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JAMES FENIMORE COOPER AND THE GENTEEL  
HERO OF ROMANCE.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro,  
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JAMES FENIMORE COOPER AND THE  
GENTEEL HERO OF ROMANCE

by

THOMAS GLADSKY

A Dissertation Submitted to  
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The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
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Approved by

  
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APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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In virtually every one of his many novels, James Fenimore Cooper used one of literature's most familiar figures--the genteel hero, whose characterization and function had become literary clichés even by Cooper's time. Over the course of the novels, however, the genteel hero became Cooper's most important character in both a technical and a thematic sense. Although his characterization and function owe much to literary history, the genteel hero, overlooked and maligned by Cooper scholars, is a developing character whose evolution in the novels is an indicator of Cooper's artistic and philosophical development. Structuring his plots around the movements and problems of his social beau ideal, Cooper gradually converted this minor character into the primary protagonist and narrator of his novels. From a passive, two dimensional, aristocrat, moreover, the genteel hero develops into a realistic, introspective democratic, American gentleman whose many roles attest to his significance and to Cooper's artistry.

After adapting his hero to an American setting in the first few novels, Cooper portrayed him as a patriotic leader in the American revolution, a participant in the conquest of the frontier in The Leatherstocking Tales, a skilled and efficient sailor in the sea tales, a landed gentleman in the Littlepage trilogy, and a humble Christian gentleman in the last novels. In addition to his fictional growth and pivotal

position in the novels, the genteel hero functions as a repository of Cooper's own values and attitudes. At first implying, through character and symbolic action, a social and moral code consistent with Cooper's, he gradually becomes an outspoken social critic, spiritual ideal, and fictional spokesman for Cooper's point of view regarding the crucial problems facing America. Finally, through the evolution of the genteel hero, Cooper provided a fictional history of the American gentleman who stood at the very center of Cooper's philosophy.

Tying together the adventure and love plots in which he is a major participant, the genteel hero functions as a structural device within individual novels. Moreover, as fictional protagonist and conceptual symbol, he adds coherence and unity to Cooper's fiction as a whole. Far from being a sop to a female audience or a leftover literary convention, the genteel hero is instead the primary means by which we can understand the relationship of Cooper's thought to his art.

I wish to thank my committee, particularly my advisor, Donald Darnell, for his exacting demands, sound judgments, and personal example. For sharing this and all tasks with me, my love to Rita, and to my daughters, Kristen and Jennifer, whose interest in Cora, Alice, Uncas, Magua, Hawkeye, and Chingachgook added so much joy.

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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION: The Genteel Hero

In virtually every one of his many novels, James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) used one of literature's most familiar figures--the genteel hero, whose character and plot functions had become literary clichés even by Cooper's time. Medieval romancers, Renaissance dramatists, and sentimental and historical novelists had all employed a well-bred, handsome, young man as the hero of their love plots where, in connection with his courtship, he became involved in various adventures which served as character tests and a means of discovering, quite often, his own prestigious identity. So widespread was the appearance of this stock character and his female counterpart, the genteel heroine, that few would disagree with Lillie Loshe's statement that "the romance of two young persons aristocratic, either by birth or by reason of wealth or position, has always with few exceptions, turned the wheel of romantic adventure. . . ." <sup>1</sup>

Cooper himself read romances, studied Shakespeare, knew the sentimental novel, and imitated Sir Walter Scott's fictional

<sup>1</sup>The Early American Novel (New York: The Columbia University Press, 1907), p. 86.

formula for the historical novel.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the genteel hero's appearance in Cooper's novels comes as no surprise. In Cooper's hands, however, the genteel hero assumed new and significant dimensions in both character and plot function. Adapting him to a wide variety of settings, situations,

<sup>2</sup>How much direct contact Cooper had with the medieval romance is unclear. Henry Seidel Canby does point out that Cooper's mother "was a great reader of romances. One of the few indications we possess of her son's early taste in literature is that he read 'Don Belianis of Greece' and proposed to write a story like it." Furthermore, James F. Beard adds that Cooper, as a boarding student in Albany "entertained his schoolmates by inventing impromptu romances which were continued from night to night in a clandestine manner." See respectively Classic Americans (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931), p. 128; and The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper, I, ed. James Franklin Beard (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1960-62), 35. Judged by the number of chapter mottoes using lines from Shakespeare and the numerous references to him in Cooper's letters, Cooper's familiarity with Shakespeare was extensive. W. B. Gates, demonstrating Cooper's indebtedness to Shakespeare, makes some perceptive comments through which the genteel heroes of Cooper's novels can be compared with similar characters in Shakespeare's plays. See "Cooper's Indebtedness to Shakespeare," PMLA, 87 (September, 1952), 716-731. Cooper, who reviewed the novels of Catharine Maria Sedgwick early in his career, was apparently quite familiar with the sentimental novel and found in it convenient devices for his own use. See his review of A New England Tale reprinted in Early American Essays, ed. James F. Beard (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1955). In addition, Herbert Ross Brown and G. W. Walker have examined Cooper's use of the didactic and the stock devices employed in the sentimental formula. See respectively The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860 (1940; rpt. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries, 1970) and "The Personal and Literary Relationship of Sir Walter Scott and JFC," Diss. North Carolina, 1950. For discussions of Scott's influence on Cooper, see, in addition to Walker, George Dekker, James Fenimore Cooper: The American Scott (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967); Donald Davie, The Heyday of Sir Walter Scott (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971); and C. Hugh Holman, "The Influence of Scott and Cooper on Simms," AL, 23 (May, 1951), 203-218.

and genres, providing him with the identity of an American gentleman, and employing him as a continuing standard of moral and social ideals, Cooper gradually developed this stock literary type into his most important fictional character. Oddly enough, however, Cooper's genteel heroes have been consistently interpreted as conventional, static characters who exist only for the sake of a love plot.

The reason that the genteel hero's importance to Cooper's fiction has been so long neglected is complicated but understandable. Over the years dissatisfaction with the genteel heroes has become a kind of literary tradition in itself. Everyone expects them to be insipid and seems secretly glad when they fulfill this expectation. Even Scott himself complained that his heroes were amiable but insipid young men who lacked interest.<sup>3</sup> But he, like Cooper, used them over and over again. Ignoring Scott's "confession," nineteenth-century writers like Robert Louis

<sup>3</sup>Cited in George W. Walker, "The Personal and Literary Relationship of Sir Walter Scott and JFC," p. 227.

Stevenson and William Hazlitt began an attack on the genteel hero that later critics have continued with amazing consistency.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Cooper's early critics, associating his genteel heroes with Scott's began what has become the accepted but stereotyped view of Cooper's young gentleman. One early reviewer, for example, found that "Robert Willoughby, like most novel heroes, is a nobody; that is to say, there is nothing about him which may be looked upon as distinctive."<sup>5</sup> Cooper's early biographer, Thomas Lounsbury, while singling out Cooper's women as special failures, found Cooper's genteel heroes even

<sup>4</sup>Stevenson bluntly commented that "the trite, obliterated features of too many of his heroes have already wearied two generations of readers" ("A Gossip on Romance," Memories and Portraits [1900; rpt. Grosse Pointe, Michigan; Scholarly Press, 1968], p. 273). Expressing his dissatisfaction over the heroes of philosophical romance, Hazlitt says, "Instead of being common place and insipid, they are one violent and startling paradox from beginning to end . . . they run atilt of all established usages and prejudices, and upset all the existing order of society" ("Why the Heroes of Romance are Insipid," The Complete Works of William Hazlitt XVII [London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1931] p. 253). V. L. Pritchett says, "At sixteen . . . we are in love with these stick in the mud heroes whose disinterestedness and honor perverts the minds of boys with a tedious and delusive idealism" (The Living Novel [New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947], pp. 56-57). Ernest A. Baker in his prestigious work on the English novel apologizes for Scott's heroes and his love plots in this way: "The long and the short of it is that Scott took over the trite apparatus of the current sentimental novel with its hero and heroine, who must be united at last, in spite of the more or less interesting obstacles that threaten their eternal separation. This was the circulating library tradition, the custom of the trade, which it did not occur to Scott or to many who followed to repudiate" (The History of the English Novel VI [London: H. F. & G. Witherby, 1935], pp. 137-138).

<sup>5</sup>Cited in George W. Walker, "The Personal and Literary Relationship of Sir Walter Scott and JFC," p. 354.

less redeeming than Scott's. Lounsbury remarks: "They are often described in the most laudatory terms; but it is little they do that makes them worthy of the epithets with which they are honored. Their talk is often a kind not known to human society. One peculiarity is especially notable. A stiffness, not to say an appearance of affectation, is often given to the conversation by the use of thou and thee."<sup>6</sup>

Twentieth century critics, accepting this point of view without challenge, have seldom bothered to notice the genteel heroes other than to echo the usual phrases and the accepted critical position. Edwin Cady, for example, writes that Cooper's gentlemanly characters "are as lifeless and typical as dummies in a store window." George Dekker adds that "Cooper's genteel characters, with their tidy manners and fortunes, their conventional phrases and emotions, are a great bore." For Henry Nash Smith, they are the "conventional lay figures which can be found in virtually all of Cooper's novels"; and for Kay Harmon House, whose study purports to categorize all of Cooper's characters into types of Americans, the genteel heroes are labeled the "heroine's hero" and dismissed in a short paragraph and a footnote.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>James Fenimore Cooper (Cambridge: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1882), p. 278.

<sup>7</sup>Respectively, The Gentleman in America (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1961), p. 115; James Fenimore Cooper: The American Scott, p. 9; Introduction, The Prairie (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. viii; Cooper's Americans (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State Press, 1965), p. 22.

More damaging than these attacks on an obviously stilted character has been the misreading of the genteel hero's function within the romances, an error responsible for much of the controversy over Cooper's artistry. Agreeing with Yvor Winters that Cooper had "an unqualified penchant for conventional sentimental romance as the structural principle in plot,"<sup>8</sup> even Cooper's most perceptive critics have accepted the genteel hero's activities as no more than a manifestation of Cooper's dependence on time-worn conventions. Donald Ringe, for example, describes the genteel hero's plot as a reflection of "the popular taste of the times"; and Leon Howard explains it as a "concession to artificial unity and the demands of popular romance." Roy Harvey Pearce argues, moreover, that within Cooper's historical adventures, particularly The Leatherstocking Tales, the genteel heroes "have no proper existence in terms which are so alien to their proper natures."<sup>9</sup>

Identifying the upper class characters as the tender spot in Cooper's fiction, critics have concluded, therefore, that Cooper's plots, in which the genteel hero is the protagonist, do not reinforce or express his themes and that Cooper did not successfully integrate his ideas with his art. Representing

<sup>8</sup>"Fenimore Cooper, or the Ruins of Time," Maule's Curse (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1938), p. 31.

<sup>9</sup>Respectively, James Fenimore Cooper (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962), p. 33; Introduction, The Pioneers (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1967), p. xi; "The Leatherstocking Tales Re-Examined," SAQ, 46 (October, 1947), 536.

the prevailing opinion, R. W. B. Lewis notes, "Cooper's novels betray an astonishing lack of coordination between the classical ingredients of narrative: plot and character and thought and diction, they are, in a phrase of Eliot's, in the same book only by accident." Roy Harvey Pearce specifically defines the Cooper problem as a failure to bring to life that part of the plot involving the genteel characters, a problem further complicated by the fact that "received literary forms and methods gave no direct indication of how it was to be solved. That solution required an originally creative artist--a pioneer so to speak, and Cooper was not."<sup>10</sup> Thus one of the major concerns in Cooper criticism--the relationship of his plots to his themes--is inextricably connected to the presence and function of the genteel hero.

Satisfied with labeling the genteel hero as a superfluous and divisory element in the novels, Cooper scholars have largely ignored the function of this important character. When discussed at all, the genteel hero becomes a frame of reference for a better understanding of the Leatherstocking. In fact, for Richard Chase, Cooper's use of these very different kinds of heroes (the genteel and the romance hero) is evidence of the "fundamental contradiction of Cooper's thought."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Respectively, The American Adam (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 101; "The Leatherstocking Tales Re-Examined," 535.

<sup>11</sup>The American Novel and Its Tradition (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1957), p. 51.

Ironically, the only one to discuss the genteel hero in terms of Cooper's artistic development, Henry Nash Smith, in his notable work, Virgin Land, has inadvertently added to the misunderstanding. Suggesting that Cooper's use of a frontier character, the Leatherstocking, was designed to illustrate the problem of social order, Smith theorizes that Cooper recognized that "his most vital character occupied a technically inferior position both in the social system and in the form of the sentimental novel as he was using it."<sup>12</sup> Beginning with The Pioneers, according to Smith, Cooper set about correcting the inferior position of the Leatherstocking, first by trying to add a genteel double of the Leatherstocking, a technical hero so to speak, and later by creating love interests for the Leatherstocking in The Pathfinder and The Deerslayer. For Smith then, the appearance of the genteel heroes in Cooper's fiction is the result of his "experiment with younger heroes who had Leatherstocking's vital relation to the forest, but were more easily converted into lovers."<sup>13</sup>

Viewing the genteel heroes only in relation to the development of the Leatherstocking character, Smith, like others, has explained away rather than accounted for the presence and development of the genteel hero in Cooper's fiction. The fact that the genteel hero is a stock literary figure and certainly

<sup>12</sup>Virgin Land (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), p. 70.

<sup>13</sup>Virgin Land, p. 74.



not an original creation of Cooper provides too easy an answer and too convenient a label. This is not to discount the importance of Smith's study, especially its explanation of the artistic process in The Leatherstocking Tales. But neither identifying the genteel hero as a double of the Leatherstocking character, nor noting the apparent lack of coordination between the genteel hero's plot and the issues associated with the frontier explains in any way the development of the genteel hero or his thematic and narrative functions in Cooper's work. Smith's reasoning works quite well for The Deerslayer, in which Leatherstocking has a love interest; not quite so well for The Pathfinder, in which a genteel hero, Jasper Western, is present; and not at all for the dozens of books from The Pioneers onward, in which Cooper associated the love story and the plot line with the genteel hero.

In reality, Cooper's genteel hero is a credible and unique character in his own right. Although his characterization and plot functions owe much to literary history, he is a developing character whose evolution in the novels is an indicator of Cooper's artistic and philosophical development. Structuring his plots around the movements and problems of his social beau ideal, Cooper gradually converted this minor character into the primary protagonist and narrator of his novels. From a passive, two-dimensional aristocrat, moreover, the genteel hero develops into a realistic, introspective, democratic, American gentleman whose many roles attest to his

significance and to Cooper's artistry. After adapting his hero to an American setting in the first few novels, Cooper portrayed him as a patriotic leader in the American Revolution, a participant in the conquest of the frontier in The Leatherstocking Tales, a skilled and efficient sailor in the sea tales, a landed gentleman in the Littlepage trilogy, and a humble Christian gentleman in the last novels. In addition to his fictional growth and pivotal position in the novels, the genteel hero functions as a repository of Cooper's own values and attitudes. At first implying, through character and symbolic action, a social and moral code consistent with Cooper's, he gradually becomes an outspoken social critic, spiritual ideal, and fictional spokesman for Cooper's point of view regarding the crucial problems facing America. Finally, through the evolution of his genteel hero, Cooper provided a fictional history of the American gentleman who stood at the very center of Cooper's philosophy.

As both a fictional protagonist and conceptual symbol, the genteel hero thus assumes a position in Cooper's novels second to no other character. Tying together the adventure and love plots in which he is a major participant, he functions as a structural device within individual novels. Moreover, his continued appearance and the consistency of his thematic functions add coherence and unity to Cooper's fiction as a whole. Far from being a sop to a female audience or a leftover literary convention, the genteel hero is instead the primary

means by which we can understand the relationship of Cooper's thought to his art.

In part, we understand the genteel hero by the contrast he affords to the romantic hero in Cooper's fiction. As a means of illustrating the opposing forces at work in a new cultural experience, Cooper normally employed both a genteel hero and a hero of romance--the former in time and the latter in space. What distinguishes Cooper's romance heroes, characters such as Harvey Birch, the Rover, and the Leatherstocking, is their simplicity, straightforwardness, and ability to master and harmonize with their environment. To them the forest or the sea, while a threat, is not an enemy which cannot be understood or conciliated. For the most part they are lonely isolates who prefer the moral laws of nature to those of civilization. They have no commitment to the white world, with few exceptions are not interested in compromise, and have chosen instead to escape.<sup>14</sup> There is in fact no way for them to incorporate their ideas into the mainstream of civilization except by influencing the genteel hero. They have no family, no children, no wife; therefore no way to affect social institutions in a continuing integrated way. R. W. B. Lewis,

<sup>14</sup>Sam Bluefarb, who calls the Leatherstocking "the prototypal escaper," places Cooper within what he identifies as a dominant motif in American literature. See The Escape Motif in the American Novel (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State Press, 1972), p. 10. Robert Zoellner says that the Leatherstocking's service does not result from his commitment to society but is rather the product of his natural gifts. See "Conceptual Ambivalence in Cooper's Leatherstocking," AL, 31 (January, 1962), 397-420.

describing them as in space and out of time, characterizes Cooper's romance hero as follows:

"His most memorable virtues come into moral being in the environmental influence of that world [the world of space]. They draw their breath in it; they reflect its simple and firm purity; they share its aloofness from time . . . the principle of survival in his essential character requires him constantly to 'jump off' . . . to keep, as it were, two jumps ahead of time . . . in the universe of Cooper . . . space so to speak asserts itself against the onslaught of time, with a vigor that is articulated in the new hero's impregnable virtue--and indeed makes that hero's birth and survival possible."<sup>15</sup>

Because of his nature and his isolation from society, Cooper's hero of romance is a social failure. In the romances he is either killed, dies, is chased away, retreats, or is dramatically converted to a shallow image of his former self. No romance hero is realistically and honorably assimilated into society.

If the romance hero is Cooper's frontier ideal, the genteel hero is his social beau ideal. In rapport with the American social experience, the westward spread of civilization, and the domination of the frontier so that society may follow, he, unlike the romance hero, commands the knowledge that the Leatherstocking reluctantly acknowledges he does not have. Cultivated, educated, and stable, he understands the fabric and manner of society; and, as a result, works within established customs and offers a continuity of vision not in the possession

<sup>15</sup>The American Adam, pp. 94-100. Lewis does not note, however, that the genteel heroes are distinctly in time.

of the romance hero. Through his acceptance of the past and the way things are, he is, in a word, a force for continuity and order, qualities that Cooper carefully built into both his function and his character.

In spirit the characterization of the genteel hero is based on Thomas Jefferson's notion of a natural aristocrat, one who through his abilities would merit the laurels of power, wealth, and leadership.<sup>16</sup> Cooper needed only to look to his father for an example of the frontier aristocrat who could with energy and cleverness establish a frontier empire and rise to a position of high esteem.<sup>17</sup> In John Jay and the Jay family, whom Cooper admired greatly, Cooper had another view of the well-established but resourceful aristocrat.<sup>18</sup> Cooper's ideal was not, however, an aristocrat in the European sense. The idea of a few who, through heredity, cornered privileges and power was repellent to him.

<sup>16</sup> Cooper had come to regard Jefferson as one of the most praiseworthy of all Americans. In 1832, he wrote: "Jefferson was the man to whom we owe the high lesson that the natural privileges of a social aristocracy are in truth no more than their natural privileges." (Letters and Journals, II, 180).

<sup>17</sup> Beard tells us that Judge Cooper "believed firmly as Jefferson in the inherent dignity of the individual man and in an aristocracy of merit" (Letters and Journals, I, xx).

<sup>18</sup> In Notions of the Americans, Cooper used John Jay as an example of the landed natural aristocrat in the service of his country. He described Jay's farm, house, and the adulation of his servants. ed. Robert Spiller (1828; rpt. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1963) I, 75-88. All subsequent citations will refer to this edition.

By natural aristocrat, Cooper actually meant any well-educated, skillful, democratic man of principle whose breeding, values, and achievements qualified him as a logical social and political leader. More precisely, Cooper was an admirer of the American gentleman, particularly the southern gentry whose courage, manners, and pride he applauded in Notions of the Americans.<sup>19</sup> What is more, Cooper constructed the character of his genteel hero around the concept of the gentleman and continually defined his social beau ideal's personal qualities and values in the novels and elsewhere. In The American Democrat, for example, he listed deportment, education, speech, honor, principle, and command as essentials of the gentleman. Moreover, in his explanation of the gentleman's duties, he outlined the values which comprised the genteel hero's moral and social code. Specifically, Cooper identified obedience to the laws, regard for the rights of others, the duties of family, the protection of the liberties of others, and liberality--all of which the genteel heroes practice in the novels.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>"I am of the opinion," Cooper wrote, "that in proportion to the population, there are more men who belong to what is termed the class of gentlemen, in the old southern states of America than in any other country of the world. So far as pride in themselves, a courteous air, and a general intelligence are concerned, they are, perhaps, quite on a level with the gentry of any other country. . . . (Notions II, 293).

<sup>20</sup>See The American Democrat, ed. George Dekker (1838; rpt. Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1969), pp. 144-154, 171-177, 200-205. All subsequent citations will refer to this edition.

In fact, the genteel hero's liberality is one of his most distinguishing and important features. Though he is somewhat pompous, often overly chivalric, and always restrained, his liberality with his domestics, with the men who serve with him, and with the unfortunate is warm and convincing. More than a virtue, his liberality identifies his thoroughly Christian outlook. Not only do all of Cooper's young gentlemen possess a compassion for the woes of others, Christian charity, and a desire "to copy after the heavenly example of our Redeemer in sacrificing ourselves to the welfare of others . . ." <sup>21</sup> but Cooper attributed his own conservative, religious persuasion to his spokesmen--to a man they are all Episcopalians. Claiming that a gentleman need not be a Christian, <sup>22</sup> Cooper did not emphasize the spiritual side of his earlier beau ideals. More often than not, spiritual matters are confined to the "natural religion" of the frontier types and the old salts; nonetheless, the genteel heroes offer unmistakable evidence that they are in fact Christian gentlemen who with little modification become the spiritual heroes of the last novels. Endowed with a Christian temperament and the character of a gentleman, the

<sup>21</sup>Precaution (New York: W. A. Townsend and Company, 1859-1861), p. 162. All subsequent references to Cooper's fiction will be to this, the Darley, edition.

<sup>22</sup>Admitting that there may be a connection in manners between the Christian and the gentleman, Cooper made it clear that "a man may be a very perfect gentleman, though by no means a perfect man, or a Christian; and he may be a very good Christian, and very little of a gentleman" (The Chainbearer, p. 171).

genteel hero, moreover, is the center of the social-moral vision around which Cooper constructed his plots.

Described by Vernon L. Parrington as a man who "imbibed certain stalwart conservatisms . . . and remained at heart as sturdily eighteenth century as any fox-hunting master of English acres,"<sup>23</sup> Cooper subscribed to a social system governed by rational principles, the code of the gentleman, and the higher laws of God. Furthermore, he understood that without the guidance of traditions, manners, and institutions man's weaknesses would produce civil chaos and moral decay. In his novels, he incorporated these concepts into the character of his genteel heroes with the result that the genteel hero is the spokesman for Cooper's own social-moral vision. Like Eaglesflight, who in The Redskins explains that "the Great Spirit makes men differently . . . some are like willows . . . some are like pines . . . now and then there is an oak among them . . . stretching its branches a great way, and making a pleasant shape" (p. 363), Cooper's gentlemen recognize that individual differences are inherent in the process of creation, and that, consequently, the task of implementing order, improving society, and achieving stability falls to the most qualified. Reflecting Cooper's belief, moreover, that the ownership of property is the primary means of accomplishing

<sup>23</sup>Main Currents in American Thought II (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1927), 216.



these tasks,<sup>24</sup> the genteel hero defends the rights of property, particularly through his relationship with the land. Cooper's social beau ideal does not draw his sustenance from the land as do the Indians, nor is he part of the timeless rhythm of the seasons in the way that the Leatherstocking is; but the land is as much a part of the genteel hero's identity as his name. Associated with tradition, family, and the past, land-property is the legacy of his ancestors and as such must be protected and passed on to the next generation. Although a number of Cooper's young gentlemen express this concept, Corny Littlepage perhaps best explains the meaning of land-property when he says in Satanstoe: "I love every tree, well, knoll, swell, meadow, and hummock about the old place . . . I love old names, such as my father knew the same places by. . . . So it is with Satanstoe; the name is homely, I am willing to allow; but it is strong and conveys an idea. It relates also to the usages and notions of the country; and names ought always to be preserved" (pp. 493-94).

Implicit in Corny's remarks is the gentleman's regard for the family which functions as his refuge against the disruption of war, the chaos of the frontier, and the threat of mobocracy. The family, in addition, is the primary vehicle for

<sup>24</sup>In The American Democrat, Cooper notes that "property is desirable as the ground work of moral independence, as a means of improving the facilities, and of doing good to others, and as the agent in all that distinguishes the civilized man from the savage" (pp. 190-91).

the orderly transition of society from one generation to the next, a theme Cooper depicted through the plot devices of inheritance, marriage, and dynasty--all associated with the genteel hero. Rather than a realized fact, the family in the early works is an ideal, a symbol of unity toward which the American gentleman inevitably gravitates. In some cases he is able to join through marriage the heroine's family (The Pioneers, The Spy, The Waterwitch, Home As Found); in others he is reunited with his own family or inherits its wealth. Either way, reunification with the family is his reward for courage, self-sacrifice, and duty.

With his return to the historical romance in 1838, and amidst increasing difficulties with his Cooperstown neighbors, the press, and political enemies,<sup>25</sup> Cooper turned more toward the united family as the repository of value. In the dynasty novels of the 1840's he incorporated the image of the besieged family into the larger context of the conflict between the American gentleman, and his adversary, the levelling democrat. By associating the dynasty motif with the genteel hero, Cooper, moreover, indirectly created an ancestry for his early genteel heroes whose identity was always a main plot concern.

<sup>25</sup>In A Letter to His Countrymen (1834), Cooper announced his retirement as a novelist. Between 1834-1838 he wrote five volumes of travel books and a political satire, The Monikans, before returning to the novel with Homeward Bound (1838). In 1837, Cooper's war with the Whig press, the controversy over ownership of Three Mile Point at Cooperstown, and the first of his many libel suits began. For a discussion of these issues, see Dorothy M. Waples, The Whig Myth of James Fenimore Cooper (New Haven: Yale Press, 1938).

Although the later works fully develop this theme, the dynasty motif is implied in Cooper's romances beginning with The Pioneers where Oliver Edwards is found to be in reality Oliver Effingham whose grandfather had begun the Effingham and Temple fortune years before the Revolutionary War. Through Oliver's marriage to Elizabeth Temple, Cooper creates his first and most important family dynasty, one that would later be reintroduced in Homeward Bound and Home As Found.

As a further expression of the significance of the family, the romances of Cooper abound in wills, deaths, inheritances, and weddings, concrete examples of social movement. Death in a Cooper novel, for example, often complicates the idea of ownership; in romances, therefore, in which the genteel hero's true identity is unknown (The Pioneers, The Red Rover, Home As Found, The Two Admirals) confusion over rightful ownership is resolved through the passage of property into the hands of the genteel hero--the rightful heir. In addition, the genteel hero frequently inherits the heroine's property through marriage, simultaneously consolidating and identifying ownership. The transfer of property through the family, more than the passage of wealth from one gentleman to another, is in fact, a symbol of the genteel hero's connection with his past and a method of securing the future, a point Cooper explained in The American Democrat:

Still some legal differences, and more social advantages are produced by birth, even in America. The child inherits the property, and a position of the consideration of the parent. Without the first of these privileges,

men would not exert themselves to acquire more property than would suffice for their own personal necessities, parental affection being one of the most powerful incentives to industry. . . . The son imbibes a portion of the intelligence, refinement, and habits of the father, and he shares in his associations. These must be enumerated as the legitimate advantages of birth. . . . (pp. 138-39)

For Cooper, the law is inextricably tied to property and freedom.<sup>26</sup> If the right to property is a necessary adjunct to freedom, the observance of the law is an equal necessity. In his preface to The Chainbearer, Cooper spoke against those who were "opposing a solemn and fundamental provision of law, and in so much opposing the institutions" (p. iv); and in The American Democrat, he suggested that the law, a restraining agent to man's harmful inclinations, is a sign of the sense of right bestowed on man by God:

It is a first necessity of his weakness, that laws founded on the immutable principles of natural justice, should be framed, in order to protect the feeble against the violence of the strong; the honest from the schemes of the dishonest; the temperate and industrious from the waste and indolence of the dissolute and idle. These laws, though, varying with circumstances, possess a common character, being formed on that consciousness of right, which God had bestowed in order that men may judge between good and evil. (p. 75)

Using the genteel hero as a model of the law-maker, Cooper portrays him as faithful to the law even when this obedience

<sup>26</sup>The issue of the law appears in many of Cooper's works and reflects the struggle in America over the identification and evolution of American legal attitudes. See Perry Miller, The Life of the Mind in America (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1965), pp. 99-265. John P. McWilliams suggests that one of Cooper's main achievements was his depiction of the evolution of justice in America. See Political Justice in a Republic (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

works to his disadvantage. From Oliver Effingham to Hugh Littlepage, Jr., the genteel hero maintains his belief in the law as the principle of guidance against the rapacity of unprincipled men. Furthermore, as an emissary of the government in his role as a military officer, he is often the only living embodiment of the law. Ironically, as government, in Cooper's view, changed from one of law to one of men, the gentleman's adherence to an "outdated" notion was responsible in part for his downfall, a theme which developed in the Littlepage trilogy. But whether involved in the issue of law at home, in victory at sea, or Indian engagements on the frontier, the genteel hero, by linking Cooper's settings and anchoring his plots, has a legitimate and consistent function as a major structural device. Moreover, his character, which suggests Jefferson's notion of the natural aristocrat, is a careful representation of Cooper's social and moral values and his high regard for the American gentleman.

In summarizing the "problem" of the genteel hero, one might, while agreeing with critics' complaints about his stilted characterization, point out that such claims do not necessarily disparage Cooper's consistent utilization of such heroes or their important function within the works. In fact, James Beard, reviewing the state of Cooper criticism, admits that "despite apparent and sometimes real inconsistencies, closer scrutiny suggests an essential coherence in Cooper's works that has been obscured by differences of presupposition and emphasis

among his critics, as well as by inadequate information."<sup>27</sup> In addition, the view that Cooper's art contains no center, no pivot, no symbol around which he could express either his developing vision or his novelistic structure completely ignores his attempt to establish such a symbol through his genteel hero.<sup>28</sup>

As critics have noted, the esteem with which Cooper regarded the gentleman is apparent both in his novels and his prose works. Robert H. Zoellner, for example, seeing the Leatherstocking figure as a symptom of Cooper's ambivalence, has suggested that the gentleman leader of Cooper's sea tales might be viewed as the key to the problem; Edwin Cady has noted that the gentleman is the substance of Cooper's art; and Frank M. Collins has added that the Cooper canon should be read as the movement toward a properly submissive, Christian tempered gentleman.<sup>29</sup> Yet, despite this agreement about the

<sup>27</sup>"James Fenimore Cooper," Fifteen American Authors Before 1900, ed., Robert A. Rees and Earl N. Herbert (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971), p. 86.

<sup>28</sup>George Dekker attributes this failure to the "absence of a hero who experiences such conflicts of allegiance and identity" as those of Scott's. See James Fenimore Cooper, p. 95. James Grossman summarizes Cooper's efforts as a failure to find a "wholly adequate symbol in which to concentrate his tragic vision" (James Fenimore Cooper [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1949], p. 264).

<sup>29</sup>Respectively, "Conceptual Ambivalence in Cooper's Leatherstocking," 397-420; The Gentleman in America, pp. 127-145; "Cooper and the American Dream," PMLA, 81 (March, 1966), 79-94.

gentleman's importance, there has been no attempt to relate the gentleman of the later novels with the genteel heroes of the earlier works, no suggestion that the genteel hero may function as a developing center of vision in Cooper's fiction, nor any substantial suggestion that the action-love plot in which the genteel hero participates implies a set of values consistent with Cooper's own. Finally, there has been no suggestion that the genteel hero may reconcile the problem of Cooper's art and his ideas by serving as a continuing thematic symbol. Taking a note from Robert Spiller who maintained that such complete concepts as the American gentleman must sooner or later be "sorted out and defined as constants in his [Cooper's] work, by which he may be accurately related to the history of ideas," this study addresses itself to these suggestions.<sup>30</sup> While an examination of the genteel hero may not put to rest the issue of the coherence of Cooper's works, it can redefine the place of this important character in Cooper's fiction, particularly as an indicator of his developing artistic and moral framework.

<sup>30</sup>"Second Thoughts on Cooper," James Fenimore Cooper: A Re-Appraisal, ed. Mary F. Cunningham (Cooperstown, New York: New York State Historical Association, 1954), 556.

## CHAPTER II

THE EARLY NOVELS: The Making of an  
American Gentleman

In his first three novels (Precaution, 1820; The Spy, 1821; and The Pioneers, 1823) Cooper laid the groundwork for his genteel hero by developing the personal qualities, functions, and values which transformed a minor, stock literary type into a land-owning American gentleman and a major character. In addition to establishing the identity and character of the American gentleman, Cooper introduced many of the basic themes and motifs with which later genteel heroes would be associated. All three of the novels, particularly The Pioneers, suggest, for example, the notion of the family dynasty; The Spy introduces the themes of conscience versus duty and the confrontation of the genteel code with the disorder of the neutral ground-frontier; and in The Pioneers, Oliver Effingham, associated with the land, law, family, and the American historical past, foreshadows the image of the landed gentleman and begins the genteel hero's fictional role in the conquest of the frontier, an association that Cooper would explore in The Leatherstocking Tales and other works.

Cooper's first work, Precaution, published anonymously in 1820, is not an historical romance, nor is the genteel hero a frontier man of action; but, for a novel that Robert Spiller



and later critics have studiously avoided,<sup>1</sup> Precaution offers some important insights into Cooper's fictional development in general and the growth of the genteel hero in particular. For one thing, the novel foreshadows the genteel hero's associations with the family, land, and history and his later function as a force for social stability. For another, it suggests, through the plot use of the genteel hero, the two-hero pattern that would dominate Cooper's romances. More importantly, in Precaution, Cooper establishes the character of his social beau ideal.

From one point of view, Precaution is a woman's book concerned with the establishment of proper attitudes toward marriage and men in the female protagonist, Emily Moseley, who, with the assistance of her aunt, Mrs. Wilson, learns to differentiate between true and false gentility. As it turns out, Emily's plot problems are less significant than Cooper's portrayal of marriage as a social institution and the character of the gentleman in relation to that institution. Marriage, as Cooper will suggest throughout his novels, works toward the betterment of society at large through the union of the best principled people. With the marriage of Emily Moseley and George Denbigh, property is consolidated, good families are made better, and society progresses in an orderly way. Before

<sup>1</sup>Of Precaution, Spiller, having little to say, succinctly comments, "Seldom has there been a less promising first novel" (Fenimore Cooper: Critic of His Times, [New York: Russell and Russell, 1931], p. 74).

marriage can occur, however, Emily and Mrs. Wilson must be satisfied that Denbigh is worthy of Emily's hand. As a result, the plot revolves around a series of tests which not only verify Denbigh's character, but which also give Cooper an opportunity to applaud the virtues of the gentleman.

Suggesting the two-hero pattern that Cooper would employ beginning with The Spy, George Denbigh, alias Lord Pendennyss, plays two parts in Precaution. As the retiring, and proper officer, George Denbigh, he is the genteel suitor of Emily Moseley. As Lord Pendennyss, he is the romantic and compassionate aristocrat who floats through the countryside dispensing mercy and justice without ever being seen by the primary characters. Denbigh's other identity is withheld from the Moseley group through a series of oversights and coincidences that last for three-quarters of the novel until he announces to the shock of Emily, Mrs. Wilson, and the rest that the mysterious lord who dashes to and fro in a coach and four is none other than himself.

Through the identity mix-up, Cooper creates a romantic ideal as a figure of comparison for the more realistic Denbigh. Cooper manages this by having Mrs. Wilson, who has never seen Pendennyss but who knows his reputation, social standing, and character, secretly hope that Pendennyss might become a suitor to Emily. Mrs. Wilson thus compares Denbigh with Pendennyss without knowing that they are one and the same. Denbigh, as it were, hurdles the obstacles erected by Mrs. Wilson. Moreover,

his two roles suggest the social ideal-romance hero pattern that Cooper later represented through two different characters. Although Cooper's approach results in probably his most convoluted and complex plot, it is character, not story, which is central to Precaution.

To initially establish Denbigh's gentlemanly character, Cooper relies on a standard technique that he would use repeatedly. Despite the fact that the genteel hero's true nature or identity is often unknown, his breeding and gentility are always evident in his bearing and physical appearance. Through this approach, Cooper allows both the reader and other discerning characters to anticipate the unveiling of the young man who is clearly more than he seems. Character is impossible to conceal, Cooper suggests, as Denbigh and the other genteel heroes, no matter what their costume or disguise, reveal their social level and their background through their appearance, a technique used by Cooper in his first description of Denbigh:

There was something in the person and manners of Denbigh that insensibly attracted those whom chance threw in his way. His face was not strikingly handsome, but it was noble; and when he smiled, or was much animated, it invariably communicated a spark of his own enthusiasm to the beholder. His figure was faultless; his air and manner, if less easy than those of Colonel Egerton, were more sincere and ingenuous; his breeding was clearly higher; his respect for others rather bordering on the old school. But in his voice there existed a charm which would make him, when he spoke, to a female ear, almost irresistible; it was soft, deep, melodious, and winning.  
(p. 121)

What Denbigh must do in the course of Precaution is prove that he is equal to his appearance and to the inner character that shines through--in a word to prove he is a gentleman.

As part of this testing process, Denbigh is contrasted with two extremes: the rakish Colonel Egerton, and the compassionate Lord Pendennyss. Cooper uses the Colonel, who is also a suitor to Emily, as a villainous foil to Denbigh and as a vehicle for a comparison of true and false gentility. Egerton, of course, fails because Mrs. Wilson shrewdly penetrates his false sensibility. Thus Cooper eliminates one of Denbigh's plot rivals while at the same time preparing the ground work for Denbigh to demonstrate that he is indeed the superior individual.

Denbigh has an easy time in his contest with Egerton, especially when he saves Emily's life by throwing himself between her and the potentially fatal bullet accidentally discharged by her brother. Denbigh's first real test comes, however, when Mrs. Wilson and Emily attempt to judge his sensibility, or, rather to use Cooper's term, his liberality. Liberality is the ultimate measurement of the gentleman to Mrs. Wilson, who notes that although "compassion for the woes of others is beautiful in itself . . . Christian charity has a higher duty" (p. 118).

In particular, Pendennyss' liberality is the yardstick by which Denbigh is measured. In response to Emily's observation that much good might be done by one as wealthy as Pendennyss,

Mrs. Wilson replies, "Much good is done . . . I am told by everyone who knows him, his donations are large and frequent. Sir Herbert Nicholson said he was extremely simple in his habits, and it leaves large sums at his disposal every year" (p. 210). Cooper dramatizes Denbigh's liberality in an eventful scene where John, Emily's brother, gives several guineas to a needy gardener and his hungry family. When Denbigh responds with only half a crown, Emily, puzzled about his lack of generosity, reconsiders her attitudes toward him. But later she and Mrs. Wilson accidentally overhear Denbigh's conversation with the gardener, whom he chastises for intemperance but forgives by placing in a new and profitable position far from temptation. This revelation combined with his selfless act of courage on Emily's behalf and those principles already noted by Mrs. Wilson raises Denbigh even higher in the eyes of all concerned.

Denbigh's most crucial test, one that Cooper uses to delay the approaching marriage and revelation, is to his honor. Through the villainy of Egerton and a series of circumstantial details, Denbigh is thought to have attacked a Mrs. Fitzgerald. Naturally enough, Denbigh again loses the respect of Emily and her aunt until the matter is resolved sometime later; but eventually, as Denbigh's honor, liberality, and manners are found to be without blemish, Mrs. Wilson and her niece are satisfied that he is a complete gentleman and therefore worthy of Emily. In addition, he compares favorably with Pendennyss whom the women had used as their ideal.

As it turns out, the love affair is less one of passion than the mutual admiration of principles. Denbigh explains that his disguise was an effort to determine Emily's character. Emily admits to the same motives. For their consistency of character, maintenance of principle, and careful preparations, Emily and George are rewarded with each other. At the close, Cooper stresses harmony and stability, the social result of the marriage of those of breeding. The lesson that Cooper wishes to teach is summarized on the last page by Dr. Ives: "Give her delicacy, religion, and a proper taste, aided by the unseen influence of a prudent parent's care, and the chances of a woman for happiness would be much greater than they are . . ." (p. 484). Marry this woman to a gentleman who has demonstrated his character, Cooper tells us indirectly, and society will profit. Cooper's last description of the Pendennyss estate underlines the social benefits of character: "Everything spoke society, splendor, and activity without; everything denoted order, propriety, and happiness within" (p. 475).

Cooper's emphasis on the gentlemanly character of the genteel hero in this his first novel became the bed-rock in the steady stream of fiction that flowed from his pen, and proper marriages permeated even his most adventure-ridden romances. In fact, the code of the genteel hero and the love plot assume, in a more sophisticated fashion, even greater significance as standards of stability and orderly progress

within a background of historical upheaval. In a long digression, Cooper foreshadows this approach and the future characterization of the genteel hero.

For approximately fifty pages, Cooper, in the process of explaining Denbigh's dual identity, reconstructs the Denbigh family tree as he would later with the Effinghams, Littlepages and others. Almost as an afterthought, Denbigh is made part of history and the establishment as Cooper recounts the exploits of the illustrious General George Denbigh of Revolutionary War fame. Although it is here that Cooper is at his worst, his enthusiasm for family history in relation to the historical process is clear. In addition, the ship scenes and the concerns of General Denbigh and Admiral Howell with inheritance, issue, and family continuity are signs of Cooper's latent themes. Furthermore, as an aftermath of the marriage, Cooper places Denbigh (now Lord Pendennyss) in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars. Although the purpose of this chapter is that of having Pendennyss confront the villain Egerton once more so that he can confess and repent before his death, Pendennyss, demonstrating the military prowess that had only been alluded to before, suggests the roles of many genteel heroes to come.

Cooper closes his novel with a final note of foreshadowing. Pendennyss and his family are shown happy and secure in their situation as landed gentry, or in this case, landed aristocrats. Reminiscent of Corny Littlepage's confidence

in his family estate, the Pendennyss farms are a testament to their owner:

The harvest had been gathered, and the beautiful vales of Pendennyss were shouting forth a second crop of verdure. The husbandman was turning his prudent forethought to the promises of the coming year, while the castle itself exhibited to the gaze of the wondering peasant a sight of cheerfulness and animation which had not been seen in it since the days of the good duke. (p. 475)

Although James Grossman summarizes the plot activities of the new Duke (Denbigh) as "the usual incident of a lover frightened off when he sees he is being managed by the mother of his beloved," Cooper's handling of this "usual incident" indicates the opposite.<sup>2</sup> Not only does Cooper's emphasis on the nature of the gentleman and the subsequent testing of his character form the backbone of the plot, but his growing interest in Denbigh results in the genteel hero's replacing Emily as the primary character. Furthermore, the novel suggests a number of fictional devices that would become a major part of Cooper's development of his social beau ideal.

In his next novel, for example, Cooper, picking up on Denbigh's abbreviated experience in the Napoleonic War, transferred his genteel hero to the battlefields of American history. Set during the American Revolution, The Spy details the activities of a pedlar, Harvey Birch, in the service of his country. In addition, Cooper describes the struggles of a "typical" family, the Whartons, who, divided in their loyalties, are

<sup>2</sup>James Fenimore Cooper (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1949), p. 21.



caught between the British and the Americans. Although Cooper describes the setting as "a neutral ground," Westchester County is hardly a neutral territory in the literal sense. Rather it is what Donald Ringe calls "a physical and moral no man's land."<sup>3</sup> Lawlessness is rampant; loyalty is questioned; even identity is tenuous. No one, it seems, is what he appears to be. Harvey Birch, suspected as a traitor, is really an American spy. The mysterious Mr. Harper turns out to be George Washington, and Henry Wharton, seized as a British agent, is only guilty of assuming a disguise to visit his family. Furthermore, property is threatened and life is uncertain. Even the warring parties, except for the disciplined Virginia Dragoons, are bands of ruffians who do not observe accepted rules of warfare. Within this moral wasteland, Cooper presents two alternatives: Harvey Birch, a moral ideal who transcends society and Peyton Dunwoodie, a symbol of social order and principle.

Although Cooper's primary interest is in Birch, he creates his first American genteel hero in Peyton Dunwoodie, the dashing leader of the Virginia Dragoons. Dunwoodie is a stilted character to be sure, but his action-ethic, his patriotism, and his loyalty to duty add a new dimension to the social beau ideal. In addition, his function as a force for order and stability is implied in his plot activities where

<sup>3</sup>James Fenimore Cooper (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962), p. 28.

his honor and devotion to principle are in striking contrast to the deception and barbarism of the neutral ground.

From Virginia, Dunwoodie, a resourceful officer, practiced horseman, and chivalric gentleman, is the first of the many Southern gentry who would fill the role of the genteel hero. In short, he is a stereotype of the Southern aristocrat, which Cooper wrote about at length in Notions, and a literary manifestation of what William R. Taylor describes as a "resurgence of interest in the North in an aristocratic ideal based on the popular conception of plantation society."<sup>4</sup> Cooper was so impressed with the "Southern" qualities of gallantry and leadership that he incorporated them into the character of many of his genteel heroes. Speaking of Dunwoodie and his Virginia Dragoons, for example, Cooper writes, "Most of the cavalry regiments of the continental army were led and officered by gentlemen from the south. The high and haughty courage of the commanders had communicated itself to the privates who were men selected with care and great attention to the service they were intended to perform." (p. 94)

<sup>4</sup>Cavalier and Yankee (New York: George Braziller, 1961), p. 96. Taylor explains that beginning in the 1820's the southern planter was "portrayed as a product of benign and salubrious country life--a horseman, hunter, and fisherman . . . his instinctual proclivities were held in check by a massive set of restraints. His natural impulses were disciplined by his concern for family and racial traditions, by rigid standards of decorum and a complicated code of honor, which all but paralyzed him as a man of action" (p. 92).

In particular, Dunwoodie's chivalric attitude figures prominently in the book. His ambition to serve his country instead of self, his standards and decorum, and his sense of honor all relate him to the tradition which Taylor describes. After The Spy, Cooper soft-pedaled, but never omitted, the chivalric behavior of the genteel hero; but in Peyton Dunwoodie, we are treated to chivalry and bravado in full. Cooper, for example, makes much of Dunwoodie's horsemanship, describing him as "master of himself and horse." In addition his gallantry and leadership in his first encounter with the English are detailed at length:

Major Dunwoodie was not less distinguished by coolness and judgment, then, where occasion offered, by his dauntless intrepidity. He at once saw his advantage, and determined to profit by it. . . . the trumpets of the Virginians now sounded long and lively. . . . the column of Dunwoodie wheeled in perfect order, opened, and as the word of charge was given. . . ." (pp. 95-96)

By means of these somewhat stylized descriptions, Cooper creates, in Dunwoodie, a direct contrast to the ragtag cowboys and treacherous skimmers who murder their captives and pillage the area. More than a figure of contrast, however, Dunwoodie, as the one character who participates in both the action and manners' scenes, is the reader's point of contact between the hospitable, social, genteel world of the Wharton home and the danger-fraught, confusing, war-weary neutral ground of Westchester County. Outside, Dunwoodie is a vigorous leader of dragoons; inside, he is the patient wooer of Frances Wharton. By alternating between military conflict

and domestic difficulties, Cooper, through his emissary Dunwoodie, brings the war inside for detached discussion while at the same time individualizing it in terms of the Whartons who have split over the Revolution. But it is primarily through Dunwoodie that the reader compares, judges, and enters into the worries of the romance.

Cooper uses Dunwoodie to ask two questions: What are the limitations of principle, and how does one resolve the conflict between duty and conscience? In both cases, Dunwoodie, unfortunately without any real probing on Cooper's part, answers correctly that duty and principle are their own excuse for being and only through their consistent application can chaos be converted into order. In fact, Dunwoodie's activities suggest that both problems are consequences of the neutral ground.

As long as the war is fought in the open field, Dunwoodie, who routs the English regulars, is successful. But when the contest switches to skirmishing and trickery, the limitations of gentlemanly behavior become apparent as the Skinners succeed in terrorizing the countryside. Harvey Birch, his house burned, is captured and robbed by the Skinners, one of whom announces, "the law of the neutral ground is the law of the strongest" (p. 204). Confronted with this topsyturvy world of espionage and counter-espionage, Dunwoodie mistakenly arrests the true patriot, Harvey Birch, and condemns him to the gallows while "recoiling in horror at his own justice" (p. 225).

Yet Dunwoodie's code, in fact his very presence, is enough to influence the actions of even the most lawless. Explaining this effect, Cooper writes, "While in the presence of the Major, the leader of the gang had felt himself under that restraint which vices must ever experience in the company of acknowledged virtue" (p. 235). Dunwoodie's power of moral persuasion is reinforced by his invested power as the legal officer of Congress. His first and most important duty is to combat the fact that "the law was momentarily extinct in that particular district" (p. 13). But it is Peyton's sworn adherence to his duty that causes him the most distress. What to do about Henry Wharton, his friend and fiancée's brother, whom he has arrested for spying, is Dunwoodie's moral dilemma.

Peyton struggles to prevent his personal feelings from interfering with his role as an officer. After the successful battle against the British, Dunwoodie, unconcerned with the glory of triumph, instead worries about principle, compassion, and Henry Wharton:

Peyton Dunwoodie, left to himself, and no longer excited by the visions which youthful ardour had kept before him throughout the day, began to feel there were other ties than those which bound the soldier within the rigid rules of honour. He did not waver in his duty, yet he felt how strong was the temptation. . . . While turning his last lingering gaze on the Locusts, he remembered only that it contained all that he most valued, the friend of his youth was a prisoner, under circumstances that endangered both life and honour. (pp. 124-25)

He responds to this temptation by choosing duty. In fact, he chides Frances for not understanding that the duty of an officer is part of an unalterable personal code. "It is not my country,"

he exclaims, "but my honour that requires the sacrifice" (p. 416). Cooper manipulates the plot so that Dunwoodie does not need to make a final decision about Henry, but through Dunwoodie's internal debate he provides a first glimpse of the natural aristocrat caught between conscience and law and confronted with the limitations of his code.

What might have been an in depth analysis of these issues is ignored, however, as Cooper saves Dunwoodie for set scenes, a cavalry charge, leave-takings, rescues, and love problems. He does not even provide Peyton with a climactic scene. Instead we are told that Dunwoodie retires to winter quarters at his Virginia estate. But in the closing chapter, Cooper includes a significant testimonial to the code of the genteel hero and to the sacrifices of his frontier types.

A method he would often employ, the testimonial epilog is separated in time from the main action of the story and highlights either the offspring of the genteel hero or summarizes his rewarding and successful life. In either case, Cooper's technique verifies the correctness of the genteel hero's actions and stresses the notion that these labors are directly responsible for the maintenance and continuation of civilized conduct. Like breeds like, Cooper shows in the closing scene of The Spy, thirty-three years after the main plot action.

On a battlefield during the War of 1812, Wharton Dunwoodie, Peyton's son, meets the aged Harvey Birch. Wharton's description, his references to his family, and Harvey's reaction support the contribution of the American natural aristocrat. Himself a dashing officer in the service of his country, Wharton calls to mind his chivalric father even in his appearance. His proud expression, Cooper tells us, "was softened by the lines of a mouth, around which there played a suppressed archness, that partook of feminine beauty. His hair shone in the sun like ringlets of gold . . . a face glowing with health" (p. 457). As he mentions his father, now General Dunwoodie, and his mother, Wharton is recognized by Harvey who is satisfied that his efforts in the Revolution were meaningful. Without reward or public acknowledgement, Harvey has sacrificed his material possessions and his good name because of his role as Washington's secret agent; but freedom has prospered and produced men like young Wharton. To Wharton's comments and his appearance, Harvey can only respond, "Tis like our native land . . . improving with time; --God has blessed both" (p. 458). Wharton goes on to mention his father's successes and those of his Uncle, General Henry Wharton, as Cooper verifies the breeding of the Dunwoodie-Wharton family line and points forward to the dynasty novels in which family succession and achievement become an important theme.

Before closing, Cooper adds two final tributes. Young Wharton leads a successful infantry charge that demonstrates his courage and training; and, afterwards finding Birch a victim of the battle, he gently lays him to rest. Thus through the son, Cooper reinforces the character and ability of the father, Peyton Dunwoodie, and suggests that courage and character, the inevitable result of genteel parents, is synonymous with America. In his words, "God has blessed both."

The Spy, well received by critics both at home and abroad, established Cooper's reputation as a writer. Maria Edgeworth called the novel "a work of great genius"; and W. H. Gardiner, though finding much to censure, cited Cooper's talent in "describing action and hitting off the humors of low life."<sup>5</sup> Bringing further acclaim, Cooper's next novel, The Pioneers (1823), additionally serves as the starting point for the study of the mythical Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook and their encounter with the forces of civilization. The lack of attention paid to the genteel hero is, however, one of the glaring areas of weakness in scholarly criticism of the work. Because The Pioneers contains characters apparently irrelevant to the mythic approach, the love plot is passed off as Cooper's gift to his reading public or his attempt to imitate the

<sup>5</sup>Respectively, "Letter to an American Lady," Port Folio, 16 (1823); North American Review 15 (July 1822). rpt. in George Dekker and John P. M. Williams, ed., Fenimore Cooper: The Critical Heritage (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 67, 63.



Scott-Austen strain of the novel.<sup>6</sup> Appearing to be only indirectly associated with the novel's primary conflict, described by Henry Nash Smith as "the old forest freedom versus the new needs of a community which must establish the sovereignty of law,"<sup>7</sup> the Oliver Effingham-Elizabeth Temple plot is, in fact, the structural and thematic center of the novel. Through Oliver's repeated encounters with the Temples, Cooper unites the various actions of the novel, and, by incorporating into Oliver's character both the old forest freedom and the social values of the new community, he offers a symbol of the best of both worlds.

Cooper's first genteel hero frontiersman, Oliver, is neither a chivalric soldier nor an English lord. But despite his frontier dress and apparent lack of social status, he is a gentleman descended from a line of English military officers. Like Denbigh, he must still prove himself the man he seems to be; but Cooper, having matured beyond straightforward demonstrations of character and honor, integrates Oliver's testing into the social and political issues of the American frontier.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Ringe says that the Oliver-Elizabeth plot is "a stock element and may be dismissed" (James Fenimore Cooper, p. 33), R. W. B. Lewis sees this plot as having only a slight connection with the real interest of the novel. See The American Adam (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 101. For Henry Nash Smith, Oliver is merely the first in a series of genteel doubles for Leatherstocking and a result of Cooper's "experiment with younger heroes who had Leatherstocking's vital relation to the forest, but were more easily converted into lovers" (Virgin Land [New York: Vintage Books, 1970], p. 74).

<sup>7</sup>Virgin Land, p. 68.

Oliver, it would appear, represents Cooper's responses to a number of critical issues. At home in either the forest or the drawing room, Oliver moves back and forth between the law-abiding community of Templeton and the law-hating frontier of Natty Bumppo. Cooper thus suggests that frontier vigor need not be antithetical to manners and that the traditional suspicions of frontiersmen and city-dwellers (themes prominent in southwest humor and even Irving's "The Legend of Sleep Hollow") can be reconciled. On another level, through his marriage to Elizabeth Temple, Oliver assuages internal divisions brought about by the Revolution; and, with his English blood and colonial American background, represents Cooper's ideal American. Finally, Oliver speaks for Cooper on the controversy over the nature and direction of American law.<sup>8</sup> Whereas Leatherstocking scoffs at society's law and Judge Temple favors codified law, Oliver insists that law needs humanitarian interpretation. Representing the notion of common law, he accuses Judge Temple of violating the spirit of the law in not considering Natty's age, character, and past service. In fact, Oliver is in general a symbol of balance, restraint, and compromise.

Although Cooper had previously introduced the genteel hero as gentleman and gallant leader in Precaution and The Spy,

<sup>8</sup>Perry Miller, discussing the national debate over codification versus common law, points out that the contest in New York was particularly heated and that James Kent, Chief Justice of New York (and Cooper's close friend) was a major spokesman for the adoption of common law. See The Life of the Mind in America (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1965), pp. 99-265.

both Denbigh and Dunwoodie suffer from the lack of a social base to support their behavior and their moral view. Concentrating almost exclusively on character and action, Cooper, in effect, created a social beau ideal without a social identity. As a result, the first two genteel heroes remain secondary figures in novels featuring other heroes. But by providing Oliver with a social identity rooted in the family, the land, and the American past, Cooper had the makings of a bona-fide protagonist and exemplar of his agrarian based social view. And in The Pioneers, Cooper tried for the first time to structure his romance around a genteel hero who develops within the framework of the plot.

Largely ignoring the genteel hero, however, Thomas Philbrick, connecting the structure of The Pioneers with James Thomson's The Seasons, suggests that Cooper's use of the seasonal motif is the unifying principle in the novel. Relating the emotional behavior of the characters to the seasonal changes in the book, Philbrick argues that the rise in temperature from December to July parallels the rising passions of the Leatherstocking-Judge Temple conflict.<sup>9</sup> Whereas Philbrick is correct in underlining the importance of cyclical change through the seasonal motif, he supports his argument with the "wrong" characters and divorces his reading from the full context of Cooper's social philosophy. Cooper was interested only in the

<sup>9</sup>"Cooper's The Pioneers: Origins and Structure," PMLA, 79 (May 1964), 579-593.

kind of ordered change that would produce the desired result--social harmony and stability. For one thing, neither Leatherstocking nor Judge Temple (Philbrick's examples) change; each in fact is chained to irreconcilable points of view so that their passions and confrontations cancel each other. On the other hand, Oliver is the only character who undergoes transformation, and he, as a mediator between two worlds, is the only one capable of bringing stability. While the movement of the seasons superimposes a cyclical structure on the novel, this design serves primarily to illustrate and parallel the emergence, growth, and maturity of Cooper's natural aristocrat, Oliver Effingham.

Oliver's is a patterned development synonymous with the movement of the seasons from winter to autumn, from obscurity to maturity. His growth is portrayed through a set of recurring situations which heighten in intensity in each "seasonal section" of the romance. Whereas in each season Oliver aids the Temples with rescues that become more dramatic with each occurrence, ironically the Temples in return do injury to Oliver. More important are Oliver's repeated and increasing challenges to Judge Temple which preface and emphasize the later contest over the rightful ownership of the land that the Judge has been "holding" for Oliver's father.

Initially Oliver, like the winter landscape, is a dormant figure. Instead, Cooper introduces characters, paints scenery, describes manners, and generally sets up the basic

elements of romance. Oliver, under the assumed name, Edwards, appears as a friend of Leatherstocking and is wounded by Judge Temple in a hunting accident; but no one pays much attention to him. Despite the urgency of his wound, the Temples carry on their business while "In a corner of the hall near to the grand entrance, stood the young hunter unnoticed, and for the moment apparently forgotten" (p. 70). Although Oliver is dressed in a rough overcoat, fox-skin cap, and generally coarse attire, Cooper, hinting of another identity, notes that "his pronunciation and language are vastly superior to his appearance" and that his single finger resting on the piano "seemed accustomed to dwell on such places." To Natty and Judge Temple, symbols of the frontier and civilization, Oliver is, nevertheless, in an inferior position. In a turkey shoot on Christmas Day, for example, Natty outshines him with his superior marksmanship. And to the Temples, he is hardly an equal as his "appearance alone rendered him entirely distinct from the busy group." Suspected, in addition, of being a half-breed, he is subsequently hired as the Judge's assistant, primarily as compensation for his wound. Finally, Oliver and Elizabeth, the Judge's daughter, take notice of each other and exchange social remarks, but the love-plot is dormant also.

Nonetheless, Oliver's ironic relationship to the Temples has been clearly marked. The Judge's wounding of him suggests a more significant injury--the earlier loss of his Tory father's property to Judge Temple. For his part, Oliver has established

his character and has placed the Temples doubly in his debt by preventing the Temple sleigh with all aboard from tumbling down the icy mountainside. In addition, his challenge to the judge over the venison (who shot it?) previews more serious differences that surface in his and Indian John's subtle challenge to the Judge's right to the land, an incident which is passed over by the comic aspects of Indian John's tavern outburst.

The spring section is neither lengthy nor important for most of the characters. The Judge, in fact, refers to the spring as the gloomy time of year. But like the bounty of nature, Oliver emerges. As a plot participant, he engages in every activity (pigeon-shooting, fishing, horseback-riding) but quite noticeably drifts away from his frontier identity. No longer living with Leatherstocking, Oliver adopts the dress and manners of a gentleman-secretary. To the inhabitants of Templeton, however, particularly the young ladies, Oliver's change is nothing short of miraculous.

Cooper, heralding the emergence of his gentlemanly protagonist, parallels Oliver's transformation with a similar event in nature. An ice storm changes the landscape from a somber late winter scene to a brilliant display of sun and ice:

In the foreground of the picture, along the shores of the lake, and near to the village, each tree seemed studded with diamonds. Even the sides of the mountains where the rays of the sun could not yet fall, were decorated with a glassy coat, that presented every gradation of brilliancy, from the first touch of the luminary to the dark foliage of the hemlock, glistening through its coat of crystal. In

short, the whole view was one scene of quivering radiancy, as lake, mountains, village, and woods, each emitted a portion of light, tinged with its peculiar hue, and varied by its position and its magnitude. (p. 233)

Elizabeth and Miss Grant are enraptured with nature's display; but, when Miss Grant observes, "The change is indeed wonderful! I am surprised that he should be able to effect it so soon," (p. 233), it is clear that Cooper has associated nature's transformation with Oliver who appears "in the ordinary, garb of a gentleman." Elizabeth adds the last word to this prophetic scene as she exclaims, "Everything in this magical country seems to border on the marvelous . . . and among all the changes, this is certainly not the least wonderful" (pp. 233-34).

After this Oliver is a more socially acceptable, if not wholly accepted, young man. He spends much time with Elizabeth and accompanies the Temples in their family activities. To polite society he is now more than a mere secretary with the result that even Leatherstocking begins to call him Mr. Oliver. To Miss Temple he implies his romantic interest with gallant but obsequious remarks. Once again he saves the Temples--this time by warning them of a falling tree; and Louisa acknowledges the mounting debt of the Temples: "Now, Mr. Edwards, both father and daughter owe their lives to you" (p. 264). But Judge Temple continues to regard him as a half-breed and underling so that Oliver must admire Elizabeth from afar. In turn Oliver's smoldering hostility continues in the form of sarcastic remarks about the legality of the Judge's claim to the land.

With the coming of summer Oliver begins to control the action. Apart from rescuing Elizabeth for the third time, he sides with Natty in the controversy over civilized versus natural law even though he himself respects society's laws and looks to them for justice in his own case. To Oliver, cognizance of the spirit of law and humanitarian interpretation (a trait of all of Cooper's genteel heroes) take precedence over strict application. Consequently, he reports the snooping of Doolittle, causes the escape of Natty from jail, and defends him against the sheriff's posse. For this support, Oliver again suffers at the hands of Judge Temple who banishes him from his house. As the conflict works toward its conclusion, Oliver, speaking on behalf of Natty, unleashes his hostility in an open challenge to the Judge:

"Crime!" echoed Edwards; "Is it a crime to drive a prying miscreant from his door? Crime! Oh! no, sir; if there be a criminal involved in this affair, it is not he." (p. 380)

And continuing to defend Leatherstocking's innocence, Oliver calls attention to the Judge's own guilt:

"Ask your own conscience, Judge Temple. Walk to that door, sir, and look out upon the valley, that placid lake, and those dusky mountains, and say to your own heart, if heart you have, whence came these riches, this vale, those hills, and why am I their owner? I should think, sir, that the appearance of Mohegan and the Leather-Stocking, stalking through the country, impoverished and forlorn, would wither your sight." (p. 380)

Afterwards, Oliver stands in open defiance of the Temple order. More importantly, he provides an opportunity for the moral rescue of Judge Temple inasmuch as the revelation of his true identity enables the Judge to correct his questionable handling



of the Effingham property by restoring it to Oliver, the rightful owner.

By the end of the summer, Oliver has developed from a supporting character to a protagonist. He has rescued Natty twice, Elizabeth thrice, and successfully challenged Judge Temple. Socially, he is clearly superior to Natty, whom he admonishes for neglecting the law, and an equal of the Temples. By his spirited actions and his steadfast character, Oliver qualifies himself as a mature leader, capable of tying together loose ends.

Except for the departure of Leatherstocking, the autumn section is without plot action. Instead, Cooper stresses Oliver's power to console, mediate, and lead. Oliver, in complete control, makes the decisions (Judge Temple is not even present). Authoritatively, he rewards the Grants for their loyal service, erects monuments to Major Effingham and John Mohegan, and offers Natty a permanent home which the frontiersman refuses. Furthermore, in his marriage to Elizabeth he solves the Temple-Effingham rift.

Through Oliver, Cooper offers a figure of hope and compromise. Leatherstocking and Judge Temple, who could never agree, have been replaced with a genteel American whose sympathies and experience qualify him to understand and unite the antagonistic philosophies of the frontier and civilization. Oliver's associations with Leatherstocking and the frontier have given him a vitality and an appreciation of land and law.

that Judge Temple could never possess. On the other hand, his cultured background and respect for tradition and the social order provide him characteristics completely alien to Natty. By means of this combination, Oliver, supplanting the old orders, restores harmony to the Eden-like setting of Lake Otsego. With the land in possession of Oliver, the theme of transformation is complete. In the midst of a perfect October day, neither too cold, nor too warm, Cooper's natural aristocrat stands poised to rescue the American dream. Echoes of The Tempest float in the breeze as Elizabeth pronounces Cooper's final benediction: "Everything in nature seems to speak the praises of the Creator" (p. 495).

With the elevation of Oliver to a dominant position in The Pioneers, the first stage in the fictional history of Cooper's American aristocrat closes. Having established the basic character and functions of his social beau ideal in the first three novels, Cooper continued over the next twenty years to accommodate his hero to new settings and to new situations; but if the genteel hero's development was steady, it was also uneven. At least part of this unevenness is attributable to the public's appetite for more Leatherstocking, a craving that contributed to the Leatherstocking's emergence as the undisputed hero of the Tales. In addition, Cooper appeared to recognize that the genteel hero's code restricted his use in a frontier setting. Eventually deciding that the Tales were an unsatisfactory vehicle for the promotion of a

social hero, Cooper eliminated the genteel hero from the final Leatherstocking novel, The Deerslayer. Nonetheless, through the genteel heroes of The Leatherstocking Tales, Cooper provided important insights into the gentleman's role in the conquest of the frontier and successfully dramatized the consequences of the clash between a civilized code of behavior and the raw forces of the wilderness.

## CHAPTER III

## The Genteel Hero and the Frontier

Among Cooper's many frontier romances, The Leatherstocking Tales represent his greatest literary achievement and offer the best example of his use of the genteel hero in his frontier works. The Tales, perhaps best described by D. H. Lawrence who called them "a decrescendo of reality and a crescendo of beauty,"<sup>1</sup> are a movement from reality to romanticism, experience to myth, and old age to youth. Through their hero Natty Bumppo, they portray both the triumph and defeat of the American myth as civilization moved relentlessly westward absorbing and being absorbed by the frontier itself. This movement and its lasting effect upon American culture is the real theme of the Tales as it has been the theme of much of American literature since William Bradford first noted the wilderness that faced the Mayflower adventurers. But unlike Bradford, Cooper was less interested in recording literal history and detailed description than he was in using the frontier as a backdrop for a discussion of the social issues confronting a new country.

By no means the first to employ the frontier in his writings, Cooper was more importantly a forerunner in a new

<sup>1</sup>Studies in Classic American Literature (1923; rpt. New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 50.

treatment described by Lucy L. Hazard, who says of Cooper and his contemporaries: "A new emphasis is at once apparent. In the first place there is more consciousness of the external world. The battleground of the human drama has shifted from the human soul to the geographical environment; a man contends not against 'principalities and powers' but against the treacherous river . . . the mountain . . . the inhospitable prairie."<sup>2</sup> More than anyone else Cooper was responsible for developing this emerging emphasis into a mainstream of American fiction so that later critics like Edwin Fussell would write: "His frontier novels were attempts to define, to nourish, and to preserve the emerging idea of a morally and aesthetically estimable America. . . ."<sup>3</sup>

In his first frontier novel The Spy, Cooper introduced the notion of the frontier as a neutral ground, a notion he continued to embrace although he subsequently transferred the neutral ground from Westchester County, New York, to the forests and the prairies which offered a broader dimension for his metaphor. Nonetheless, he continued to describe the frontier as a place of physical and moral ambiguity. In one way it was a symbol of the grand benignity of God in which man might reach complete harmony and contentment as expressed by Natty in The Prairie:

<sup>2</sup>The Frontier in American Literature (1927; rpt. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1961), p. 96.

<sup>3</sup>Frontier: American Literature and the American West (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 28.

"I passed the spring, summer, and autumn of my life among the trees. The winter of my days had come, and found me where I loved to be, in the quiet. --Ay, and in the honesty of the woods! Teton, then I slept happily, where my eyes could look up through the branches of the pines and the beeches, to the very dwelling of the Good Spirit of my people. If I had need to open my heart to him, while his fires were burning above my head, the door was open and before my eyes." (p. 264)

But in another way, Cooper's frontier was a place of danger, violence, darkness and ambiguity, a living example of unrecorded history and a region of unknown possibility that tended to ignore the refinement of civilization and tear down old notions of class, identity, and morality, a process described as disintegration by Walter Prescott Webb in his superb essay "Jim Brown Knows the Way." Webb writes that as a result of this process, "It was the men that survived, learned to play the game, who formulated the standards of conduct and value which were eventually accepted as the ideas of society."<sup>4</sup> To illustrate the power of the frontier as a shaping process and a testing ground, Cooper used the genteel hero, whom he had adapted to his own use in his first romances.

Most of Cooper's frontier romances thus have two beau ideals, the romance hero (Natty in The Leatherstocking Tales) and the genteel hero. Because the frontier is the natural milieu of Natty, he dominates the action and serves as teacher, guide, and protector to his inexperienced friend; but it is in the interaction of the two that Cooper describes the coming together of the frontier and civilization. Armed only with the

<sup>4</sup>The Great Frontier (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1952), p. 35.

concepts of established society, the genteel hero discovers that the character and code of a gentleman is not nearly enough in the neutral ground and that he must learn new ways or be defeated. Not for nothing, therefore, is he involved in intense action which breeds in him adaptability, individuality, and a healthy respect for the unique talents of diverse individuals.

The penetration of the frontier is more than a testing ground for the American aristocrat, however. Wherever he goes, he brings with him morality, law, and tradition suggesting that whatever benefit civilization receives from the freedom and honesty of the frontier it returns in the way of refinement and order. Even more importantly, Cooper, through the persons of Natty and the genteel hero, pinpointed the paradox of American culture and the dualistic nature of man in general: Natty expresses man's eternal search for illimitable freedom and immortality which he finds in the frontier expanses of the forest and the prairie while the genteel hero, a distinctly historical character, represents the security and identity of historical time and place.

Outside of time, free of place, a non-historical being without any ties to society, Natty is described as the new Adam by R. W. B. Lewis, who writes:

The evolution of the hero as Adam in the fiction of the New World . . . begins rightly with Natty Bumppo. I call such a figure the hero in space, in two senses of the word. First, the hero seems to take his start outside time, or at the very outer edges of it, so that his

location is essentially in space alone; and, second, his initial habitat is space as spaciousness, as the unbounded, the area of total possibility. The adamic hero is discovered, as an old stage direction might have it, "surrounded, detached in measureless oceans of space."<sup>5</sup>

Juxtaposed against the hero in space is the hero of time and place--the genteel hero who, thinking in terms of home, land, and family, superimposes stability and history over the frontier. The crucial distinction between these values is nowhere better expressed than in the love plots where he, in contrast to Natty, works to attach himself to woman and therefore time and place. For all of his sympathy with the romantic attractions of Natty's life style, Cooper nevertheless understood the power of woman and the necessity of a social identity which could only be expressed through the values of his genteel hero.

Read as "A sort of American odyssey" back into time in which "the slow forming of the new skin underneath is the slow sloughing of the old skin,"<sup>6</sup> the Tales are no less important for their depiction of the origins of the real American hero as they are for the development of the mythical one. But after having created in The Pioneers a fictional symbol that adequately represented his point of view, Cooper was faced with a new literary problem: how to use the genteel hero in future

<sup>5</sup>The American Adam (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 91.

<sup>6</sup>D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature, p. 53.



novels that would have as their setting not the streets and outskirts of the settled village of Templeton but the dense forests and rugged prairies of the American frontier. Caused partly by the decision to exploit Natty's popularity by examining his youthful adventures, the problem was a devastating threat to the genteel hero's future in The Tales; for, as Cooper followed Natty deeper into the wilderness, the genteel hero was correspondingly drawn farther away from civilization, the base of his power. Also, with Natty's increasing prominence, Cooper had less opportunity to use his social spokesman, a dilemma responsible for much of the apparent ambivalence in The Tales. For this problem, Cooper had no ready answer. He did not foresee the possibility of using the genteel hero in initiation stories (although The Last of the Mohicans has all the markings), and he could not substantially alter the genteel hero's code. In fact, he failed, even when opportunities arose, to contrast successfully the values of his social beau ideals and the frontier types.

His response to the problem did, however, produce a number of changes. In The Tales, Cooper's reliance on the genteel figure gradually diminished so that in the last novel, The Deerslayer, he did not include a genteel hero at all. But while he took away the genteel hero's responsibility as a major plot protagonist, Cooper continued his attempts to increase the genteel hero's effectiveness, primarily by adding frontier characteristics to him. Jasper Western, for example, not quite

comfortable in the forest, is nevertheless as much at home on the frontier, particularly its rivers and lakes, as many of Cooper's more rugged frontiersmen. After The Pioneers, Cooper also increased the interaction between The Leatherstocking and the genteel hero in order to illustrate the tensions produced by the collision of civilization and the wilderness, and, in a technical sense, to support the sometimes overwhelming plot problems of his genteel hero. Duncan Heyward, Duncan Uncas Middleton, and Western--all look to the Leatherstocking for guidance, information, and friendship.

But whether the natural aristocrat is the protagonist or a supporting character, whether he is accustomed or unaccustomed to the frontier, whether he succeeds or fails, his mission, to provide an insight into the meaning of the frontier to white, civilized, genteel America, is the same. Anathema to the Indians but the hope of white civilization, he brings order and stability based on the reason, gentility, and vigor inherent in his conduct. While Cooper applauded his heroes' efforts to learn and to conquer, his analysis, honest and straightforward, admitted their limitations as well. In fact, the frontier novels from The Last of the Mohicans onward suggest what Cooper would fictionally conclude much later--that a social order based on merit and traditional values and the people who populated it could not succeed or even be respected in a frontier democracy. The frontier novels then celebrate the best and the worst of the westward movement--civilized

man's success at penetrating and settling the frontier and his inability to impose his social vision on the ambiguities and hostile forces present in the American experience.

In the three years that passed between the publication of The Pioneers and The Last of the Mohicans, Cooper wrote his first sea story, The Pilot, and the first and only volume of a projected series on the thirteen colonies, Lionel Lincoln, each of which contains a genteel hero whose confused characterization is overshadowed only by the general ineptness of the novels. In the Last of the Mohicans, however, Cooper returned to the chivalric hero he had introduced in The Spy. Duncan Heyward, who identifies himself and his party as "believers in religion and friends to the law" is, like Peyton Dunwoodie, a rich, young, southern officer. Also like Dunwoodie's, Heyward's notions of war are unsuited to the trials of the neutral ground.<sup>7</sup>

Despite his similarity to Dunwoodie, Heyward is the product of a number of significant changes introduced in The Last of the Mohicans, not the least of which is the transfer of the chivalric gentleman from the battlegrounds of polite Westchester county to the wilds of the frontier. Not designed, of course, with the genteel hero primarily in mind, the change

<sup>7</sup>Cooper, for example, tells us that one night Heyward dreamt he was "a knight of ancient chivalry, holding his midnight vigils before the tent of a recaptured princess, whose favor he did not despair of gaining by such a proof of devotional watchfulness" (p. 163).

in setting, nevertheless, serves to highlight the tensions inherent in the clash of the code of the gentleman with the amoral forces of the neutral ground. By allowing Dunwoodie in The Spy to return occasionally to the Wharton household and the company of genteel people, Cooper avoided leaving him alone in the neutral ground to squarely face the issues implicit in the plot. But in the forests of up-state New York, Heyward's only alternative is to face the reality of the frontier. As a result, The Last of the Mohicans offers some insights into the limitations of the genteel code, a problem only vaguely implied in The Spy and ignored in The Pioneers.

Unaccustomed to the forest, frontier warfare, or the often devious ways of the red man, Heyward mistakenly believes that all men are governed by the same gentlemanly code that he follows. As a result, his forest adventures are drastic failures that pinpoint the problem inherent in the confrontation of civilization and the frontier. Eventually, Heyward, a repository of civilized value, learns the skills necessary for survival without compromising his principles; and through him Cooper points out that the American aristocrat, a unique combination of vigor, skill, and gentility, is capable of adapting to the frontier.

Critics have found it very difficult, however, to talk about a social hero in a mythopoetic romance. The novel has been labeled pure adventure, action for its own sake, an initial situation and denouement, filled with "improvised but richly

varied material."<sup>8</sup> More lately Donald Darnell and Thomas Philbrick have noted a pattern of order within disorder, but neither has included Heyward in his analysis.<sup>9</sup> Yet one way to understand Cooper's violent epic is to take a hint from Darnell who asks "where the pursuit leads and what its ultimate consequences are"<sup>10</sup> and to note at the same time that the journey of the white party is a symbolic movement from civilization to the dark, impenetrable forest where reality is easily misjudged.

Almost Dantesque, The Last of the Mohicans presents a dream world, a region of fantasy, an underworld if you will, where a beaver colony is mistaken for an encampment of hostile Indians, a bear (actually Natty in disguise) acts human, and the prince of darkness (Cooper's description of Magua) reigns. To Magua, Uncas, and Natty, the shadows, ambiguities, and bizarre events form a recognizable order of their own. But to

<sup>8</sup>William Charvat in his introduction to the work describes the internal structure of a Cooper novel as a space filled with "incident, description, fact, discourse, commentary--much of which was only loosely related to the plot" (The Last of the Mohicans [Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1958], p. vii).

<sup>9</sup>Darnell suggests that the emphasis and the direction in this romance lead toward the recognition of a lost order--that of the Delaware nation and its culture. See "Uncas as Hero: the Ubi Sunt Formula in The Last of the Mohicans," AL, 38 (November 1965), 259-266. Thomas Philbrick emphasizes David Gamut, the psalmodist, as a force for "peace and benediction." See "The Last of the Mohicans and the Sounds of Discord," AL, 43 (March 1971), 25-41.

<sup>10</sup>Darnell, "Uncas as Hero," p. 261.

Heyward and the other whites, the frontier is ominous and deceiving. To them, "the whole landscape, which, seen by a favoring light and in a genial temperature, had been found so lovely, appeared now like some pictured allegory of life, in which objects were arrayed in their harshest but truest colors, and without the relief of any shadowing" (pp. 229-30). What Heyward sees is largely that which the reader sees so that, like Dante, Heyward is the vehicle by which the ordered values of civilization can be contrasted against the seemingly disordered world of the wilderness.

Cooper prepares the reader for the journey and more importantly for the acceptance of the civilized white point of view by creating an atmosphere of apprehension and distrust of the frontier. Early in the romance he describes the reaction of the colonists to stories of frontier horror:

Numberless recent massacres were still vivid in their recollections; nor was there any ear in the provinces so deaf as not to have drunk in with avidity the narrative of some fearful tale of midnight murder, in which the natives of the forests were the principal and barbarous actors. As the credulous and excited traveler related the hazardous chances of the wilderness, the blood of the timid curdled with terror, and mothers cast anxious glances even at those children which slumbered within the security of the largest town, in short, the magnifying influence of fear began to set at naught the calculation of reason, and to render those who should have remembered their manhood, the slaves of the basest of passions. Even the most confident and the stoutest hearts began to think the issue of the contest was becoming doubtful; and that abject class was hourly increasing in numbers who thought they foresaw all the possessions of the English crown in America subdued by their Christian foes, or laid waste by the inroads of their relentless allies. (p. 14).

Thus when the journey begins, the reader, similar to Cooper's colonists, already fears the frontier and awaits expected terrors. In addition, he pays little attention to Heyward whose attitudes more closely resemble his own and are therefore less noticeable.

But in a novel which highlights the adventures of Natty and Uncas, Heyward's function, the confrontation of disorder, is a pivotal one; for only through his survival and his success can Cooper point with certainty to the validity of civilized behavior. Given the vast differences, however, between this code and frontier reality, Heyward must change or suffer defeat. Heyward's experiences like the plot of the novel, therefore, may be divided into two parts. In the events leading up to the massacre at Fort William Henry, Heyward, who relies on a simplistic trust in civilized manners and behavior, blunders, falters, and miscues; and Magua seizes the initiative. As the whites penetrate deeper into the unknown, reality appears more disordered and events culminate in what Philbrick calls "the triumph of chaos as Cooper's protagonists give themselves to the confusion, participate in it, and profit by it."<sup>11</sup> As disorder grows into chaos, Heyward recognizes that his behavior must change. Consequently, from the massacre to the novel's conclusion, Heyward practices what Hawkeye preaches, adapts, grows stronger, and succeeds.

<sup>11</sup>Philbrick, "The Sounds of Discord," 34.

Before Heyward can triumph, however, he must survive. In the first half of the romance, Duncan, unprepared to think in terms of ambush, treachery, and a running fight, is simply inadequate. Hawkeye too notices Heyward's unpreparedness so that when he volunteers to guard the camp at night, Hawkeye wisely observes:

"If we lay among the white tents of the 60th, and in front of an enemy like the French, I could not ask for a better watchman . . . but in the darkness and among the signs of the wilderness your judgment would be like the folly of a child, and your vigilance thrown away." (p. 162)

Lacking good judgment and naïve in his expectations, Heyward needs assistance to complete his mission; but his inability to differentiate between good and bad advice almost ruins his chance of success. Hawkeye himself cryptically explains that distance, in fact survival, in the wilderness "may depend on who is your guide."<sup>12</sup>

Heyward cannot at first discern between the true and false guide. His first choice, Magua, identified by Cooper as the prince of darkness, is prepared to lead Heyward to his peril; but Heyward, taught to trust in men, cannot see Magua for what he is. Even when Alice expresses her distrust of Magua, Heyward tries to convince her otherwise. Magua, he thinks, "May be accounted a hero . . . or he would not have

<sup>12</sup>In The Spy and The Pioneers, neither Harvey Birch nor Leatherstocking is indispensable to the development of the genteel hero within the plot; but in The Last of the Mohicans and the succeeding Leatherstocking Tales, Cooper moves the genteel hero into a position which makes him dependent on the older, more experienced guide-figure for his survival.



my confidence . . . it is enough, that he is now our friend" (pp. 23-24). Unable to believe any man capable of betrayal, Heyward is led in circles by Magua and is soon hopelessly lost. But providentially, he stumbles upon Uncas, Chingachgook, and Hawkeye, who soon becomes his guide and teacher.

Still proud and naïve enough to hold on to civilized notions of class structure, Heyward is reluctant to accept the advice of Leatherstocking, a social inferior. As a result, he makes mistake after mistake. Twice, Hawkeye must save him. On another occasion, Heyward, advocating rifle fire, almost gives away their hiding place except that Hawkeye cautions him to "trust the experience of men who know the ways of the savages, and who are not often backward when the war whoop is howled" (p. 166). As Hawkeye shows his skill, Duncan is more and more impressed. Finally, with the fort in sight, Heyward, who wishes to take a circuitous path to avoid the French, is again corrected by Hawkeye who reminds him, "Who that once bends from the line of his march in a fog can tell when or how to turn to find it again" (p. 180).

The scenes in and around Fort William Henry are for Heyward the turning point and for the romance the thematic center. The bargaining with Montcalm, the surrender, and the subsequent massacre illustrate the fallacy of Heyward's thinking and destroy the illusion that a civilized moral code can be immediately and completely superimposed on the frontier. Inside the fort, social roles are reversed; and Heyward reassumes his

social station and his snobbishness. Making no mention of his debt to Hawkeye, he condescendingly introduces him to Colonel Munro as "the messenger I so warmly recommended" and foolishly states, "I hope there is no reason to distrust his fidelity," to which Munro returns, "The fidelity of 'The Long Rifle' is well known to me" (p. 191).

Replacing Hawkeye as leader, Heyward also assumes a major responsibility for the fate of the fort's inhabitants. Having appraised the condition of the fort, he is the one, for example, who persuades Colonel Munro that further resistance should end. And in the negotiations with the French, it is he who accepts Montcalm's promise of full safety and "every privilege dear to a soldier." So trusting is he, Heyward appoints only David Gamut, the ineffectual psalmodist, to watch the ladies with the advice that should the Indians menace, "You will remind them of the terms of the capitulation and threaten to report their conduct to Montcalm. A word will suffice" (p. 219). The Hurons unfortunately care little for terms, formalities, and gentlemanly conduct, a lesson Heyward learns too late. After the massacre, he, a shocked and shattered man, walks the battlefield casting "serious but furtive glances at the mangled victims . . . afraid to exhibit his feelings and yet too inexperienced to quell entirely their sudden and powerful influence" (p. 231).

In the second half of the romance, Cooper invests Heyward with the frontier skills necessary to prevent a repetition of

such a tragedy. Whereas Heyward had formerly sought to conduct himself with civility and honor, he learns that a wary eye and a watchful step are welcome additions. Surprisingly, it is he who first discovers the footprint which enables the party to pick up the Huron trail. Duncan, of course has much more learning to do, but he will not compromise his principles. When Hawkeye complains that he had not disposed of Magua when he had the chance, Heyward's belief in the bond of a man's word leads him to say, "That would have been an abuse of our treaties, and unworthy of your character" (p. 249).<sup>13</sup> Hawkeye reminds him, though, that human nature and natural rivalries supersede both treaties and laws. When Hawkeye shows concern over possible retaliation by the Oneidas, Heyward is puzzled. He trusts that "our presence--the authority of Colonel Munro--would provide a sufficient protection against the anger of our allies" (p. 256). Hawkeye once again cautions Heyward that conventional respect for authority would not turn aside the bullet of a varlet's rifle. Then during the canoe chase as the pursuing Hurons are about to fire, Heyward refuses to take cover in the bottom of the canoe as Hawkeye suggests, referring instead to the duty of rank. To these chivalric notions, Hawkeye can only exclaim, "Lord! Lord! that is now a white man's courage . . . and like too many of his notions, not to be maintained by reason" (p. 263).

<sup>13</sup>Cooper uses the Hawkeye-Heyward relationship for two purposes. On the one hand, Heyward becomes a device, a listener, a questioner through which Cooper-Hawkeye can expound on Indian-frontier manners. On the other, Cooper shows that new methods and new understandings are necessary to frontier survival.

Cooper, however, has no intention of changing Heyward's principles. Instead Hawkeye's efforts only supplement Heyward's civilized notions of law, authority, and duty which work in the social world of Virginia, but not in the forests of upstate New York. Hawkeye teaches him about canoe warfare, sighting the enemy, reading signs, the value of experience, and the inherent weakness of human nature to which the trusting Heyward can only respond, "Heaven protect us from such an error." But heaven withholds its protection, and instead Heyward must learn to furnish his own. This he and Colonel Munro do by "imitating the example, and emulating the confidence of their more experienced associates," so that when Hawkeye looks for the manner in which the Hurons have transported the girls, Heyward, to Hawkeye's delight, discovers a sort of handbarrow which explains the method.

Having learned from Hawkeye and having decided that the best way to function on the frontier is to use frontier tactics, Heyward is more successful. Volunteering to penetrate the Indian camp, he vows to "play the madman, the fool, the hero; in short, any or everything to rescue her I love." His sense of decorum put aside, his inherent superiority surfaces. Hawkeye is speechless as Duncan, "who, in deference to the other's skill and services, had hitherto submitted somewhat implicitly to his dictation, now assumed the superior, with a manner that was not easily resisted" (p. 288). Heyward, Cooper tells us, is an awakened spirit, an imposing form which Hawkeye did not

know how to combat. Hawkeye, however, sees in Heyward's changed character something "that suited his own hardy nature, and that secret love of desperate adventure which had increased with his experience" (p. 289).

To prepare Heyward for his solo test, Hawkeye gives him his final fatherly advice--advice which emphasizes wit, cunning and a readjustment in Heyward's code:

"And now God bless you! You have shown a spirit that I like; for it is the gift of youth, more especially one of warm blood and a stout heart. But believe the warning of a man who has reason to know all he says to be true. You will have occasion for your best manhood, and for a sharper wit than what is to be gathered in books, afore you outdo the cunning or get the better of the courage of a Mingo . . . and remember, that to outwit the knaves it is lawful to practice things that may not be naturally the gift of a white skin." (pp. 290-91)

Using his new found skills, but not about "to practice things that may not be naturally the gift of a white skin," Duncan penetrates the Indian camp. With amazing success he is able to deceive the wisest of the chiefs into thinking he is French. Next, asked if he can chase away the evil spirit that lives in the wife of one of the young men, Heyward puts to use his knowledge of the mummery practiced among the Indians (how and when he got this knowledge is not revealed). He and Hawkeye (disguised as a bear) even subdue Magua while Heyward continues to practice his new found cunning to keep the other Hurons away from the cave. Heyward's greatest act of self-sacrifice and attempted cunning is, however, thwarted by Hawkeye. Thrilled that the dreaded La Longue Carabine has fallen into

their ranks, the Delawares are temporarily confused by Heyward, who, in an effort to repay his friend, attempts to pass himself off as Hawkeye and submit to Indian torture to save his teacher and faithful guide; but Hawkeye prevents this needless sacrifice by identifying himself.

In the last battle against the Hurons, Heyward, still a brave warrior, is much more cautious and wise. Offered a command of part of the Delaware force, but sensing his limitations, he refuses and fights and learns at the side of Hawkeye who stops in mid-battle to explain that an Indian fight "consists mainly, in a ready hand, a quick eye, and a good cover." Hawkeye performs his service well. As an interpreter of the wilderness and a pathfinder for civilization, he offers Heyward guidance, information, and protection and, in general, lays the groundwork for the eventual settlement of the frontier; but it is no less clear, given the elegaic nature of the romance, that Hawkeye's time, like the Indians, is also limited.

In the broadest sense, The Last of the Mohicans, documenting the French-English struggle for control of the frontier, signals the spread of civilization westward and the ultimate defeat of both the Indian nations and the frontier types. Consequently, even the last scenes, which are devoted to explaining the demise of the Indian culture, must be interpreted, at least partially, in terms of Heyward's activities. As society's representative, he has survived a journey of horror which included the Fort William Henry slaughter, and culminated

in the tragic deaths of Cora and Uncas. The significance of his survival is implied in Tamenund's remarks on the relentless movement of the white man from the Atlantic shores inland. The venerable and aged Delaware chief remembers, "It was but yesterday . . . that the children of the Lenape were masters of the world. The fishes of the salt lake, the birds, the beasts, and the Mengwee of the woods, owned them for the Sagamores" (p. 385).

Tamenund also understands that the future belongs neither to the red man nor to the Hawkeye but to men and women like Duncan Heyward and Alice Munro and their offspring as he closes the romance with his elegaic statement, "The pale-faces are masters of the earth, and the time of the red-men has not yet come again . . . 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" (p. 443). Given the truth of Tamenund's statements and Cooper's obvious sympathy with them, Heyward becomes a particularly important character. Convinced of the destiny of America, Cooper offers through his genteel hero the type of gentleman needed to fulfill the aspirations of the American dream and suggests that the frontier will and must be won not by the sacrifice of principle, honor, and integrity, but by a combination of those qualities and the required frontier skills.

Cooper obviously did not recognize the fictional implications and potential of Heyward's journey in The Last of the Mohicans. Duncan's development, for instance, halts abruptly short of the romance's conclusion as Cooper tells us that Heyward has returned "far into the settlements of the pale faces." Otherwise, the genteel hero successfully illustrates the effect of the frontier on civilized man, the adaptability of the natural aristocrat, and the limitations of chivalric idealism. By 1827, however, Leatherstocking's popularity and his importance in Cooper's fictional scheme so dominated the next Leatherstocking book, The Prairie, that the genteel hero, Duncan Uncas Middleton, is relatively inactive in comparison to his predecessors, a point which has led Henry Nash Smith to describe Middleton and Inez (the heroine) as "conventional lay figures which can be found in virtually all of Cooper's novels."<sup>14</sup>

As far as the development of the genteel hero is concerned, Smith's comment is accurate. Although continuing to explore certain of the frontier issues introduced in the previous Tales, Cooper added little to the character and function of his social beau ideal and, in fact, failed to take advantage of the fictional possibilities offered within The Prairie itself. As an experienced officer serving in the newly purchased Louisiana territory, Middleton is no more

<sup>14</sup>Introduction, The Prairie (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. viii.



capable on the frontier than Heyward. Furthermore, Cooper spends little time analyzing Middleton's confrontation with the neutral territory, a turn-about from his treatment of Heyward. Undoubtedly, Cooper's strategy is at least partly attributable to his desire to emphasize Natty, in Natty's supposedly last fictional appearance. This point notwithstanding, Middleton shows no development and occupies only a secondary structural position. His rather weak story line, constructed around the rescue of his kidnapped bride Inez, is overshadowed by the activities of Natty and Ishmael Bush. As a consequence, Middleton has little to do. He seldom interacts with Bush, or even Inez for that matter, has few speaking lines, and does not actively participate in the Indian clashes. Despite these problems, Middleton is not wholly irrelevant to the theme of The Prairie.

Influenced by the French encyclopedists, Cooper presents in The Prairie, finished in Paris in 1827,<sup>15</sup> the theory that social evolution is comprised of a series of social stages: solitary hunter, migratory tribe, sedentary agriculture,

<sup>15</sup>In July, 1826, Cooper and his family arrived in Europe for a stay that lasted until November, 1833. Making his home in Paris, Cooper traveled widely but still managed to write The Red Rover (1827), Notions of the Americans (1828), The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish (1829), The Water-Witch (1831), The Bravo (1831), The Heidenmauer (1832), and The Headsman (1833) while in Europe. See Robert Spiller's account of Cooper's European residence in Fenimore Cooper: Critic of His Times (New York: Russell and Russell, 1931), pp. 99-204.

mercantilism. Most critics have analyzed The Prairie in terms of this theory by contrasting the attitudes of Ishmael Bush, the patriarchal tribal leader, with Natty Bumppo, the solitary trapper.<sup>16</sup> Given the fact, however, that Cooper regarded the gentleman as that stage toward which society ultimately pointed, one can see the qualitative differences which distinguish civilized man from his uncivilized predecessors only by comparing Middleton with Bush. The social values which Middleton displays are, therefore, indispensable to Cooper's theory of social evolution. In particular, Cooper depends on Middleton's views of woman and the family, his personal conduct, and his relationship to history to represent that edge of the social spectrum that Cooper prized most highly.

As he did in The Last of the Mohicans and The Pioneers, Cooper presents types of characters whose contrasting ethical systems and responses to the frontier make up the thematic debate. In The Prairie, the issues evolve from the juxtaposition of three white men: Ishmael Bush who has a rapacious attitude toward the frontier, Natty Bumppo who is in harmony with nature's plan, and Duncan Uncas Middleton, the genteel Eastern soldier, who is both suspicious of and misplaced on the prairie-frontier.

<sup>16</sup>For discussions of Cooper's social theory in The Prairie, see H. N. Smith's introduction; Donald Ringe, James Fenimore Cooper (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962); James Grossman, James Fenimore Cooper (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1949); and William Wasserstrom, "Cooper, Freud and the Origins of Culture," The American Imago, 17 (Winter 1960), 423-437.

Basically, the Middleton plot is the pursuit of Bush who flees West with Inez, Middleton's kidnapped bride. With the help of Leatherstocking, Middleton eventually rescues his wife and returns East. In the process, however, the Bush family changes from a tribe to a family when Ishmael turns from revenge to moral law. Part of Cooper's theory of social evolution, therefore, is that the movement from pre-civilization to civilization involves a transformation from a set of ritualistic and animalistic attitudes to a consciously codified moral tradition, one which Middleton represents. Since Natty, belonging to neither class, transcends civilization, the contrast is between Bush, the barbarian, and Middleton, the gentleman. The contrast is a weak one, however, because Cooper, depending on separate characterizations and implied comparisons, rarely brings the two together for face to face meetings. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of Bush's attitudes with Middleton's civilized code comprises the center of Cooper's social theory in the novel.

Unlike Middleton, who adheres to the ordered laws of man and God, Bush is "incapable of maturing any connected system of forethought, beyond that which related to the interests of the present moment" (p. 15). A social fugitive, he is hostile to any law which restricts his own desires. In particular Bush's attitude toward land ownership reflects his disrespect for society's law: "'Owners!' echoed the squatter, 'I am as rightful an owner of the land I stand on, as any governor of the

states!" (p. 74). As for God's law, he boasts that "there are few men living who can say they ever struck a blow, that they did not get one as hard in return from Ishmael Bush," a statement Natty undercuts by responding, "Then has Ishmael Bush followed the instincts of the beasts, rather than the principle which ought to belong to his own kind" (p. 76).

Bush undergoes a civilizing process when he turns away from primitive revenge to justify the execution of his brother-in-law, Abiram White, who killed Bush's son Asa. Finding in the Bible a moral basis for his deed, Bush substitutes a conscious morality for instinct and revenge, the effect of which is immediate. Cooper tells us that "for the first time, in a life of so much wild adventure, Bush felt a keen sense of solitude" (p. 449).

Representing the civilized state toward which Bush is finally directed is Duncan Uncas Middleton, the only gentleman among the primary characters. Like Duncan Heyward, Middleton is out of place in the prehistoric and timeless frontier where Cooper stresses the spaciousness, the sameness, and the illusory quality of the landscape. Unlike Heyward, however, Middleton does not set about learning frontier skills; Cooper instead features Natty. From a plot standpoint, Middleton, a grandson of Heyward, has been told by his family about the exploits of Natty so that he already values the skills of the frontiersman. During the greatest part of the romance, therefore, Middleton trusts Natty's frontier superiority and, silently following

his guidance, manages to survive the hostile Bushes, Indian captivity, a buffalo stampede, and a prairie fire. Deprived of action and utilized primarily to exhibit Natty's talents, Middleton, nevertheless, is a repository of civilized value and a bench mark by which all men's actions may be evaluated.

In the midst of a frontier world which tends to disarrange preconceived notions of reality and morality and which he only half understands, Middleton maintains his code of conduct and his historical identity. In contrast to Bush who operates in prehistorical time and Natty who vaults above time, Middleton is particularly conscious of his historical purpose, a point he verifies with a parchment signed by Thomas Jefferson. In addition, the only one of the three who has a personal history, he connects himself to historical time by noting that his grandfather had fought in the American Revolution (Cooper conveniently changes Duncan Heyward's allegiance), by recounting Chingachgook and Natty's exploits in the French and Indian War, by recalling the beauty of his grandmother Alice Munro, and by mentioning his brother and two cousins who reflect their historical connection through their name, Nathaniel (Natty's name). In fact, Middleton, symbolically descended from Natty, places Natty in time through this same process.

In addition, Middleton's attitude toward his family serves to contrast civilized man's concept of the family with the nomadic Bush's. While the Bush family, torn by the revolt

of the son against the father, has no traditions by which to transfer culture, Middleton's reverence toward his family and his pride in his heritage illustrate the role of the family in defining civilized man. Furthermore, through Cooper's admission that "Middleton was among the first of the new possessors of the soil" and through Middleton's own identification with New York, he is the only character who has a sense of place and a sense of permanence in which tradition and morality can take root and grow.

Middleton, in fact, represents the accumulation of the American experience and its future. A transitional figure, he bridges the cultural gap between the Americans and the English through his British grandparents, and between the whites and the Indians through his symbolic connection with Uncas. Through his marriage to Inez, he suggests the assimilation of the old world by the new; and, in his mission to the prairie, he helps absorb the frontier world into the civilized experience.<sup>17</sup>

Much of this progress, Cooper suggests, is directly related to civilized society's concept of woman. Cooper explains woman's importance to the cultural development of America at

<sup>17</sup>William Wasserstrom writes, "Inez embodies the highest achievement of an old and supremely defined aristocracy--Creole-New Orleans. Her marriage with a natural nobleman, Duncan Uncas Middleton, represents an amalgam of old and new, a blend of the best virtues in each" ("Cooper, Freud, and the Origins of Culture," 427). Similarly, Joel Porte regards the Inez-Middleton plot as a symbolic healing of the old wound between Catholic Europe and Protestant America, a union that suggests a progressive feature in a fallen world. See The Romance in America (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), p. 47.

some length:

In such a novel intermixture of men born and nurtured on freedom, and the compliant minions of absolute power, the catholic and the protestant, the active and the indolent, some little time was necessary to blend the discrepant elements of society. In attaining so desirable an end, woman was made to perform her accustomed and grateful office. The barriers of prejudice and religion were broken through by the irresistible power of the master passion; and family unions, ere long, began to cement the political tie which had made a forced conjunction between people so opposite in their habits, their education, and their opinions. (pp. 194-95)

This conscious view of the power of woman Cooper incorporates in Middleton's attitude toward Inez. Whereas Natty disassociates himself from woman entirely and Bush regards Inez only as property, Middleton places Inez on a pedestal. In his eyes she is a delicate flower which needs tender and loving care. Continually he expresses his concern about her treatment by the Bushes and her ability to endure the hardships. As the civilizing process had made Middleton aware of woman's gifts, time, and place, it has also taught him to restrain his passion. Middleton notes with anger the obvious sexual advances made by Mahtoree and Hard Heart; but, despite even the narrator's declarations of Inez's sensual beauty, Middleton himself carries on more of a child-father relationship with Inez.<sup>18</sup> More than once Inez comments, "Imitate my father, Middleton, and I can ask no more of you," to which Middleton tacitly agrees in his actions.

<sup>18</sup>Because Inez was abducted on her wedding night, the marriage, Cooper implies, is not consummated.

Duncan's treatment of Inez is matched by his compassion toward his enemies and his faith in the law. In contrast to Bush, Duncan has controlled man's tendency toward violence and cruelty by trusting to the laws of God and man. Despite Bush's transgressions, Middleton, for example, has no interest in either revenge or punishment. Instead Middleton, when confronted with Bush's sudden decision to free all his prisoners, is "awestruck by what he believed a manifest judgment of heaven" and is content to leave Bush to his own fate. Although he is an officer of the government and as such the living embodiment of the law, there is little Middleton can do. Like the forests and battlegrounds of upstate New York and Westchester county, the prairie-frontier is indifferent to Middleton's notions of law and order.

Cooper reveals Middleton's sense of helplessness on the frontier by contrasting it with the feeling of security he regains when he reaches the camp of his troops: "The presence of this force [his army unit] small as it was, removed every shadow of uneasiness from his mind. It made him master of his movements, gave him dignity and importance in the eyes of his new friends, and would enable him to overcome the difficulties of the wide region . . ." (p. 454).

Cooper picks up Middleton's story later after his return to New Orleans where his relative ineffectiveness on the frontier becomes even more apparent by comparison. In the civilized world, Middleton is successful, respected, and prominent.



Cooper writes that Middleton, a member of the legislature, "was soon employed in various situations of responsibility and confidence, which both served to elevate his character in the public estimation, and to afford the means of patronage" (p. 466). But in the last chapter, which is given to Natty's death, Middleton on his return to the prairie is once again a secondary figure still suspicious enough of the frontier to exclaim to his companions, "Look to your arms, men; it may be necessary to let these savages feel our strength" (p. 468). Middleton is mistaken, but Cooper, celebrating Natty's passing is not interested in his genteel hero. Nevertheless, Middleton's manners, decorum, compassion, and respect for social institutions qualify him as Cooper's gentleman leader, the indirect recipient of Natty's life-long frontier efforts, and the antithesis of Ishmael Bush in Cooper's theory of social evolution.

In the first three Leatherstocking Tales, the pattern of the genteel hero within the design of the frontier romance is clear. By using an upper class character who was experiencing the frontier for essentially the first time, Cooper was able to dramatize the effects of the frontier on a traditional moral code and to employ the standard bearer of that code, the genteel hero, as a repository of value by which the more primitive attitudes of the inhabitants of the neutral ground could be compared. Although Cooper presented the genteel hero's limitations as well as his strengths and gave him a fictional

opportunity to learn and practice frontier skills, the distance between the rugged and violent frontier kingdom of Natty Bumppo and Cooper's formal and stilted characterization of his social beau ideal continued to cause artistic problems. The third frontier genteel hero, Middleton, is as brittle as any of his literary ancestors, and his role within the romance lacks the force and clarity of either Oliver's or Heyward's.

Returning to the Tales after a lapse of thirteen years, Cooper in The Pathfinder (1840) continued to use the genteel hero in familiar ways; but, in an effort to assimilate him more smoothly into a frontier environment and to involve him more directly in social issues, he also made his most overt attempt at altering the genteel hero's characterization. Jasper Western, the genteel figure, marks a departure from the southern, chivalric aristocrat featured in the preceding land and sea novels. Portrayed as an experienced frontier, fresh-water sailor, Jasper is the product of a plain, undistinguished upbringing which, in combination with his good but uneven education and his marriage to a non-commissioned officer's daughter, places him in the middle class. In this sense Jasper resembles and points to Cooper's middle class, landed-gentry heroes of the 1840's, notably the Littlepages and Mark Wollaston of The Crater.

The remaking of the genteel hero in The Pathfinder occurs as much by plot necessity, however, as by conceptual design. In a book about Natty in love, Cooper was obligated to supply

his heroine with a social background relatively equal to Natty's but genteel enough to illustrate Natty's lack of education and refinement. Similarly, Natty's successful rival, Jasper in this case, had to be somewhat more refined than Natty yet not appreciably different in social status than a sergeant's daughter. The result is that Jasper, more believable as a character, is better suited to the forests and lakes and more integrated with the frontier plot than any of the previous frontier gentleman.

Not satisfied merely to add frontier characteristics to his genteel hero's background, Cooper also tried to reshape his fictional role. Jasper, for example, does not enter the neutral ground armed with only naiveté and a chivalric code, nor does Cooper use him as a foil to the violence and disorder of the frontier itself. Instead Cooper, more interested in this novel in the workings of a social democracy than in the westward movement, converts the genteel hero's frontier mission into a romantic example of the recognition and rise of the natural aristocrat.

As early as The Pioneers, Cooper showed that an harmonious and just society must necessarily be founded on a recognition of the distinct and separate gifts which characterize individuals and social classes. He further suggested in Precaution as well as in The Pioneers that the progress of a just society is best achieved by the marriage of the best people. In this sense, The Pathfinder more nearly resembles those earlier works

than it does the rest of the Tales. Although the historical plot involves the attempts of Natty and the English to secure the frontier from the threat of the French and Indians, the novel is in reality a treatise on social structure and reflects Cooper's growing concern over America's increasing tendency to disregard qualitative differences in men. Jasper's purpose in this social scheme is threefold: A unique combination of frontier vigor and gentility of character, he represents yet another attempt by Cooper to describe and applaud the man of quality. The first genteel hero to gauge his frontier talents accurately, he illustrates Cooper's firm conviction in the necessity of recognizing one's limitations as well as one's strengths and in the necessity of accepting one's place in the resulting social order. Finally, a member of the yeoman class with French connections, Jasper illustrates Cooper's belief that natural ability must be recognized and rewarded in spite of social levels or extraneous circumstances.

In addition to being an adventure story then, The Pathfinder, like Precaution, is a book about the recognition and selection of the superior individual. Instead, however, of having an Emily Moseley witness from a drawing room the relative merits of her suitors, Cooper transfers the testing and evaluation to the frontier. But even in the wilds of eighteenth century upstate New York, it is clear that a successful and proper marriage is vital to society's well-being. As evidence of this notion Cooper contrasts the courtship of Mabel Dunham by Jasper Western with a number of unsuccessful love affairs.

In fact, the landscape of The Pathfinder is littered with the remains of tragic and would-be marriages. The traitorous nature of the quartermaster, Muir, is reinforced by his callous attitude toward his previous three wives; Sergeant Dunham, Mabel's father, is a melancholy victim of the loss of his wife; the elderly Major Duncan pines away in his frontier outpost at the prospects of the drastic change in his life style awaiting him in his up-coming marriage in faraway Scotland; the Indian couple, June and Arrowhead, illustrate the tragic results of a marriage which works at cross-purposes; and the Pathfinder, fearing for his independence, complains, "If I have a consarn in marrying Mabel, it is that I may get to love such things [property] too well, in order to make her comfortable" (pp. 475-76). Amidst this backdrop of failed and fearful marriage prospects, the courtship and happy union of Jasper and Mabel offer a consoling and significant contrast and support Cooper's contention that social progress and inner harmony reside in a well-made and happy marriage.

The wooing of Mabel Dunham, therefore, serves both as the basis of the plot and the substance of the theme. Within the love plot Cooper further incorporates his notions of social levels and natural abilities. The daughter of a sergeant, Mabel has been educated, trained, and refined so that, while she is not the social equivalent of the officer class, she is clearly above her father's social level. In addition to Mabel's problem, Cooper portrays the dilemma of Jasper

Western, a frontiersman of sorts, whose education places him a cut above the frontier type. Jasper's courtship of Mabel is no easy matter, however, as Cooper illustrates that character and ability must be recognized and appreciated before a valid social structure can be formed.

Jasper is perhaps the most frontier-like of Cooper's genteel heroes. No aristocrat, his mother belonged to a simple and honest colonial family, and his father spent his life as an English seaman. Although captain of a small ship, the Scud, Jasper himself is only a Great Lakes sailor in the service of the British. Nonetheless, his genteel character and his education are enough to distinguish him, and in some ways isolate him, from his peers. Jasper, for example, speaks French, an accomplishment which arouses only suspicion in some; and, as for his education in general, Natty comments that "he is quite a scholar--knows the tongues of the Frenchers--reads many books . . ." (p. 502).

In addition, his speech and his manners betray a character not commonly found in frontier outposts. To Mable, "he was earnest, sincere, and kind in his attentions, which, though they wanted a conventional refinement that perhaps Mabel never missed, had those winning qualities that prove very sufficient as substitutes" (p. 19).. And his kindness catches the admiration of even Natty who compliments him, saying, "I like you boy on your own account, but I like you all the better that you think of one so feeble at a moment when there is need of all

your manhood" (p. 73). Unlike Natty who cannot escape bragging about and displaying his skills, Jasper is modest, claiming not to have "any particular skill." As a matter of fact, Jasper's modesty is such that we learn of his prior bravery and achievements only through the Pathfinder who, mistaking modesty for inability, asserts that Jasper "don't know how to give a history at all." Moreover, Jasper's modesty and humility prevent him from openly courting Mabel. Believing there is nothing about him to please such a girl and respecting Pathfinder's own interest in her, Jasper prefers to suffer quietly.

But while his personal qualities testify to his genteel nature, they also cause him difficulties. Whereas Heyward and Middleton were clearly spokesmen for a particular social caste, Jasper has no such identity. Caught in social limbo and restricted by his own modesty and innocence, Jasper, in addition to proving his loyalty (he is suspected of being a traitor), must once again demonstrate his natural abilities and his character to gain his rightful place in the social structure.

The Pathfinder, Cooper's spokesman for a social structure based on ability, has no difficulty recognizing Jasper's superior nature, for he judges all men on the basis of merit. To Natty each individual and each group has its own gifts which distinguish one man from another and operate to form a natural social order. His tolerance and discrimination extend from the Indians who "have their gifts . . . and are not to be blamed for following them" (p. 338) to Sergeant Dunham whose "gifts

are martial and who looks at most things in the world over the barrel of his musket" (p. 101) to Jasper, the object of Natty's continual praise particularly for his nautical skills. Jasper in turn has no doubts about Natty's forest gifts; but he knows, as Natty does, that on water he is the better man. As a consequence, Natty and Jasper, apart from forming a splendid team, are evidence of Cooper's belief that social harmony and social justice are the product of the recognition and respect of individual differences and that society works best when men trust to those who possess the appropriate gifts.

To support these contentions, Cooper limits Natty's heroics to the forest while allowing Jasper to dominate the river-lake episodes. In fact, on land Jasper is yet another of Cooper's genteel forest fools. Having used wet wood for a fire which creates enough smoke to attract every Mingo in the colony, Jasper draws a subtle reproof from Natty: "The Indians and the Frenchers at the north shore call him 'Eau Douce' on account of his gifts in this particular. He is better at the oar and the rope, too, than in making fires on a trail" (p. 23). Obviously then, in the forest it is Natty who controls the action and tutors Jasper. Continuing in his traditional role as interpreter of the frontier, he points out places of safety, cautions Jasper against excessive effort, explains Indian customs, preaches conservation, and most importantly teaches Jasper to respect both nature and man's gifts and to judge them accordingly.



But whereas Natty verbalizes Cooper's ideas, Jasper's part in the plot demonstrates them in action.

From the beginning, Jasper reveals that a genteel nature does not impede skill in action. Escaping from the Mingoes, the party owes its life to Jasper who takes them through the rapids in a canoe. But this is not enough to convince Sergeant Dunham, or Cap, Mabel's uncle, of Jasper's worth or his loyalty. Jasper's lowest point, and Cooper's strongest denunciation of man's failure to recognize natural superiority, occurs when the suspect Jasper is placed below decks as the Scud sails to its island destination. His replacement, Cap, a tested ocean sailor, fails badly in trying to save the ship from the storm, and only when Jasper is begrudgingly called for does the vessel respond to Jasper's expert handling. Later it is again Jasper who rescues the besieged island outpost by deftly sailing in and out the channels of the Thousand Islands finally convincing Cap that "it must be owned too, that boy handled his boat as if he were thoroughly bred" (p. 448).

It is this skill in combination with his spotless character which silences Jasper's severest critics and makes him the logical choice for Mabel. Pathfinder all along is conscious of his own limitations, having admitted, "I did not think my gifts were such as would please the fancy of a town bred gal" (p. 298). Knowing that "it's of no use to attempt to make the dove consort with the wolf," he relinquishes his claim on Mabel

and pushes Jasper's cause. For all his forest skill, Natty knows that he lacks gentility and that he cannot leave the forest which he loves even for Mabel. Jasper, on the contrary, although partial to the Great Lakes, is sympathetic to the settlements which he defends when Natty tries to assert the superiority of the forest to the clearing.

Ultimately Natty bows to Jasper not because of friendship nor even because of the attraction of the forest, but because he recognizes in Jasper a gentleness of character, a softness of speech, and a loving concern which he can never have. Natty explains:

"Then the lad has a manner of letting his thoughts be known that I fear I can never equal. If there's anything on 'arth that would make my tongue bold and persuading, Mabel, I do think it's yourself; and yet in our late conversations Jasper has outdone me, even on this point, in a way to make me ashamed of myself. . . .

I now understand what you meant, Jasper, by speaking without a tongue and hearing without an ear . . . Ah's me! I told the sargeant I wasn't fit for her--that I was too old, too ignorant, and too wild, like, but he would have it otherwise." (pp. 502-03)

As Natty returns to practice his frontier gifts, Jasper and Mabel turn toward the settlement where their own gifts work best. Described as "resembling Milton's picture of our first parents," Jasper and Mabel offer a striking contrast to the solitary hunter as Cooper suggests the contrasting values of the forest and the settlement in his closing. Talking about Pathfinder, Cooper mentions "solitude," "disappeared," "loneliness," "isolated," "without companions," and "without hope"; but in his picture of Jasper and Mabel's new life, he suggests

permanence and stability by the words "anchor," "roadstead," "clearing," "dwelling," "comfort," "abundance," and "house." For Cooper, Jasper and Mabel hold the future of the American experience in their hands. The frontier can be conquered, a solid social structure can be constructed; but only if society recognizes the gifts of its various members and in particular those of the genteel hero, the natural aristocrat. In the epilog, Cooper, as was his method, offered evidence for this contention by explaining that Jasper, a father of three sons, "eventually became a successful and respected merchant." Natty, as Mabel discovers in her visit to Lake Ontario some years later, is still "the most renowned hunter of that portion of the state . . . a being of great purity of character and of as marked peculiarities" (p. 515). Taken together, however, Jasper and Natty possess the complimentary gifts necessary to translate the frontier experience into a permanent part of American culture.

The next year, 1841, saw the publication of The Deerslayer, the last in the Leatherstocking series; but Cooper, interested in the origins of his mythical hero, Natty, saw no need for a genteel hero. Instead, Deerslayer has his own love interest which in its failure seals Natty's aloneness forever. But in the other tales, Natty and the genteel hero form a team as inseparable as Natty and Chingachgook, for it is through the contact of the genteel hero with Natty and the other frontier inhabitants that Cooper contrasts the often opposing values of the frontier and civilization.

While the fictional development of his social beau ideal is lack-lustre through the course of his frontier works and, excepting one last feeble attempt in Wyandotté (1843), comes to a swift halt in The Deerslayer, Cooper's efforts to convert an essentially drawing room character into a genteel frontier type deserve at least a nod of approval. Plagued by the problems of stilted characterization and the unforeseen dimensions of a new genre, Cooper used this stock character more successfully than most care to admit. Admittedly, the frontier novels are not Cooper's greatest achievement in regard to the genteel hero, nor do they best illustrate the steady climb from his entrance as a stock character in Precaution to the fully developed protagonists of the later novels. For the link that ties those works to the early romances, and for a milieu better suited to the genteel hero's talents and social vision, one must look to Cooper's sea fiction.

## CHAPTER IV

## The Genteel Hero at Sea

If James Fenimore Cooper had only secondhand knowledge of the primitive frontier life described in The Leatherstocking Tales, he had direct and extensive information about life at sea, gained from his five year service in the merchant marine and the United States Navy.<sup>1</sup> These experiences produced an outpouring of almost a dozen novels whose publication spanned Cooper's entire career. Offhandedly he commented that his first sea novel was no more than a reaction to Scott's The Pirate, an attempt as it were "to produce a work which, if it had no other merit, might present truer pictures of the ocean and ships than any that are to be found in The Pirate" (The Pilot, p. viii). Cooper soon discovered, however, that the sea tale contained inherent characteristics that made it even better suited to the dramatization of his social theories than the frontier romance. He also found that correct combination

<sup>1</sup>In 1806, at the age of seventeen, Cooper sailed on a European voyage aboard the merchant ship Sterling and two years later accepted a commission as midshipman in the United States Navy. Disappointed with his assignment to Oswego, New York, on Lake Ontario, he resigned May 6, 1811. Despite his short-lived naval career, Cooper, incorporating many of his experiences into his fiction, had a life-long and somewhat scholarly interest in the sea and produced, in addition to the sea novels, The History of the Navy (1839) and Lives of Naval Officers (1846).

of stylistic techniques which, when blended with the sea setting, led to the genteel hero's development from a passive, symbolic, secondary figure to a realistic, credible protagonist and a vigorous social critic.

Needless to say, Cooper's success with his sea hero was not immediate, nor was his approach to the character particularly revolutionary. In fact, the genteel hero's characterization follows the pattern introduced in the early works and later employed in the frontier tales. Like Denbigh, Dunwoodie, and Oliver Effingham, the sea protagonists are men of character whose high-mindedness, devotion to duty, and adherence to principle complement their courage and vigor. Coupled with their genteel background and traditional social values, these personal qualities connect them with the social beau ideals who appear in the other novels and identify them as the American gentlemen whom Cooper praised throughout his life.

Likewise, Cooper retained the basic plot activities and thematic functions that he had associated with the other genteel figures. At sea, the young hero, a participant in both the action and love plots, continues to serve as a unifying device for the plot structure. In the love plots, he courts the heroine, placates often reluctant parents, and assuages suspicions about his character. Within the action scenes he is concerned with the usual problems of leadership, survival, strategy, and the natural elements. More importantly the general scheme of the sea novels follows for the most part the identity-testing pattern that Cooper had used so well in conjunction with

characters like Denbigh, Oliver, and Jasper. Cooper also continued, particularly in the early sea novels, to imply his hero's social attitudes through his plot activities and through the juxtaposition of characters with contrasting points of view. Furthermore, the genteel hero at sea has the same general thematic significance as his frontier counterparts in the sense that once again the American aristocrat is a force for order and stability, a repository of civilized values, and an example of ethical and competent leadership.

Despite his adherence to these tried (and sometimes trying) methods, Cooper in the sea tale raised the genteel figure to new heights, dramatized the genteel code in an emphatic and convincing way, and successfully altered the character to fit his own evolving artistic style and social concerns. While these successes are in part due to conscious efforts, a process evident in the fiction, much of the genteel hero's prominence and development is the product of the nature of the sea novels themselves. For one thing, the sea tales are not all of a kind. Thomas Philbrick, dividing them into three periods, describes the early novels (1823-1831) as tracts in support of maritime nationalism, the middle ones (1838-1842) as examples of the growing trend toward realism, and the later sea stories (1844-1849) as rejections of the

idealistic and romantic treatment of maritime life.<sup>2</sup> The effect of these very different periods on the characterization of the genteel hero is apparent; but, even more importantly, the sea setting itself helped Cooper make fundamental changes in his portrayal of the character.

Cooper's sea is, like his frontier, a wild, threatening, and morally indifferent neutral territory that serves in part as a testing ground for value and the selection of the superior individual. Different, however, from the frontier which fostered independence, aloneness, and a reliance on individual ability, the sea required cooperation, interdependence and collective effort from those who sailed on her. Furthermore, not subject to civilization and therefore change, the sea was a perfect vehicle for the display of Cooper's ideal social order. In The Pathfinder, Cap, Cooper's salt-water sailor, explains the crucial differences between the land and the sea that Cooper used to such great advantage in the sea tales:

"Religion at sea is just the same thing to-day that it was when I first put my hand into the tar-bucket . . . I can see no difference between the state of religion on board ship now, and what it was when I was a younker. But it is not so ashore, by any means. Take my word for it, Master Pathfinder, it is a difficult thing to find a man--I mean a landsman--who views these matters to-day, exactly as he looked at them forty years ago.

<sup>2</sup>Cooper's early sea novels include The Pilot (1823), The Red Rover (1827), and The Water-Witch (1831). Homeward Bound (1838), Mercedes of Castile (1840), The Two Admirals (1842), and Wing and Wing (1842) make up what Philbrick calls "the middle period." Afloat and Ashore/Miles Wallingford (1844), Jack Tier (1848), and The Sea Lions (1849) are the later sea tales. See James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 120 ff.



"Not ashore. That is the worst of the land; it is all the while in motion, I tell you, though it looks so solid. If you plant a tree, and leave it, on your return from a three years' v'y'ge, you don't find it at all the sort of thing you left it. The towns grow, and new streets spring up; the wharves are altered; and the whole face of the earth undergoes change. Now a ship comes back from an India v'y'age just the thing she sailed, bating the want of paint, wear and tear, and the accidents of the sea." (pp. 102-03)

The sea to Cap and to Cooper is immutable and timeless. If landed society is caught in a treadmill of purposeless change with the pedlars of the levelling philosophy at the controls, life at sea is still governed by tradition, discipline, and natural ability. At sea the ship exemplifies the well-regulated society in which each knows his place, the best lead, and order prevails--a carefully structured social system which acts as a defense against social and moral confusion and as security against the challenge of the frontier. Thus in the sea novels which contained advantages for the genteel hero not inherent in the frontier works, Cooper could celebrate the genteel hero's role at the top of a clearly defined social pyramid; he could illustrate the positive results of order and authority; he could explain more easily his theory of individual differences and gifts; and he could point with pride to the self-reliance, moral vigor, and genteel code of his American aristocrats.

Much of Cooper's ease in celebrating and explaining the American aristocrat's importance to society is realized

by the portrayal of the ship and the ocean as a microcosm of life.<sup>3</sup> "Life is like a passage at sea," Captain Truck explains in Homeward Bound, "We feel our way cautiously until off soundings on our own coast, and then we have an easy time of it in the deep water; but when we get near the shoals again, we take out the lead, and mind a little how we steer. It is the going off and coming on the coast, that gives us all the trouble" (p. 263). It is not only in the beginning and in the end that life is hazardous. As Master Trysail, the sailing master, explains in The Water-Witch:

I have often thought, Sir, that the ocean was like human life,--a blind tract for all that is ahead, and none of the clearest as respects that which has been passed over. Many a man runs headlong to his own destruction, and many a ship steers for a reef under a press of canvass. To-morrow is a fog, into which none of us can see; and even the present time is little better than thick weather, into which we look without getting much information. (p. 260)

<sup>3</sup>Robert Zoellner, examining Cooper's use of the ship as microcosm and vessel of culture, makes the case that "James Fenimore Cooper develops the motif of ship and sea in his sea novels in order to articulate in a symbolic way certain major aspects of his social and political theory. On the one hand, the ocean, both dangerous and challenging, becomes the vehicle for the expression of certain qualities of the American frontier ethos which Cooper regards as being of permanent value. On the other hand, the microcosmic ship of the sea novels becomes an expression of the democratic yet caste-structured world, dominated by the gentleman-leader, which Cooper saw as expressing American social and political principles" ("James Fenimore Cooper's Sea Novels: His social theories as expressed symbolically through the Gentleman-Leader of the Microcosmic Ship on the Sea Frontier" *Diss. Wisconsin* 1962, p. II). Zoellner's argument is cogent; he neglects, however, to differentiate between the genteel and romance heroes--two very different kinds of gentleman-leader. Consequently, by ignoring the singular importance of Cooper's social beau ideal within the total context of the fiction, he blurs Cooper's social thrust and finds instead in his evaluation of Cooper's fiction the kind of ambivalence noted in his article "Conceptual Ambivalence in Cooper's *Leatherstocking*," AL, 31 (1960), 397-420.

A microcosm of life, a family if you will, the ship is a society of men banded together for protection against the destructive fog. Captain Truck, describing all of Cooper's vessels and their crews, explains, "We are but a small family, and so much the greater need that we should prove a jolly one" (HB, p. 204). The happiness-in-security to which Truck refers is made possible only by a rigid caste system in which each individual performs his duty, accepts his place, and depends on his neighbor to do the same. The crew has its own internal divisions and privileges; the marines have theirs; the topmen theirs. All are deferential to the officers who in turn respect the rank and authority of the captain who as "father" and stern taskmaster is at once the head of the family and the top of the tightly knit social ladder. "He is first and foremost," Zoellner explains, "the product of the social structure of the ship. On the other hand . . . he succeeds in standing apart from it, and leading it."<sup>4</sup>

The genteel hero's rank and social position required, however, a major revision in Cooper's strategy. Whereas in the frontier tales the Leatherstocking character controls the action and dominates the genteel hero, in the sea novels the genteel hero has the upper hand. The Natty types, Tom Coffin, Fid, Moses Marble, and the other sea dogs, are thrust into secondary roles at least partly because they, understanding the social

<sup>4</sup>"Cooper's Sea Novels," p. 307.

order of the ship, are naturally deferential to rank and authority. Unable to exploit the teacher-student motif as he would do in The Leatherstocking Tales, Cooper instead featured a different kind of romance hero who, although himself a gentleman, serves as an antagonist and presents a point of view different from the genteel hero's in much the same way that Natty, Ishmael Bush, and Judge Temple do in the frontier works.

Yet, if the sea novels provided Cooper with a newly-paved avenue whereby he might parade his ideas, the fictional success of his theories rested by and large in the transfer of an essentially land-oriented character to the sea. Not an easy task, this transfer caused plot difficulties and thematic tangles, the eventual resolution of which helped to alter the shape of the sea fiction. Cooper's major problem was one of incorporating into a sea setting the social attitudes involving land, family, and marriage that he had associated with the backbone of his own social view. To put it simply, how to get the genteel hero out of the space and timelessness of the sea and back into the permanence of historical time and place was the artistic dilemma.

Ironically, the sea novels were almost too effective as examples of an idealistic but somewhat utopian society in that they separated the genteel hero from the landed society from which he drew his identity and his values. Also, at sea no way existed for him to substantiate his values through social

achievement nor to pass on his accomplishments to his children. While the early sea novels in particular were therefore excellent models for an ordered social structure led by the American gentleman, they did not provide any convenient way for Cooper to include certain social values inherent in his agrarian vision. From the beginning he took steps to allow his genteel hero both a land and sea identity by using a substantial but separate land plot in The Pilot and a land plot as a framing device in The Water-Witch. It was not, however, until the companion novels Homeward Bound-Home As Found and Afloat and Ashore-Miles Wallingford that he successfully intertwined the sea-land sections thereby accurately representing his genteel spokesman's social vision on land and at sea. Further influencing the development of Cooper's sea fiction was the advent of the more realistic sea novels of writers like Richard Henry Dana.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Cooper's sea tales and their gentleman sailors serve as an excellent example of the fictional growth of the genteel code in action.

In general, the sea heroes are the direct opposites of their landed counterparts. Whereas the frontier gentleman is awkward, ill-prepared, misplaced and hence at the mercy of frontier forces, the sea aristocrat is capable, well-trained, adapted to his environment, and qualified to lead. Furthermore,

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Philbrick credits Dana's Two Years Before the Mast with beginning the reaction against the romantic, gentlemanly sea story. See James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction, p. 83.

as a proven leader and experienced sailor, he is secure, confident, and knowledgeable about life at sea. He knows the winds, tides, channels, and every conceivable aspect of sailing and of ships. For him the sea is not the threat that the forest is to Heyward, nor does he need the protection and guidance of the frontier-type. Consequently, the sea aristocrat, more important than either the old sea dogs or the romance hero, dominates the sea novels as the frontier aristocrats never dominate the forest tales.

Although his significance in the works never wavers, the genteel hero undergoes increasing development from Cooper's first sea novel, The Pilot (1823) to his best, Afloat and Ashore (1844). From a somewhat lack-luster entrance as a stiff, secondary character in The Pilot, he becomes a clearly defined major figure in Cooper's next sea story, The Red Rover (1827), and later in Homeward Bound (1838) emerges as Cooper's first social critic.

But with publication of Afloat and Ashore, the genteel hero became the singular protagonist in Cooper's fiction. Using the genteel hero to narrate the story in the first person, Cooper injected his character with vitality, color, and a decidedly social perspective. Just as important, he identified Miles Wallingford with the land values which had eluded the genteel hero all through the sea tales and in so doing created a novel whose unified social vision and capable spokesman qualify it as one of Cooper's best and most underrated works. Afloat

and Ashore then, representing a reaffirmation of value on Cooper's part, is a prelude to the later social and spiritual novels and the turning point in the development of the genteel hero.

Cooper turned to the sea novel in 1823, as a result, according to Robert Spiller, of a dinner party challenge to write a better sea tale than Scott's The Pirate, which Cooper had loudly criticized.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately there were few general models to imitate, and except for the land-oriented protagonists of Precaution, The Spy, and The Pioneers, even fewer sources from which to construct his first genteel figure of the sea. Consequently, Cooper in The Pilot borrowed heavily from his own already tested approaches. Once again the setting, in this sea-remake of The Spy, is the American Revolution; and once again Cooper uses the family as a particularized example of a divided country.<sup>7</sup> Reminiscent of the Whartons, Colonel Howard, a loyalist, has removed himself and his patriot niece to safer and more comfortable surroundings; but, through a

<sup>6</sup>Fenimore Cooper: Critic of His Times (New York: Russell and Russell, 1931), p. 82.

<sup>7</sup>Although James Grossman states that Cooper attempted and failed to "use war as an instrumentality for furthering the hero's love for an unthreatened woman" (James Fenimore Cooper [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1949], pp. 38-39), Cooper's method in The Pilot, The Spy, The Last of the Mohicans, Lionel Lincoln, and Wyandotté is to portray war, and the American Revolution in particular, as a family conflict and to use the genteel hero's plot as a specific example of the larger historical struggle.

flimsy plot device, a journey to capture English hostages, Cooper brings the war to England and to the Howards as he traces the activities of Edward Griffith, John Paul Jones, and others on the English coast. Eventually, Griffith is reunited with his sweetheart, Cecilia Howard; Jones sails off to new fortunes; Colonel Howard dies; and the original purpose of the mission is conveniently stowed away as Cooper, examining questions of order, discipline, and authority, alternates between land and sea passages.

This plot difficulty, which has led Thomas Philbrick to charge that the structure of the novel collapses with long Tom Coffin's death,<sup>8</sup> is only one of the problems in The Pilot, however. The romance hero, John Paul Jones, is a rather petulant professional revolutionary whose shadowy background and pompous postures often amount to silliness. The most colorful character, Tom Coffin, is killed off midway through the plot. Griffith's role lacks clarity and emphasis; and Cooper's theme is somewhat inconclusive.

Many of these problems are associated with Cooper's undeveloped conception of the genteel hero's role at sea. As was his custom in the early novels, he depended on too many major characters to carry out the plot, a practice which diffused his social beau ideal's effectiveness. In The Pilot, for example, the protagonist's position is divided between

<sup>8</sup>James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction, p. 83.



John Paul Jones, the historical-romance hero; Captain Barnstable, the individualistic and rugged captain of The Ariel, and Edward Griffith; in addition, Tom Tiller, the wizened old salt, figures prominently. But through a contrast of Jones, Barnstable, and Griffith, Cooper subtly and consistently pushes Griffith and his code forward as an example of the value and necessity of self-discipline.

John Paul Jones is a more able and more experienced seaman than Griffith, but his Byronic nature and his zest for personal glory disqualify him as a social leader. A restless revolutionary, Jones describes himself as a rover, "one who may be termed a Quixote in the behalf of liberal principles, and who may be hourly called to seal the truth of those principles with his life" (p. 413). Destined to roam from one cause to another, Jones is undercut as he betrays his real motivation to Griffith: "There is glory in it, young man; if it be purchased with danger, it shall be rewarded by fame . . . If I succeed, I shall claim the honour" (pp. 241-42).

Cooper also dismisses Barnstable, a true sailor, officer, and hearty individualist, because he, rebellious by nature and lacking an education, is no "gentleman." In love with his ship, Barnstable displays his social limitations in his attitude toward authority and breeding. More than once, he challenges the orders of his superiors and the duty of his mission explaining that his vessel's safety comes before duty and even life. And his antagonism toward formal education is evident

in sarcastic remarks like, "This comes of passing the four best years of his [Griffith's] life within walls of brick, poring over Latin Grammars and Syntaxes, and such other nonsense . . ." (p. 366-67).

In contrast to the romantic subjectivity of Jones and Barnstable, Cooper offers the microcosm of the ship and its first lieutenant, Edward Griffith, as examples of how men can and need to discipline themselves in order to produce a stable, dependable social order. Griffith does not have ample opportunity to demonstrate the American gentleman's place in this order, however; for Cooper, in developing the courtship-hostage plot, forces him to spend more than half the novel on land where his ineffectiveness and inactivity, reminiscent of the frontier romances, detract from his stature within the novel. Ashore, Griffith mistakenly follows the advice of the ineffectual Captain Manual (which results in capture), confuses land warfare for sea fighting as he foolishly tries to repel all boarders from the indefensible cave where the Americans have hidden, and spends, consequently, much of the time locked up as a prisoner of the British. In these scenes Lieutenant Griffith is no more than another of the frontier genteel heroes: educated, refined, principled, but ordinary in ability.

Aboard ship, however, Griffith is a competent, respected, knowledgeable, and inspiring leader of a well-run society organized around rank, privilege, tradition, and ability. Each man understands the structure and acts accordingly

because he recognizes that the ship's safety is intimately dependent on his own self-discipline. Cooper describes the sailors' knowledge of the social order in a number of scenes, one of which involves the youthful Mr. Merry and the old salt, Tom Coffin who, despite differences in age, rank, and experience, share a common bond of deference and obedience to the ship's rules:

The boy obeyed a mandate which was given in the usual prompt manner of their profession, and which, he well understood, was intended to intimate, that the distance which years and rank had created between them . . . was now to be resumed . . . The cockswain, who, in the absence of most of the inferior officers, had been acting, on the forecandle, the part of one who felt, from his years and experience, that he had some right to advise, if not to command, at such a juncture, now walked to the station which his commander had taken, near the helmsman, as if willing to place himself in the way of being seen. (p. 312)

The result of this clear and stable order is an efficient and happy crew-society which Cooper praises in his depiction of its common efforts:

The unusual earnestness of their aged commander acted on the startled crew like a voice from the deep, and they waited not for the usual signals of the boatswain and drummer to be given, before they broke away from their guns, and rushed tumultuously to aid in spreading the desired canvass. There was one minute of ominous confusion . . . during which every hand, and each tongue, seemed in motion; but it ended in opening the immense folds of light duck which were displayed along the whole line of the masts. . . . (p. 447)

An integral part of the fixed and efficient social order, Griffith knows his own place as well. When the captain commands, "Griffith bowing his silent acquiescence in the decision of his superior," obeys. So cognizant is he of authority that, when

someone questions his own, he barks, "Who is it that dares to countermand my orders?" (p. 58). In addition to honoring and preserving distinctions of rank, the young lieutenant is the epitome of self-discipline, the core of a stable society. Primarily Cooper dramatizes this quality through Griffith's attitude toward duty and the confusion that occurs when men fail to respect this moral obligation. Early in the novel Griffith reiterates the idea that a man's appearance means little "so that he does his duty, as you say, in good faith" (p. 33). Later he explains to Barnstable, "We must yield our own inclinations to the service of our country" (p. 95).

During the course of events, however, Griffith momentarily ignores his duty in order to assist in the rescue of Cecilia--a mistake that results in bloodshed and quarreling, leading Colonel Howard to observe, "Behold, my dear Cecilia, the natural consequences of this rebellion! It scatters discord in their ranks; and, by its damnable levelling principles, destroys all distinction of rank among themselves; even these rash boys know not where obedience is due" (p. 393). Quick to correct his error, Griffith is not one to forget his duty either in personal or professional matters. Tradition-oriented, he "rigidly observes" the usual ceremonials of the ship, Cooper tells us, even to the point where Sailing Master Boltrope complains of Griffith's attention to "trifles and gimcracks . . . too much of small follies; such as man-of-war discipline" (p. 424). What Boltrope really means is that Griffith enforces the ship's regulations on every matter from clean shirts to muster.

It is this very discipline that makes Griffith a respected and obeyed officer. As the landing party prepares to embark, for example, Cooper explains, "Everything appeared to be done in obedience to strict orders that must have been previously communicated; for the young man . . . seldom spoke, and then only in the pithy expressions that are apt to fall from those who are sure of obedience" (p. 17). This obedience is rendered to Griffith, and to all men, Cooper suggests, who can lead by example and inspire others to their best. As a storm arises, Cooper describes Griffith's ability to do both: "The extra-ordinary activity of Griffith, which communicated itself with promptitude to the crew, was produced by a sudden alteration in the weather. . . . Even Griffith, while thundering his orders through the trumpet, and urging the men, by his cries, to expedition, would pause for instants . . ." (p. 51). And as the ship becomes endangered, "he rushed forward among the men, and, by his presence and example, added certainty to the experiment" (p. 59).

Throughout the course of the novel, however, Griffith's leadership and competence at sea are underplayed as Cooper alternates between the land-sea sections and divides his time among his multiple heroes. But in the climactic battle against the English fleet, Cooper presents his microcosmic society and its beau ideal in a spectacle of organized, vigorous, and efficient action. When the order for battle is given, Colonel Howard's warning of the consequences of rebellion are all but

forgotten as "the seamen threw themselves from their hammocks . . . rushed to the decks" and, in a fury of activity, show the fruits of self discipline.

Killing off Captain Munson mid-way through the battle, Cooper elevates Griffith to the command; and he, with the expert advice of John Paul Jones, rises to his finest hour. "Stand to your guns, men . . . not a shot is to be fired without the order," cries the genteel hero, free from the chaos of the neutral territory, and the social problems on land. Griffith is the maestro as the crew eagerly responds to his direction; and, when he trumpets, "Let fall-out with your booms--sheet home--hoist away of everything," the American aristocrat's "inspiring cry was answered by a universal bustle; fifty men flew out of the dizzy heights of the different spars, while broad sheets of canvas rose as suddenly along the masts, as if some mighty bird were spreading its wings" (p. 459).

In the important epilog, Cooper, touching on the whereabouts of his characters, assigns Barnstable to an eternity at sea and eulogizes Jones with suspect praise. Griffith points out that Jones' "devotion to America proceeded from desire of distinction, his ruling passion . . ." (p. 486). As for Griffith, who withdrew entirely from the ocean, Cooper tells us that he "devoted the remainder of his life to the conjoint duties of a husband and a good citizen" (p. 484). Moreover, as he did aboard ship, Griffith trusts in the ordered continuation and maturation of society and in its selected leaders. In response

to Cecilia's inquiry about America's new government, Griffith says, "The wisdom and name of Washington will smooth the way for the experiment, until time shall mature the system" (p. 484). Although Cooper does not stress Griffith's social achievements or the promulgation of his code through children, as he often did, the implication of Griffith's settled life and mature comments is that the gentleman leader brings ashore those qualities and that point of view responsible for his success at sea.

Closely resembling its predecessor, The Red Rover (1827) includes extended sea chases, naval battles, detailed comments on the art of sailing, and a vague historical background within which Cooper incorporates the personal studies of Henry Wilder, the genteel hero, and Captain Heidegger, the misdirected patriot. Having learned, however, from his first sea tale, Cooper corrected many of the technical problems that plagued The Pilot and the genteel hero in particular. For one thing, Cooper used a land plot only as a frame for the sea journey, bringing the heroine, Gertrude Grayson, and her governess aboard ship and not returning his characters to shore until the novel's end. More importantly, he concentrated his story and his theme around the contrast between Henry Wilder and the Red Rover (Heidegger) with the result that the genteel hero is thrust into the forefront of the romance. In addition, the story line follows Wilder and exploits his point of view from the outset. These fictional maneuvers enabled Cooper to

intensify and clarify the social themes in the novel and to employ more effectively the genteel hero as a symbol of his social vision.

The plot traces Wilder's attempts to capture the Rover, a pirate since fleeing the British navy where he killed a fellow officer who had insulted America. As a rebel to authority, the Rover operates under self-made laws; whereas Wilder, the king's officer, obeys the laws of heaven and earth as expressed in society's institutions. Through their conflict, Cooper, offering examples of the right and wrong way for the gentleman to behave,<sup>9</sup> verifies the superiority of Wilder's moral vision.

Sympathetic to the Rover, even interceding on his behalf, Wilder, is, nevertheless, loyal to his country, his duty and the law. In this regard, he, following in the footsteps of Edward Griffith, displays breeding and character, qualities which are evident in his appearance. When Cooper tells us that Wilder's features were "rather noble and manly . . . marked to give the whole of the superior parts of his face that decided intellectual expression" (p. 32), we can predict the correctness of his later actions.

The increased importance of the genteel hero in The Red Rover is due not so much to the correctness of Wilder's code, however, as it is to certain strategic adjustments in

<sup>9</sup>Robert Zoellner, "Cooper's Sea Novels," p. 374.



his plot function. From the beginning, there are few scenes in which Wilder does not direct the action. Even in the extended land plot which precedes the sea journey, the point of view follows Wilder, introducing Newport Harbor, the city, the mystery ship, and the heroines through his eyes. In the complicated departure from the harbor and the magnificent sea chase that dominate the middle of the novel, Cooper, dropping the Rover from the plot completely, focuses on the activities of Wilder and his ship, the Caroline, in their struggle against the mystery vessel and the storm. Moreover, the first close examination of the Rover's mystery ship, the sinking of the Caroline, and the subsequent rescue of the women--all center around the heroics of the genteel hero. In Cooper's grand finale, therefore, when Wilder resumes his identity as a British officer and commands the English man-of-war in the fight against the Rover, his success is neither sudden, unexpected, nor fictionally contrived.

Besides constructing the plot around his genteel hero, Cooper develops and emphasizes Wilder's knowledge of sailing and experience at sea. Whereas Griffith is a novice in comparison to the seaman par excellence, John Paul Jones, Wilder, equal in ability to the romance hero, qualifies as the first truly notable genteel sailor. Speaking of Wilder's expertise, Cooper writes:

His eye had long been familiar with every star that rose from out the dark and ragged outline of the sea, nor was there a blast that swept the ocean, that his burning cheek could not tell from what quarter of the heavens it poured out its power. He knew, and understood, each inclination made by the bows of his ship: his mind kept even pace with her windings and turnings, in all her trackless wanderings; and he had little need to consult any of the accessories of his art, to tell him what course to steer, or in what manner to guide the movements of the nice machine he governed. (p. 257)

Actually, older and more experienced, Wilder is more dedicated to and in harmony with the ship at sea than his predecessor, Griffith. In response to a question from Gertrude about his future at sea, for example, Wilder replies, "Quit it . . . It would be like quitting the air I breathe . . . I have reason to think I was born on the sea" (p. 226). And nowhere does Cooper better express the love of the sailor for his ship than in his explanation of Wilder's attraction to the ship at sea:

There is a high and exquisite taste, which the seaman attains in the study of a machine that all have united commend, which may be likened to the sensibilities that the artist acquires, by close and long contemplation of the noblest monuments of antiquity. It teaches him to detect those imperfections which would escape a less instructed eye; and it heightens the pleasure with which a ship at sea is gazed at, by enabling the mind to keep even pace with the enjoyment of the senses. It is this powerful (and to a landsman incomprehensible) charm that forms the secret tie which binds the mariner so closely to his vessel, and which often leads him to prize her qualities as one would esteem the virtues of a friend, and almost to be equally enamoured of the fair proportions of his ship and of those of his mistress . . . It is his home, his theme of constant and frequently of painful interest, his tabernacle, and often his source of pride and exultation. (p. 470)

Reinforcing the harmony between Wilder and the ship, Cooper explains that after Wilder takes command of the Caroline, "The ship itself seemed like an animated being, conscious that her destinies were reposed in different, and more intelligent, hands than before" (p. 206).

More than a skillful and sentimental sailor, Wilder is a vigorous and inspiring leader of men. During the chase sequence, when the Caroline is pushed to her limits by the young commander, the crew grows frightened and rebellious. Cooper uses this episode to reveal the gentleman's ability to establish order where chaos threatens and to elicit obedience and to inspire men to a mighty collective effort. At a crucial moment in the chase, the crew gives every appearance of a general and inextricable confusion, but "the same authority which had so unexpectedly aroused them into activity, produced order from their ill-directed but vigorous efforts . . . Wilder had spoken to awaken the drowsy and to excite the torpid . . . in a few minutes, the ship was reduced to the action of her more secure and heavier canvass. To effect this object, every man in the ship exerted his powers to the utmost, under the guidance of the steady but rapid mandates of their commander" (p. 259). Ironically, Wilder's travail results in mutiny because the crew, suspicious of a new commander, lacks the trust so necessary for social governance. In fact, the mutiny is only one more illustration of man's inability to

know the truth in a novel ultimately concerned with truth and falsehood.<sup>10</sup>

To illustrate his theme, Cooper once again uses the ship at sea as a microcosm; but the Rover's vessel is far from being an example of an efficient, happy, and ordered social structure. On the surface, the crew appears disciplined and content; but, once on board, Wilder soon learns that the men are ruled not by justice, tradition, and a benevolent captain but by fear, deceit, and a despot whose spies and threats of flogging keep the sailors in order. Founded not on principles but on whims, the Rover's arbitrary world is therefore illegitimate. Cooper leaves it to Mrs. Wyllys, another of his shrewd observers, to explain the crucial distinction between Wilder and Rover and thus to pinpoint the crux of the theme. The Rover, who has taken Wilder prisoner, comments, "There is a law which binds together this community, into which you have so treacherously stolen . . ." (p. 451), to which Mrs. Wyllys instantly rejoins, "You have forgotten the ties which bind man to his fellows, but cruelty is not natural to your heart . . . the laws of God and man are with him . . . the cause, the motive, sanctify his acts; while your career can find justification in the laws

<sup>10</sup>Paul Stein argues that Cooper's fiction can be described as a search for truth. In particular, Stein points to Cooper's use of disguises, missing heirs, and identity tangles as the fictional manifestations of the slow revelation of truth. See "The Mask and the Face: Aspects of Reality in the Novels of JFC" Diss. Western Reserve, n.d.

neither of heaven nor earth" (p. 451).

After the closing battle, Cooper offers further evidence of the Rover's erroneous moral view. Believing that law and the bond between men can be quixotically suspended, the Rover tells his crew, "We have long been submissive to the same laws . . . But the covenant is now ended. I take back my pledge, and I return you to your faults . . . the compact ceases and our laws are ended" (p. 511). In a few moments, the crew is dispatched, the ship set ablaze, and the Rover finished as Cooper suggests that anyone who chooses to manipulate the laws of heaven and earth is doomed.<sup>11</sup>

If the Rover, warped by injury and vengeance, twists the truth, Wilder aligns himself with the truth of law and Christian ethics as noted by Mrs. Wyllys. Initially, when all believe the suspicious vessel in the harbor to be a slaver, Wilder knows it is the home of the Rover. Later, as the Caroline leaves port, the Rover's ship appears to lie quietly at anchor; but "to the understanding eye of Wilder, she exhibited a very different spectacle." Guided by his instinctive knowledge of ships and men, Wilder notes that the apparent

<sup>11</sup>Though a deserter, thief, and murderer, the Rover later resurfaces and redeems himself by his service in the American Revolution, an event which has led Donald Ringe to state, "If we take this as seriously as Cooper presents it, we are drawn to the conclusion that piracy is justified if the motives are properly patriotic" (James Fenimore Cooper [New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962], p. 49).

quietude covers ominous "signs of readiness which none but a seaman could discover."

The subsequent mutiny only substantiates Wilder's superiority to those who are unwilling or unable to know the truth. Superstitious and ignorant, the crew associates the difficulties of the voyage with their new captain; but Cooper has Knighthead, one of the crew, unwittingly explain the plight of men who, "though half-inclined to believe in the truth," have "too much leaning to superstition and credulity" (p. 279). Quite the opposite, Wilder understands that natural disasters are no more than natural. In fact, his seemingly casual power of observation and his solitary stance in the mutiny and sinking of the Caroline are subtle indicators of the strength of his character.

Along with Wilder's more notable qualities, Cooper includes two rather minor items that point to the superiority of his genteel hero's code--the land plot and the Fid-Scipio-Wilder triangle. On the one hand, the land section introduces characters and conflict; but, on the other, it is a test of Wilder's honor. Promising to preserve the Rover's anonymity while at the same time trying to warn the ladies of the imminent danger, Wilder finds these tasks delicate and difficult but manages to keep his word to the Rover while fulfilling his obligations to Gertrude and Mrs. Wyllys. As for Fid and Scipio, Cooper uses their relationship with Wilder as an example of the common man's respect for the able gentleman and the gentleman's

concern for those farther down the social scale, a theme that would be developed more extensively in later novels. Unquestioningly, Fid and Scipio serve their friend and share his problems as they had done for over twenty years, a mark of devotion, climaxing with Scipio's sacrifice of his life for his young master, that further downgrades the mercenary and self-serving union of the Rover and his crew.

Emphasized throughout the novel, Wilder's character, his devotion to his men and his ship, and his loyalty to his mission and his country, justify his triumph in the closing chapters. Courageous and proud even in captivity, Wilder explains his motivation and displays the self-sacrifice which characterizes all of Cooper's genteel heroes. "I have incurred the risk," he tells the Rover, "in order to drive a scourge from the ocean . . . I knew the hazard, and shall not shrink from the penalty" (pp. 450-51). "But for these ignorant, confiding, faithful followers," he later adds, "I claim, nay, beg, entreat, implore your mercy; they knew not what they did" (p. 497).

As was his custom, Cooper reaffirms the truth of his genteel hero's code in the denouement. Coming home to die, the reformed Rover, childless and alone, carries his self-constructed world to the grave. But as a testimony to his past actions, Wilder, still in the service of his country, is characterized as a successful, affluent, and respected citizen, comfortably surrounded by a good family and a well-bred son.

Closing his novel with one last noble gesture by his genteel hero, Cooper points out Wilder's compassionate act of forgiveness toward the Rover as the genteel hero maintains the high standards implicit in his code.

Homeward Bound (1838) marks a change in Cooper's sea fiction. In place of the celebration of maritime nationalism and the romance of the sea and ship, Cooper substitutes high comedy, social satire, and political analysis. The romance heroes of the early sea novels give way to the garrulous, eccentric, and somewhat comic old salt, Captain Truck; and verbal by-play and polite conversation replace the sober and disciplined atmosphere of the man-of-war. A most serious book, however, Homeward Bound begins Cooper's full scale fictional attack on the excesses of majority rule, an issue which he had already taken up with his neighbors and the Whig press in law suits that had begun in 1837 over controversies that arose almost immediately on Cooper's return to the United States in 1833.<sup>12</sup>

Homeward Bound also signals a change in the basic function and conception of the genteel hero. From a superficial character whose actions, rather than his words, implied his values, Cooper's social beau ideal develops into an opinionated, highly verbal, and socially conscious protagonist. Paul Powis, therefore, occupies a pivotal position in Cooper's depiction of the

<sup>12</sup>See Note 25, Chapter I.



American natural aristocrat.<sup>13</sup> By means of his action ethic and his moral code, he looks back to the genteel heroes of the earlier romances; but, through his criticism of social and political abuses, he points directly toward Cooper's social critics, the Littlepages, Mark Wollaston, and the Effinghams. In addition, by connecting him with the Effinghams (Oliver of The Pioneers and John and Edward of Homeward Bound-Home As Found),<sup>14</sup> Cooper once again suggests the importance of family tradition and sets the stage for the dynasty novels of the 1840's.

In many ways, the fictional ingredients of Homeward Bound are similar to those of the previous sea tales. Action abounds in the form of an extended sea chase, reminiscent of The Red Rover, and bloody battles off the coast of Africa against marauding Arabs. Cooper also includes a standard love plot, this one involving Eve Effingham and Powis, and adds suspense through Powis' uncertain background and identity. Captain Truck, the ship's captain, even identifies the ship at sea as a microcosm of society. Within this rather typical framework, however, Cooper features not military but civilian characters engaged more often than not in heated conversation

<sup>13</sup> Donald Ringe apparently attaches little significance to Powis. For Ringe, Powis is a "romantic cliché of the handsome stranger . . . who appears to be something other than what he seems . . ." (James Fenimore Cooper, p. 76).

<sup>14</sup> Powis, as it is revealed in Home As Found, is really the son of John Effingham.

over contemporary social and political issues, the most lively of which involves the opinions of the genteel hero, Powis.

During the first part of the novel, Powis shares the protagonist's role with John and Edward Effingham, but later he demonstrates that he can handle himself ably in either a debate or an attack and in so doing becomes the true protagonist of the novel. The Effinghams, as it turns out, lack the action-ethic which distinguishes Cooper's genteel heroes.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the Effinghams, who, though good men, are better social critics than able leaders, Powis shows that he is in the best tradition of the chivalric, gentleman leader from Peyton Dunwoodie to Henry Wilder. When The Montauk comes under attack off the African coast, Powis becomes the center of the plot. All eyes look to his military experience, his daring, and his judgment. So self-sacrificing is his service that Eve complains, "It is not just that you should always devote yourself in behalf of those who seem fated never to do you good" (p. 336). Paul's skill and courage earn him the special respect of even the skeptical Captain Truck, who later puts aside his own plan to escape a British warship and takes Powis' advice instead.

<sup>15</sup>Robert Zoellner describes the Effinghams this way: "Edward is unsatisfactory as a beau ideal of the American gentleman leader because of his effeminate gentility. John is equally unsatisfactory, despite his American vigor, because of his soulless commercialism, his landlessness and his embittered alienation" ("Cooper's Sea Novels," p. 257).

Powis does more than symbolize the code of the gentleman in thought and deed. When he raises his voice on a wide range of socio-political issues, it becomes clear that the genteel hero has overtly assumed the role of Cooper's fictional spokesman. Similar to his outspoken creator, Powis is a staunch patriot but a severe critic. Compassionate and just, he, nevertheless, does not hesitate to upbraid America for its shortcomings. If his apparently random comments on diverse issues reveal any pattern at all, it is that his strong feelings and acute understandings, like those of Cooper, are concerned primarily with the sanctity of individual rights and directed against any person, group, or government which threatens those rights.

To slip into his social comment, Cooper uses a newly married English couple, the Davises, who are fleeing a rascally guardian. When English attorneys board the Montauk to arrest the Davises, Paul interferes on their behalf insisting that according to the law a wife may not be removed under a process issued against the husband. This incident is no more than a springboard for a general discussion of the maritime doctrine of the right of search. Powis, admitting the legality of limited search, again has the last word on the topic. Noting that civil liberty cannot and may not be breached under the guise of national security, he explains, "If we give a man permission to enter our house to look for thieves, it does not follow that, because so admitted, he has a right to exercise

any other function. . . . Even the right I concede ought to be exercised in good faith, and without vexatious abuses" (p. 73).

When Powis later takes on Steadfast Dodge, the villain of the novel, there is no question but that the genteel hero has become Cooper's sharpest weapon in the fictional attack on those who would subvert democratic principles. Dodge, whose hobbies are majorities, lives by the rule of public opinion and detests any sign of inequality among men. At one point he even advocates subjecting Captain Truck's decisions to majority vote. For Cooper, however, who had long preached the principle of individual differences (separate gifts as Natty explains it) Dodge is a monster that must be crushed. When Dodge insists that one man is as good as another, Powis leads him into a series of logical errors and absurd rationalizations. In Powis' eyes men like Dodge substitute "provincial notions for true taste and liberality; by confounding the real principles of liberty with personal envies, and the jealousies of station; and by losing sight entirely of their duties to the public, in the effort to advance their own interests" (p. 221).

As Dodge temporarily retreats, the issue broadens from equality among men to the relationship of the states and the federal government. As he had before, Powis continues to emphasize the principle of individual rights and the restraint of power. Interpreting the union as a confederation of individual states, he describes the federal government as "purely a government of delegated powers" having no authority to act on the particular interests of the states.

Underlying Powis' comments and Cooper's fiction from Homeward Bound onward is a strong plea for the restitution of justice in America where, according to Cooper, rapid socio-political changes had endangered its very existence. In the American Democrat (published in 1838, the same year as Homeward Bound), Cooper outlined his social and political theory, much of it directed at the claims of justice. In that work, he argued that man's innate sense of justice is universal and nowhere better seen than in the maintenance of private property. In Homeward Bound, Powis, repeating Cooper's words almost verbatim, makes this same observation: "The rights of property," Powis explains, "are everywhere acknowledged. . . . All seem to have the same general notions of natural justice, and they are forgotten only through the policy of systems, irresistible temptation, the pressure of want, or the result of contention" (p. 443).<sup>16</sup>

Having presented Cooper's own notions on individual rights, social inequality, the structure of the federal union, and the erosion of justice, Powis is given the opportunity, near the end of the journey, to appraise the moral state of the nation. "As for America, Miss Effingham," he exclaims, "she is fast getting vices peculiar to herself and her system, and, I think, vices which bid fair to bring her down, ere long, to the common level . . ." (p. 445). Still a patriot, Powis nevertheless believes that it is time for political demagoguery and blind patriotism to be set aside in favor of vigorous analysis and

<sup>16</sup>See "On Property," The American Democrat, pp. 186-192.

sound reform, a process possible only if every American actively participates. "It is a duty," he asserts, "of the citizen to reform and improve the character of his country. . . . The American . . . should be the boldest in denouncing the common and national vices, since he is one of those who, by the institutions themselves, has the power to apply the remedy" (pp. 445-46).

Powis' challenge to America is Cooper's most direct fictional assault and the real conclusion to the novel which wanders on for almost one hundred pages more. The sea journey finished, Powis has temporarily succeeded in establishing the superiority of the natural aristocrat in repelling the leveling democrat, Steadfast Dodge. But as James Grossman reminds us, "At the very heart of the gay Homeward Bound is an unwritten tragedy of conquest."<sup>17</sup> As the land sequel, Home As Found reveals, the gentleman is far more secure at sea than on land where the steadfast Dodges have the majority and public opinion as their allies.

At sea, however, the American natural aristocrat remains the undisputed leader of the microcosmic society where he displays the code of the gentleman in action in addition to his new function as a social critic. Considering that Cooper, from Precaution onward, had imbued his genteel heroes with his own social code, this conversion, if sudden, is not unexpected.

<sup>17</sup>James Fenimore Cooper, p. 117.

Yet, if Cooper added a new and significant dimension to his social beau ideal, he also added to an already long list of genteel characters who inadequately represent his social-moral vision. Powis, for example, lacks the social identity of time and place represented through marriage, home, family, and property-land, despite Cooper's efforts to provide such an identity in Home As Found. As a result, Powis, though a proven leader and sharp-tongued critic, is no more effective at conveying Cooper's genteel agrarian tradition than the beau ideals of the previous frontier and sea romances. In order to express emphatically and completely his social concerns, Cooper abandoned the sea romance, reaffirmed his land-based social values, and further altered his social spokesman, the genteel hero, in Afloat and Ashore (1844).

Cooper's finest sea tale and perhaps his most underrated novel, Afloat and Ashore might best be described as a reaffirmation of value.<sup>18</sup> The excellence of this two volume sea-land story<sup>19</sup> is attributable, however, not so much to a restatement of Cooper's values as it is to a redirection in his fictional method. Instead of implying his point of view in subtle contrasts, a passive hero, and the microcosm

<sup>18</sup>Donald Ringe uses the phrase, "affirmation of value" in describing Cooper's works of the 1838-1844 period. See James Fenimore Cooper, p. 106.

<sup>19</sup>The second volume of Afloat and Ashore also published in 1844 is entitled Miles Wallingford.

of the ship at sea, Cooper incorporates his criticism within the larger context of a social vision that is set forth realistically, forcefully, and explicitly. Cooper again depends on the genteel hero as the principal conveyor of his code; but, in choosing to portray him as a member of the landed gentry who narrates the novel in the first person,<sup>20</sup> catapults his young hero into the primary position in the novel, a prominence he holds throughout the remaining works.

Over the course of his fiction, Cooper added significantly to the role of the genteel hero within the novels, particularly in the sea tales. At the same time, he turned away from the chivalric southern aristocrat whose somewhat misplaced and brittle code had caused so many fictional problems in the frontier romances. In sea and land novels, such as Homeward Bound and The Pathfinder, he tried unsuccessfully instead to return to the middle class, landed gentleman, an image that worked so well with Oliver Effingham of The Pioneers. Miles Wallingford, the genteel hero of Afloat and Ashore, is the result of both these steady developments.

Miles is, however, a far more sophisticated character than any of Cooper's former social ideals. As the plot hero, he is the youthful idealist who seeks fame and fortune; but as the aged narrator he is a slightly cynical, weathered social

<sup>20</sup>Cooper had already experimented with first person narration in the semi-fictional biography Ned Myers (1843).



critic who sees the error of his youthful ambitions. Through his recollections Miles reveals that as a youth he had almost fallen victim to the evils of the age: mercantilism, progress, wealth, and rootlessness. As Miles explains, "There was something taking, to my imagination, in the notion of being the fabricator of my own fortune" (p. 32). By having Miles serve both as the young protagonist and the elderly social commentator, Cooper, according to Ringe, "is able to contrast the fervor of twenty with the knowledge and disillusion of sixty and to reveal in one stroke the unending conflict of appearance and reality."<sup>21</sup> At the center of Miles' conflict is his inability to recognize the sources that give life meaning: land, home, family, and the continuity of time. Quite simply then, Afloat and Ashore is the story of a man's reintroduction to the well springs of value and the moral legacy of the past.

To portray Miles's education, Cooper uses three principal devices: the sea voyage, the subplot of Moses Marble, and the symbol of Clawbonny, the Wallingford family estate. Formerly an illustration of the possibilities inherent in a social structure predicated on rank, privilege, and the leadership of the natural aristocrat, the sea plot is put to an entirely different use in Afloat and Ashore. Replacing Cooper's romantic view of the sea and ship and the efficient and happy family of seamen is the view that life at sea is cruel, chaotic, and

<sup>21</sup>James Fenimore Cooper, pp. 106-107.

ultimately without purpose. Time after time, Miles's ships are battered, sunk, or victimized by hostile vessels; men are imprisoned, maimed, and needlessly killed. Mercilessly the John, Miles's first ship, is torn apart by swirling eddies and jagged rocks. Next, the Crisis, lost in the Straits of Magellan, is attacked by hostile natives and the captain is murdered. Miles himself suffers through a variety of situations not the least of which is his voyage on the Dawn when, captured by the French, wrecked off the coast of Ireland, and forced to drift hopelessly on the open sea, he finally understands that nature is capricious, men are weak, and appearance is deceiving. Moreover, it becomes clear to him that meaning is not to be found in solitary freedom, adventure, or the challenge of the sea, but in the solid and fulfilling security of time and place. In effect, Miles goes to sea for five years only to find out that he should not have gone at all.

Miles's mentor, friend, and companion at sea is Moses Marble whose subplot serves as a specific example of the rival claims of time and timelessness, space and place, freedom and responsibility. At the outset, Moses, in a very real sense, is a picture of that which Miles could easily become. Orphaned at an early age, Marble, without a past or even a name, has no interest or roots in society. Proud, like the Leatherstocking, of his solitary independence, he boasts to Miles, "Family! Yes, I belong to my own family. I'm a more important man in my family than Bonaparte in his, for I am all in all--ancestors,

present time, and posterity" (AA, p. 323). But Cooper, who had always allowed his romance heroes to spring forth from their own conception of themselves, is most assuredly convinced that these dangerous notions must give way to a more conservative view. Consequently, Moses is domesticated as Cooper, now a fifty-five year old author of some twenty-two novels, signals the consolidation of his social and moral attitudes.

The Marble sub-plot thus becomes an ironic parallel to the education of the natural aristocrat, Miles Wallingford. Seeking a new beginning, Marble chooses to remain on a deserted Pacific island which will become his home, his America, and in the process reveals that he is not content with his self-made identity or his timeless wandering. A sense of gloom pervades his good-bye to Miles:

"Just look at my situation, Miles, and decide for yourself. I am without a friend on earth--I mean nat'ral friend--I know what sort of friend you are, and parting with you will be the toughest of all--but I have not a relation on the wide earth--no property, no home, no one to wish to see me return, not even a cellar to lay my head in. To me all places are alike. . . ." (AA, p. 331)

Moses soon gives up his Crusoe-like existence and returning to New York, discovers his aged mother still living on the family estate. Happy to have found his identity, Marble now proclaims, "Next thing to being a bloody hermit, I hold, is to belong to nobody in a crowded world; and I would not part with one kiss from Kitty, or one wrinkle of my mothers' for all the desert islands in the ocean" (MW, p. 434).

Moses becomes aware that he has been the victim of romantic illusions, a charge he also levels at Miles. As he links himself with the past, he suggests a course of action for Miles; and, in his conversion from a romantic isolate to a social man, he quietly answers whatever questions Cooper might have had about the relative attractions of the frontier and civilization. Marble's changed behavior, the sea voyages, and the steady guidance of Lucy Hardinge, the genteel heroine, are all influential on Miles; but it is not until he almost loses Clawbonny that he too fully understands the sources of his identity and his values.

As a symbol of the achievements and moral legacy of the past to which Miles must return, Cooper uses Clawbonny, the Wallingford family estate. A refuge of security and permanence in an ever changing world, Clawbonny is the product of four generations of Wallingfords who have labored to construct the values by which men must live. With its fertile fields, friendly neighbors, and faithful servants, the estate is an oasis of civility, order, and tradition, not unlike the ship of the early sea tales. In fact, Cooper, portraying the inhabitants of Clawbonny, master and servant alike, as a close family, transfers the image of the happy family of seamen to an agrarian setting. Neb and Chloe, for example, two old servants, have adopted Clawbonny as their own name. Refusing to take wages, they consider themselves family. Neb speaks for all the servants when he spurns his freedom saying, "What

good he do, Masser Mile, when heart and body well satisfy as it is" (AA, p. 427). Even the Wallingford house is an example of the type of measured change advocated by Cooper. "Warm in winter, and so cool in summer; with good thick stone walls," the hundred year old home has grown methodically as each generation has fittingly added its own wing to the original structure.

In a very real sense, Mile's mission is to add his own wing to the house and in so doing to weather time, to preserve as well as change, and to maintain his moral identity in the face of natural and social calamity. Miles, however, cannot claim Clawbonny, his moral legacy, until he purges himself of modern notions. His father's prophetic death at the hands of a milling machine goes unheeded as Miles leaves to accumulate property, and to search for his own beginning, only to feel guilty at leaving home. As he suffers and learns, however, he begins to think differently about Clawbonny, "If this house were good enough for our forefathers," he wonders, "why is it not good enough for me?" (AA, p. 414).

Despite his growing awareness, Miles continues to place his trust in movable property, an attitude which he as the older narrator scorns. Mortgaging Clawbonny to support his mercantile efforts, he realizes, with the sinking of the Dawn and all his goods, that his stone house anchored to the fertile fields of Clawbonny is the better investment and the greater protection against the ravages of time, nature, and man. Later,

when he discovers that Clawbonny is not lost after all (the will of John Wallingford who holds the mortgage is found), Miles reunites himself with the past by returning home, marrying his childhood sweetheart, Lucy Hardinge, and assuming his hereditary role as a Wallingford and a landed gentleman. Symbolically he adds his wing to the old home just as each generation of his ancestors did.

Jumping in time some thirty-five years, the novel closes with Miles as the spokesman for the principles and traditions of the past. A conservative, gentleman farmer who has conquered the American notion that the past is useless, Miles is skeptical of contemporary America. He attacks mercantilism, banking, and the increasing reliance on money as the measurement of wealth. Particularly concerned with the rights of the landowner, he defends the tenant system and the ownership of huge tracts, suggesting that attacks on landowners have brought the country to the brink of crisis.

Miles is no less skeptical of America's future. Having learned that the revelation of truth is a slow process, one more likely to succeed if judged in traditional terms, he warns of a "certain spirit, which appears to think there always must be more and more change . . ." (MW, p. 449). Instead Miles advocates "a serious move backward" to save the nation from the "movement-philosophers" whose zeal for change brings only social and moral confusion. As for himself, Miles concentrates on improving and reinforcing his bastion of tradition,

Clawbonny. He speaks glowingly of his two daughters and his sons, his ever faithful servant Neb, the reliable Moses, and the rest of the Clawbonny family. He is content in his marriage, in his traditions, and in his values--all of which, he admits, "we came very near losing." Snugly settled at Clawbonny, Miles Wallingford is ready to defend his and all men's rights to the same happiness; and, in the novels to follow, Cooper puts his genteel hero to such a test.

Thus the sea novels lead directly to Cooper's most important social novels, the Littlepage trilogy and The Crater, where the genteel hero, in the footsteps of Miles Wallingford, is the singular agent for Cooper's thoughts on a democracy. Having ably served as miniature models of an idealistic society, the sea tales, like their forest counterparts, were, nevertheless, limited in their ability to portray essentially land-oriented social problems.

As a result, Cooper in Afloat and Ashore literally converted the sea story into a social novel. Likewise the genteel sailor was forced to give way to the landed gentleman who, concerned with real and immediate issues, was more suited to display Cooper's code in action against America's internal enemies. In any event, the line of development from Edward Griffith to Miles Wallingford is clear. From Afloat and Ashore onward the genteel hero becomes a modern literary protagonist capable of inner conflict, introspection, social comment, and sophisticated plot responsibilities.

## CHAPTER V

## THE LITTLEPAGE WORLD:

## The Rise and Fall of Genteel Values

An excellent work in itself, Afloat and Ashore is perhaps even more important as a turning point in Cooper's fiction. With the creation of an aging genteel narrator who, through recollecting his youthful adventures, contrasts his own traditional values with the decline of principle in America, Cooper added a new dimension to the genteel hero; and with Miles Wallingford's return to the land, the source of his values and his identity, the genteel hero became a landed gentleman. Further refining both of these developments in his next works, the Littlepage trilogy, Cooper created his most important genteel characters, the Littlepages, who are the culmination of a twenty-five year effort to find a fictional character fully capable of expressing his world view.

On one level, the trilogy, comprised of Satanstoe, 1845; The Chainbearer, 1845; and The Redskins, 1846, is a direct response to a deterioration in the social and political climate in New York where farmers and landowners engaged



in a violent conflict known as the anti-rent war<sup>1</sup> which Cooper viewed, according to Robert Spiller, as "the ultimate test of America's theories of government."<sup>2</sup> Fearing that the principles of a democracy might be subverted by majority rule, that popular opinion might replace law, and that ill-qualified and unscrupulous men might rise to power, Cooper sides with the Establishment in the trilogy. He attacks the farmers for renegeing on their contracts, defends the legality of the patents, and declares the leasing system to be both fair and democratic. Furthermore, he points out that the system is to the advantage of the tenant in that the rent is modest, payment in kind is accepted when hard money is scarce, personal improvements are protected, and renters may terminate at the expiration of the lease if they wish.

<sup>1</sup>The New York troubles of 1839-1846 involved primarily the old Van Rensselaer holdings in and around Albany. This Dutch patent, and others granted later by the English, consisted of large tracts of land which the patroons divided into sections and leased on long terms to individual farmers at a fixed but usually quite modest rent. But in the 1830's an economic slump, culminating in the Depression of 1837, made it difficult for the tenants to pay the rent. In addition, the descendants of the original lessees did not feel obligated to pay rent on land which they and their families had lived on for generations. Instead they sought an end to what they considered a feudal system. By the 1840's, the controversy had reached the point of open war, with farmers from a number of counties armed in defiance of the landlords and the state. For detailed discussions of the Anti-Rent War, see Granville Hicks, "Landlord Cooper and the Anti-Renters," AR, 5 (1945), 95-109 and Henry Christman, Tin Horns and Calico (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1945).

<sup>2</sup>Fenimore Cooper: Critic of His Times (New York: Russell and Russell, 1931), p. 306.

On another level, the trilogy is a celebration, history and eulogy of the landed gentleman, presented in the story of the Littlepages of Westchester County, New York, a typical, genteel, landed family. Through six generations, the trilogy follows the fortunes of the Littlepage-Mordaunts from the pre-revolutionary period to the anti-rent activities of 1839-1846. With Cornelius Littlepage ("Corny") as narrator, Satanstoe describes the manners and attitudes of the landed gentleman, the establishment of the Littlepage patent in up-state New York, and the egalitarian notions that make up the principal threat to the Littlepage world throughout the trilogy. Continuing the family history after the American Revolution, The Chain-bearer, with Mordaunt, Corny's son, narrating, records the family's efforts to civilize and defend Ravensnest, their frontier estate, while supplying the philosophical basis for the gentry's social order. In The Redskins, Hugh, Mordaunt's grandson, presides over the destruction of the family dynasty amidst the background of the anti-rent struggle.

Although the history of a single family serves well to connect the plots of the novels, the trilogy is further unified by a pervasive and, for Cooper, unerring argument that the landed gentry is the repository of the highest ideals of the American civilization and that any attack on the gentry is a certain sign of the deterioration of the republic. Celebrating the gentry's manners, adventures,

Christian character, and love of land, family, and country, all three novels present the landed gentleman as the epitome of American culture and the last defense against moral decay and meaningless change. More particularly, Cooper asserts that the civilization of the frontier and the improvement of the country in general are due in large measure to the efforts of the gentry. In this sense, the Littlepages are for Cooper a symbol of the fundamental values that best represent the American experience; they are, in effect, the embodiment of the American dream, as mythic in their own way as Natty Bumppo in his. Believers in Anglo-Saxon supremacy, divine guidance, the westward movement, and the principles of a democracy, they practice and support the concept of manifest destiny in their relentless drive to civilize the American wilderness by imposing a system of order and Christian ethics that converts an untutored Eden into a peaceable kingdom. With industry, courage, and resourcefulness they direct the dispossession of the Indian, the conquest of the frontier, and the settling of the land which in turn becomes the cornerstone of their social and moral code. In a word, the trilogy is a history of the evolution of the landed gentleman from a provincial, dependent Englishman to a sophisticated, democratic American. The gentleman's history, however, is a tragic one: having served the republic, he is in turn dispossessed and forced into exile by a new and pernicious

moral doctrine that brings about the fall of genteel values in America.

For a protagonist capable of expressing these themes, Cooper needed only turn to his previous fiction to find a character who could, with little modification, become the landed gentleman of the Littlepage novels. In the early novels, Cooper, for example, had adapted a stock literary type to an American landscape and had established his character. And in The Leatherstocking Tales he had utilized his young gentleman as a social symbol through which he contrasted the frontier and civilization and investigated the limitations of the genteel code in a frontier environment. Although The Tales, dominated by the Leatherstocking, proved ultimately to be an inappropriate setting for the genteel hero, they served, nevertheless, to associate him with the conquest of the frontier, a point that Cooper would return to in the Littlepage trilogy. But if The Leatherstocking Tales overpowered the genteel hero, the sea novels, Cooper soon found, offered a setting in which he could successfully illustrate the character and function of his social beau ideal. Consequently, the genteel hero gradually assumed a prominence in the sea tales that culminated in his role as protagonist in novels like Homeward Bound and Afloat and Ashore. Moreover, in Afloat and Ashore, Cooper rediscovered the landed gentleman, an image that enabled him to place his beau ideal in a context Cooper new best--the life

style of the landed gentry of New York.

In his own father, Cooper had an excellent model for the landed gentleman. Able to recall in later life that "there were 40,000 souls holding land, directly or indirectly, under me,"<sup>3</sup> Judge William Cooper typified the landowners who developed upper New York in baronial fashion. Shaped by many of his father's convictions and personally familiar with the problems of the gentry, Cooper, in addition, married Susan Delancey, whose social background and family as Robert Spiller describes it, were "deeply rooted in the soil and more nearly feudal in structure . . . thus [Cooper] became by adoption, a somewhat modified patroon."<sup>4</sup> Given these powerful influences, "It was inevitable," Edwin Cady observes, "that he should build a theory of American history and that that theory should be founded on his ideal of the agrarian gentleman."<sup>5</sup>

Although the Littlepages are the prime example of this ideal, the appearance of the landed gentleman in a number of novels prior to Afloat and Ashore provides evidence of Cooper's

<sup>3</sup>Cited in Vernon S. Parrington's Main Currents in American Thought II (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. 1927-30), 216.

<sup>4</sup>Fenimore Cooper: Critic of His Times, pp. 62-64. For a brief sketch of the DeLancey family and Cooper's life as a Westchester farmer, see Spiller's "Ashore," pp. 59-75.

<sup>5</sup>The Gentleman in America (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1949), p. 111.

deep and sustained interest in the relationship of the gentleman and the land. Cooper's first genteel hero, George Denbigh of Precaution, is, for example, no less than an English country squire whose pride in his family estate foreshadows the Littlepage affection for their own farms. And in The Pioneers, in addition to presenting a baronial landowner, Judge Temple, modeled after his own father, Cooper suggested in Oliver Effingham a new breed of landed gentleman, one who sensitively recognizes that the land embodies the legacy of his past and, hence, the source of his identity. In fact, through the reintroduction of the Effinghams in Homeward Bound and Home as Found, he depicted, however vague and incomplete, the evolution of a genteel family whose values are derived in part from the land. Two other Cooper novels, The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish (1829) and Wyandotté (1843) provide studies of the gentleman's attempts to carve a sanctuary out of the American wilderness. The first half of Wyandotté, for example, describes the Willoughbys' journey to their patent in upstate New York, the clearing of the land, the building of the family home, and the planting of crops. In the second half, the Willoughbys unsuccessfully defend their civilized oasis against marauding Indians and brute neighbors. Moreover, in Miles Wallingford of Afloat and Ashore, Cooper integrated the accumulated functions and character of his genteel hero with the image of the landed gentleman; but, sidetracked by

a sea plot and lacking the necessary historicity, the novel failed to present either an in depth study of the gentry or their role in the development of the republic.

Cooper did not make the same mistakes in the Littlepage trilogy. Placing his gentleman on the land from the very beginning, carefully planning his family history,<sup>6</sup> and using his genteel hero to the best advantage, he succeeded in fictionally reproducing his agrarian dream of a civilized landscape dotted with a capable and democratic gentry ready to lead and serve the people. In particular, he exploited the theme of the American gentleman and the land which, although always in the background of the frontier novels, assumes a new significance in the trilogy. "In each," as Donald Ringe has noted, "the plot centers around a struggle for possession of the land. All three heroes, for example, are called to their estates by a threat to their ownership. . . . It is almost as if the Littlepages are never in complete control of their lands but must fight to maintain what they legally possess."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Writing to Richard Bentley in 1845, Cooper explained that "'The family of Littlepage' will form three complete tales, each perfectly distinct from the others as regards leading characters, love story, etc., but in this wise connected. I divided the subjects into the 'Colony, Revolution, and Republic' carrying the same family, the same localities, and same things generally through three books but exhibiting the changes produced by time, etc." (The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper, V ed. James Franklin Beard [Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Press, 1960-62], 6-7).

<sup>7</sup>"Cooper's Littlepage Novels: Change and Stability in American Society," AL, 32(1960), 282-283.

More than a structural device or even an example of the rights of private property, the land is the basis for the Littlepage social order and moral code. Corny, Mordaunt, and Hugh all interpret the land as a symbol of the accomplishments and the legacy of their ancestors, as a primary means of achieving social stability, and as the source of their identity.

In the sympathetic terms with which Hugh in The Redskins describes the Rensselaer estate, Cooper sums up the importance of the land to the gentry: "It is property that has descended to him through ancestors for two centuries; property that is historically connected with his name--on which he was born, on which he has lived, and on which he has hoped to die; property, in a word, that is associated with all the higher feelings of humanity" (p. 53). But Hugh's affection for the land, heightened by the attempts of the anti-renters to strip him of his property, his name, and his history, is no more than consistent with the attitudes of his forbears, Corny and Mordaunt. From the opening pages of Satanstoe where Corny spends much time proudly describing Satanstoe, the family's "four hundred and sixty-three and a half acres of excellent Westchester land," to the closing pages of The Redskins where Hugh fights to prevent the burning of the family home at Ravensnest, the Littlepages carry on a love affair with the land.



Praising the excellence of the soil, the field walls and even the hog sties and sheds of Satanstoe, Corny finds the farms of Westchester County breathtaking. His awe extends even to the neighboring estate, Lilacsbush, the home of his future wife Anneke Mordaunt, where he discovers the grounds "attuned to harmony and love" and a "certain indescribable air of comfort, gentility, and neatness about the whole, that impressed me in an unusual manner" (p. 144). Nowhere, however, is the Littlepage love for the land more apparent than in his final description of Satanstoe:

It was and is a noble farm; rich, beautifully placed, having water on three of its sides, in capital order, and well stocked with such apples, peaches, apricots, plums, and other fruits, as the world can scarcely equal. . . . I have never tasted any fruit that I thought would compare with that of Satanstoe. I love every tree, wall, knoll, swell, meadow and hummock about the old place. (p. 493-94)

In The Chainbearer, the Littlepage's high regard for the land is maintained by Mordaunt who, while less emotional than his father, Corny, describes his home (Corny and Anneke having taken up residence at the Mordaunt family estate) as "Happy, happy Lilacsbush! Never can I forget the delight with which I roamed over its heights and glens, and how I rioted in the pleasure of feeling I was again a sort of master in those scenes which had been the haunts of my boyhood" (p. 41). Inheriting the joy of the land, Hugh, as is evident in his description of the Rensselaer estate, loves the Ravensnest property (where Mordaunt finally settles) as much as Corny and Mordaunt had appreciated Satanstoe and Lilacsbush.

In addition to defining in part the character and values of the gentry, the land becomes in the trilogy a vehicle by which Cooper praises the gentleman's contribution to the progress of American civilization, particularly the westward movement. Implicit in the attitudes of all three of the Littlepages, for example, is not the romantic worship of nature for its own sake but rather a testimony to the beneficent results of the civilizing process. As Vernon Parrington has observed, Cooper "had no love for the stumpy clearings, the slovenly cabins, the shiftless squatters,"<sup>8</sup> nor was he especially fond, one might add, of the raw wilderness which constituted an annoying nuisance and a dangerous threat to his civilized characters. Instead the frontier represented to Cooper, and to his fictional gentlemen, the opportunity to transform primitive disorder into civilized order. The Littlepages, consequently, believe that it is the gentleman's responsibility to tame and settle the land so that civilization may follow. In The Chainbearer, Corny, explaining this process to Mordaunt, declares that nothing adds more to the civilization of a country than to dot the land with a gentry, and adds, "It is

<sup>8</sup>Main Currents in American Thought II, 224.

impossible for those who have never been witnesses of the result, to appreciate the effect produced by one gentleman's family in a neighborhood in the way of manners, tastes, general intelligence, and civilization at large" (p. 474). If the gentleman does not accept this responsibility, the trilogy further suggests, the land will fall to the unscrupulous and the wasteful, men like Jason Newcome and Aaron Thousandacres, the Littlepages' antagonists. Equally aware of the gentleman's mission, Mordaunt himself notes that the misuse of the land by ill-qualified men breeds carelessness and neglect which will in turn lead to violations of the law, an assumption later verified in the activities of the anti-renters.

In reality, this attitude is only part of a larger commitment by the Littlepages to the concept of manifest destiny. Self-righteous participants in the dispossession of the Indians and confident of the benefits of America's westward movement, the Littlepages suffer no guilt, admit no error, and ask no questions concerning either the plight of the Indian or the carving up of the continent. To Susquesus' question in Satanstoe, "Who give king land at all? All land here red man's land; who give him to king?", Corny straightforwardly replies, "Why, the king's warriors, you know, my friend, have taken possession of this country, just as the Six Nations took possession of the Delawares, before they made them women" (p. 395). But if Corny's

tone is almost gentle and apologetic, Mordaunt, removed in time, proudly boasts of westward expansion without even a passing reference to the Indian problem:

The American axe! It has made more real and lasting conquests than the sword of any warlike people that ever lived; but they have been conquests that have left civilization in their train instead of havoc and desolation. More than a million of square miles of territory have been opened up from the shades of the virgin forest, to admit the warmth of the sun; and culture and abundance have been spread where the beast of the forest so lately roamed, hunted by the savage . . . a brief quarter of a century has seen these wonderful changes wrought; and at the bottom of them all lies this beautiful, well-prized, ready, and efficient implement, the American axe! (p. 97)

Furthermore, Hugh in The Redskins adopts a fatalistic attitude toward the dispossession of the Indian. When Susquesus, an aged chieftain in the novel, laments that "all is changed! The plough has frightened away the deer. The moose will not stay near the sound of the church bell. He does not know what it means. The deer goes first. The red man keeps on his trail, and the pale face is never far behind" (p. 366), Hugh, who has wholeheartedly embraced manifest destiny, dismisses the issue matter-of-factly: "Like the wheel that rolls along the highway," he observes, "many is the inferior creature that we heedlessly crush in our path. Thus has it been with the red man, and, as the Trackless has said, thus will it continue to be" (p. 367).

Mindful of America's destiny and the gentleman's responsibility, the Littlepages survey their patents, encourage cultivation, and bring order to the frontier

which once conquered, whether at Ravensnest or Satanstoe, becomes a receptacle for tradition and ultimately identity. Of Satanstoe, for example, Corny exclaims, "I love old names such as my father knew the same places by. . . . So it is with Satanstoe, the name is homely, I am willing to allow, but it is strong and conveys an idea. It relates also to the usages and notions of the country; and names ought always to be preserved . . ." (p. 494). As for himself, Corny through his exploits at Ravensnest continues the cycle which his ancestors before him began by settling Westchester county. A hundred years later, Hugh, blessed like his ancestors with a sense of time and place, understands that the history of the Ravensnest property and that of his family are identical. "From childhood," he explains, "I had regarded that place as my future home, as it had been the home of my parents and grandparents, and, in one sense, of those who had gone before them for two generations more. . . . It was natural that I should love an estate thus inherited and thus situated. 'No civilized man, no man, indeed, savage or not, had ever been the owner of those broad acres, but those who were of my own blood'" (pp. 142-43).

As a constant in a changing world, the land is, therefore, a force for social stability and a way to control and plan the future--to conquer time by ensuring a

continuity of value.<sup>9</sup> Cooper makes it clear, however, that none of this is possible without the self-sacrifice, great expense, and hard work of the gentleman. Explaining his own motivations in purchasing a patent, Henry Mordaunt, for example, explains to Corny that "A century hence, indeed, my descendants may benefit from all this outlay of money and trouble; but it is not probable that either I nor Anneke will ever see the principal and interest. . . . Every man who is at his ease in his moneyed affairs, Corny, feels a disposition to make some provision for his posterity" (p. 334). Later Mordaunt Littlepage collects on this investment and he, with a similar understanding, prepares the way for his descendants. Equating this process with the progress of civilization, Mordaunt states, "Thus it is that the father gives to the son what he has learned, as well as what he has built or bought, and so, in time, nations get to be powerful, as they get to be what we call civilized" (p. 123).

Although the Littlepages occasionally give the appearance of being too self-centered and too concerned with the preservation of their provincial dynasty, the

<sup>9</sup>Identifying the main conflict in the trilogy as a struggle between change and stability, Donald Ringe points out that it is the development of the concept of order that gives form and meaning to the Littlepage novels. See "Cooper's Littlepage Novels: Change and Stability in American Society," 281.

family is, in fact, extremely public spirited. In fact, one of Cooper's major aims in the trilogy is to show that, legal claims and emotional ties notwithstanding, the gentry has earned the right to the land and the nation's respect by their years of service to the country, by their dedication to the principles of law and justice, and by their everpresent highmindedness. Not for nothing, therefore, is the trilogy sprinkled with accounts of the family's patriotism, sacrifice, and service. At the beginning of Satanstoe, Corny begins this tribute by noting that both his father, an ensign, and his grandfather, a captain, had held king's commissions, with the result that the "military services of the family stood us in for a great deal" (p.14). And twice he points out that "both my father and grandfather had sat in the Assembly, in their time, and, as I have heard elderly people say, with credit, too" (p.14). Moreover, he implies that, connected to the Stuyvesants, Van Cortlandts, and Van Bussees on his mother's side, the Littlepages have shared in the founding of the colony. As for himself, Corny participates with distinction in the assault on Fort Ticonderoga against the French.

Later, the Littlepages distinguish themselves in the American Revolution as patriots of the first rank. In The Chainbearer, Mordaunt proudly explains that his paternal grandfather, who led a campaign against the Indians, gave his life for his country, that his father, Corny, was "generally

admitted to be one of the best lieutenants colonel in the whole army," and that he himself left college to participate in the White Plains, Trenton, Princeton, Monmouth, and Brandywine battles in addition to serving at the siege of Yorktown. Having donated huge amounts of supplies as well as their personal services, the Littlepages, moreover, "fought more for principle than for hope of reward," Mordaunt humbly admits. Mordaunt concludes by telling the reader that Corny, now a general, "was elected to Congress as soon as the new constitution was formed, and continued to sit as long as his health and comfort would permit" (p. 464).

The Littlepages' formal service is, however, no more than a prelude to their involvement in what Cooper regarded as America's most serious challenge--the conflict over whether the republic would be a government of laws or a government of men. For the landed gentry whose social order was based in part on the acceptance of qualitative differences among men and whose moral code was centered around the belief that the law reflected God's providential wisdom, this conflict, more than political, threatened not only their social order but their survival. As the central issue of the trilogy, one which permeates each of the novels, this struggle, moreover, necessitated an additional adjustment in the characterization of Cooper's protagonists. Traditionally, he had identified his genteel heroes with the law by



portraying them as military officers and by pitting them against law breakers like the Rover and Ishmael Bush. In either case the genteel hero's stance towards this crucial issue was passive or indirect; but in the trilogy, the Littlepages emerge as the central spokesmen for government by law and the active enemies of the advocates of the increasingly prevalent, "pernicious doctrine that this is a government of men, instead of one of principles," a doctrine that Cooper personally blasts in his preface to The Chainbearer. Consistent in this role, the family is thus cited in yet another way as the defenders of the republic and the guardians of American morality.

Although the Littlepage argument is directed at three specific areas--change, majority rule, and the decline of principle--in reality all three are manifestations of the same problem which, intensifying throughout the trilogy, is interpreted differently by each of the narrators. What Corny characterizes as change, Mordaunt identifies as the dilemma of a democracy, and Hugh describes as moral decay. Inherent in each of their interpretations, however, is the awareness that the high ideals upon which the country was founded are being threatened.

Cooper personifies this threat primarily in the New England Newcome clan, whose antagonism toward the Littlepages grows as the trilogy progresses. As the Littlepages represent the best of the past, the Newcomes, fictional descendants of

Steadfast Dodge, embody the worst of the future. Pre-dating Faulkner's Snopeses, they are aggressive materialists and levelling democrats who equate public opinion and majority rule with truth. Although Jason is Corny's companion in Satanstoe, he secretly schemes to claim part of Ravensnest for himself, thinking that as a defender of the patent he might lay claim by right of conquest should the Indians be driven off. Educated from a "few books that had been expressly written to praise New England, and to undervalue all the rest of the earth" (p. 47), Jason particularly resents quality, tradition, and manners--all that which constitutes the Littlepage world. Aptly characterizing his "friend," Corny explains, "There is an absolute absence in his mind of everything like a perception of the fitness of things, so far as the claims and rights of persons were connected with rank, education, birth and experience. . . . In a word, all that was allied to sentiment, in matters of this nature, was totally lost on Jason Newcome . . ." (p. 326).

Even though Jason does not present a serious problem in Satanstoe, he, nonetheless, signals the beginning of the moral decay that Mordaunt and Hugh would later record. Corny, however, merely notes that Jason has continued his attempts on the Ravensnest property and that undoubtedly future chronicles would have more to say. Unfortunately, Corny does not fully understand the seriousness of the situation.

Somewhat naive, he verbalizes the problem largely as a growing penchant for change in America; but implicit in his comments is a warning of an approaching attack on the stability of the Littlepage world:

Indeed change--change in all things seems to be the besetting passion of these people. We of New York are content to do as our ancestors have done before us; and this they ridicule, making it matter of accusation against us that we follow the notions of our fathers . . . that there is such a thing as improvement I am willing enough to admit, as well as that it not only compels, but excuses changes; but I am yet to learn it is a matter of just reproach that a man follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before him . . . where there is so much stability of morals, there must be permanent principles, and something surely is worthy to be saved from the wreck of the past. (p. 419)

In The Chainbearer, Cooper shows that Jason with the passage of time has subverted the Littlepage order from within. As manager of Ravensnest, he has taken advantage of his position to preach against his employers, to spread his notions of mobocracy and even to cheat the Littlepages of their lumber. More perceptive than his father, however, Mordaunt understands that these activities, more than a penchant for change, are signs of a class struggle. "It is not the tenure itself with which they quarrel," he points out, "but with a class of men who are, or seem to be, their superiors" (pp. 494-95). During the anti-rent struggle Jason's descendants are so bold as to attempt to burn the Littlepage home. Citing injustice in

their leases and abuses by the privileged classes, they argue, as leaders of the anti-renters, that the people can change society's laws at any time and in any way they see fit.

In light of the Newcomes' subsequent activities, Corny's argument against change must be interpreted, therefore, not as a resistance to social justice, but as an indictment of majority rule, which threatens the permanence of law. For the Littlepages, the principle of law is sacred and unchanging. Mordaunt, for example, reminds his readers that the law is an invention to protect individual rights and as such is indispensable to a democracy. In fact, the law should be even more respected by the poor since they are most vulnerable to the machinations of the powerful. Central to Mordaunt's position, moreover, is the notion that, as laws are derived from principles which reflect God's wisdom, "men, however unanimous in sentiment have no more right to change them, than to blaspheme His holy name" (p. 441).

Aware of the inherent weakness of men, the Littlepages are convinced that only a society organized around immutable principles can save the republic. Consequently both Mordaunt and Hugh lash out against those who would alter the law to suit their own ends. Continuing his father's attack on "change," Mordaunt more correctly identifies the culprit as the tyranny of the majority:

God forbid that majorities should ever rule in all things in this republic or anywhere else. Such a state of things would soon become intolerable, rendering the government that admitted of its existence the most odious tyranny that has been known in Christendom in modern times. The government of this country is the sway of certain great and incontestable principles, that are just in themselves, and which are set forth in the several constitutions . . . God forbid, I repeat, that a mere personal majority should assume the power which alone belongs to principles. (p. 137)

In The Redskins, Hugh adds that the entire problem is attributable to a fundamental weakness in the system--the erroneous assumption that "there are both honesty and intelligence enough in the body of the community to see them [the laws] well made, and well administered" (p. 44).

To the Littlepages, the proponents of majority rule are, in reality, democratic levellers who refuse to admit that the landed gentry have earned their place in the social system. As Corny had indicted Jason on this account, so too does his son Mordaunt. He explains that these disclaimers, coming from a society where few such distinctions exist, "are incapable of even seeing, much less of appreciating the vast differences that are created by habits, opinions, and education, but who reduce all moral discrepancies to dollars and cents. . . . One of their first acts is to assail the title of the landlord . . . by lying and slandering . . . the lie only varies in particulars. . . . It is the lie of the Father of Lies, who varies it to suit circumstances and believers" (p. 251).

Continuing the attack on the majority and the levelling instinct, Hugh insists that the farmers are obligated to their contracts and that he is entitled to be- have and handle his property as he sees fit. Still faithful to law, he sees, however, that what his ancestors had warned against has begun to destroy the republic. "America no longer seemed America to my eyes," he sadly notes, "but in place of its ancient submission to the law . . . there had been substituted the rapacity of the plunderer . . . and the truckling of the wretches intrusted with authority; men who were playing into the hands of the demagogues, solely in order to secure majorities to perpetuate their own influence" (p. 418).

Although America may have changed its moral standards and values, the Littlepages' persistent support of a government of law, respect for the land, service to the country, and high ideals mark them as a force for moral and social stability. Despite the consistency of their beliefs, the Littlepages, as has been suggested, do change. Increasingly more perceptive in their estimate of the threat posed by the Newcome types and more vocal in their defense of the agrarian order and in their attack on the nation's enemies, they represent in the trilogy a movement from naivèté and acceptance to cynicism and rejection in the attitude and outlook of the American gentleman. Undoubtedly Cooper's attempt to capture the

growing intensity of America's problems partially explains these character alterations, but the fictional growth of the Littlepage narrators throughout the course of the novels is a patterned one that reveals yet another function of the genteel protagonists: the portrayal of the evolution of the landed gentleman from a provincial, class conscious, English-oriented colonial to a sophisticated, democratic, confident American, capable of objectively and intelligently evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the republic.

In Satanstoe, for example, Cooper makes it clear that the Littlepages, for all their strengths, are only fledgling Americans. For one thing, Corny is awed and intimidated by his English counterparts, the British officers stationed in New York and Albany, whose "metropolitan superiority over provincial ignorance and provincial dependence . . . had an effect on me, I find it difficult to describe" (p. 91). In truth, Corny's attitude is a combination of scorn and self-consciousness; but his deference to the English is obvious in his relationship with Major Bulstrode whom he fears will win Anneke Mordaunt's hand. Corny's deference, however, is as much a symptom of the provinciality of the American gentleman as it is a mark of his status as a second class citizen. Untraveled, unsophisticated, and, for the most part, unlettered,<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Cooper describes Corny's education at Nassau Hall with tongue-in-cheek humor. See pp. 32-34.

he is impressed with all he sees in his first visit to New York City where he notes with wonder the governor's carriage, Trinity Church, City Hall etc., and expresses delight at the elegance of the dining habits which includes the serving of soup, "a dish that I never saw at Satanstoe, except in the most familiar way" (p. 118).

Furthermore, extremely conscious of social class, Corny is overwhelmed by the Mordaunts who are to him the height of gentility. He notes that Anneke possesses all the grace of a young lady of the better class and admits that her father, Herman Mordaunt, is "the highest bred man I have ever seen." By marrying Anneke, Corny, in effect, moves up the social ladder and boasts at the end of the novel that, having added Lilacs bush, the Mordaunt estate, and Anneke's mother's fortune to the Littlepage coffers, "we made but one family, between town, Lilacs bush and Satanstoe . . . ." (p. 501). More concerned with questions of class, marriage, and manners, Corny is not the perceptive social critic that Mordaunt and Hugh will become; he even miscalculates the seriousness of the challenge posed by Jason Newcome. Nonetheless, his experiences in the frontier and in the French and Indian War bring some degree of maturity and sophistication. In addition, Bulstrode's dismissal by Anneke suggests, according to Donald Ringe, that "a democratic society is assured, one in which all subsequent social conflicts must develop from elements inherent in the



society itself."<sup>11</sup>

Having broken with the Crown and having emerged as leaders in the Revolution, the Littlepages of The Chainbearer are evidence of rapid progress and the Americanization of the gentleman. Mordaunt, for example, is totally free from English influence.

As James Grossman points out, despite Corny's closing notice that his son will have more to say of Harry Bulstrode, "Mordaunt knows so little of his father's friend that on the first page of The Chainbearer he describes him vaguely as a 'Sir Something Bulstrode.'"<sup>12</sup> And unlike Corny whose encounters with the world outside Westchester County were limited, Mordaunt has added to his sophistication and to his ability to judge more accurately the life style and values of his own country by having toured Europe.<sup>13</sup> More importantly, in accepting Andries Coejemans, a chainbearer, as his equal, and in marrying Coejeman's niece, Dus Malbone,

<sup>11</sup>James Fenimore Cooper (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1962), p. 118.

<sup>12</sup>James Fenimore Cooper (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1949), p. 206.

<sup>13</sup>Comparing the eating habits of both continents, for example, Mordaunt reports, "If the service were only as tasteful, and the courtesy as good with us, as both are in France, for instance, America would be the very paradise of the epicure. . . . I have been abroad in these later times, and speak of what I know" (Ch., p. 87).

a genteel but poor girl, Mordaunt shows that he is less conscious of social class than his father.

In addition to being more independent, more sophisticated, and more democratic than Corny, Mordaunt is also more perceptive in analyzing the problems of a democracy. Interpreting the Newcomes' activities as indicators of a class struggle, he, as has already been noted, attacks the root of the problem--the tyranny of the majority and the levelling instinct of a democracy. Adding a new dimension to the trilogy, however, he describes the conflict as no less than a recurrence of the eternal struggle of good and evil and in so doing foreshadows the plight of the gentle man detailed more thoroughly in The Redskins:

But roguery is so active, while virtue is so apt to be passive, that in the eternal conflict which is waged between them, that which is gained by the truth and inherent power of the last is, half the time, more than neutralized by the unwearied exertions of the first! This, I fear, may be found to contain the weak spot of our institutions. So long as law represents the authority of an individual, individual pride and jealousy may stimulate it to constant watchfulness; whereas, law representing the community, carries with it a divided responsibility, that needs the excitement of intolerable abuses ere it will arouse itself in its own vindication. The result is merely another proof that, in the management of the ordinary affairs of life, men are usually found to be stronger than principles. (Ch. p. 262)

Mordaunt's view of America is, however, a balanced one.

While noting its weaknesses, he also contends that "a respect for law is a distinguishing trait in the American character"

and concludes his narrative with an optimistic, if not cheerful, tone.

Although The Redskins continues to illustrate the evolution of the American gentleman, Hugh, a bit too haughty, especially in the first half of the novel, is not nearly as sympathetic or as effective as the previous narrators.<sup>14</sup> A sophisticated world traveler, Hugh, for example, refers to his trip back to America as consisting "of the usual amount of good and bad weather, the usual amount of ennui" (p. 68). On land his boredom turns to condescension in regard to New York City and even Ravensnest, both of which Corny had lavishly praised. Admitting that New York is an important town in its way, he unfavorably compares the "commercial emporium" with the great cities of Europe and later adds that Ravensnest, in contrast to the luxury of Europe, "mortified and disappointed" him. Hugh's arrogance and condescension, over-played

<sup>14</sup>For Donald Ringe, "In some ways, the heroes became less attractive as we move through the series, and the physical world itself seems to shrink" ("Cooper's Littlepage Novels," 233); James Grossman complains that Hugh's narration is a "struggle more by his argument with the reader than by his action in the tale, to save civilization from immediate catastrophe" (James Fenimore Cooper, p. 213); Robert Zoellner goes so far as to say that Hugh has "a severe case of emotional alienation" ("Cooper's Sea Novels: His Social Theories as Expressed Symbolically Through the Gentleman-Leader and the Microcosmic Ship on the Sea-Frontier" Diss. Wisconsin 1962, p. 33); and Cooper himself apologized for his narrator, noting that Hugh's narrative is "the language of a man who writes with the ardor of youth increased by the sense of wrong" (Red., p. 535).

to be sure, have a purpose, however--one directed at pricking the inflated, provincial, notion of American superiority which Cooper found as appalling as the slavish worship of Europe.<sup>15</sup>

In actuality, Hugh is Cooper's conception of the modern American gentleman. As dedicated to the land, law, and Christian ethics as Corny and Mordaunt, Hugh is the most democratic of all the Littlepages. Although Corny married up and Mordaunt wed a poor but genteel wife, Hugh accepts the poor daughter of a rural Episcopalian minister. Moreover, he is willing to remove the canopy from the family church pew (provided he is not forced) because he does not believe in arbitrary social distinctions. In addition, more analytical, worldly-wise, and well educated than his predecessors, and geographically removed from America for some time, Hugh is ostensibly more perceptive and objective in his appraisal of America's dilemma.

Hugh's most revealing personal characteristic, however, is neither his democratic outlook, worldly

<sup>15</sup> In his preface to The Redskins, Cooper writes: "We have elsewhere imputed much of the anti-rent feeling to provincial education and habits . . . our opinion is unchanged . . . many excellent things, moral and physical are to be found within these limits [New York State] beyond a question; but we happen to know by an experience that has extended to other quarters of the world, for a time now exceeding forty years, that more are to be found beyond them. If 'honorable gentlemen' at Albany fancy the reverse, they must still permit us to believe they are too much under the influence of provincial notions" (pp. xvi-xvii).

sophistication, or analytical powers, but his cynicism, the product of a changing America. Having returned to protect the Littlepage home, property, and family from the dangers of the anti-rent rebellion, he soon discovers that moral decay has saturated the society for which generations of his ancestors had toiled and bled. Courage, honor, principle, and duty are no longer valued, instead the landed gentleman has become the target not only of the anti-renters but of a misguided press, a corrupt jury system, and a biased state legislature.<sup>16</sup>

In short, a government of men has replaced a government of law; and materialism, greed, and the levelling instinct have displaced genteel values. Whereas only fifty years before, Mordaunt offered this generally accepted definition of the gentleman:

In addition to the great indispensables of tastes, manners and opinions, based on intelligence and civilization, and all those liberal qualities that mark his caste, he cannot stoop to meanness of any sort. He is truthful out of self-respect . . . free with his money . . . superior to scandal. . . .  
(Ch, p. 172)

Hugh sarcastically paraphrases contemporary society's idea of the gentleman:

Thus, if there happen to be a man whose property is assessed at twenty-five per cent above that of all his neighbors---who must have right on his side bright as a cloudless sun to get a verdict, if obliged to appeal to the laws--who pays fifty per

<sup>16</sup>See The Redskins, pp. 168, 244, 414, 534.

cent more for every thing he sells, than any other person near him--who is surrounded by rancorous enemies, in the midst of a seeming state of peace--who has everything he says and does perverted, and added to, and lied about--who is traduced because his dinner hour is later than that of "other folks"--who don't stoop, but is straight in the back--who presumes to doubt that this country in general, and his own township in particular, is the focus of civilization--who hesitates about signing his name to any flagrant instance of ignorance, bad taste, or worse morals, that his neighbors may get up in the shape of a petition, remonstrance, or resolution--depend on it that man is a prodigious aristocrat, and one who for his many offenses and manner of lording it over mankind, deserves to be banished. (p. 225)

Hugh realizes that the gentleman has become a victim of the erosion of law and, ironically, of his own steadfast allegiance to a moral code that others find it convenient to disregard, a predicament verbalized by Hugh's Uncle Ro who complains that "we are worse off than if we were tied in a state of nature, in many respects; having our hands tied by the responsibility that belongs to our position and means, while those who choose to assail us are under a mere nominal restraint. They make the magistrates, who are altogether in their interests; and they elect the sheriffs who are to see the laws are executed" (p. 452).

Cooper's history of the landed gentry concludes, therefore, with the image of the gentleman as an outsider, "a sort of stranger in my own domain," as Hugh describes himself. Bitterly, Hugh announces that America, offering no incentive for the gentleman, is cursed, that "military

fame, military rank, even, are unattainable, under our system! The arts, letters, and science bring little or no reward; and there being no political rank that a man of refinement would care for, men must live for money, or live altogether for another state of being" (p. 213). With home, land, and reputation under siege and with moral and social disorder unchecked, Hugh leaves Ravensnest as Cooper sarcastically adds, "Should Washington fail him, he has the refuge of Florence open, where he can reside among the other victims of oppression with the advantage of being admired as a refugee from republican tyranny" (p. 536). Thus The Redskins presents the tragic dispossession of the landed gentry, reveals Cooper's loss of hope in the possibility of a social order led by the gentleman, and indicts America for its treatment of those whose vision forged the structure of the republic.

But if the Littlepages are Cooper's most important and most fully developed social beau ideals, his characterization of them is not without fault. Carried away with theme, Cooper neglected his protagonists as the trilogy progressed, a failing that has drawn wide criticism.<sup>17</sup> Only Corny, for example, is a vibrant, believable character and only his views are smoothly integrated into the framework of the plot. Mordaunt and Hugh, on the other

<sup>17</sup>See note 14 in this chapter.

hand, are so caught in the grip of theme that, as plot gives way to polemics in the trilogy, Hugh, in particular, becomes little more than a mechanical contrivance for the delivery of set speeches and longwinded arguments, presented at the expense of plot and character development.

Moreover, the Littlepages are portrayed as insensitive to the problems of the Indian and unaware of their own participation in the cyclical tragedy of the land, a theme implied throughout the novels by the ageless Susquesus. In The Redskins, for example, the wise Onondago notes, "The wicked spirit that drove out the red man is now about to drive off the pale face chiefs. It is the same devil, and it is no other. He wanted land then, and he wants land now" (p. 512). Earlier, Susquesus had indicted Corny for measuring the land and Mordaunt for not knowing the land. So consistent and accusing are Susquesus' comments and so ineffective is the Littlepage response that Cooper's celebration of the American ideal is at least mildly tainted.

Nonetheless, Cooper's most important and most fully developed social beau ideals more than adequately dramatize the rise and fall of genteel values in America. The destruction of the Littlepage dynasty, moreover, foreshadows the gentleman's future role in Cooper's fiction. Speaking in general terms, Frank Collins observes that for



Cooper the American idyll was "less a sanctuary than a place where sanctuaries (home, countryside, forest) might exist. . . ." <sup>18</sup> For Cooper's gentleman hero this sanctuary is forever destroyed with the collapse of the Littlepage world. In his last novels, therefore, Cooper turned to the only sanctuary still remaining, "the other state of being" to which Hugh Littlepage refers, and sought to convert his landed protagonist into a submissive hero concerned with new issues and a new set of values.

<sup>18</sup>"Cooper and the American Dream," PMLA, 81 (1966), 89.

## CHAPTER VI

## COOPER'S LAST NOVELS

Although the Littlepages are Cooper's most important and most effectively drawn genteel figures, the trilogy, ironically, only further aggravated certain of Cooper's problems. For one thing, he was concerned with the dwindling returns from the sale of the Littlepage novels<sup>1</sup> and puzzled by their critical reception.<sup>2</sup> For another, his unpopularity with the public and press was compounded in part by his strategy in the anti-rent novels of too closely identifying himself with the often arrogant and single-minded opinions of his narrators.<sup>3</sup> In yet another sense,

<sup>1</sup>Although the sales of Cooper's books in America did not diminish in the 1840's, lower royalty rates decreased his financial return. See William Charvat, "Cooper as a Professional Author," New York History, 35 (1954), 496-511. Threatening to sever his relationship with Richard Bentley, his English publisher, Cooper finally agreed to accept a reduced price for the Littlepage novels, but not before a loud and lengthy protest. See The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper V, ed. James Franklin Beard (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1960-62), 8, 18-20, 55-56.

<sup>2</sup>See Letters and Journals V, 44, 106. Actually neither Satanstoe nor The Chainbearer was accorded even one important review. See Fenimore Cooper: The Critical Heritage, ed. George Dekker and John P. McWilliams (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup>James Beard theorizes that "The Redskins . . . should surely have had a disinterested or ambivalent narrator. When the reader finds him an aggrieved character whose behavior is permeated by self-interest and self-pity, he is tempted to telescope author and narrator and regard the book as an elaborate, ill-considered apology for a caste" (Letters and Journals V, 5).

the destruction of the Littlepage dynasty and the dis-possession of the landed gentleman in The Redskins forced Cooper into a literary corner. Denied the image of the landed gentry, having concluded his fictional history of the American gentleman, and having outgrown the romantic frontier-sea adventure story, Cooper had little choice but to seek new avenues for his fictional spokesman.

Consequently Cooper's last works and their protagonists are decidedly different from the social protest novels and their agrarian beau ideals. Gone are the landed gentlemen, the family dynasties, the manners and values of the genteel order, and the sequential plan of novels like Afloat and Ashore and the Littlepage trilogy which presented the temporal problems of life in upstate New York. In their stead, Cooper produced five novels whose varied settings, generic differences, and dissimilar protagonists testify to his efforts to create a new context and a new spokesman for his changing views. These novels are The Crater (1847), a Robinson Crusoe type, social-adventure tale set in the mid-Pacific; Jack Tier (1848), an anti-romantic sea tale that takes place off the Florida keys; Oak Openings (1848), a historical romance of the 1812 period in frontier Michigan; The Sea Lions (1849), a journey to the antarctic; and The Ways of the Hour (1850), a murder mystery set in contemporary New York City. Cooper's protagonists, moreover, are as dissimilar as the novels. Mark Wollaston

(The Crater), a Pennsylvania sailor turned landed gentleman, is, for example, the only character who can be called a gentleman in the traditional sense. Quite unlike Wollaston, Harry Mulford (Jack Tier) is a poor New Yorker whose social status is unclear and whose character and motivation are somewhat suspect. Ben Boden, the familyless, backwoods bee-hunter of Oak Openings is no more than a genteel double of the Leatherstocking; and Roswell Gardiner (The Sea Lions), an orphaned sailor, is a member of a family that originally settled one of the islands off Suffolk County, New York. Cooper's final protagonist, Thomas Dunscomb (The Ways of the Hour) is an elderly Manhattan lawyer.

Despite their differences, the later novels share a similarity of purpose that is, in the last analysis, the natural evolution of ideas implicit in the Littlepage and other of Cooper's works. If the Littlepage trilogy portrayed, for example, a loss of hope in the possibility of a republic governed by moral truths and led by men of principle and manners, they further implied a vision made even darker by the realization that the folly and failings witnessed by the Littlepages were an inherent part of human nature that the genteel code in itself was powerless to change. In point of fact, the code, Cooper appeared to conclude, offered no more protection against evil than any other social philosophy, and the gentleman himself was no less subject to attack (and even error) than any other man.

Not only was the genteel code vulnerable, but it provided a false security because it placed too much emphasis on social schemes, self-reliance, and property and not enough on spiritual awareness and Christian humility. Man's only alternative, therefore, lay in a kind of tragic acceptance of life made possible only by a spiritual awakening and a moral rejuvenation.

As a result, Cooper's last novels are motivated by what Donald Ringe describes as a search for the definition and discovery of truth.<sup>4</sup> All five of the novels, in one way or another, affirm the necessity of embracing the spiritual understandings inherent in Christian principles and underscore man's inability to reach the truth by relying solely on reason and fact. All five further suggest, according to Frank Collins, that "man in his terrible plasticity must inevitably follow the course of being directed by God or used by Satan. . . ."5

To dramatize this clear, simple, and necessary choice, Cooper again turned to the character who had represented, throughout the novels, a moral as well as

<sup>4</sup>The later novels, Ringe explains, argue that, although the average man cannot discern the truth, the "ideal of Christian humility and self-control" may serve as a formidable weapon against evil and ignorance. See "Cooper's Last Novels: 1847-1850," PMLA, 75 (1960), 583-590.

<sup>5</sup>"Cooper and the American Dream," PMLA, 81 (1966), 93.

social ideal. From Precaution to The Redskins, the genteel hero, a decidedly Christian gentleman, had based his code on Christian ethics and his actions on an awareness of his maker. Usually, however, his religion, subordinated to social issues, manners, and self-reliance, was described as no more than one of the traits which marked the character and behavior of the gentleman. Beginning with The Crater, however, Cooper, growing increasingly religious himself but not to be officially confirmed in the Episcopal Church until a few months before his death, began to convert his social hero into a spiritual ideal by minimizing the gentleman's social identity and by emphasizing his spiritual development.

The protagonists of the later novels, therefore, are quite unlike their literary predecessors. In particular, Cooper altered or eliminated many of the methods he traditionally used to characterize his young hero. Seldom, for instance, does he include the extended examples of manners, speech, and chivalry that once stood as the gentleman's hallmarks; even the action-ethic, considerably less prominent, is motivated by concerns less noble than responsibility, courage, and honor. In addition, a major down-grading in social rank occurs. Portrayed first as aristocrats, then as landed gentry, Cooper's later beau ideals are, with the possible exception of Mark Wollaston, typical middle-class men who must work for their daily bread.

Without vested interests in property, land, and law, they are, therefore, neither the leaders, spokesmen, nor defenders of society's institutions. Social institutions, when discussed at all, are generally described in a religious framework, a prime example of which is the change in marriage from a symbol of orderly social movement to a force for religious conversion and spiritual union. Finally, little is made of family, inheritance, and continuity, the fictional devices through which Cooper had identified the gentleman's sense of time and place, stability and order.

Instead of social identity and genteel behavior, Cooper concentrates on the spiritual values of his new hero who learns, for example, that time and place are only additional reminders of man's probationary stay on earth. Moreover, in three of the novels, The Crater, Jack Tier, and The Sea Lions, the protagonists experience a spiritual awakening that causes them to reevaluate their place in the universe. Resembling the heroes of modern fiction in the sense of being imbued with a disturbing form of discontent--spiritual unrest,<sup>6</sup> Wollaston, Mulford, and Gardiner each

<sup>6</sup>Although Sean O'Faolain does not include Cooper in his study of fictional heroes, his analysis suggests that the protagonists of Cooper's late novels are "transitional" heroes who, while still representing socially approved norms, foreshadow the more subjective figures of modern literature. See The Vanishing Hero (Freeport, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), pp. xii-xxv.

discovers that he, as much as his antagonist, is the enemy and that without acknowledging the presence and power of God no meaning can be found. Although gradual, and at times poorly handled in individual novels, the spiritual growth of Cooper's gentleman from The Crater to The Sea Lions is clear and certain, with the result that in The Sea Lions the hero's last fictional role is that of a properly submissive Christian whose spiritual vision enables him to place social concerns in a clear perspective and allows him to reconcile himself with the ways of the world.

Mark Wollaston of The Crater, however, might best be described as a transition character, a bridge between the landed gentry and the humble Christian gentleman. Resembling the Littlepages, he is a member of a family, for example, that "comes from a part of this great republic where the names are still as simple, unpretending, and as good Saxon English, as in the county of Kent itself" (p. 13). Moreover, the Wollastons "retain some of the good old fashion directness and simplicity," scorn New England notions, and possess "solid and respectable habits." And Mark himself, an alumnus of the Littlepage alma-mater, Nassau Hall, voices social criticism that would make any Littlepage proud. "Progress was the great desideratum; and change was the handmaiden of progress," (p. 471) he complains, echoing Corny, Mordaunt, and Hugh. In fact, in the latter half of the novel, he becomes a landed



gentleman whose views of property are identical to those of the Littlepages.<sup>7</sup>

Actually the general scheme of The Crater owes much to the Littlepage trilogy; but, instead of recording the establishment and collapse of the genteel order over a hundred year period, Cooper compresses time in the novel to barely one generation and switches the setting to a volcanic island in the mid-Pacific.<sup>8</sup> There the shipwrecked Wollaston in frontier fashion transforms a barren reef into an Edenic paradise and founds a peaceful republic governed by moral principles and led by gentlemen. Eventually the same problems that surface in the trilogy--greed, ignorance, and mistaken notions of equality and democracy--corrupt Mark's idyllic society; and it vanishes beneath the sea, a victim of God's wrath.

Although the plot is no more than another opportunity for Cooper to air once again his social views, for the first time in his fiction he directly defines these views in

<sup>7</sup> Like Cooper in The American Democrat, Paul Powis in Homeward Bound, and The Littlepages, Wollaston believes that "civilization could not exist without property, or property without a direct personal interest in both its accumulation and its preservation" (p. 324).

<sup>8</sup> Donald Ringe believes that, in presenting his material through an imaginary society, "Cooper seems to have consciously sought to make his meaning as clear and as acceptable to a contemporary audience as he possibly could" (James Fenimore Cooper [New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1962], p. 128).

spiritual terms, largely by recasting his genteel standard bearer. Educated, able, and self-reliant, Wollaston, however, is still within the tradition of the genteel hero. At sea his natural abilities earn him quick promotions and the respect of his colleagues; and, after the shipwreck which maroons him and his friend, Bob Betts, on the tiny lifeless reef, he displays vigor, creativity, and resourcefulness. Quickly and efficiently, he transforms what might have been a hopeless existence into a purposeful, comfortable stay. Fertilizing the reef with guano, he plants grass, trees, and vegetables from seeds in the ship's stores, raises animals, and even builds a small boat.

Eventually, however, Mark succumbs to a severe and lengthy illness which Cooper uses as a catalyst for the spiritual rebirth of his genteel protagonist. Reflecting on his illness, studying the stars, and noting the blessings that surround him, Wollaston becomes acutely aware of "the true character of our probationary period here on earth" and gains a new sense of purpose and a clearer understanding of his relationship to the universe--insights which place him "in much closer communion with his Creator." In particular, Mark's spiritual rebirth teaches him humility regarding "his own position in the scale of created beings," and regarding the insignificance of man compared to "the power and wisdom of the Deity." Furthermore, he learns that self-reliance has its limitations, that without divine assistance no social or

individual progress is possible, and that ultimately all of man's schemes and creations are destined to become the unwitting victims of time.

In effect, Mark emerges as one capable of balancing "reason and faith, knowledge and belief"<sup>9</sup> in his attitudes and his actions. For his spiritual rejuvenation, he is rewarded with a substantial addition to his tiny reef, a new island atoll which rises after a sudden volcanic eruption. Likening himself to "Adam in the garden of Eden, before woman was given to him for a companion," (p. 223) he sets about naming the geographic features of the island chain thereby bringing order to God's most recent creation which under Mark's care blossoms into an island paradise.

Later, when stray sailors, refugees from distant islands, and American immigrants swell the colony's population, Mark, elected governor for life, attempts to construct a social-political order based on simple and familiar principles: the sanctity of private property, equal rights under law, and government by the best qualified. He is guided, moreover, by the knowledge that "great moral truths existed as the law of the human family, and that they were not to be set aside by visionaries; and least of all, with

<sup>9</sup>Ringe uses these words to describe Cooper's general direction in the later novels. See "Cooper's Last Novels," 586.

impunity" (p. 325).<sup>10</sup>

Braced by these moral truths and Mark's balanced vision, the colony, like the Littlepage patents and the American republic in general, prospers; but visionaries soon effect a second change in the island paradise. Unscrupulous lawyers, narrow minded clerics, and levelling journalists manipulate the laws, instigate religious controversies, and prattle about social equalities where none in fact exist. So corrupting is their influence that "the ancient humility," Cooper reports, "seemed suddenly to disappear; and in its place a vain-glorious estimate of themselves and of their prowess arose among the people. The word 'people,' too was in everybody's mouth as if the colonists themselves, had made those lovely islands, endowed them with fertility, and rendered them . . . scenes of the most exquisite rural beauty, as well as granaries of abundance" (p. 462).

As for God's agent in the founding and supervision of the colony, Mark, like the Littlepages, becomes the object of the "people's" meanness. Having lost their humility before God and their respect for the gentleman-leader, the "people" pronounce Mark "proud because he did not neglect his

<sup>10</sup>Relying heavily on this statement, John C. McCloskey interprets The Crater as an attack upon "Fourierism and similar socialist doctrines based upon the concepts of equality and a community of interests . . ." ("Cooper's Political Views in The Crater," MP, 53 [November 1955], 115).

teeth, as the majority did, eat when they ate, and otherwise presumed to be of different habits from those around him. Some even objected to him because he spat in his pocket-handkerchief, and did not blow his nose with his fingers" (p. 472). To all this, Mark, supported by his newly-gained truths, offers a simple and controlled response. Unlike Cooper's previous gentlemen, who with the power of words and arms vociferously defended their point of view, he merely reminds the colonists that the great principles which govern human conduct have been ordained by God and are not subject to change. With this said, Cooper's new hero submits to "progress," becomes a private citizen, and soon leaves his island utopia.

Actually, the actions of the colonists only bear out Mark's tragic view of life on earth. Resignedly, he concludes that time and man's flawed nature destroy even the best of efforts, that resistance is futile, and that man's only alternative is to live for the next world:

In the meantime, the earth revolves; men are born, live their time, and die; communities are formed and are dissolved; dynasties appear and disappear; good contends with evil, and evil still has its day; the whole, however, advancing slowly but unerringly towards the great consummation, which was designed from the beginning, and which is certain to arrive in the end, as that the sun sets at night and rises in the morning. The supreme folly of the hour is to imagine that perfection will come before its stated time. (p. 478)

As a footnote to Mark's prophetic comments, another volcanic eruption returns the reef to its former state, destroying all the inhabitants except for Mark, his family and friends who had earlier returned to America.

Unquestionably, Cooper's use of divine intervention is heavy-handed; so too, in some ways, is his portrayal of the Christian gentleman. From one angle, Mark's spiritual conversion seems no more than a device to enlist religion as a justification for the social theories presented in the novel. Nonetheless, Wollaston's characterization reflects a new dimension in the development of the genteel protagonist. Still suggesting the manners, action-ethic, and social ideals of his predecessors, he additionally introduces Cooper's growing conviction that social ideals and the personal virtues of knowledge and self-reliance are secondary to a proper understanding of man's insignificance in the face of "the great consummation, which was designed from the beginning" (p. 478).

In his next novel, Cooper continued to develop the spiritual themes introduced in The Crater through the deepening perspective of his genteel protagonist. The result in Jack Tier, however, is a radical change in Cooper's conception of the sea tale and in his characterization of the gentleman sailor.<sup>11</sup> In the early sea novels,

<sup>11</sup>Written almost concurrently with The Crater, and having appeared first in Graham's magazine (1846-1848), Jack Tier was also undoubtedly influenced by the demands of serialization.

genteel heroes like Edward Griffith, Henry Wilder, and Paul Powis head a clearly defined social structure of tightly-knit and efficient seamen. Skilled sailors and well-bred young men, they symbolize an iron-clad code of manners and action capable of thwarting any threat to man's ordered world, including the sea itself. Their self-reliance in battle, in courtship, and in every day affairs idealistically portrays and stoutly defends man's ability to triumph by the force of his own initiative within a framework of traditional values. Taken together, the tales and their chivalric heroes testify to the validity of the genteel code and the romantic outlook of their author.

Jack Tier, however, is a grim rejection of this idealized point of view.<sup>12</sup> Greed and ignorance, cruelty and deception are the orders of the day aboard the Molly Swash, which is peopled not with gallant youths, reverential subordinates, resourceful officers, and graceful ladies but by a captain as sinister as his name (Spike); an obstinately ignorant matron, Mrs. Budd; a misshapen, mysterious seaman, Jack Tier; a faint-hearted plump heroine, Rose Budd; and a new kind of genteel sailor, Harry Mulford.

<sup>12</sup> While many Cooper critics have commented on the realism of Jack Tier, James Grossman has specifically outlined the change in Cooper's treatment of life at sea by comparing the novel to The Red Rover. See James Fenimore Cooper, pp. 225-228.

Not fitting the conventional pattern of the genteel hero, Mulford is neither an aristocrat, landed gentry, nor even a gentleman in terms of social level. A poor sailor following in the footsteps of his shipmaster father, he is introduced, for example, without the usual testaments of breeding, family, education, wealth, or patriotic service. Cooper does add that Mulford, like Jasper Western before him, is "better educated and better connected than was customary for the class"; but this abbreviated and somewhat apologetic testimonial does little to provide Mulford with the secure identity of time and place that characterizes most of Cooper's previous beau ideals. Moreover, while still crediting him with ability, intelligence, and manners, Cooper, by questioning Mulford's motivation, presents his young hero as a man with a flawed character (a slight flaw to be sure).

Heretofore a sign of excellence, the genteel protagonist's plot activities, even when clouded for purposes of suspense as in the case of Wilder, Powis, and Jasper Western, were motivated by patriotism, duty, and principle. However, Mulford's reasons for serving with Captain Spike, whose past is suspect and whose greed has led him to betray his country by selling arms to the enemy during the Mexican War,



are indicative of moral weakness.<sup>13</sup> Plot necessities notwithstanding, Cooper soft-pedals this uncomfortable alliance by noting that Mulford had, two or three times before, "thought of seeking another berth, on account of certain distrusts of Spike's occupation; but he was poor, and so long as he remained in the Swash, Harry's opportunities of meeting Rose were greatly increased" (pp. 78-79). The truth of the matter, as later revealed, is that Mulford, loyal to his captain and his ship, has confused duty and conscience, a theme that had interested Cooper as far back as The Spy. Whereas Cooper had skirted this issue in The Spy and had sided with the call of duty in The Pilot and The Red Rover, in Jack Tier he argues that duty is second to conscience in that men are obligated to differentiate "between a true and a false duty" (p. 201).

Mulford's confused loyalties are, moreover, only a symptom of what Cooper describes as too singular a dependence on self-reliance in matters of truth and morality. Mulford, Cooper notes, is a man whose "pride of profession and of manhood offered themselves as stumbling-blocks to prevent submission to his secret wishes" (p. 254). This self-reliance, a quality that Cooper had praised in previous novels,

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Philbrick observes that "before Jack Tier seamanship automatically entailed moral excellence" (James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961], p. 207).

is the result, Cooper continues, not of disbelief but of Mulford's having been taught that "the Anglo-Saxon mariner did not call on Hercules, on every occasion of difficulty and distress that occurred . . . but he put his own shoulder to the wheel, confident that Hercules would not forget to help him who knew how to help himself" (p. 254).

When Mulford and the Budd party (Rose, Mrs. Budd, and Jack Tier) finally leave the Molly Swash, however, Cooper quickly shows that self-reliance, without an equal measure of spiritual guidance, has its limitations. Having lost their little schooner in a squall, Mulford and his companions, encircled by sharks, exhausted, hungry, and thirsty, cling to the hull of the overturned and slowly sinking boat. The sharks, moreover, prevent Mulford from swimming to a small boat wedged in a reef only a few hundred yards away. Rose's response to their desperate situation is to seek God's succor, but Henry, who rarely prayed, is content to rely on his wits. A second time he refuses Rose's request to join her in prayer; but on the succeeding night Mulford, humbling himself before his maker, "called on the Divine aid, in a fervent but silent petition to God, to put away this trial from the youthful and beautiful Rose, at least, though he himself perished. It was the first prayer that Mulford had made in many months, or since he had joined the Swash . . ." (p. 256).

Having acknowledged God's power and man's limitations, Mulford, like Wollaston, is rewarded. Within hours, rain falls, further convincing him that "God is indeed with us" and that he mercifully "furnishes the means" for their survival. As proof, Mulford safely manages to swim to the nearby craft (unmolested by the sharks) where he finds food stored in the boat and fresh water in the recesses of the reef. Referring to the reef as that "blessed rock," Harry rows back and saves the ladies only moments before the hull sinks. For all his good luck, Mulford does not fail to thank his maker profusely, another sign that God-reliance has replaced his former self-reliant stance.

With his protagonist's emergence as a humble and contrite Christian gentleman, Cooper, as he did in The Crater, switches emphasis in the novel; but whereas Wollaston's conversion serves as a prelude to and a justification for Cooper's social theories, an attempt as it were to present a unified social-moral view, Mulford is relegated to a relatively minor position, a foil to the unrepentent Captain Spike. In the second half of the tale, he merely acts the part of the typical young lover engaged in flight and pursuit to save his lady from the villain. Relatively buried in the movements of Spike, Jack Tier, the American navy, and the Mexicans who await the arrival of Spike's ship, his spiritual change and even his presence as a character are obscured by the God-forsaken actions and

death of Spike in whom the "thought of the dread hereafter never entered"; and the revelation that Jack Tier is Spike's long abandoned wife.

With his return to the novel of adventure, Cooper, in effect, is indecisive as to the exact purpose of his genteel figure who in Jack Tier is neither a fully developed social nor spiritual ideal. On the social level, Mulford's characterization suggests an erosion of a number of the values and plot functions traditionally associated with the genteel hero. He voices no social criticism, for example, nor does he clearly represent the genteel code--although his defense of Rose is courageous and honorable and his cooperation with the American navy once again points to the patriotism of Cooper's gentlemen. In addition, little significance is attached to Mulford's marriage, certainly no suggestion that the social order has been stabilized or revitalized. In fact, Cooper does not even add his usual epilog to trace his hero's further achievements or to verify his character through the exploits of the son. All we know is that Mulford, by means of Rose's generosity (she is an heiress), continues his career at sea as the captain of his own ship.

On the spiritual level, Harry's characterization and plot activities in the early part of the novel reaffirm the change in the genteel protagonist from a self-reliant to

a God-reliant hero; but Cooper fails to develop this theme in Jack Tier. Actually Harry's spiritual transformation is treated perfunctorily. He suffers no internal debates, for example; and, unlike Mark Wollaston, reaches no poignant conclusions about his place in the scheme of things. In fact, Cooper, concentrating more on Captain Spike in the second half of the tale, offers little evidence that Mulford's moral development is sustained or far reaching. Instead, the theme of the Christian gentleman is assimilated into a larger issue--the decay of principle in a world where, according to Donald Ringe, "coherence and order have been lost in the only standard of value that many will admit--monetary gain." <sup>14</sup>

Cooper's next novel, Oak Openings, a historical romance set in Michigan during the War of 1812, is also dominated by a religious theme; but, using a frontier bee hunter as his young hero, Cooper concentrated not on the evolution of his spiritual ideal but on the Christianization of a savage Indian chieftain, Scalping Peter. Ben Boden, loving solitude and the forest, is characterized instead in the tradition of the Leatherstocking.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly

<sup>14</sup>James Fenimore Cooper, p. 134.

<sup>15</sup>Henry Nash Smith, attributing Boden's refinement to the "absence of a genteel hero," cites the bee hunter "as Cooper's ultimate achievement in trying to use a man of the wilderness as a technical hero" (Virgin Land [New York: Vintage Books, 1950], p. 75).

enough, Boden, however, eventually becomes an upper middle-class gentleman, general, and senator at the end of the novel as Cooper adds a passing tribute to manifest destiny and "the power of man when left free to make his own exertion" (p. 496). Boden's "dual identity" and Cooper's interest in Scalping Peter do little to advance the fictional development of the Christian gentleman; but in his next to last novel, The Sea Lions, Cooper reinstated his genteel figure as protagonist, eliminated distracting subplots, and brought the evolution of the genteel hero to its fictional conclusion.

One of Cooper's most complex novels, The Sea Lions, as Thomas Philbrick observes, brings together "the two great tendencies of his literary and philosophical development, the progress from romance to realism and a shift from a conception of the universe as the arena in which individual man wins fulfillment to a conception of the universe as the material expression of God's purpose. . . ." <sup>16</sup> The novel further suggests, according to Robert Zoellner, that to arrive at this conception man must conquer "the immense moral space which separates us from divinity. And this moral space Cooper suggests, cannot successfully be crossed unless one is both physically and spiritually resourceful,

<sup>16</sup> James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction, p. 209.

courageous, skillful, self-reliant, and God-reliant."<sup>17</sup> In Roswell Gardiner Cooper not only supplies such a hero; but, in Gardiner's journey from New York to Antarctica and back, he dramatizes both the crossing and the conquest of this "moral space."

To Zoellner, Gardiner is Cooper's "final view of the nature of the true leader of men";<sup>18</sup> but Philbrick, noting that Gardiner is "the kind of character that Cooper's early romances would have exalted," more accurately identifies him as "the representative of the unregenerate natural man, the man whose talents, admirable though they may be, are misdirected. . . ."<sup>19</sup> Far removed, in this sense, from the spotless young men who acted with valor and honor in The Leatherstocking Tales, repelled all villains in the sea novels, and carved a country out of the wilderness in the Littlepage trilogy, Gardiner is, nonetheless, the legitimate descendant of Cooper's literary gentlemen.

Introduced as a "young seaman par excellence," he belongs, for example, to one of the oldest families in the

<sup>17</sup>"James Fenimore Cooper's Sea Novels: His Social Theories as Expressed Symbolically Through the Gentleman-Leader of the Microcosmic Ship on the Sea Frontier". Diss. Wisconsin 1962, p. 622.

<sup>18</sup>"Cooper's Sea Novels," p. 602.

<sup>19</sup>James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction, p. 238.

Long Island area. "Indeed," Cooper notes, "he was known to be a descendant of Lyon Gardiner, that engineer who had been sent to the settlement . . . to lay out a fort" and who subsequently purchased and gave the family name to an island now in the possession of its ninth owner, "all having been of the name and blood of its original patentee." Moreover, at the end of the novel, Cooper invites a comparison between Gardiner and Miles Wallingford. Poor and orphaned, Gardiner, with the help of his wife's inheritance, gives up the sea, moves west of Cayuga Lake, and becomes a miller of some renown.

Gardiner, however, is neither a dashing, young aristocrat nor a landed gentleman. His early introduction as a distant member of the genteel establishment and his eventual return to the land as a prosperous miller serve only to frame his transformation from a proud man, overly dependent on reason and self-reliance, to a submissive Christian gentleman capable of understanding God's plan and man's role within the grand design. Although Cooper had attributed a similar understanding to Mark Wollaston and Harry Mulford, he abruptly sidestepped his protagonist's development in favor of social issues in The Crater and a general illustration of the decay of principle in Jack Tier. Concentrating exclusively on his genteel protagonist in The Sea Lions, Cooper thoroughly prepares for, analyzes, and integrates Gardiner's spiritual growth into the setting and



the plot. The result is that the introspective, sensitive Gardiner is Cooper's most convincing Christian gentleman.<sup>20</sup>

In theological terms, Gardiner's failing is that he cannot understand and so cannot accept the divinity of Christ; but in a more general sense, his flaw, like Mulford's, is his reliance on reason and self as the yardsticks for the measurement of ethical and moral conduct. Although Cooper had criticized the gentleman's failure to differentiate between true and false duty and his lopsided dependence on self-reliance in Jack Tier, in The Sea Lions, he additionally indicts Mulford for his rational approach to the discovery of truth. In this regard, Gardiner's shortcomings are typical of those whom Cooper held responsible for the moral and social degeneracy afflicting America.

Not a Newcome, however, Gardiner is directed by his conscience and a sense of high purpose. To his betrothed, Mary Pratt, he explains that it is man's obligation "to use those gifts which he has received from his Maker, and to treat the most important of all subjects, as a rational being instead of receiving a creed blindly, and without thought" (p. 118). His confidence in his own ability to

<sup>20</sup> Praising the novel in general, Herman Melville in his review judged Roswell's "timely conversion" to be "one of the subordinate parts of the book" ("Review of The Sea Lions," Literary World, V (April, 1849), 370, rpt. in Fenimore Cooper: The Critical Heritage, p. 243).

discover the truth extends even to whaling as he notes, "Nor do I care so much for charts. They are well enough when a vessel is on her road; but, as for whales or seals, the man who wishes to find either, in these times, has to look for them, as I tell my owner" (p. 82). Believing that "if we do not take care of ourselves, no one will take care of us," Roswell sails for Antarctica in search of seals and buried treasure--a fateful journey in which he finds that the most valuable treasure is the sublimity and magnificence of God's creation and discovers that man's ability to "take care of ourselves in the search for truth is grossly overestimated."

Trapped in the Antarctic ice where he must spend a winter without adequate protection, the Deistic, self-centered Gardiner ultimately concludes that "Christianity admitted of no half-way belief; it was all true, or it was wholly false" (p. 411). Gardiner's change of heart is no quick process. In addition to the pressure previously exerted by Mary, he comes under the tutelage of an old salt, Stimson, who reminds him throughout the long winter that the Deity is by nature inscrutable. It is neither the pleading of Mary nor the counsel of Stimson which precipitates Gardiner's religious conversion, however, but a single confrontation with the majesty of the universe, a method Cooper had used both in The Crater and Jack Tier.

Staring at the Southern Cross, Roswell, like Wollaston, simultaneously discovers the sublimity of God and the meanness of man. "Never before," writes Cooper, "had he been so conscious of his own insignificance, as he became while looking on the firmament that night, glowing with its bright worlds and suns, doubtless the centres of other systems in which distance swallowed up the lesser orbs" (p. 408).

As a result of this spiritual insight, Gardiner's conception of himself changes. "Fast getting to be humbled and searching" he realizes his presumptuousness in demanding to understand God, his overestimation of man's significance, and his error in measuring truth by reason alone. Protected now by his faith, Roswell weathers the Antarctic winter until the spring thaw frees the Sea Lion from the ice. On his way home, he wonders, "What then, was that intellect of which he had been so proud, and what reason had he to rely on himself on these matters that lay equally beyond the cradle and the grave . . ." (p. 443).

With Gardiner safely back at Oyster Pond, New York, Cooper concludes his study of the Christian gentleman with Gardiner's marriage to Mary Pratt. Formerly awarded to the genteel hero for his valor and celebrated as an institution which furthered social stability and civilization, marriage in The Sea Lions, however, becomes a reward for spiritual progress. By being named executor of Deacon Pratt's estate and

by wedding Mary, Gardiner is assured of an opportunity to revitalize his family line. In addition, marriage provides him a chance to begin anew. With the help of Mary who did not consider him "safe so long as he could scent the odors of a salt marsh," Gardiner rejects his past (he is not heir to the family estate), moves west, and never wavers in his faith "from the time when his feelings were awakened by the just view of his own insignificance, as compared to the power of God" (p. 490).

Cooper went on to write one more novel, The Ways of the Hour, before his death in 1851; but The Sea Lions, the last work to make significant use of the genteel figure, is, in that sense, a more fitting conclusion to his literary career; for, by adding spiritual values to his social beau ideal, Cooper in his later novels broadened and made clearer the code by which the gentleman symbolized Cooper's own vision throughout his fiction. The later novels, to be sure, are as religiously heavy-handed as the Littlepage trilogy is socially dogmatic; a similar charge might also be levelled at the characterization of the genteel protagonists. Nevertheless, the creation of the Christian gentleman remains as yet another sign of Cooper's consistent and imaginative use of his genteel heroes and provides yet another avenue by which his later novels might be studied.

## CHAPTER VII

## CONCLUSION

True to the demands of romance, Cooper's characters are either honorable or treacherous, principled or unprincipled, virtuous or sinful. Whether villains or heroes, however, they reflect his concern not with the trivialities and fluctuations of day to day existence but with the immutable, universal truths of human nature. Believing men in general to be weak, fallible, and selfish, he presented as models to be imitated numerous fictional portraits of people not as they are but as they might be. Explaining that his models were the result of a blending of traits chosen from different people, "as the Grecian statue of Venus is said to have been designed,"<sup>1</sup> Cooper added that "it is the privilege of all writers of fiction . . . to present the beau ideal of their character to the reader."<sup>2</sup> Faithful to this method of characterization, he created his own models of ideal Indians, sailors, soldiers, and

<sup>1</sup> The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper IV, ed. James Franklin Beard (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Press, 1960-62), 74.

<sup>2</sup> The Deerslayer, p. x.

frontiersmen; but for his social beau ideals, he adopted from literary history the star-crossed lovers of romance, the genteel hero and heroine.

Over the course of the novels, however, the genteel hero became Cooper's most important character in both a technical and a thematic sense. Around his social beau ideal's problems, Cooper structured his plots; and from the genteel hero's conflicts, he fashioned his themes. Inheriting a passive, young gentleman as character type from Sir Walter Scott, Cooper continually altered and reshaped his social beau ideal's character and function to fit widely different settings, situations, and genres and to reflect his own changing interests. As Cooper became less concerned with maritime nationalism and the physical conquest of the American frontier, the Dunwoodies, Griffiths, and Heywards gave way to more socially oriented characters who vocalized Cooper's social ideas. And as Cooper grew disillusioned with the people's inability to discriminate between quality and quantity, improvement and change, taste and vulgarity, the Effinghams, Littlepages, and Mark Wollaston grew equally disillusioned. Finally as Cooper switched from social concerns to spiritual ones, so too did the genteel protagonists of the later novels. More importantly, developing as a character and representing, even in the early romances, a set of standards consistent with Cooper's,

the genteel hero evolved into the primary protagonist in Cooper's fiction and the spokesman for his social-moral view. As both a plot hero and a conceptual idea, the genteel hero serves, therefore, as a device for the evaluation of Cooper's fictional progress and as a symbol that unites his thought and art.

In artistic terms, Cooper's handling of a literary stereotype is a tribute to his versatility, imagination, and determination. Introducing him in Precaution as an English aristocrat, Cooper quickly adapted his hero to an American landscape and remodeled him as an American gentleman in the early novels, portrayed him as a frontier adventurer in The Leatherstocking Tales, and converted him to an expert sailor and social critic in the sea novels. Having established his beau ideal as a protagonist, Cooper went on to present the genteel hero in two more roles: as a landed gentleman of the Littlepage trilogy and the Christian gentleman of the final novels. Changing more than his beau ideal's outer costumes, however, Cooper gradually transformed the two-dimensional, cardboard aristocrat of the early works into a relatively realistic, three-dimensional, democratic, middle-class, American gentleman. Primarily in connection with the genteel protagonists, he also experimented with first person narration, created some of American literature's most memorable social critics, invented the family chronicle, and, in his attempts

at psychological introspection in The Sea Lions, helped prepare the way for the heroes of twentieth century fiction.

Even at his best, however, Cooper was an uneven writer, a fault which his treatment of the genteel hero makes plain. If the genteel hero's growth is sustained, it is also erratic; and if his significance is noteworthy overall, it is also inconsistent from novel to novel. Troubled by too many potential heroes in The Pilot, Cooper, for example, improved the sea tales by recasting the genteel hero as the protagonist in The Red Rover; but in The Water Witch Cornelius Ludlow, invested with neither the structural prominence nor the thematic significance of Wilder in The Red Rover, is not one of Cooper's more memorable genteel sailors. Later, after introducing the genteel hero as a social critic in Homeward Bound, Cooper all but ignored his young gentleman in The Two Admirals before presenting his most significant and fully developed sea hero, Miles Wallingford.

In part, the genteel hero's erratic growth is the result of Cooper's inability to gauge accurately at first the potential of his hero within individual novels. With Oliver Effingham of The Pioneers, he had introduced most of the personal qualities and plot functions that would characterize all of his social beau ideals, but up to Afloat and Ashore the evolution of the genteel hero is a record



of missed opportunities and misdirected emphasis. The Leatherstocking Tales are perhaps the best example of Cooper's failure to use imaginatively a character whose code was a ready-made vehicle for an examination of the clash of the frontier and civilization. In The Prairie, for example, a novel that purports to describe the varying stages of Cooper's concept of social evolution, Cooper does little to contrast sharply the opposing values of Middleton and Bush who rarely come into contact or exchange a word. As a result, Middleton is weakly drawn and Cooper's social analysis is lopsided and incomplete. Moreover, he relegated his genteel figure to a minor role in The Pathfinder and omitted him entirely from The Deerslayer. Elsewhere, indications of psychological characterization introduced in Lionel Lincoln (1825) remain dormant until the late novels, and the image of the landed gentleman and the family dynasty suggested in The Pioneers, The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish, and Wyandotté went undeveloped until the Littlepage novels, largely because of the absence of a strong genteel protagonist.

Cooper's use of the genteel hero is flawed, to be sure; but the gradual and sustained growth of the character points out a relationship, not generally admitted to exist, between the earlier novels of adventure and the later social-spiritual works. Fortunately for Cooper, Scott and literary

history had handed him a character who had already accumulated many of the virtues and values that were an essential part of Cooper's own philosophy. Refined, high-minded and courageous, the genteel hero was thus a coincidental but fitting ally upon whom Cooper needed only to graft an American identity, Christian ethics, and the specifics of his social vision. Although the novels show that Cooper did not consciously realize the potential of his genteel heroes as overt, fictional spokesmen for some time, he nevertheless implied his social-moral vision in their passive character and symbolic actions from the very beginning.

As a devout Christian, Cooper knew that compassion, liberality, faith, humility, and a rigid adherence to God's laws marked the good man. While his later protagonists best illustrate these qualities, his earlier heroes are no less endowed with the Christian spirit. In virtually every novel Cooper cites his Christian gentlemen for their charity, kindness, and compassion. George Denbigh, for example, meeting Mrs. Wilson's test, assists a gardener's hungry family; Oliver Effingham intercedes on behalf of the aged Natty who is about to be imprisoned; Duncan Heyward pleads with Hawkeye not to shoot an injured Huron; Henry Wilder forgives the law-breaking Rover; Paul Powis anonymously contributes a huge sum to the persecuted Davis family; and Miles Wallingford provides for his shiftless

brother-in-law, Rupert Harding.

In addition to their impeccable character and Christian outlook, Cooper's early beau ideals imply the social values that the later gentleman would articulate. As defenders of the law and the bringers of order, they represent the social institutions that determined what "that God-like-devil man would in fact become."<sup>3</sup> For Cooper, society's institutions were to be patterned after laws of God so that they could function as guides to right thinking and right acting and as checks on man's sinful nature. Associated with moral progress, they provided him, moreover, with the tools to conquer primitive nature and barbaric behavior by giving shape, form, and order to man's actions, outlook, and achievements. In concrete terms, Cooper expressed his social-moral vision in the early novels by associating his social beau ideals with the law and with the military. Thematically, however, their plot functions have a decidedly social perspective.

Although Richard Chase points to the contrast between the Leatherstocking and the genteel hero as an example of the polarized values in the American romance, Cooper

<sup>3</sup>Commenting on Cooper's reliance on social institutions as a check on man's nature, James Beard also cites the importance of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights to Cooper's moral view. See Letters and Journals I, xviii-xix.

continually characterized his frontier American gentleman as a reconciling agent.<sup>4</sup> Each genteel hero, for example, is directly or indirectly involved in the restoration of social stability, the defense of property, the reconciliation of divided parties, the restitution of peace, or the civilization of the frontier. Moreover, as evidence of the genteel hero's success, Cooper repeatedly closed his romances by emphasizing order and stability. Largely in connection with his love plots, he stressed continuity through the hero's newly discovered identity, inheritance, and illustrious progeny and depicted the orderly progress of society through the marriage of the genteel hero and heroine. Retaining these plot devices, Cooper granted his later genteel protagonists the power to verbalize these values and supplied a philosophical base for their plot actions and attitudes; but the ideals of the Littlepage world are no less than those expressed in the character and symbolic actions of Peyton Dunwoodie, Oliver Effingham and the rest.

Central to Cooper's moral-social vision, moreover, was his appreciation of the gentleman's role in society. Convinced that nothing benefits society more than the presence of a gentleman, a point perhaps best illustrated in the

<sup>4</sup>See The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1957), pp. 43-65.

Littlepage trilogy, Cooper incorporated this concept into the characters of all of his genteel figures. In fact, the evolution of the genteel hero is, in its own way, a detailed history of the American gentleman who struggles to gain an identity, triumphs, and ultimately falls victim to the new wave of gift-bearing demagogues and democratic levellers. In his earlier works, Cooper cited both the gentleman's service as a loyal subject of the crown and his subsequent struggle on behalf of independence. In either case, it was the gentleman, Cooper suggested, who provided the leadership and skills necessary for the survival of the American experiment. Reflecting his own admiration for the southern aristocracy, Cooper at first characterized his gentleman as chivalric, southern officers; but eventually he reshaped this somewhat stylized type into a more uniquely American character by associating him with the customs and traditions of a specific geographic area (usually New York State), by endowing him with a sense of time and place in relation to the American landscape, and by involving him as a spokesman and participant in contemporary issues.

Providing a literary record of a changing America, Cooper's works are, however, both a tribute to the code of the gentleman and an indictment of the erosion of principle, morality, and democracy. Partly as a result of this erosion and partly because of Cooper's own increasingly spiritual frame of mind, the last novels present a new kind of beau

ideal--the Christian gentleman. Tempered by humility and spiritual awareness, the later protagonists possess a coherent view that places social concerns within broad moral principles. Even in their decidedly Christian roles, however, Cooper's gentlemen continue to express the manners, courage, and attitudes by which Cooper had characterized his social beau ideals from Precaution onward. Representing in this sense a fusion of the social and moral standards found throughout the novels, the gentlemen protagonists of The Crater, Jack Tier, and The Sea Lions are, moreover, the culmination of an unbroken line of social beau ideals who serve as literary protagonists, representative American gentlemen, and repositories and spokesmen for Cooper's social-moral vision. More than merely a stock literary type, the heroine's hero, or a refined double of the Leatherstocking, the genteel hero functions as a symbol that adds coherence and unity to the novels and that reconciles the apparent division between Cooper's thought and art.

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