82.

[9] Clausen, p. 76.

[10] Commager, p. 10.

[11] Michael Grant, The World of Rome (New York, 1961), p. 244.

cost to the land, the cost in lives--and it is characteristic of Virgil that we should remember not the victors but the defeated."[12] The last books of the epic point up the contrast "that the formation of Rome's empire involved the loss of the pristine purity of Italy. . . . Turnus, Aeneas' antagonist, . . . is made the embodiment of a simple valor and love of honor which cannot survive the complex forces of civilization."[13]

An American writer wishing to write an epic based upon the settlement of America by the white man, a settlement personified by the frontier, would be presented with some of the same conditions which Virgil had to consider before writing the Aeneid. He would be faced with the historical fact of the conquering of the original inhabitants of the land, the necessity of making the quest nationalistic, and of showing, through the hero, the break and separation of the old and the new.

Although Romans of Virgil's time were acquainted with the Greeks and their writings, they were unsure of their origins. They did know that the early Italian settlers had driven out a simpler, less civilized people. Virgil, using Greek literature and Roman history, gave the Romans Trojan origins and showed that the original Italian people had to be subdued to make room for a great new

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[12] Commager, p. ll.

[13] Parry, p. 110.

force, the successor to Troy--the Roman State.

Much the same situation existed in American minds in the nineteenth century. While Americans knew of their European origins, they preferred to think of America as something new--the successor to the old civilizations of Europe. And Americans had, without a doubt, taken the land from the simpler, less civilized original inhabitants, the American Indian, who had, like the original Italians in Italy, left his name on the land. Americans felt that the Indian stood in the way of something destined to come about--the powerful American State.

Since Americans felt that America as a nation was destined to expand until it reached the western coast, any epic dealing with this expansion would have a suitable national quest: pushing the frontier westward, driving the Indians from the land while bringing civilization to replace them. This quest would be an expression of the national feeling that existed almost from the first settlement of America.

And, like Virgil's Aeneas, the American hero would be the man who, while showing the heroic traits of isolation, stoicism, and killing only for a cause, would be the link between the old and the new.

These three elements, historical necessity, a national quest, and a hero as a bringer of civilization are basic parts of Virgil's Aeneid; they are also basic to the Leatherstocking Tales of Cooper

who, presented with much the same situation as Virgil, wrote an epic that takes up similar problems as they were encountered in America.

CHAPTER VI

THE LEATHERSTOCKING EPIC

Before discussing, in sequence, the five Leatherstocking Tales as an American epic, it will be helpful to first discuss the two types that are doomed by the expanding white civilization: the Indian and the heroic pioneer, the bringer of civilization, represented by Natty Bumppo.

Not much is revealed about Natty's early life in the Tales. Fittingly enough, he was born at the eastern ocean shore. He says, in The Prairie, that "'My father lies buried near the sea, and the bones of his son will whiten on the prairies.'"[1] His family at one time had some importance in civilized society: "'Now I come of a humble stock, though we have white gifts and a white natur'; but we are not so poorly off as to have no name. Bumppo we are called, and I've heard it said . . . that the time has been when the Bumppos had more standing and note among mankind than they have just now.'"[2]

Natty's education was primarily a religious one, given him by Moravian missionaries; his practical education was found in nature: "'My edication [sic] has been altogether in the woods; the only

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[1] James Fenimore Cooper, The Prairie (New York, 1964), p. 427--hereafter cited in the text as Prairie.

[2] James Fenimore Cooper, The Deerslayer (New York, 1962), p. 367--hereafter cited in the text as Deerslayer.

book I read, or care about reading, is the one which God has opened afore all his creatur's in the noble forest, broad lakes, rolling rivers, blue skies, and the winds, and tempests, and sunshine, and other glorious marvels of the land! This book I can read, and I find it full of wisdom and knowledge'" (Deerslayer, p. 366).

Just what Natty learned from the Moravians cannot be exactly determined, for Natty combined his own thinking with their teachings. He felt that formal Christianity was not necessary for himself: "'I have not been Christianized by the Moravians, like so many of the Delawares, it is true; but I hold to Christianity and white gifts. I hold that a good Delaware is a good Christian, though he never saw a Moravian; and a good Christian a good Delaware, so far as natur' is consarned.'"[3]

This education formed in Natty a sense of following Providence in what he did. Cooper says that Natty combined "excessive energy . . . and the most meek submission to the will of Providence" (Prairie, p. 338). To Providence Natty imputes his duties, seeing his actions as carrying out God's will. This belief accounts for his isolation: "'I may never marry; most likely Providence, in putting me here in the woods, has intended I should live single, and without a lodge of my own'" (Deerslayer, p. 413). Natty sees his actions as divinely observed. On furlough from captivity in

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[3] James Fenimore Cooper, The Pathfinder (New York, 1960), pp. 457-458--hereafter cited in the text as Pathfinder.

The Deerslayer, he tells Harry March that

> "This furlough is not, as you seem to think, a matter altogether atween me and the Mingos, seeing it is a solemn bargain made atween me and God. He who thinks that he can say what he pleases, in his distress, and that 'twill all pass for nothing, because 'tis uttered in the forest, and into redmen's ears, knows little of his situation, and hopes, and wants. The words are said to the ears of the Almighty. The air is his breath, and the light of the sun is little more than a glance of his eye."
>
> (Deerslayer, p. 355)

And Natty sees the breaking of God's compact as a crime: "'He [the Quartermaster] held a commission from God to act right, and to deal fairly with his fellow creatur's, and he has failed awfully in his duty'" (Pathfinder, p. 450).

Allied with this sense of divine purpose in Natty Bumppo are two important ideas--his piety and his obligation to his race. Cooper, through Natty's talk about the "gifts" of the white man and the Indian, makes it clear that, while Natty may be allied with various Indians, his foremost obligation is toward the white man. In The Last of the Mohicans Natty tells Duncan Heyward, "'[I am] no Indian myself, but a man without a cross.'"[4] This point is clarified in The Prairie when Natty says, "'Still am I a man without the cross of Indian blood; and what is due from a warrior to his nation, is owing by me to the people of the States'" (Prairie, p. 78).

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[4] James Fenimore Cooper, The Last of the Mohicans (New York, 1965), p. 142--hereafter cited in the text as Mohicans.

This obligation consisted of being "the foremost in that band of pioneers who are opening the way for the march of the nation across the continent."[5] This task was set before Natty Bumppo by God, he felt, and it demanded such things of him that he no longer belonged to either white civilized society or any of the Indian nations; he became, in effect, a separate race.

Natty saw that he did not fit in with white society in speaking of the woman he most felt affection for, Mabel Dunham:

> ". . . I can kill a deer, or even a Mingo at need, with any man on the lines; or I can follow a forest path with as true an eye, or read the stars, when others do not understand them. No doubt, no doubt, Mabel will have venison enough, and fish enough, and pigeons enough; but will she have knowledge enough, and will she have ideas enough, and pleasant conversation enough, when life comes to drag a little, and each of us begins to pass for our true value?" (Pathfinder, p. 451)

Natty says the "'Lord has made me for a doer and not a talker'" (Prairie, p. 413) and that he is "'formed for the wilderness'" (Pioneers, p. 422). Near death, he brings out his tragic isolation: "'I am without kith or kin in the wide world . . .; when I am gone there will be an end of my race'" (Prairie, p. 426).

Natty Bumppo is, then, a Christian believer--*not a church* Christian but a man who sees God in the nature around him; he is not at home in civilized white society, but he works for white civilization and clings to his white tradition, or gifts; and he feels

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[5] James Fenimore Cooper, The Pioneers (New York, 1962), p. 424--hereafter cited in the text as Pioneers.

that he has a quest, that of helping civilization spread across the American continent. Specifically, Natty fights those Indians, commonly grouped as Mingos, who oppose the coming of the white man.

But in fulfilling his quest Natty is, as an American hero must be, pious. He kills only to further the job he feels Providence has set for him. Natty is hardened: "the honest but implacable scout made the circuit of the dead, into whose senseless bosoms he thrust his long knife with as much coolness as though they had been so many brute carcasses'" (Mohicans, p. 129); but he is not bloodthirsty.

This piety is made clear in The Pathfinder when Natty tells Jasper Western, "'I do not seek blood without a cause; and my bullet is well leathered and carefully driven down for the time of need. I love no Mingo, as is just, seeing how much I have consorted with the Delawares, who are their mortal and natural enemies; but I never pull trigger on one of the miscreants unless it be plain that his death will lead to some good end'" (Pathfinder, p. 72). In the same book the idea is tied in with honor: "'There is honor in doing what's right, and unhonor in doing what's wrong; and I think it wrong to take the life even of a Mingo, without a useful end in view, I do; and right to hear reason at all times'" (Pathfinder, p. 433).

This, then, is Natty Bumppo, the man of changing epithets: Deerslayer, Hawkeye, Pathfinder, Leatherstocking; a man willing to

kill to further the spread of civilization but regretting that he must do it; a man following God's orders or Providence, but not a Christian; the man who first appears in The Deerslayer.

The people whom Providence decreed be dispossessed were the American Indians. Cooper gives the background to this conflict in The Pioneers.

> Before the Europeans, or to use a more significant term, the Christians, dispossessed the original owners of the soil, all that section of country, which contains the New England States, and those of the Middle, which lie east of the mountains, was occupied by two great nations of Indians, from whom had descended numberless tribes.
>
> (Pioneers, p. 66)

These two great nations were the Lenni Lenape, or Delawares, and the Six Nations, or Mingos.

> Of . . . the Delaware nation, the principal tribes, besides that which bore the generic name, were, the Mahicanni, Mohicans, or Mohegans, and the Nanticokes, or Nentigoes. Of these, the latter held the country along the waters of the Chesapeake and the seashore; while the Mohegans occupied the district between the Hudson and the ocean, including much of New England. Of course, these two tribes were the first who were dispossessed of their land by the Europeans.
>
> (Pioneers, p. 67)

The settlement of the land drove the Indians westward. "'As the natives gradually disappeared from the country of the Mohegans, some scattering families sought a refuge around the council fire of the mother tribe, or the Delawares (Pioneers, p. 67). An agreement was made between the Delaware and Mingo peoples. "According to this declaration, the Delawares were to cultivate the arts of peace, and to entrust their defence entirely to the men, or warlike

tribes of the Six Nations" (Pioneers, p. 67).

After the Revolutionary War many Indians of the Delaware nation again became warlike, fighting the white settlers. "Several fierce and renowned warriors of the Mohegans, finding the conflict with the whites to be in vain, sought a refuge with their Grandfather [the Delaware tribe], and with them the feelings and principles that had so long distinguished them in their own tribe" (Pioneers, p. 67).

This is the basic Indian history Cooper gives; Chingachgook, in The Last of the Mohicans, gives a view from the displaced Indian's point of view, one covering Indian history into the dim past:

> "We came from the place where the sun is hid at night, over great plains where the buffaloes live, until we reached the big river. There we fought the Alligewi, till the ground was red with their blood. From the banks of the big river to the shores of the salt lake, there was none to meet us. The Maquas followed at a distance. We said the country should be ours from the place where the water runs up no longer on this stream to a river twenty suns' journey toward the summer. The land we had taken like warriors we kept like men. We drove the Maquas into the woods with the bears. They only tasted salt at the licks; they drew no fish from the great lake: we threw them the bones."
>
> (Mohicans, p. 28)

All these events took place before the coming of the white man. It was a time of peace and tranquility for the Delaware nation: "'then, Hawk-eye, we were one people, and we were happy'" (Mohicans, p. 28).

Then civilization came and with it the Indian's enemy, rum:

> "The Dutch landed, and gave my people the firewater; they drank until the heavens and the earth seemed to meet, and they foolishly thought they had found the Great Spirit. Then they parted with their land. Foot by foot, they were driven back from the shores, until I, that am a chief and a Sagamore, have never seen the sun shine but through the trees, and have never visited the graves of my fathers!" (Mohicans, p. 29)

The resistance of the Indian to the intrusion of white culture accounts, to a great extent, for the division of these Indians into so-called "good" and "bad" Indians. The Indians are good or bad not so much by nature as by their reaction to the white man's civilizing quest.

Cooper said of the Indian that "In war he is daring, boasting, cunning, ruthless, self-denying, and self-devoted; in peace, just, generous, hospitable, revengeful, superstitious, modest, and commonly chaste. These are qualities, it is true, which do not distinguish all alike."[6] The Indians are basically alike, but differ in their reactions to civilization, showing that Cooper exercised more objectivity in his Tales than is at first apparent.

Magua, the Le Renard Subtil or cunning fox of The Last of the Mohicans, is one of Cooper's most fully developed Indian villains. He too has a view of Indian history and the white man's place on earth:

> "The Spirit that made men colored them differently. . . . Some he made with faces paler than the ermine of the forests:

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[6] James Fenimore Cooper, "Introduction--1850," The Last of the Mohicans (New York, 1965), p. xxiii.

> and these he ordered to be traders; dogs to their women, and wolves to their slaves. He gave this people the nature of the pigeon; wings that never tire: young, more plentiful than the leaves on the trees, and appetites to devour the earth. . . . With his tongue, he stops the ears of the Indians; his heart teaches him to pay warriors to fight his battles; his cunning tells him how to get together the goods of the earth; and his arms inclose the land from the shores of the salt water to the islands of the great lake. His gluttony makes him sick. God gave him enough, and yet he wants all. Such are the palefaces."
>
> (Mohicans, p. 356)

Magua sees the Indian as God's chosen people: "'Some the Great Spirit made with skins brighter and redder than younder sun . . . and these did he fashion to his own mind'" (Mohicans, p. 356). And, as did Chingachgook, Magua saw the Indians as happy in the past. "'The winds cooled them in summer; in winter, skins kept them warm. If they fought among themselves, it was to prove that they were men. They were brave; they were just; they were happy'" (Mohicans, pp. 356-357).

Then Magua summarizes and finishes his oration: "'But why should I . . . tell a wise people their own traditions? Why remind them of their injuries; their ancient greatness; their deeds; their glory; their happiness--their losses; their defeats; their misery? . . . My tongue is still, for my heart is of lead. I listen'" (Mohicans, p. 357).

Magua's history of the Indians differs from that of Chingachgook mainly in emphasis, pointing out the Indian's defeats, injuries, and misery, since Magua wants to fight against the coming civilization; he knows of its corrupting power, for he was driven

from his tribe because of that most powerful influence, the white man's whisky. Before that time he had been much the same type of Indian as Chingachgook, as he says in his own words:

> "Magua was born a chief and a warrior among the red Hurons of the lakes; he saw the suns of twenty summers make the snows of twenty winters run off in the streams, before he saw a paleface; and he was happy! Then his Canada fathers came into the woods and taught him to drink the firewater, and he became a rascal. The Hurons drove him from the graves of his fathers as they would chase the hunted buffalo. He ran down the shores of the lakes, and followed their outlet to the city of cannon. There he hunted and fished, till the people chased him again through the woods into the arms of his enemies. The chief, who was born a Huron, was at last a warrior among the Mohawks!"
>
> (Mohicans, p. 113)

And Magua blames this dispossession on the white man: "'Was it the fault of Le Renard that his head was not made of rock? Who gave him the firewater? Who made him a villain? 'Twas the palefaces'" (Mohicans, pp. 113-114).

Then, in company of the Mohawks, Magua, under the command of Colonel Munro, fought against his own people. And the firewater brought further trouble: Magua was caught drunk and punished by Munro. Magua questions the white man's justice:

> "Is it justice to make evil, and then punish for it? Magua was not himself; it was the firewater that spoke and acted for him! But Munro did not believe it. The Huron chief was tied up before all the pale-faced warriors and whipped like a dog. . . . See! . . . Here are scars given by knives and bullets--of these a warrior may boast before his nation; but the grayhead has left marks on the back of the Huron chief that he must hide like a squaw, under this painted cloth of the whites."
>
> (Mohicans, pp. 114-115)

So Magua was twice dispossessed by his own people and was publicly humiliated by the white soldiers for whom he fought; and it was the white man's firewater that began his troubles. There is little wonder that Magua might oppose the civilization of America. Yet, evil as he has become in The Last of the Mohicans, his strange affection for Cora Munro serves to show that the light of humanity has not become completely dimmed.

In the climactic last battle in The Last of the Mohicans Magua holds Cora captive:

> "Woman," he said, "choose; the wigwam or the knife of Le Subtil!"
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "Woman," repeated Magua hoarsely, and endeavoring in vain to catch a glance from her serene and beaming eye, "choose!" But Cora neither heard nor heeded his demand. The form of the Huron trembled in every fiber, and he raised his arm on high, but dropped it again with a bewildered air, like one who doubted. Once more he struggled with himself and lifted the keen weapon again--but just then a piercing cry was heard above them, and Uncas appeared, leaping frantically from a fearful height, upon a ledge. Magua recoiled a step; and one of his assistants, profiting by the chance, sheathed his own knife in the bosom of Cora.
>
> (Mohicans, p. 399)

Magua attempts to kill his countryman but Uncas falls between them; Magua, "maddened by the murder he had just witnessed . . . buried his weapon in the back of the prostrate Delaware [Uncas]" (Mohicans, p. 399).

This, then, is one of Cooper's "bad" Indians. John Erskine compares him with Milton's Satan:

> [Le Renard Subtil] . . . is the finest of Cooper's villains because the evil in him is joined with a great capacity and

> a noble sense of action, and he is not a coward. The original injustice of the harsh treatment that made him the Englishman's foe, almost turns the reader's sympathy to him, and in places the general sense Cooper has of the rights of the Indians to the land, serves to render Le Renard, as well as Chingachgook, an object of pity; and the ethical poise of the story becomes unsteady,--as a greater mind than Cooper's once found, when he sang of Satan's defiance of the eternal justice.[7]

But Magua shows Cooper's objectivity, not a slip in ethical poise.

This point can be further clarified through Chingachgook, the Delaware chief who fights by Natty's side through four of the Tales. He is the best of Cooper's Indians. As was stated before, Chingachgook sees that civilization is pushing the Indian from his land; yet he does not fight the white man, for he feels that the time of the Indian is past but will come again. But Chingachgook is also ruined by white society.

Chingachgook says that he is "'an unmixed man. The blood of chiefs is in my veins, where it must stay forever'" (Mohicans, p. 29). By the time of his old age his pure blood is all that Chingachgook has preserved; when he appears in The Pioneers he has been Christianized and "baptized by the name of John" (Pioneers, p. 68). The settlers have completed the naming process; they "had united, according to the Christian custom, his baptismal with his national name, and to them he was generally known as John Mohegan, or, more familiarly, as Indian John" (Pioneers, p. 68).

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[7] John Erskine, Leading American Novelists (New York, 1910), p. 126.

And besides accepting the white man's religion John Mohegan becomes a victim to his whisky, blaming his feebleness on it: "'Is John old? When was a Mohican a squaw, with seventy winters! No! the white man brings old age with him--rum is his tomahawk!'" (Pioneers, p. 163). And John sees that he, as Magua, has been ruined by civilization; Magua is made a villain, Chingachgook a beast:

> "My fathers came from the shores of the salt lake. They fled before rum. . . . But warriors and traders with light eyes followed them. One brought the long knife, and one brought rum. They were more than the pines on the mountains; and they broke up the councils, and took the lands. The evil spirit was in their jugs, and they let him loose. Yes, yes . . . John is a Christian beast."
>
> (Pioneers, p. 164)

Chingachgook, the Great Snake of the Delawares, reaches his lowest point in the Tales when he appears publicly drunk:

> [Chingachgook] . . . turned his face toward the listeners and gazed intently on the Judge. He shook his head, throwing his hair back from his countenance, and exposed eyes that were glaring with an expression of wild resentment. But the man was not himself. His hand seemed to make a fruitless effort to release his tomahawk which was confined by its handle to his belt, while his eyes gradually became vacant. Richard at that instant thrusting a mug before him, his features changed to the grin of idiocy, and seizing the vessel with both hands, he sank backward on the bench and drank until satiated, when he made an effort to lay aside the mug with the helplessness of total inebriety.
>
> "Shed not blood!" exclaimed the hunter, [Natty Bumppo] as he watched the countenance of the Indian in its moment of ferocity; "but he is drunk, and can do no harm. . . . Well, well, the time will come when right will be done; and we must have patience."
>
> (Pioneers, p. 145)

These, then, are the opposing forces in Cooper's epic of the

civilization of America. Natty Bumppo is a hardened, stoic pioneer who feels called on by God to help bring this civilization. He sees that it will bring him unhappiness and isolation; he realizes that he must take human lives to complete his quest. Natty also realizes that he is almost a separate race. He is a white man without the cross of Indian blood but, as will be discussed, he is also unable to cope with civilized society.

Cooper's Indians, the people destined to be dispossessed, are shown to be good or evil primarily through the degree of their acceptance of the white civilization. Some, like Magua, are early corrupted and oppose the white man with force until they meet death in battle; others, like Chingachgook, stoically accept the white man's presence, are corrupted, and die almost in shame, anxious to arrive at their heaven, populated, they hope, only by Indians. A summary of the five Leatherstocking Tales will show these opposing forces in action, and the gradual movement of the Tales to the West.

Cooper wrote The Deerslayer in 1841; the last in composition, it is first chronologically in the Leatherstocking Tales. The story takes place about 1740 around Otsego lake. Natty Bumppo, here called the Deerslayer, is in his early twenties.

The narrative of The Deerslayer concerns the efforts of Natty and Chingachgook to recover Chingachgook's woman, Wah-ta-Wah, from Briarthorn, a Mingo who had kidnapped the girl. All of the action takes place around Otsego lake, called Glimmerglass. On the lake,

in a raised house called a castle, lives Thomas Hutter with his two daughters, the worldly Judith and the simple Hetty. Thomas Hutter and Harry March, who accompanies Deerslayer to the lake, are not adverse to taking Indian scalps for money. Hutter rationalizes by blaming war: "'. . . when mankind is busy in killing one another, there can be no great harm in adding a little bit of skin to the plunder'" (Deerslayer, p. 77); Harry March considers the Indian less than human: "'I think no more of a redskin's scalp than I do of a pair of wolf's ears; and would just as lief finger money for the one as for the other'" (Deerslayer, p. 78). Thomas Hutter is eventually scalped alive and dies, while March escapes and returns to the civilization of the fort.

Wah-ta-Wah is recovered from the Mingos; the Mingo villain, Briarthorn, is killed by Chingachgook. The arrival of English soldiers dooms the rest of the Mingos, or Hurons, but Hetty Hutter is mortally wounded in the fight. Her sister, Judith, leaves the lake to return to the settlement.

The most important sections in The Deerslayer are those which concern Natty Bumppo. First, Natty talks about the gifts of various races, giving emphasis to the idea that the races cannot successfully mix. Civilization is for the white man but not the Indian; the white man must always act white and not as a red man would:

> "God made us all, white, black, and red; and, no doubt, had his own wise intentions in coloring us differently. Still, he made us, in the main, much the same in feelin's; though I'll not deny that he gave each race its gifts. A white man's gifts are Christianized, while a redskin's are more for the wilderness. Thus, it would be a great offence for a white man to scalp the dead; whereas it is a signal vartue in an Indian."
>
> (Deerslayer, p. 47)

Thus Natty sees that the Indian has human feelings but he also sees that there is no way for the races to join on earth. So the Indian must be driven back into the wilderness.

In the making of Natty as a hero The Deerslayer is very important. In it he receives his initiation into death and is given his weapon, Killdeer. The initiation comes when Natty, or Deerslayer, is trying to recover one of Hutter's canoes. Meeting an Indian on the beach of the lake, Natty tries to be peaceful, again showing his unwillingness to kill without a good reason:

> "I know its war atween your people and mine, but that's no reason why human mortals should slay each other, like savage creatur's that meet in the woods; go your way, then, and leave me to go mine. The world is large enough for us both; and when we meet fairly in battle, why, the Lord will order the fate of each of us."
>
> (Deerslayer, p. 106)

But when Natty begins to leave, the Indian tries to shoot him in the back. Both firing at once, the Indian is gravely wounded. To Natty the moment is important. "It was the first instance in which he had seen a man fall in battle--it was the first fellow-creature against whom he had ever seriously raised his own hand. The sensations were novel; and regret . . . mingled with his

triumph" (Deerslayer, p. 109). And the victim, dying, pronounces Natty a warrior:

> "That [Deerslayer] good name for boy--poor name for warrior. He get better quick. No fear there,"--the savage had strength sufficient, under the strong excitement he felt, to raise a hand and tap the young man on the breast,--"eye sartain--finger lightning--aim, death--great warrior soon. No Deerslayer--Hawkeye--Hawkeye--Hawkeye. Shake hand." (Deerslayer, p. 111)

When the Indian dies, Natty reaserts his piety, saying, "'I didn't wish your life, redskin, . . . but you left me no choice atween killing or being killed. Each party acted according to his gifts, I suppose, and blame can light on neither'" (Deerslayer, p. 112). In this first victory Cooper seems to affirm Deerslayer's, and the white man's, right to kill the Indian for a just cause. Deerslayer affirms not only his "personal prowess and moral superiority; he affirms his whole culture."[8]

Deerslayer is then made a complete hero: he receives his rifle, Killdeer. The weapon had belonged to Thomas Hutter and had already acquired a reputation: "'The hunters have told me of its expl'ites, and by all I have heard, I should set it down as sartain death in exper'enced hands'" (Deerslayer, p. 34). The rifle, as described, seems suited to Natty: "The piece was a little longer than usual, and had evidently been turned out from the workshop of some manufacturer of a superior order. It had a few silver

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[8] Quentin Anderson, "Introduction," The Deerslayer (New York, 1962), p. 5.

ornaments; though, on the whole, it would have been deemed a plain piece by most frontier men; its great merit consisting in the accuracy of its bore, the perfection of the details, and the excellence of the metal" (Deerslayer, p. 341). Judith Hutter gives Deerslayer the weapon, telling him to "'keep it, Deerslayer, and become King of the Woods. It can never be in better hands than it is at this moment; there I hope it will remain these fifty years'" (Deerslayer, p. 342).

Then, having received his initiation as a pious warrior and having received the weapon that is to accompany him throughout his career, Natty is first presented with the symbolic choice of staying with civilization or striking out into the woods. The Hutters are gone; Hetty and her father are dead and Judith has decided to return to the soldiers' garrison. The Hurons are also gone, either killed or captured, and soldiers watch the lake. Chingachgook waits "at a spot where the two trails, that to the garrison, and that to the villages of the Delawares, separated" (Deerslayer, p. 475). Judith "immediately proceeded on the trail of the soldiers, without casting a single glance behind her" (Deerslayer, p. 475). Deerslayer follows her a short way on the trail, explaining why he does not love her. Judith continues to the garrison. "For some time Deerslayer was irresolute as to his course; but in the end, he retraced his steps and joined the Delaware" (Deerslayer, p. 476). The next evening Natty enters the tribal village of the Delawares

"in a sorrow that it required months of activity to remove" (Deerslayer, p. 476).

As The Deerslayer symbolizes the coming of the white man as a pious dispossessor and killer, so The Last of the Mohicans symbolizes the destruction of the Indian, a fact pointed out by Cooper in his 1850 introduction:

> The Mohicans were the possessors of the country first occupied by the Europeans in this portion of the continent. They were, consequently, the first dispossessed; and the seemingly inevitable fate of all these people, who disappear before the advances, or it might be termed the inroads of civilization, as the verdure of their native forests falls before the nipping frost, is represented as having already befallen them. There is sufficient historical truth in the picture to justify the use that has been made of it.[9]

The historical basis for the novel, written in 1826, is the Indian massacre of the British defenders of Fort William Henry, surrendered to Montcalm in 1757 after the British were assured safe passage southward.

The plot of the story concerns the efforts of Natty Bumppo, or Hawkeye, and Chingachgook and his son, Uncas, to deliver Cora and Alice Munro to their father, Colonel Munro, the commandant at Fort William Henry. The sisters had been accompanied by Duncan Heyward and Magua, their guide, who intended to betray them. Besieged by Hurons led by Magua, Natty, Chingachgook, and Uncas go for help;

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[9] James Fenimore Cooper, "Author's Introduction," The Last of the Mohicans (New York, 1965), p. xxv.

Heyward, Cora, Alice, and David Gamut are captured. However, they are rescued by Natty, Chingachgook, and Uncas, with Magua escaping.

After the massacre at Fort William Henry, Alice and Cora are again taken by Magua, who is pursued by Duncan Heyward, Colonel Munro, Natty, Uncas, and Chingachgook. Uncas is captured, but rescued. The story ends with the battle between the Hurons and Delawares in which Uncas, Cora, and Magua are killed. Like The Deerslayer, The Last of the Mohicans ends with death and a funeral.

The most important character in the book is Uncas, for he personifies the fate of the Indian. His death is made a symbol for all Indians and the stoicism of his tribe, especially that voiced by Tamenund, best illustrates one of the choices of the Indian confronted by civilization: waiting, hoping that his time will again come.

Uncas, the son of Chingachgook and Wah-ta-Wah, is the hope of the Indians. Before his death in The Last of the Mohicans he is reunited with his tribe as their leader. When the Delawares see that Uncas is tattooed with a small tortoise, they know that he is a chief. Old Tamenund "of many days," on asking his identity, is told that he is "'Uncas, the son of Chingachgook . . . a son of the great Unamis [Turtle]'" (Mohicans, p. 366).

Then Tamenund expresses the significance of Uncas to the Indians:

> "The hour of Tamenund is nigh! . . . The day is come, at last, to the night! I thank the Manitto, that one is here

> to fill my place at the council fire. Uncas, the child of Uncas, is found. Let the eyes of a dying eagle gaze on the rising sun.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Is Tamenund a boy? . . . Have I dreamt of so many snows--that my people were scattered like floating sands--of Yengesse [the white man], more plenty than the leaves on the trees! The arrow of Tamenund would not frighten the fawn; his arm is withered like the branch of a dead oak; the snail would be swifter in the race; yet is Uncas before him as they went to battle against the palefaces! Uncas, the panther of his tribe, the eldest son of the Lenape, the wisest Sagamore of the Mohicans!"
>
> (Mohicans, pp. 366-367)

Then Uncas speaks, again telling of Indian history but with a stoic view. He acknowledges that he is the last Mohican chief: "'The blood of the turtle has been in many chiefs, but all have gone back into the earth from whence they came except Chingachgook and his son'" (Mohicans, p. 367). Then he gives his view of the future: the Indian will be driven westward until God decides it is the Indian's time again. Then, "'When the Manitto is ready, and shall say "Come," we will follow the river to the sea, and take our own again.' Such, Delawares, is the belief of the children of the Turtle. Our eyes are on the rising, and not toward the setting sun. We know whence he comes, but we know not whither he goes. It is enough.'" (Mohicans, p. 368).

But Uncas, the Indian "with eyes that had already lost their fierceness, and were beaming with a sympathy that elevated him far above the intelligence, and advanced him probably centuries before the practices of his nation" (Mohicans, p. 130), was killed by

Magua, the chief corrupted by civilization. The Delawares were left only with their beliefs.

This belief is best expressed by Tamenund at the funeral of Uncas, when Natty and Chingachgook, both to become victims of civilization, clasp hands: "Chingachgook grasped the hand that, in the warmth of feeling, the scout had stretched across the fresh earth, and in that attitude of friendship these two sturdy and intrepid woodsmen bowed their heads together, while scalding tears fell to their feet, watering the grave of Uncas like drops of falling rain" (Mohicans, p. 415). Then Tamenund closes the novel, expressing the only hope of the Indian, a hope mingled with sorrow and probably the only hope Cooper saw for the Indian, as the red man could neither successfully stop the white man, as Magua attempted, or join him, as Chingachgook was to do unsuccessfully. Tamenund saw that the Indian must wait and must remain an Indian:

> . . . Tamenund lifted his voice to disperse the multitude. "It is enough," he said. "Go, children of the Lenape, the anger of the Manitto is not done. Why should Tamenund stay? The palefaces are masters of the earth, and the time of the Red Man has not yet come again. My day has been too long. In the morning I saw the sons of Unamis happy and strong; and yet, before the night has come, have I lived to see the last warrior of the wise race of the Mohicans."
> (Mohicans, p. 416)

So The Last of the Mohicans, like the Iliad, ends with a symbolic death and funeral; the hand of fate is on the Indian as it was on the Trojan people. "Pathetic in itself, the death of Uncas symbolizes still greater pathos in the expiration of a noble family,

and beyond that in the passing of a race."[10] And Cooper could well have used a paraphrase of the last sentence of Homer's Iliad, as translated by Samuel Butler: "Thus, then, did they celebrate the funeral of Uncas, the last of the Mohicans."[11]

In The Pathfinder, third in the narrative of the Leatherstocking Tales but written fourth, in 1840, not much is added to either the theme of Indian dispossession or to the stature of Natty Bumppo, called Pathfinder, as a hero. The story contains an Indian villain, Arrowhead; a young white woman, Mabel Dunham; a young white man, Jasper Western; and Natty's companion, Chingachgook.

In the novel Natty, Mabel, and a party of soldiers sail to a station on an island in Lake Ontario. There, while Natty, or Pathfinder, Jasper Western, and Sergeant Dunham, Mabel's father, are absent, the garrison is attacked. Mabel takes refuge in the blockhouse and is assisted by Dew-in-June, Arrowhead's wife. It is Arrowhead who leads the attack.

Then Pathfinder and Chingachgook return to the fort. Sergeant Dunham later comes, having been wounded. With the arrival of Jasper in the Scud, Captain Sanglier, the French leader of the Indians, decides to negotiate a truce. All the Indians except Arrowhead and his wife leave; Arrowhead kills Lieutenant Muir, and is killed

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[10] Warren S. Walker, James Fenimore Cooper: An Introduction and Interpretation (New York, 1962), p. 55.

[11] Homer, The Iliad, trans. Samuel Butler (New York, 1964), p. 389.

by Chingachgook. Mabel Dunham marries Jasper Western while Natty and Chingachgook go back into the woods.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the book is Natty's attachment to Mabel Dunham, an attachment that he reluctantly breaks when he realizes that Mabel and Jasper are better suited for each other; Natty realizes that he is unsuited for marriage to a civilized woman like Mabel: "'When all is remembered, age, looks, *learning, and habits*, Mabel, conscience tells me I ought to confess that I'm altogether unfit for you, if not downright unworthy; and I would give up the hope this minute, I would, if I didn't feel something pulling at my heartstrings which seems hard to undo'" (Pathfinder, p. 483). Then Natty tells Mabel and Jasper that he cannot follow his heart: "'I could live and die in your company, if I only followed feeling; but, if I follow reason, I shall quit you here. I shall return to the wilderness and my Maker'" (Pathfinder, p. 488). Like Aeneas, Natty's quest draws him on, and he foregoes personal happiness.

The Pioneers, written in 1823, is the first of the Leatherstocking Tales in composition; it is fourth in the chronology of the Tales. Natty Bumppo is in his seventies in this story, which is set in the town of *Templeton* in 1793, thirty-four years after The Pathfinder narrative. Much of the book describes the social events of the town, such as the turkey shoot; but primarily the book shows the destruction of the land caused by the coming of

civilization.

The death of Chingachgook, now old John Mohegan, addicted to the white man's firewater and an unstable convert to the white man's religion, occurs in the book. Chingachgook, confronted with death, sees in it a chance to escape the white men who have so changed him:

> "Hawkeye! my fathers call me to the happy hunting-grounds. The path is clear, and the eyes of Mohegan grow young. I look, but I see no white skins; there are none to be seen but just and brave Indians. Farewell, Hawkeye! you shall go . . . to the white man's heaven; but I go after my fathers. Let the bow, and tomahawk, and pipe, and the wampum of Mohegan be laid in his grave; for when he starts 'twill be in the night, like a warrior on a war-party, and he cannot stop to seek them."
>
> (Pioneers, pp. 389-390)

And Cooper makes the passing of Chingachgook impressive, giving a final grand stature to the Indian who wished to die red instead of white:

> While Mr. Grant [the minister] was speaking, a flash which sent its quivering light through the gloom, laying bare the whole opposite horizon, was followed by a loud crash of thunder, that rolled away among the hills, seeming to shake the foundations of the earth to their center. Mohegan raised himself, as if in obedience to a signal for his departure, and stretched his wasted arm toward the west. His dark face lighted with a look of joy; which, with all other expressions, gradually disappeared; the muscles stiffening as they retreated to a state of rest; a slight convulsion played, for a single instant, about his lips; and his arm slowly dropped by his side; leaving the frame of the dead warrior reposing against the rock, with its glassy eyes open, and fixed on the distant hills, as if the deserted shell were tracing the flight of the spirit to its new abode.
>
> (Pioneers, p. 391)

In remarking on this death Natty speaks of the force that he has made possible but which will gradually cut him off from the new

society, making him a man out of his time: the law. "'Red skin or white, it's all over now! He's to be judged by a righteous Judge, and by no laws that's made to suit times, and new ways'" (Pioneers, p. 391).

In The Pioneers the subject of law is tied in with the destruction to the land brought by civilization; civilization brings the destruction, and only the laws of civilization can stop the gradual erosion of nature brought by the white man.

Cooper quite clearly speaks of the destruction brought to the land. He uses Judge Temple and Natty to point this out. The Judge sees conservation as his duty as a citizen looking to the future of the nation; he feels that ownership brings responsibility: "'it behooves the owner of woods so extensive as mine, to be cautious what example he sets his people, who are already felling the forests, as if no end could be found to their treasures, nor any limits to their extent. If we go on in this way, twenty years hence we shall want fuel'" (Pioneers, p. 87).

Natty also speaks out on the wanton destruction of the game, after witnessing a mass killing of pigeons and seining of fish. Seeing the dead pigeons covering the ground, Natty says, "'It's much better to kill only such as you want, without wasting your powder and lead, than to be firing into God's creatures in this wicked manner'" (Pioneers, p. 224). And on seeing fish being caught in a seine by the thousands, Natty remarks to Judge Temple: "'I call

it sinful and wasty to catch more than can be eat'" (Pioneers, p. 241).

The Judge agrees with Natty; the Sheriff, one of the men using the net, sees this agreement as somewhat of a contradiction, saying "'A very pretty confederacy, indeed! Temple, the landlord and owner of a township, with Nathaniel Bumppo, a lawless squatter and professed deer-killer, in order to preserve the game of the country!'" (Pioneers, p. 241).

But it is really no confederacy. The Judge wants laws to regulate the taking of the game; Natty Bumppo wants all men to use the woods and game only as he does, killing only what can be used, leaving the rest untouched, and in that way to assure a plentiful supply. But the Judge knows that the woods and game must decrease to make room for the coming towns and cities while Natty wants these basic units of civilization to stay away. At the pigeon shoot Natty tells the Judge to "'Put an ind [sic] . . . to your clearings. Ain't the woods His work as well as the pigeons? Use, but don't waste. Wasn't the woods made for the beasts and birds to harbor in?'" (Pioneers, p. 244). And, strangely, the Sheriff agrees with Natty. He sees no need for the conservation laws of civilization, for he feels that nature is inexhaustible:

> "But this is always the way with you, Marmaduke; first it's the trees, and 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 water won't run the

> way you wish it to go; and the next, you say something about mines of coal, though any man who has good eyes like myself--I say with good eyes--can see more wood than would keep the city of London in fuel for fifty years. . . ."
> (Pioneers, p. 236)

But civilization comes, almost inevitably, and Natty has helped bring it. The woods will remain neither virgin nor inexhaustible, and it is the man of law, the Judge, who will emerge victorious, for civilization is behind him. Here begins Natty's tragedy, for he is a man not made for law.

Natty sees early in The Pioneers that law will be carried out and that, perhaps, he will be its victim: "'I never expected to live forever; but I see, times be altering in these mountains from what they was thirty years ago, or, for that matter, ten years. But might makes right, and the law is stronger than an old man, whether he is one that has much l'arning, or only one like me'" (Pioneers, p. 116). And, indeed, Cooper expresses the idea that the law is stronger than any man, even the Judge. An attorney, discussing the Judge's wounding of Oliver Edwards in a hunting accident, expresses this view: "'The law, gentlemen, is no respecter of persons in a free country. It is one of the great blessings that has been handed down to us from our ancestors, that all men are equal in the eye of the law as they are by natur'. Though some may get property . . . yet they are not privileged to transgress the laws any more than the poorest citizen in the State'" (Pioneers, p. 132).

So the stage is set for the conflict between Natty and the law, a conflict arising in the novel from putting a season on the killing of deer, a conflict Natty is completely aware of: "'There's them living who say that Nathaniel Bumppo's right to shoot on these hills is of older date than Marmaduke Temple's right to forbid him. . . . who ever heard of a law that a man shouldn't kill deer where he pleased!'" (Pioneers, p. 11).

Natty does kill a deer out of season, one caught in the lake, even after being reminded by Edwards that the Judge will prosecute Natty if he is caught. Hiram Doolittle, the magistrate, turns Natty in, and attempts to search Natty's cabin for the carcass of the deer. Natty drives him off by threatening to shoot him. It is this last offense that Natty is prosecuted for. The Judge would forgive the killing of the deer as long as the fine was paid, for the magistrate demanded that; but he could not forgive opposition to the law: "'Would any society be tolerable . . . where the ministers of justice are to be opposed by men armed with rifles? Is it for this that I have tamed the wilderness?'" (Pioneers, p. 316).

To the Sheriff, Natty is an outlaw, as he tells the men he has gathered to arrest Natty:

> "I have required your assistance, my friends, . . . in order to arrest Nathaniel Bumppo, commonly called the Leather-Stocking. He has assaulted a magistrate, and resisted the execution of a search-warrant, by threatening the life of a constable with his rifle. In short, my friends, he has set an example of rebellion to the laws, and has become a kind of outlaw."
>
> (Pioneers, p. 327)

But Natty Bumppo is no outlaw. He is a man made to function in a world without laws. This fact is brought out by Kirby, the wood-chopper, one of the men sent to arrest Leatherstocking: "'This [killing deer] is the man's calling . . . and the law was never made for such as he'" (Pioneers, p. 306). Driven to desperation in an attempt to preserve the things of his world from the settlers, Natty burns down his cabin and surrenders. His world is destroyed:

> "What would ye with an old and helpless man?" he said. "You've driven God's creatur's from the wilderness, where his providence had put them for his own pleasure; and you've brought in the troubles and diviltries of the law, where no man was ever known to disturb another. You have driven me, that have lived forty long years of my appointed time in this very spot, from my home and the shelter of my head, lest you should put your wicked feet and wasty ways in my cabin. You've driven me to burn these logs, under which I've eaten and drunk . . . for the half of a hundred years; and to mourn the ashes under my feet, as a man would weep and mourn for the children of his body. . . . What more would ye have? for I am here--one to many. I come to mourn, not to fight; and, if it is God's pleasure, work your will on me." (Pioneers, pp. 328-329)

Natty is found guilty of threatening a law officer, and is made to suffer the humiliation of sitting in public in stocks for one hour; this is indeed suffering at the hands of civilization for the man who began his career on Lake Glimmerglass with the name of Deerslayer, for it was the killing of a deer that led to his punishment.

But Natty's time had not yet come. There were still lands to the West not yet changed by civilization, lands that would be, for

a time, like his old world. Natty leaves for the prairies: "'they tell me that on the Big Lakes there's the best of hunting, and a great range, without a white man on it, unless it may be one like myself. I'm weary of living in clearings, and where the hammer is sounding in my ears from sunrise to sundown. . . . I crave to go into the woods ag'in, I do'" (Pioneers, p. 421). So Leatherstocking sets off to be in his own world, the wilderness; The Pioneers remains "an object lesson in the painful progress from noble savagery to noble civilization, a cultural journey which Natty is neither willing nor able to complete."[12]

The Prairie, written in 1827, ends the epic career of Natty Bumppo who, having lost his heroic epithets, is called only the trapper or the old man. The book contains many of the same elements found in the four previous Tales. There are Indians, the Sioux, who oppose the coming of the white man, led by their chief, Mahtoree; there are Indians who do not oppose civilization, the Pawnees, led by Hard-Heart; there is some talk about the ravage of the land. Most importantly, the theme of law brought by civilization is carried through the book, making a complete circle from The Deerslayer.

Mahtoree, the Sioux chief, is one of Cooper's most interesting Indian villians because of the love of honor and the stature given

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[12] Walker, p. 33.

him by the author. It is Mahtoree who speaks of the Indian's dispossession, addressing Natty Bumppo:

> . . . a warrior of powerful frame advanced out of the dark circle, and placed himself before the captives, with that high and proud bearing for which a distinguished Indian chief is ever so remarkable. He was followed by all the party, who arranged themselves around his person, in a deep and respectful silence.
>
> "The earth is very large," the chief commenced, after a pause of . . . true dignity . . .; "why can the children of my great white father never find room on it?"
>
> (Prairie, p. 42)

And it is Mahtoree, the chief "who was not ashamed in the moments of inaction to admit the softer feelings of a father and a husband" (Prairie, p. 317) who takes on, in time of war, satanic powers. In scouting the camp of Ishmael Bush, Mahtoree makes his way through the limbs of a cotton-wood tree. "Then raising himself on his feet, he stalked through the encampment, like the master of evil, seeking whom and what he should first devote to his fell purposes" (Prairie, p. 51).

In Mahtoree and Hard-Heart the struggle between those favoring the coming of civilization and those opposing it is most clearly brought out. Meeting on an island in the middle of a river, with their opposing tribes on opposite banks, they prepare to fight. But Mahtoree tries to get Hard-Heart and his warriors to come to a truce; Mahtoree wants all Indians to fight the white man. Here he speaks for his tribe: "'They [the Sioux] think that the moccasin of every Pale-face should be followed, like the track of the bear.

That the Long-knife, who comes upon the prairie, should never go back. That the path shall be open to those who come, and shut to those who go'" (Prairie, pp. 370-371). Hard-Heart rejects his offer: "'Teton--no! Hard-Heart has never struck the stranger. They come into his lodge and eat, and they go out in safety. A mighty chief is their friend! . . . No, Teton; his arm will never be lifted against the stranger'" (Prairie, p. 371).

The two chiefs then fight. Mahtoree is stabbed; "the blade was buried to the buck-horn haft" (Prairie, p. 372). Then, dying, Mahtoree's pride asserts itself: "The cunning and duplicity which had so long obscured the brighter and nobler traits of his character, were lost in the never dying sentiment of pride, which he had imbibed in youth" (Prairie, p. 372). Mahtoree dives into the stream to keep Hard-Heart from taking his scalp. But Hard-Heart follows, determined to drown or gain the scalp; he soon returns, "flourishing the scalp of the Great Sioux, as a banner that would lead to victory" (Prairie, p. 373).

Natty Bumppo has much less to say about the destruction of the land in The Prairie than he had in The Pioneers. He only predicts that white civilization will regret that destruction when the continent is settled from East to West: "Look around you . . .; what will the Yankee choppers say, when they have cut their path from the eastern to the western waters, and 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'" (Prairie, p. 77).

And, in speaking of his career as an Indian fighter Natty laments that, when fighting with General Wayne, he didn't know the cause of the fight. This statement again asserts Natty's piety: "'to my shame it may be said, I never knew the right of the quarrel as well as a man of threescore and ten should know the reason of his acts afore he takes mortal life, which is a gift he can never return!'" (Prairie, p. 63).

It is, however, the theme of law which is most important in The Prairie. Cooper has taken Natty and the Indians, symbolically, to "the final gathering place of the red men."[13] When the law reaches this last refuge of freedom, there will be no place left for the old man and the Indians to flee to; they must become civilized or die. Strangely enough, the law finally arrives with the borderer, Ishmael Bush.

Early in the novel the aged Natty Bumppo admits that there is need for law: "'The law--'tis bad to have it, but I sometimes think it is worse to be entirely without it. Age and weakness have brought me to feel such weakness at times. Yes--yes, the law is

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[13] James Fenimore Cooper, "Introduction," The Prairie (New York, 1964), pp. xiv-xv.

needed when such as have not the gifts of strength and wisdom are to be taken care of'" (Prairie, p. 21). But any sort of law-giver would seem to be far away. Besides Natty and the Pawnee and Sioux Indians there is only one other party of people on the prairie. It is composed of Ellen Wade, Dr. Bat, Ishmael Bush, his wife Esther, their seven sons and numerous daughters, Esther's brother, Abiram White, and a kidnapped Creole girl, Inez. The party is pursued by Duncan Uncas Middleton, who seeks to regain his wife, Inez, and by Paul Hover, a bee hunter in love with Ellen Wade. Inez was kidnapped by Abiram White; she is freed by Ishmael, who punishes Abiram. Ellen Wade goes to live in a settlement with Paul Hover.

Ishmael Bush is a borderer. Cooper explains the borderer's place in society in this way:

> The gradations of society, from that state which is called refined to that which approaches as near barbarity as connection with an intelligent people will readily allow, are to be traced from the bosom of the States, where wealth, luxury and the arts are beginning to seat themselves, to those distant and ever-receding borders which mark the skirts and announce the approach of the nation, as moving mists precede the signs of the day.
>
> . . . The resemblance between the American borderer and his European prototype is singular, though not always uniform. Both might be called without restraint, the one being above, the other beyond the reach of the law--brave, because they were inured to danger--proud, because they were independent--and vindictive, because each was the avenger of his own wrongs. . . . He is irreligious, because he has inherited the knowledge that religion does not exist in forms, and his reason rejects mockery. . . .
>
> Ishmael Bush had passed the whole of a life of more than fifty years on the skirts of society. He had boasted that he had never dwelt where he might not safely fell every tree he could view from his own threshold; that the law had rarely

> been known to enter his clearing; and that his ears had never willingly admitted the sound of a church bell. . . . He had no respect for any learning. . . .
>
> (Prairie, pp. 65-66)

Ishmael had, then, spent fifty years on the borders of civilization, just as Natty had spent most of fifty years in the wilderness. Like Natty he was not concerned with formal religion, and attempted to stay away from the law. But there also existed a great gulf between Ishmael and Natty because Ishmael, although living on the fringes of civilization, was still a part of that civilization; Natty was a part of an older order.

Ishmael is made to realize his position as a small part of civilization when he is left to judge the members of his party after Mahtoree and his Indians have been defeated. Ishmael's son, Asa, has been murdered by a member of his party; Ishmael suspects Natty of the crime. He must also decide what is to be done with Middleton and Inez, Dr. Bat, and Ellen Wade and Paul Hover; Ishmael cannot leave these problems behind, for the kidnapping, murder, and falling in love have occurred in his own party, which has come to be a small society in itself.

All are gathered together:

> . . . the family of the squatter assembled to make their final decision, concerning the several individuals who had been thrown into their power by the fluctuating chances of the incidents related. . . . even the youngest of the erratic brood seemed conscious that the moment had arrived, when circumstances were about to occur that might have a lasting impression on the wild fortunes of their semi-barbarous condition.
>
> Ishmael moved through his little encampment, with the seriousness of one who had been unexpectedly charged with matters

> of a gravity exceeding any of the ordinary occurrences of his irregular existence.
>
> (Prairie, p. 378-379)

Then the subjects are brought before Ishmael: "Middleton and Inez, Paul and Ellen, Obed and the trapper, were all brought forth and placed in situations that were deemed suitable to receive the sentence of their arbitrary judge" (Prairie, pp. 379-380). Ishmael proceeds to talk about the law:

> "I am called upon this day to fill the office which in the settlements you give unto judges, who are set apart to decide on matters that arise between man and man. . . . I am no troubler of county-houses, and least of all do I like living on a plantation that the sheriff has surveyed; yet there is a reason in such a law that makes it a safe rule to journey by, and therefore it ar' a solemn fact that this day shall I abide by it, and give unto all and each that which is his due and no more."
>
> (Prairie, pp. 380-381)

Ishmael releases Inez and Middleton and apologizes for her being kidnapped, saying he was led into doing it by Abiram. Natty Bumppo then talks about the law, showing that he still opposes it:

> "A busy and a troublesome arm it 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. . . . Why do you know, my men, that there are regions where the law is so busy as to . . . [tell a man how to live and die]! A wicked and a troublesome meddling is that, with the business of One who has not made his creatures to be herded like oxen, and driven from field to field as their stupid and selfish keepers may judge of their needs and wants. A miserable land must that be, where they fetter the mind as well as the body, and where the creatures of God, being born children, are kept so by the wicked inventions of men who would take upon themselves the office of the great Governor of all!"
>
> (Prairie, p. 382)

In this speech Natty sees only the bad side of the law, much as the Indians only point out the bad side of the white civilization; the dispossessed does not tend to praise the dispossessor.

Ishmael next releases Dr. Bat and, on finding that Ellen Wade loves Paul Hover and would not consider one of Ishmael's own sons as a possible husband, releases them both; Ellen would prefer a life in the settlements. Then, at the climax of the judgment, Natty reveals that he saw Abiram kill Ishmael's son, Asa. Abiram is confined. Then Ishmael disperses the assembly in much the same way that Tamenund dispersed the Indians in The Last of the Mohicans; but Ishmael is sending out the civilized to settle the land: "'Now,' he said, turning to those who were strangers in his camp, 'nothing is left to be done, but for each to go his own road. I wish you all well'" (Prairie, p. 391).

Ishmael and his party then turn back toward the settlements, perhaps realizing that he has become a settler and is no longer a borderer; the border has ceased to exist. Ishmael next decides on Abiram's punishment. To do so he consults the Bible, a source of law of which Cooper evidently approves: "Her husband made a gesture for her [Esther] to find one of those brief rules of conduct which have been received among all Christian nations as the direct mandates of the Creator, and which have been found so just, that even they who deny their high authority, admit their wisdom" (Prairie, p. 397). The sentence is death; Abiram is hanged and

buried, and Ishmael's family joins civilization: "As they approached the confines of society the train was blended among a thousand others" (Prairie, pp. 404-405).

Thus far in the Tales Cooper has shown America change from a wilderness to a land of settlements; he has shown the Indians' decline from happy warriors to "villains" and "Christian beasts" corrupted by the white man; and he has shown the making of Natty Bumppo as a heroic pioneer, and that same hero's decline to an old man living as a trapper on the prairie in order to stay beyond the reach of the law he helped make possible. There remains only Natty's death.

Death comes to Natty Bumppo as he is seated, symbolically, between the two races that had been a part of his quest: the Indian, whom he had helped to doom, and the white man, whose coming he had made possible. "Middleton and Hard-Heart placed themselves on the opposite sides of his seat, and watched with melancholy solicitude, the variations of his countenance" (Prairie, p. 428). Then Natty dies, facing, as Chingachgook, the West:

> When opened, his gaze seemed fastened on the clouds which hung around the western horizon, reflecting the bright colors, giving form and loveliness to 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. For a moment he looked about him, as if to invite

> all in presence to listen (the lingering remnant of human frailty), and then, with a fine military elevation of the head, and with a voice that might be heard in every part of that numerous assembly, he pronounced the word--
>
> "Here!"
>
> (Prairie, pp. 428-429)

Natty dies as a soldier just as Chingachgook dies as an Indian warrior, both overtaken by civilization.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales are, by the criteria set forth in this thesis, an American epic. They contain a subject of great scope and national interest, a hero who brings out the qualities of character most esteemed by Americans, an objective attitude by the author toward the warring white and Indian forces, and the total effect is one of tragedy.

Cooper chose as his subject the one great American concern: the civilization of the continent from East to West. The five Tales trace Natty Bumppo as he moves westward preceding this settlement and helping to make it possible. In The Deerslayer Natty is a young warrior in the New York wilderness; in the last of the Tales, The Prairie, the continent is settled clear to the western prairies. When civilization reaches this point, the continent is, symbolically, fully settled. In showing this arrival of civilization Cooper reflects the American attitude toward civilization: ". . . its march is ceaseless and after all does confer some advantages."[1] Cooper, and Americans, affirm "the values of civilized

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[1] William Wasserstrom, "Cooper, Freud and the Origins of Culture," Leatherstocking and the Critics, ed. W. S. Walker (Dallas, 1965), p. 106.

society"[2] as "the higher good."[3] Thus the Tales take a subject of national interest and great scope and express, as must the epic, the national attitude toward that subject.

To the hero of the epic, Natty Bumppo, the settling and civilizing of the continent constitutes a quest. He feels that it is his duty to help bring this new white civilization. In pursuing this quest Natty, as do all epic heroes, brings out the qualities of character most esteemed by his nation. He is hard, isolated, stoic, and a pious killer. Natty is hardened from the many battles and bloody deeds he has seen and has participated in; he is isolated because he feels that God wants him to live alone and to listen to reason instead of his heart; he is stoic because he feels that the plans of God will be carried out and that he will get his just reward; and Natty is a pious killer because his quest allows him to kill those opposed to the civilization he brings. Like all epic heroes, Natty comes to mean something to an entire people as a hero and as a symbol: he "is at once a sharply individualized representative of the type [of those who preceded civilization], and beyond that a mythical hero who symbolizes the whole

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[2] Donald A. Ringe, "Introduction," The Last of the Mohicans (New York, 1965), p. xii.

[3] Ringe, p. xii.

phase of history in which the type flourished."[4]

In telling of the conflict between the Indian and the white man, Cooper maintains an objective attitude, as did Homer in telling of the war between the Greeks and Trojans, and Milton, in telling of the conflict between God and Satan. Cooper shows his Indians to be good or bad by their reaction to civilization, not from a basically evil nature. Magua, in The Last of the Mohicans, is bad because he was corrupted by civilization and then fought against it; Mahtoree, in The Prairie, is bad because he opposes, and wants all Indians to oppose, the coming of the white man. Cooper does not make the Indian a lower form of life or less human than the white man. He points out, through Natty's talk about racial gifts, that the Indian's gifts are suited to the wilderness, the white man's to a civilized world. When the wilderness is gone, the Indian will be out of place. A valiant opponent, the Indian cannot win; his only hope is that his time will come again, when the white man's time is over.

The Deerslayer shows the making of the pious Christian warrior; The Last of the Mohicans shows the symbolic dispossession of the Indian from the land; and The Pathfinder shows Natty rejecting the love of Mabel Dunham in favor of following his civilizing quest. In these three books Natty is able to live on the moving

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[4] Warren S. Walker, James Fenimore Cooper: An Introduction and Interpretation (New York, 1962), p. 32.

frontier, isolated, but exercising his great freedom in order to make the continent safe for the coming of towns and cities. However, in The Pioneers and The Prairie Natty's freedom is curtailed by the law he helped to bring. This makes Natty tragic, for he was not made to live in a world of law and he is unable to cope with it. Arrested for defying the law in The Pioneers, Natty moves to the prairies to gain freedom. But the law arrives there also, and Natty, a man out of his time, has no place to turn except to death. He becomes the victim of his quest just as the Indians have become before him.

So Cooper in his Leatherstocking Tales did fulfill both the general requirements of the epic and the specific qualities needed for an American epic. Cooper, then, like Homer and Virgil, helped to shape a nation's picture of itself by evoking a meaningful past. Cooper, in creating his American epic,

> . . . becomes to us what Ariosto is to the Italian exile, Cervantes to the Spaniard, Scripture to the Hebrew,--the literary representative of our nationality,--the enchanter through whose spells we are transported, at will, to the bogs and meadows, the Indian trail, the hunter's lodge, the frontier bulwark, the rocky coast, the patriotic strife, the secret council, the ambush, the skirmish, the pure domestic altar, and the simple human sympathies, which make up the adventurous ordeal through which our ancestors passed to win the heritage that is their children's vast and vaunted home.[5]

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[5] H. T. Tuckerman, "James Fenimore Cooper," Leatherstocking and the Critics, ed. W. S. Walker (Dallas, 1965), p. 8.

Cooper "alone [of the shapers of American fiction] entered that realm of the creative imagination in which a whole people unconsciously owns a small share"[6] when he created his American epic, the Leatherstocking Tales.

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[6] George Snell, "The Shaper of American Romance," Leatherstocking and the Critics, ed. W. S. Walker (Dallas, 1965), p. 58.

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