

“THE HELMSMAN OF LAKE ERIE”

IN LIGHT OF

THE ROLE PLAYED BY RELIGION IN THE FICTIONAL WRITING OF JAMES FENIMORE COOPER

OR,

THE SECRET WHY THE GOOD MAN, WHEN DYING, DOES NOT GROAN

BY

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I. INTRODUCTION

The very notion of a “hero” predicates qualities that shine far brighter than those of the general run of humanity. Yet no matter how “God-like” the hero may appear, he cannot escape his own mortality. As a legend, he will indeed outlive his own death, yet die he must – and the encounter with death will often represent his finest hour. It is in the nature of the historical romance that those heroes who have been able to look death in the eye without flinching have been regarded as a rare species of humanity that calls forth both awe and deep respect. James Fenimore Cooper believed in the elevated sort of humanity he created and felt the writer’s prerogative to engage in such activity required no apology. [1]

The object of this paper is to provide parallels between the 1845 sketch of John Maynard, the dying hero of “*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*” [2], and those protagonists in Cooper’s works that seem to exhibit many of the features, convictions, courage, and powers of endurance of Maynard. (This, of course, does not mean that “less worthy” subjects – villains, for example - will be ignored.) The passage in “*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*” that may be viewed as the focal point triggering this study, describes the courageous helmsman’s almost superhuman powers of endurance during the conflagration of a fictional steamer named the *Jersey*. The resolute helmsman remained at his post and, in spite of excruciating pain and approaching death, was able to steer his vessel to the saving shore:

“...the flames came nearer and nearer; a sheet of smoke would sometimes almost suffocate him; his hair was singed; his blood seemed on fire with the great heat. Crouching as far back as he could, he held the wheel firmly with his left hand, till the flesh shrivelled, and the muscles cracked in the flames; and then he stretched forth his right, and *bore the agony without a scream or a groan.*” [My emphasis]

The ability to withstand and bear extreme pain, given a religious mindset, is a hallmark of James Fenimore Cooper’s writings. For this reason, a comparison of the way Cooper comes to grips with this phenomenon with the way John Maynard is portrayed in the short sketch entitled “*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*” could reveal shared aspects not immediately apparent. Whether, as this writer has long suspected [3], “*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*” is indeed a piece of “fugitive literature” by Cooper, spun off while working on *The Chainbearer*, cannot be the object of this one paper. Instead, what this writer will term the “*kinship of convictions and underlying hypotheses held in common*” by “*The Helmsman*” and a selection of eight novels by Cooper will be targeted:

This paper will focus upon Cooper’s five renowned *Leatherstocking Tales* [4]:

The Pioneers – published in 1823

The Last of the Mohicans – published in 1826

The Prairie – published in 1827

The Pathfinder: or, The Inland Sea – published in 1840

Deerslayer – published in 1841.

The first two lesser-known but well-written novels of *The Littlepage Trilogy* will also be examined:

Satanstoe – published in June 1845

The Chainbearer – published in November 1845

Last but not least, *The Pilot* – America’s first maritime novel, published in one volume in January 1824 – will also be scrutinized.

The Leatherstocking Tales, which, to quote Wayne Franklin, engendered “the core myth of the expansive new nation” and exerted “a profound influence on shaping the imagination of the country at large” [5], have been considered an effective general backdrop to Cooper’s handling of dying protagonists between the years 1823, the date of publication of *The Pioneers*, and 1841, the year the final novel of the *Leatherstocking Tales*, *The Deerslayer*, was published. Both *Satanstoe* and *The Chainbearer* may also be viewed as logical choices as they were both published in the very same year as “*The Helmsman of Lake Erie.*” The latter, which appeared anonymously in a spate of American newspapers beginning August 30, 1845, presents the dying American hero in a manner strikingly reminiscent of that of Cooper. *The Pilot*, America’s first sea novel, published in one volume by January 1824, and in part inspired by Sir Walter Scott’s *The Pirate* (1822), presents an early representative of John Maynard proportions: the guileless helmsman (“cockswain”) Long Tom Coffin.

It should perhaps be pointed out that *“The Helmsman of Lake Erie,”* although an anonymously published literary-journalistic creation, was from the very beginning received by the public as a prose news item based upon an actual occurrence. The descriptive tale was so dramatic and thrilling that it was taken at face value as an accurate depiction of the actual death of a contemporaneous heroic helmsman, who gladly sacrificed his life to save the lives of all on board his endangered Lake Erie steamer, which was given the fictive name the *Jersey*. The helmsman’s name, which has escaped detection in the annals of Lake Erie, was John Maynard. Viewed etymologically, the name is allegorical: John Stout Heart. The question as to the veracity of the convincing tale was not even critically posed until *nine years* after first publication. [6] Yet even then, and in spite of an emphatic denial of any historical antecedents, public opinion has always favored an “historical core.” Viewed as such, the original 1845 sketch may be seen as a highly successful and extremely popular historical romance, which underwent a surprising number of transformations in the course of the 19th century, both in prose and in ballad form in both English and German – the latter achieving lasting literary success in Theodor Fontane’s popular ballad *“John Maynard”* (published in both Munich and Vienna in 1886), which, if no longer recited by German school children, is still taught in German schools to this very day.

The role of religion in both *“The Helmsman of Lake Erie”* and in Cooper’s own fictional works, deserves careful attention. At the end of his evaluation of Cooper, Donald A. Ringe refers to Charles A. Brady’s article, *“Myth-Maker and Christian Romancer”* (1958) and points out:

“Cooper is alone among nineteenth-century American writers in using the truths of Christianity as the subject for serious art; and, by and large, he is quite successful in giving them objective expression in works that are also convincing in terms of plot, character, and setting.” [7]

The strong undercurrent of religion in Cooper’s works is, one should think, common knowledge, yet, as Ringe dismally notes:

“None of them [=Cooper’s biographers and critics] treat the moral and religious themes with the seriousness that Cooper clearly intended, nor do they attempt to relate the novels to one another in any way.” [8]

Although over half a century has elapsed since Ringe’s statement on the lack of research into Cooper’s use of religion in his works, very little interest has been taken in the interim in this pivotal aspect of Cooper’s novels. Indeed, the very assertion has been recently questioned. [9] This paper will attempt to relate eight of Cooper’s novels to one another *and* to *“The Helmsman of Lake Erie”* in terms of the role played by religion in creating a Cooperian hero or heroine.

II. A STUDY OF DEATH AND DYING IN *THE CHAINBEARER* (NOV. 1845)

Perhaps no work has ever presented such *clinical* and, if the word may be used, *scientific* analysis of the death of the good versus the bad man as does James Fenimore Cooper's *The Chainbearer*. As *The Chainbearer* (published in November 1845) is also *the* novel with the greatest temporal proximity to the first known publication of "*The Helmsman*" (August 30, 1845, *Baltimore Sun*) and offers a fascinating study in how to overcome the agony of death and prepare oneself for the afterlife, it is the obvious starting point.

Although *The Chainbearer* represents the second historical novel in the *Littlepage Trilogy* of Cooper's anti-rent novels, this novel itself goes far beyond the mundane considerations of property rights and the unlawfulness of squatting in that it broaches one of the central issues in great literature: death and dying.

The young first-person narrator, Mordaunt (Morty) Littlepage, son of Cornelius (Corny) Littlepage of *Satanstoe*, introduces the hero Andries Coejemans in the following way:

"I well remember to have been struck with a captain in my father's regiment, who certainly was a character, in his way. His origin was Dutch, as was the case with a fair proportion of the officers, and he bore the name of Andries Coejemans, though he was universally known by the *sobriquet* of the "Chainbearer."

The Chainbearer, Ch. I, p. 8

Twenty-two-year-old Mordaunt (the setting is 1784) goes on to point out two features of Andries' character that remind the reader of Maynard, his "unrivalled reputation" and his "honesty:"

"As a chainbearer he had an unrivalled reputation. Humble as was the occupation, it admitted of excellence in various particulars, as well as another. In the first place, it required honesty, a quality in which this class of men can fail, as well as all the rest of mankind."

Ibid. [10]

"*The Helmsman of Lake Erie:*"

"He [=John Maynard] was known from one end of Lake Erie to the other, by the name of honest John Maynard..."

In terms of endurance, appearance, age, and bearing, Andries and John Maynard have much in common:

“Andries Coejemans stood six feet, at seventy; was still as erect as he had been at twenty; and so far from showing inroads of age on his frame, the last appeared to be indurated and developed by what it had borne. His head was as white as snow, while his face had the ruddy, weather-beaten color of health and exposure. The face had always been handsome, having a very unusual expression of candor and benevolence impressed on features that were bold and manly.

The Chainbearer, Ch. X, p. 138

“*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*” provides the following description of John Maynard:

“Old John Maynard was at the wheel; a bluff weather-beaten sailor, tanned by many a burning summer day, and by many a winter tempest. . . . He had, in the worst time, a cheerful word and a kind look for those with whom he was thrown;...”

If Andries is the hero in *The Chainbearer*, Aaron “Thousandacres,” the illegal squatter on young Mordaunt’s estate, is – if not without great pathos – the villain. As the right-hand man of the surveyor, Andries, who measures theoretical surveyed distance with his unerring chains, represents the advance of civilization and law and order. Thousandacres, who is engaged in felling trees for sale as lumber, without any title to the land, feels that hard work, industry and “betterments” should count, and not a piece of paper granting ownership to an absentee landlord, whose endless acres have not even been surveyed.

What does the word “chainbearer” mean? Cooper uses it in several senses. Firstly, it refers to a surveyor’s attendant who actually measures the lengths of surveyed territory with his heavy chains. In this sense, a man with little education (“Chainbearer was no scholar” – Ch. XV, p.218), a “common laborer” (Ch. V, p. 69) and “inveterate woodsman” (Ch. V, p. 70) – one, in fact, who is engaged in hard, though honest labor and, due to the very nature of the work, is measuring bits of wilderness and contending with the elements:

“Carrying chain I [=Andries] like; it gives sufficient occupation to t’e mind; put [=but] honesty is the great quality for the chainbearer. They say figures can’t lie, Mortaunt [=Mordaunt]; but ‘t is not true wit’ chains; sometimes they [=figures] do lie, desperately.”

The Chainbearer, Ch. XI, p. 156

Yet the most important connotation, akin to *Pilgrim’s Progress*, must be described as allegorical. Chains, of course, can refer to that which robs a person of his liberty:

“After serving so gallantly through the whole war [=the War of Independence], he has gone back to his chains; and many is the joke he has about remaining still in chains, after fighting so long and so often in the cause of liberty.”

The Chainbearer, Ch. V, p. 70

The question posed towards the end of the novel is whether Andries will be able to *cast off* his chains, which tie him to his earthly existence, and be set free to enter a new dimension of existence.

Andries’ antagonist in the novel is Aaron Thousandacres, a name loaded with connotations. Andries’ faithful Indian friend Susquesus (also called “Trackless” or “Sureflint”), explains the meaning:

“Call himself T’ousandacre – say he always own t’ousand acre when he have mind to find him.”

The Chainbearer, Ch. XVI, p. 235

“The *sobriquet* of Thousandacres” (*The Chainbearer*, Ch. XVI, p. 236) may thus be viewed as a form of glorification in the number of acres the squatter deemed his natural right. Aaron, the “patriarch,” was the father of “a new generation of squatters springing up about him” (Ch. XVII, 2nd paragraph, p.242). Mordaunt clearly links “Aaron” with the Bible:

“I soon had occasion to note that the patriarchal government of Thousandacres was of a somewhat decided and prompt character. A few words went a great way in it, as was now apparent; for in less than two minutes after Aaron had issued his decree, those namesakes of the prophets and law-givers of old, Nathaniel, and Moses, and Daniel, were quitting the clearing on diverging lines, each carrying a formidable, long, American hunting-rifle in his hand.”

The Chainbearer, Ch. XVIII, (4th paragraph), p. 257

It is when Thousandacres decides to hold court against Chainbearer and Mordaunt, and pronounce judgment, that one fatal shot is fired. During the “trial,” Andries receives a lethal wound, and – shortly afterwards - Thousandacres, too, is shot. Both Andries and Thousandacres are placed in the same room in Thousandacres’ cabin where they will undergo the agony of death until the following morning. Cooper’s comparative description of their deaths provides insights into his own psychology of the good man dying.

What follows is a singular episode in literature. The two dying men are placed in separate beds in the same room. Dus, Chainbearer’s beloved half-niece administers to her uncle, whereas Prudence administers to the needs of her husband Aaron Thousandacres.

What does Prudence beg her husband to do? As the allegorical name of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* suggests, she gives prudent advice:

“Think no more of the lumber, my man, think no more of the lumber,” said Prudence earnestly; “time is desp’rate short at the best, and yours is shorter than common, even for a man of seventy, while etarnity has no eend. Forgit the boards, and forgit the b’ys, and forgit the gals, forgit ‘arth and all it holds!”

The Chainbearer, Ch. XXVIII, p. 423 [11]

Yet Thousandacres, as his name so clearly signifies, cannot give up his hold on the land and worldly possessions, which he fails to understand are not even rightfully his. His appeal to his wife shows the deep love and heart-wrenching humanity of a man for whom the comforts of religion can have no hold:

“You would n’t have me forgit you, Prudence,” interrupted Thousandacres, “that’s been my wife, now, forty long years, and whom I tuck when she was young and comely, and that’s borne me so many children, and has always been a faithful and hard-working woman – you would n’t have me forget you!”

The Chainbearer, Ch. XXVIII, p. 423 [12]

The Chainbearer, on the other hand, has received instruction in Christianity from his Dus (the Dutch diminutive of Ursula), which helps him to bear the agony of his suffering:

“Yes,” resumed Chainbearer, “Dus hast mate me see—”

The Chainbearer Ch. XXVIII, p. 422

Although both Andries and Aaron undergo a painful death, it is Andries, who is able to come to terms with what is happening to him:

“I shall lif till mornin’, I now fint, Mortaunt,” he said; “put, let deat’ come when it wilt, it ist sent py my Lort and Maker, ant it is welcome. Deat’ hast no fears for me.”

The Chainbearer , Ch. XXIX, p. 436

The following lines sum up the glaring difference:

[Andries:] “Lif in sich a way, my tear chiltren, as to pe apel to meet t’is awful moment, in which you see me placed, wit’ hope and joy, so t’at we may all meet hereafter in t’e courts of heafen. Amen.”

A short, solemn pause succeeded this benediction, when it was interrupted by a fearful groan, that struggled out of the broad chest of Thousandacres. All eyes were turned on the other bed, which presented a most impressive contrast to the calm scene that surrounded the parting soul of him about whom we had gathered. I [=Mordaunt] alone advanced to the assistance of Prudence, who, woman-like, clung to her husband to the last; “bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh.” I must own, however, that horror paralyzed my limbs; and that when I got as far as the foot of the squatter’s bed, I stood

riveted to the place like a rooted tree.

. . . finding the sight too frightful for even my nerves, I veiled my eyes. When my hand was removed, I caught one glimpse of that dark tenement in which the spirit of the murderer and squatter had so long dwelt, Prudence being in the act of closing the glary, but still fiery eyes. I never before had looked upon so revolting a corpse; and never wish to see its equal again.”

The Chainbearer, Ch. XXVIII, last 2 paragraphs, pp. 433-434 [13]

And now Chainbearer’s death:

“The death of Chainbearer occurred, as he himself prognosticated, about the time of the return of light on the succeeding morning. A more tranquil end I never witnessed. He ceased to suffer pain hours before he drew his last breath; but he had whispered to me, in the course of that day, that he endured agony at moments. . . . Nevertheless, it would have been difficult for one who was not in the secret to detect the smallest sign that the sufferer endured a tithe of the agony he actually underwent.

. . . That final breath in which the spirit appears to be exhaled, was calm, placid, and as easy as comports with the separation of soul and body; leaving the hard, aged, wrinkled, but benevolent countenance of the deceased, with an expression of happy repose on it, such as the friends of the dead love to look upon. Of all the deaths I had then witnessed, this was the most tranquil, and the best calculated to renew the hopes of the Christian.”

The Chainbearer, Ch. XXIX, pp. 437-438

Mordaunt, when held in captivity by Thousandacres, was given the only books “in all the libraries of the family” so as to pass the time:

“There were but three – a fragment of a Bible, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and an almanac that was four years old.”

The Chainbearer, Ch. XIX, last paragraph, p. 285

The Chainbearer, a novel about a man who, succored by his religion, can find the strength to cast off the chains of this existence for a better world to come, is indeed a latter-day *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The agony of a John Maynard [14], or an Andries Coejemans, each man fortified by his “love of God,” cannot extort even an involuntary scream or groan. Both texts, that dealing with the parallel but very different deaths of Andries and Aaron, and that of John Maynard, were written in the very same year – and possibly in the very same month.

III. GUERT TEN EYCK, ANDRIES COEJEMANS’ YOUTHFUL PRECURSOR IN *SATANSTOE* (JUNE 1845)

A study of suffering and death reminiscent of the sad, yet heroically borne, fate of Andries Coejemans [15] occurred roughly half a year earlier in *Satanstoe*, published in June of 1845. Whereas both Andries and Aaron were a robust seventy and seventy-three, respectively, young Guert Ten Eyck was “a fine, dare-devil, roystering looking fellow of four or five-and-

twenty” (*Satanstoe*, Ch. XI, p. 152). Andries, Thousandacres, Guert, and – as we shall shortly see – Hetty Hutter of *The Deerslayer* were cut down in each instance by a fatal and capricious shot. In Andries’ case, the reader’s suspicions lead to Aaron Thousandacres, who, one can only surmise, had lost all patience with the Chainbearer and all he stood for. Yet Cooper feels no necessity in immediately revealing the identity of the culprit. Amazingly, no-one *sees* who fires the shot that was to kill Andries, and Cooper allows the reader room for conjecture [16]:

“In the midst of this scene of confusion, a rifle suddenly flashed; the report was simultaneous, and old Andries Coejemans fell.”

The Chainbearer, Ch. XXV, last sentence

Similarly, “Thousandacres had been shot in his chair, by one of the rifles first discharged that night” (*The Chainbearer*, Ch. XXVII, first sentence). Mordaunt Littlepage *believes* that Susquesus has exacted revenge (“dealing out Indian justice”) for the fatal wounding of his good friend, Andries. Yet in both instances, the fatal bullet seems to come from nowhere and the perpetrator remains veiled. In *Satanstoe*, young Guert Ten Eyck is also cut down by a quirk shot out of nowhere:

“But one more shot did come from the Hurons in that inroad. It was fired from some one of that retreating party, who must have been lingering in its rear. The report sounded far up the ravine, and it came like a farewell and final gun. Distant as it was, however, it proved the most fatal shot to us, that was fired in all that affair.”

Satanstoe, Ch. XXVIII, p. 420

Each man, Andries, Aaron, and Guert, dies slowly as a result of the fatal wound. Each man receives support from the woman he dearly loves: Andries from his half-niece Dus [Ursula Malbone], Aaron from his wife Prudence, and young Guert from Mary Wallace, the woman he had hoped to wed. Mary Wallace had played “hard to get,” perhaps due to Guert’s “boyish” propensities and pranks – e.g., recklessly hand-sledding down a hill with Corny (Ch. XII), or hoodwinking the major of Albany out of his own supper! (Ch. XIII). Guert is obviously more interested in horses than in books, perhaps another aspect to be frowned upon. [17] Only when it was too late, did Mary “own her love,” thus easing the way for Guert to “die contented.” It is the “boy-gets-girl” theme, which here contends with the much more serious question of Christian salvation:

“But for you, Mary, I should be little better than a heathen —“ said Guert, holding the hand of his beloved, and scarce averting his eyes from their idol, a single instant. “If God has mercy on me, it will be on your account.”

Satanstoe, Ch. XXIX, pp. 422-423

Although Mary Wallace “yearned to lead his [=Guert’s] thoughts to dwell on the subject of the great change that was so near” (*Satanstoe*, Ch. XXIX, p. 424), the reader remains unconvinced of her success. No mention is made of a single groan issuing from Guert’s bosom. How could there be? He died in the “quiet, cherishing, womanly embrace” of the woman he loved with all his heart. As can be seen, Cooper’s fictional studies of heroes (and villains) dying often had the fundamental question of Christian salvation either in the background or in the foreground. The deaths of Andries and Aaron represent a more consistent reworking of neglected elements in the death of Guert Ten Eyck. This was done simply by transferring the scenes of love and romance to that of Corny and Dus, thus freeing Andries, who had enjoyed a reasonably long life, for true meditation, prayer and repentance. As for young Guert’s character, Corny (Cornelius) Littlepage, the first-person narrator of *Satanstoe*, provides a fitting obituary:

“Thus prematurely, terminated the earthly career of as manly a spirit as ever dwelt in human form. That it had imperfections my pen has not concealed, but the long years that have since passed away, have not served to obliterate the regard so noble a temperament could not fail to awaken.”

Satanstoe, Ch. XXIX, concluding paragraph

Another aspect of Guert’s character that will remind the reader of Natty or even John Maynard was his humility:

“There was a certain charm in Guert’s habitual manner of underrating himself, that inclined all who heard him to his side, and, for myself, I will confess I early became his friend in all that matters, and so continued to the last.”

Satanstoe, Ch. XIV, p. 198

With regard to heroic attributes, Corny wrote: “Guert was a man of decision” (*Satanstoe*, Ch. XVII, p. 249). This can be seen in the manner in which he rescued Mary Wallace from the breakup of the ice on the Hudson River and in the manner in which he conducted himself in fighting the Hurons and the French. Just as Andries and John Maynard were well-known individuals, of Guert, too, it could be said: “Everybody in the place [=Albany] knew him” [*Satanstoe*, Ch. XI, p. 152]. And, in spite of an occasional prank (possibly an autobiographical allusion to Cooper himself), Corny asserts: “Guert Ten Eyck was one of the honestest fellows I ever dealt with” [*Satanstoe*, Ch. XI, p. 162].

IV. SERGEANT DUNHAM, AN EARLIER PRECURSOR OF ANDRIES COEJEMANS IN *THE PATHFINDER OR, THE INLAND SEA* (1840)

The original title Cooper had planned for this historical romance was *The Inland Sea*, in this case, Lake Ontario.^[18] The novel combines the wilderness of upstate New York and the vastness of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence before the spread of settlements in that region. The setting of the passages in question is, like Guert Ten Eyck's fatal wound in *Satanstoe*, during the French and Indian War. The maze of uninhabited and countless islands called "Thousand Islands" serves as a backdrop of the action.

Outside the besieged block house on one of those unidentified islands in the St. Lawrence, Mabel Dunham tells Pathfinder:

"Surely, I hear a groan!"

"'Tis fancy, Mabel – When the mind gets to be skeary, especially a woman's mind, she often conceits things that have no reality. I've known them that imagined there was truth in dreams —"

"Nay, I am *not* deceived – there is surely one below, and in pain!"

The Pathfinder, Ch. XXIII, p. 393

As it turns out, Mabel was not deceived. And the soldier fatally wounded in an Indian ambush turns out to be none other than Mabel's own father, Sergeant Dunham. Although basically a minor character, Dunham's final hours represent some of Cooper's best writing on the role of religion in the heart and mind of a dying man:

"Although the soldier may regard danger, and even death, with indifference, in the tumult of battle, when the passage of the soul is delayed to moments of tranquility and reflection, the change commonly brings with it the usual train of solemn reflection; of regrets for the past, and of doubts and anticipations for the future. Many a man has died with an heroic expression on his lips, but with heaviness and distrust in his heart; for whatever may be the varieties of our religious creeds – **let us depend on the mediation of Christ**, the dogmas of Mahomet, or the elaborated allegories of the East, there is a conviction common to all men, that death is but a stepping-stone between this and a more elevated state of being. Sergeant Dunham was a brave man, but he was departing for a country in which resolution could avail him nothing, and, as he felt himself gradually loosened from the grasp of the world, his thoughts and feelings took the natural direction; for, if it be true that death is the great leveler, in nothing is it more true, than that it reduces all to the same views of the vanity of life."

The Pathfinder, Ch. XXVIII, 1st
paragraph, p. 450

Dunham, like Guert, Andries and Thousandacres, has a woman who stands by him and offers him Christian consolation – it is his daughter Mabel. The initial question is, however, whether Mabel, like Thousandacres' wife Patience, or perhaps Guert's cherished Mary Wallace, will be doomed to fail:

“Mabel’s heart yearned to be in communication with the father she was so soon to lose, and yet she would not disturb his apparent repose. But Dunham slept not. He was in that state when the world suddenly loses its attractions, its illusions, and its power, and the unknown future fill the mind, with its conjectures, its revelations and its immensity. He had been a moral man, for one of his mode of life, but he had thought little of this all important moment. Had the din of battle been ringing in his ears, his martial ardor might have endured to the end, but, there, in the silence of that untenanted block-house, with no sound to enliven him, no appeal to keep alive factitious sentiment, no hope of victory to impel, things began to appear in their true colours, and this state of being to be estimated at its just value. He would have given treasures for religious consolation, and yet he knew not where to seek it.”

The Pathfinder, Ch. XXIV, pp. 400-401

As in “*The Helmsman*,” when bluff John Maynard, in no uncertain terms, informs the panicking women on the burning *Jersey* to pray, Mabel provides her dying father with the American Creed:

“Put your *trust in God* [my emphasis], father – lean on his holy and compassionate son. Pray, dearest, dearest, father – pray for his omnipotent support.”

The Pathfinder, Ch. XXVIII, p. 453

When the dying man confesses that he simply does not know how to pray, his daughter says:

“Father, you know the Lord’s prayer – you taught it to me yourself, while I was yet an infant.”

The sergeant’s face gleamed with a smile, for he *did* remember to have discharged that portion at least, of the paternal duty, and the consciousness of it gave him inconceivable gratification at that solemn moment. He was then silent for several minutes, and all present believed that he was communing with God.

The Pathfinder, Ch. XXVIII, p. 456

As these models so clearly demonstrate, a victim of violence, who is not struck down immediately, but who must endure the pain, often for hours, can receive strong support from his religious convictions. Sergeant Dunham, initially “writhing with pain, until the cold sweat stood on his forehead” (Ch. XXIV, p. 399) undergoes a marked change. Like the Chainbearer, he is able to confer his blessings on those he loves before quietly passing away.

V. LONG TOM COFFIN AND CHRISTOPHER DILLON IN *THE PILOT* (JAN. 1824)

Even quite early in Cooper's writing career, an object of special interest was the juxtaposition of the death of a hero and that of a villain. The true hero of *The Pilot* is not the Pilot (containing numerous allusions to the historic John Paul Jones), whose character remains shrouded in a cloak of mystery from beginning to end, and who is likely to strike the reader as indulging too much in attempting to garner vain glory and too little in giving due consideration to the arguments for "home" and "native country" ("...it [=the word home] embraces the dearest of all ties," Ch. XXXI, p. 364) presented by Alice Dunscombe, who after so many years still steadfastly loves the "adventurer" (the appellation "pirate" or "privateer" may also come to mind), yet who wisely realizes that there is little ground upon which they can build a common future. Instead, a strongly depicted though somewhat underdeveloped hero, the guileless coxswain of the schooner, the *Ariel*, stands in the foreground, and moves the hearts and (perhaps even in our times) the minds of Cooper's readers. The noble coxswain's death roughly one hundred pages before the end of the novel may strike the reader as a structural flaw within the tale, and Cooper himself must also have realized that Long Tom Coffin [19] had the strength of character of a Nathaniel Bumppo and, given perhaps more thought, could have been developed into a whole series of novels:

"With Long Tom Coffin. . . he [=Cooper] was, in his own last years, less satisfied than many of his readers. As he looked back at the character, in the maturity of long experience, he saw it with a clearer view, a greater fullness of conception, a more complete finish of detail – he considered it as a sketch only, and would gladly have wrought up the sketch of the old salt, as he has done with Natty Bumppo."

Remarks by Susan Cooper from *The Cooper Gallery* (Philadelphia: Lippencott & Co., 1865), p. 77, as quoted in "Historical Introduction" by Kay Seymour House in *The Pilot, The Writings of James Fenimore Cooper*, J. F. Beard, Editor-in Chief, p. xxv.

Long Tom Coffin is a coxswain (Cooper spells this "cockswain"). A coxswain is, according to *OED*, "the helmsman of a boat:"

"Our ground tackle has parted," said Tom, with a resigned patience of manner undisturbed; "she [=the *Ariel*] shall die as easy as man can make her!" While he yet spoke, he seized the tiller, and gave to the vessel [=the *Ariel*] such a direction, as would be most likely to cause her to strike the rocks with her bows foremost."

The Pilot, Ch. XXIV, p. 283

One example of Long Tom Coffin's incredible strength is when he is clinging to the side of a cliff supporting not only himself but also the archvillain Christopher Dillon:

"The cockswain, who had stood, all this time, firm as the rock which supported him, bearing up not only his own weight, but the person of Dillon also . . ."

The Pilot, Ch. XXIII, p. 269

Further examples of the coxswain's singular strength include not only his skill as a harpooner of whales ("...here stands the man that has killed his round hundred of whales!" – Ch. XVIII, p. 205), but also the ease with which he can overcome the wily, yet likeable gourmet British officer Captain Borroughcliffe and with which he can toss his reluctant young commander Richard Barnstable into the whale-boat so that he will not go down with the shattered *Ariel*.

Although roughly twenty years younger than Andries Coejemans or Aaron Thousandacres, he is often referred to as "old." Yet Long Tom's black whiskers had only begun "to be grizzled a little with age" (*The Pilot*, Ch. II, p. 20).

The reference to "long" is due to his size ("nearly six feet and as many inches in his shoes") and his "great length of limbs" (*The Pilot*, Ch. II, pp. 19-20). When a rather confused Cecilia Howard talks about "that terrific seaman" (Ch. XXVII, p. 312), she is referring to Long Tom's *terrifying* proportions and strength. Long Tom will obviously stand out in a crowd.

The appellation "honest seaman/sailor" crops up several times. Perhaps the most touching example is when "simple-hearted" Coffin, shortly before his death, sees that Barnstable and young Merry have been able to rescue themselves from the wreck of the *Ariel*:

"The honest old seaman gave a cry of joy, as he saw Barnstable issue from the surf, bearing the form of Merry in safety to the sands, where one by one, several seamen soon appeared also, dripping and exhausted."

The Pilot, Ch. XXIV, p. 286

The scene calls to mind the deep satisfaction and joy Maynard felt before his own death:

"It was enough for him [=John Maynard] that he heard the cheer of the sailors to the approaching boats; the cry of the captain, 'the women first, and then every man for himself and God for us all.' And they were the last sounds he heard."

The Helmsman of Lake Erie

The description of John Maynard in "*The Helmsman*" as "weather-beaten" and "tanned by many a burning summer day, and by many a winter tempest" is a standard Cooperian description to be found throughout Cooper's works dealing with outdoorsmen, encompassing the whole spectrum from sailors to trappers.^[20] In *The Pilot*, the crew is "weather-beaten and hardy" (Ch. I, p. 18); Long Tom exhibits a "weather-beaten visage" (Ch. XXII, p. 254); Captain Barnstable has a "sun-burnt countenance" (Ch. I, p. 16), and Mr. Boltrope, the sailing-master is a "weather-beaten seaman" (Ch. VII, p. 73). On top of this, Cooper throws in "the coarse and weather-beaten vestments of seamen who had been exposed to recent and severe duty" (Ch. XII, 1st paragraph).

The background information on Long Tom Coffin thus far presented meshes neatly with John Maynard in "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*:" a simple-hearted, honest old sailor and

helmsman who is able to sacrifice himself for others and who can give “a cry of joy” even though he knows that he will shortly die. Old Long Tom is also not above a silent prayer:

“Think boy, he [=Long Tom] may, at this moment, be looking at us, and praying to his Maker that he would turn our eyes upon him; ay, praying to his God, for Tom often prayed, though he did it in his watch, standing, and in silence.”

The Pilot, Ch. XXV, p. 290

The religious aspect comes to the fore in the manner in which Cooper successfully contrasts the character of Long Tom with that of Christopher Dillon, a scheming archvillain with no sense of personal integrity and no belief in God. Dillon was taken prisoner for his deceitful doings and, together with Long Tom, was left on the *Ariel* just before she broke apart on the rocks. The cowardly Dillon asks Long Tom, “Do you think there is much danger?” This scene is strongly reminiscent of the scene in which John Maynard is accosted by frantic women passengers on the *Jersey*, who ply him with their questions until he finally blurts out:

“But, to speak the truth,” he [=John Maynard] added, “we are all in great danger; and I think if there were less talking and a little more praying, it would be the better for us, and none the worse for the boat!”

“The Helmsman of Lake Erie” [21]

The dialogue between Cooper’s Long Tom and Dillon, two men who are about to die, foreshadows the completely different deaths they will suffer:

“If ye are about to strive for your life, take with ye a stout heart and a clean conscience, and trust the rest to God!” [22]

“God!” echoed Dillon, in the madness of his frenzy; “I know no God! There is no God that knows me!”

“Peace!” said the deep tones of the cockswain, in a voice that seemed to speak in the elements; “blasphemer, peace!”

The Pilot, Ch. XXIV, p. 287

The moving scene of the deaths of Long Tom and Christopher Dillon in Chapter 24 does not show either man “groaning.” Instead, it is the *Ariel* herself who groans:

“’Tis the poor thing herself,” said the affected cockswain, “giving her last groans. The water is breaking up her decks, and in a few minutes more, the handsomest model that ever cut a wave, will be like the chips that fell from her timbers in framing!”

The Pilot, Ch. XXIV, p. 286

Dillon, in an act of despair, jumps overboard and swims in vain against the under-tow. Even then, Long Tom, in an act of human charity, calls out to Dillon giving him instructions as to the direction he should take to reach the “saving shore.” Dillon in his state of panic, however, unable to grasp the intent of the message and follow the course Long Tom, the helmsman, has given him. Dillon’s final struggle for life is so horrid that even Long Tom is

unable to gaze upon it without shielding his eyes from the dreadful scene. Shortly thereafter, the *Ariel* splits apart and Long Tom Coffin suffers death with his beloved schooner.

The awkward question of why Long Tom *chose* to die is not easily answered. A simple but not completely convincing response would be that Long Tom did not wish to endanger the ship's crew because the whale-boat was filled to overcapacity and could be swamped at any moment. Yet even then, Long Tom himself could have attempted to swim to the shore, and he *knew* the direction he should take. Long Tom's good friend Captain Barnstable kept an eye out for Long Tom, hoping he had done just that. Yet a stronger argument can be made out for Long Tom's love of the *Ariel*:

"I believe it is as natural, sir, for a seaman to love the wood and iron in which he has floated over the depths of the ocean, for so many days and nights," rejoined the boy [=Merry], "as it is for a father to love the members of his own family."

The Pilot, Ch. XXV, p. 293

Long Tom's own response to the following question posed by Dillon, would seem to confirm young Merry's belief:

"Why, then, did you remain here!" cried Dillon, wildly.

"To die in my coffin [i.e., the *Ariel*], if it should be the will of God," returned Tom; "these waves, to me, are what the land is to you; I was born on them, and I have always meant that they should be my grave."

The Pilot, Ch. XXIV, p. 287

Or Long Tom's farewell to his fellow seamen (which they were unable to hear) after he had summarily thrown Barnstable into the whale-boat and unpinned it from the *Ariel*:

"God's will be done with me," he cried; "I saw the first timber of the *Ariel* laid, and shall live just long enough to see it torn out of her bottom; after which I wish to live no longer."

The Pilot, Ch. XXIV, p. 285

In other words, Long Tom has placed his faith in God, and, quite unlike the mysterious Pilot, declares himself ready to go home, "*if it should be the will of God.*" Yet in Coffin's case, the word "home" is no longer restricted to a particular belligerent like Britain or America at the time of the American Revolution, but assumes metaphysical dimensions in the nameless expanses of God's trackless creation, over which the *Ariel* has sailed. Thus does the *Ariel* and all she encompasses signify an integral part of Long Tom's own identity and the life he loved: The play on the word "coffin" is again apparent when Coffin tells Dillon: "Wretch! If I should cast you into the sea, as food for the fishes, who could blame me? But if my schooner goes to the bottom, she shall prove your coffin" (*The Pilot*, Ch. XXIII, p. 270). As these words were spoken, Long Tom was already aware of his own imminent death on the *Ariel*.

One aspect of Long Tom's character which may perhaps be thought of nowadays as rather outdated deserves at least passing mention: his superstitious nature. A delightful example is when the boy Mr. Merry was singing during the storm that wrecked the *Ariel*:

“Captain Barnstable would please to call Mr. Merry from the gun; for I know, from having followed the seas my natural life, that singing in a gale is sure to bring the wind down upon a vessel the heavier, for He who rules the tempests is displeased that man's voice shall be heard, when He chooses to send His own breath on the water.”

The Pilot, Ch. XXIV, p. 278

Barnstable himself was obliged to “shake off the superstitious awe that he felt creeping around his own heart” and complied with his coxswain's request! Yet such an “infirmity,” which was by no means limited to Long Tom, only adds color to the personality of one of Cooper's most dynamic characters. [23]

A fascinating footnote to the juxtaposition of the deaths of Long Tom and Dillon is a consideration of the condition of their corpses. This calls to mind *The Chainbearer*! Long Tom's body is not recovered: “...for the sea was never known to give up the body of the man who might be, emphatically, called its own dead” (*The Pilot*, Ch. XXV, p. 291). But what about Christopher Dillon's body when it was washed up upon the beach? Barnstable's first thought was that it might be his coxswain's:

“'Tis my cockswain!” cried Barnstable, rushing to the spot. He stopped suddenly, however, as he came within view of the features, and it was some little time before he appeared to have collected his faculties sufficiently to add, in tones of deep horror – “what wretch is this, boy! His form is unmutilated, and yet observe the eyes! They seem as if the sockets would not contain them, and they gaze as wildly as if their owner yet had life – the hands are open and spread, as though they would still buffet the waves!”

“The Jonah! The Jonah!” shouted the seamen, with savage exultation, as they successively approached the corpse; “away with his carrion into the sea again! Give him to the sharks! Let him tell his lies in the claws of the lobsters!”

The Pilot, Ch. XXV, p. 291

Although there is much about Aaron Thousandacres to awaken a sense of pity in the reader of *The Chainbearer* and thus render Aaron still worthy of human sympathy, no matter how “fallen” he may have been, Christopher Dillon in *The Pilot* has no saving grace to fall back upon. Dillon has forfeited his human integrity and his belief in anything of value simply to further his own ruthless and selfish pursuit of advancement. His corpse becomes a sort of picture of Dorian Grey, exposing his corrupt and ugly self, which he successfully camouflaged in life.

VI. "THE SECRET OF HIS HONESTY TO HIS NEIGHBORS, WAS HIS LOVE OF GOD"

– "The Helmsman of Lake Erie"

In *The Chainbearer* (1845), *The Deerslayer* (1841), and *The Pilot* (1824), Cooper makes exemplary use of the concept of honesty in allowing "furlough" (*The Deerslayer*) or "parole" (*The Chainbearer* & *The Pilot*) to a prisoner held captive. In *The Deerslayer*, the captive is young Deerslayer; in *The Chainbearer*, it is the Indian Susquesus; and in *The Pilot*, it is the villain Christopher Dillon.

The prisoner is given complete freedom to go wherever he pleases but must consent to return to his captors after a certain length of time *unless* - as intended in *The Pilot* - an exchange of prisoners was to take place. The notion of furlough or parole is most graphically portrayed in *The Deerslayer*, as by promising to return to the Iroquois, young Deerslayer will be committing himself to various trials of courage that ultimately end in death. It should be noted that during such trials, the brave man (i.e. the good man) will not groan or whimper but look death in the eye. The obvious question is *why* should even a good man voluntarily return after his allotted time, knowing that by so doing he must submit to trials of torture? Cooper's concept of personal integrity is perhaps best explained in *The Deerslayer*:

"You cannot mean to give yourself up ag'in to them murdering savages, Deerslayer!" he said, quite as much in angry remonstrance, as with generous feeling. "Twould be the act of a madman or a fool!"

"There's them that thinks its madness to keep their words, and there's them that don't, Hurry Harry. You may be one of the first, but I'm one of the last. No red skin breathing shall have it in his power to say, that a Mingo minds his word more than a man of white blood and white gifts, in any thing that consarns me. I'm out on furlough, and if I've strength and reason, I'll go in on furlough afore noon to-morrow!"

"What's an Injin, or a word passed, or a furlough taken from creatur's like them, that have neither souls nor reason!"

"If they've got neither souls nor reason, you and I have both, Henry March, and one is accountable for the other. *This furlough is not, as you seem to think, a matter altogether atween me and the Mingos, seeing it is a solemn bargain made atween me and God* [my emphasis]. He who thinks that he can say what he pleases, in his distress, and that twill all pass for nothing, because 'tis uttered in the forest, and into red men's ears, knows little of his situation, and hopes, and wants. The woods are but the ears of the Almighty, the air is his breath, and the light of the sun is little more than the glance of his eye. Farewell, Harry; we may not meet ag'in, but I wish you never to treat a furlough, or any other solemn thing, that your Christian God has been called on to witness, as a duty so light that it may be forgotten according to the wants of the body, or even accordin' to the cravings of the spirit."

The Deerslayer, Ch. XXIII, p. 886

The binding aspect of Deerslayer's promise to return to the encampment of his future tormentors does not rest on abstract notions of right and wrong. Instead, his concrete belief in the existence and immanence of God is a precondition. And Deerslayer's word is not given merely to the "Injins," but is a sacred pact between himself and his God. In "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*," the reader is informed that "the secret of his [=John Maynard's] honesty to his neighbours [=fellow-man], was his love of God." This "secret" can also explain John Maynard's willingness, like Deerslayer's, not to run away from mortal danger, when, by so doing, both personal integrity and *Weltanschauung* would be shattered. Instead, there remains an iron-clad resolution to face death itself because a sacred pact with God, in "*The Helmsman*" expressed simply as Maynard's "love of God," has been entered into. The implicit kinship of thought in both "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*" and *The Deerslayer* gives both Nathaniel Bumppo and John Maynard the iron will to accept and endure even the agony of torture (whether in a trial of courage by Indians or as a result of a ship on fire).

Although nowadays, the notion of personal honesty is seldom thought to rest upon a belief in God, in both *The Deerslayer* and in "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*" such underpinnings are clearly stated. The underlying assumption would suggest that any upbringing devoid of religious education cannot make a man honest – or, to state the case even more bluntly, a God-less man is by nature inherently dishonest, or, transposing this into Cooperian terms, incapable of staking his life on his word of honor.

The final example of "furlough" or "parole" is that of Christopher Dillon in *The Pilot*, the man who stated: "I know no God! There is no God that knows me!" (*The Pilot*, Ch. XXIV, p. 287). Given Cooper's approach to honesty, it is obvious that Dillon lacked the foundation upon which to even consider the righteousness of keeping a sacred promise. Stripped of his moral integrity and his humanity, his corpse is ultimately deemed suitable only as a meal for sharks and lobsters (*The Pilot*, Ch. XXV, p. 291), in short, *nihil sine Deo*.

VII. COOPER'S THEOLOGICAL DEFENSE OF RACIAL EQUALITY

Americans may take pride in the fact that in the early days of the Republic, James Fenimore Cooper was clearly not a champion of the saying "The only good Injin is a dead Injin." In *The Deerslayer*, the "savage" Hurons give the courageous white marksman "furlough;" they trust him to return just as they would trust one of their own. It should not be forgotten that two whites in *The Deerslayer* (Hurry Harry and Thomas Hutter) turn "savage," have every desire to kill indiscriminately and feel no compunction in taking scalps, even those of women and children. In *The Chainbearer*, no white man is given "parole" by Aaron Thousandacres for the simple reason that "if you let a white man loose, he sets his wits at work to find a hole to creep out on the bargain – goin' back to the creation of 'arth but he'll find one" (*The Chainbearer*, Ch. XXI, p. 315). Yet Susquesus' word and the commonly held view of the absolute integrity of the red man suffices to allow him furlough (*The Chainbearer*, Ch. XXI, pp. 314-315).

[24] This is not compatible with a view of "soulless and unreasoning savages." The view of the "noble savage" is, however, too one-sided, for just as there are good and bad white men,

Cooper does not hesitate to portray good and bad Indians (certainly the treacherous Magua, le Renard Subtil, of *The Last of the Mohicans* is a glaring example of the latter, no matter how generously “mitigating circumstances” may be taken into account). Yet the Deity of the Native American, as stated in *The Last of the Mohicans*, is the very same Deity of the Christian:

“Even the Mingo adores but the true and living God! ’Tis a wicked fabrication of the whites, and I [=Nathaniel Bumppo] say it to the shame of my colour, that would make the warrior bow down before images of his own creation. It is true, they endeavour to make truces with the wicked one – as who would not with an enemy he cannot conquer – but they look up for favour and assistance to the Great and Good Spirit only.”

The Last of the Mohicans in *Leatherstocking Tales*, vol. I, Library of America, Ch. XXII, pp. 731-732; **Cooper Edition**: p. 226

And the heaven of the “red skins” is the same heaven as that of the “pale face:”

“The Delaware, here, and Hist, believe in happy hunting grounds, and have ideas befitting their notions and gifts, as red skins, but we who are of white blood hold altogether to a different doctrine. Still, I rather conclude our heaven is their land of the spirits, and that the path which leads to it will be travelled by all colours alike. ’Tis impossible for the wicked to enter on it, I will allow, but fri’nds can scarce be separated, though they are not of the same race on ‘arth.”

The Deerslayer, Ch. XXV, p. 918

Given the same God and the same heaven, one may ask, is not a sacred promise between man and his God the basis of the red man’s willingness to accept the full conditions of “furlough” or “parole.”

Indeed, Cooper would appear to be a man far ahead of his time, not only with regard to the explosive question of God’s many faces and that He alone – and not a multiplicity of gods – is worshipped by all races and creeds, but – going one step further – the question of interracial marriage, *even after death*, with the obvious implication of a non-segregated heaven accessible to all races. Although the scout remains adamant and proud that “there is no cross in my veins,” i.e., that he is not of mixed blood, and has difficulty imagining posthumous interracial marriage as suggested by the funeral rites for Cora (the “ardent, high-souled, and generous” mulatto [25]) and Uncas, the final hope of the Delawares. [26] Cora’s father, Colonel Munro, asks the scout (Natty Bumppo) to translate the following message to the Indian women who performed the funeral rites for his daughter. The guileless scout apparently stumbles over his own imperfect views of interracial marriage, rather than his quite liberal notion of heaven. Reflecting the prejudice of his times, the scout shook his head and

conveyed only that part of the message which “he deemed most suited to the capacities of the listeners.” What follows is the original and revolutionary statement of the bereaved sergeant:

“Say to these kind and gentle females, that a heart-broken and failing man, returns them his thanks. Tell them, that the Being we all worship, under different names, will be mindful of their charity; and that the time shall not be distant, when we may assemble around his throne, without distinction of sex, or rank, or colour.”

The Last of the Mohicans in Leatherstocking Tales, vol. I, Library of America, Ch. XXXIII, p. 874; **Cooper Edition**: p. 347.

At this juncture, the sharp contrast between the climate of white bigotry in American society and the complete lack of racial prejudice on behalf of the “savage” Delaware maidens is noteworthy:

“Clothing their ideas in the most remote and subtle images, they [=the Delaware girls] betrayed, that, in the short period of their intercourse, they had discovered, with the intuitive perception of their sex, the truant disposition of his [=Uncas’] inclinations. The Delaware girls had found no favour in his eyes! He was of a race that had once been lords on the shores of the salt lake [=Atlantic Ocean], and his wishes had led him back to the people who dwelt about the graves of his fathers. Why should not such a predilection be encouraged! That she was of a purer blood and richer than the rest of her nation, any eye might have seen. That she was equal to the dangers and daring of a life in the woods, her conduct had proved; and, now, they added, the “wise one of the earth” had transplanted her to a place where she would find congenial spirits, and might be for ever happy.”

The Last of the Mohicans in Leatherstocking Tales, vol. I, Library of America, Ch. XXXIII, pp. 869-870; **Cooper Edition**: p. 343.

The union of three races – the Native American, the white and the black – in Cora and Uncas’ posthumous marriage is consistent with Cooper’s notion of “heaven and hell,” and the basic shared humanity of all races:

“I [=Natty] tell him [=Chingachgook] there is but one heaven and one hell, notwithstanding his traditions, though there are many paths to both.”

The Pathfinder, Ch. II, p. 26

VIII. THE RUTHLESSNESS OF ENCROACHING CIVILIZATION VS. THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD IN THE WILDERNESS

The Pioneers, the first of *The Leatherstocking Tales*, written in 1823, ends with the death of The Great Serpent, also known as John Mohegan, Indian John or Chingachgook, the last of the Mohicans. The circumstances leading up to the death of this tragic and legendary hero deserve a close look.

Whereas the spread of the white man's civilization across the American continent was generally regarded as "taming" the wilderness, an act of "Manifest Destiny," and the march of progress sanctioned by Divine Providence, *The Pioneers, or the Sources of the Susquehanna; A Descriptive Tale*, points out a number of detrimental features that, at the time, were either ignored or regarded as unworthy of serious consideration. In this sense, Cooper may be securely placed among the vanguard of contemporary critical observers of the transformation taking place, even if his works are generally couched in the form of historical romances of events several generations prior to the time of their author's creation.

As is common knowledge, the white man's view of property rights was at odds with that of the Native American (and, no doubt, the first pioneers). Also, a sedentary life style transplanted from Europe effectively reduced the sources of sustenance required by the nomadic and mobile tribes of North America. Without considering very clear-cut autobiographical aspects of *The Pioneers*, several scenes from this "Descriptive Tale" will first be selected to illustrate the tension in westward expansion.

Before proceeding, it may be sufficient to point out that both Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, the latter now known by the domesticated Christian name of "Old John" or "Indian John," have reached a ripe old age of around seventy, and obtain their sustenance by hunting and fishing in the forest just outside the settlement of Templeton, founded by Judge Marmaduke Temple, who built up the community *after* Natty and Chingachgook had already been living peacefully there in a little log cabin. As the land upon which their cabin was built now legally belongs to Judge Temple, they are in effect "squatters," though not in the sense of Aaron Thousandacres, who was commercially active in destroying the surrounding forest for lumber. In fact, when Judge Temple first visited the region, it was Natty, who offered him the hospitality of his cabin. Hunting laws are introduced by Judge Temple, which affect the livelihood of the two aging men. Old John, once a fierce warrior and the last of his race, has been reduced to the role of a basket-maker who occasionally succumbs to the temptation of fire-water, a humiliation he afterwards regrets. He has also been converted to Christianity and attends the local church in Templeton.

The negative effect of encroaching settlement is graphically portrayed in Cooper's tale. A few examples of the indiscriminate killing of flora and fauna may be cited. In chapter XX, even Judge Temple reacts to the callous collection of maple syrup by inflicting "dreadful wounds" in the trees:

"It grieves me to witness the extravagance that pervades this country," said the Judge, "where the settlers trifle with the blessings they might enjoy, with the prodigality of successful adventurers. You are not exempt from the censure yourself, Kirby, for you make dreadful wounds in these trees, where a small incision would effect the

same object. I earnestly beg you will remember, that they are the growth of centuries, and when once gone, none living will see their loss remedied.”

The Pioneers, Ch. XX, p. 229

In chapter XXII, the massacre of the pigeons is even conducted with a “miniature cannon” firing indiscriminately into the flock! The old hunter Natty Bumppo provides the following comment:

“...*it's wicked* [my emphasis] to be shooting into flocks in this wastey manner; and none do it, who know how to knock over a single bird. If a body has a craving for pigeon's flesh, why! It's made the same as all other creater's, for man's eating, but not to kill twenty and eat one. When I want such a thing, I go into the woods till I find one to my liking, and then I shoot him off the branches without touching a feather of another, though there might be a hundred in the same tree.” *The Pioneers*, Ch. XXII, p. 249.

In chapter XXIV, Natty provides a similar argument when the townspeople overfish Lake Otsego with their seine:

“I eat of no man's wasty ways. I strike my spear into the eels, or the trout, when I crave the creators, but I wouldn't be helping to such a sinful kind of fishing, for the best rifle that was ever brought out from the old countries. If they had fur, like a beaver, or you could tan their hides, like a buck, something might be said in favour of taking them by the thousands with your nets; but as God made them for man's food, and for no other disarnable reason, *I call it sinful* [my emphasis] and wasty [27] to catch more than can be eat.”

The Pioneers, Ch. XXIV, pp. 267-268.

Although beaver and deer are not necessarily exempt in Natty's less-than-perfect reasoning from overhunting, it is clear that *The Pioneers* represents an early statement of the need for environmentalist measures to restrain the first settlers' indiscriminate destruction of Nature. It is also clear that a religious element is operating in Natty's mind when he condemns such practices as “wicked” or “sinful.” In *The Pathfinder*, towns and settlements receive little praise, whereas the beauty of Nature is such as to elevate a man's mind to the worship of God:

“That towns and settlements lead to sin, I will allow, but our lakes are bordered by forests, and one is every day called upon to worship God, in such a temple.”

The Pathfinder, Ch. II, p. 26

Similarly:

“It is not easy, Mabel, to dwell always in the presence of God, and not feel the power of his goodness. I have attended church-sarvice in the garrisons, and tried hard, as becomes a true soldier, to join in the prayers; for though no enlisted sarvent of the King, I fight his battles and sarve his cause, and so I have endivoired to worship garrison-fashion, but never could raise within me, the solemn feelings and true affection, that I feel when alone with God, in the forest. There I seem to stand face to face, with my master; all around me is fresh and beautiful, as it came from his hand, and there is no nicety, or doctrine, to chill the feelin’s. No – no – the woods are the true temple a’ter all, for there the thoughts are free to mount higher even than the clouds.”

The Pathfinder, Ch. VII, p. 95

The refreshing aspect of this view of religion is that it is unencumbered with dogma. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, the illiterate scout points out that there is only one “book” worth reading:

“What call you the volume?” said David, misconceiving the other’s meaning.

“’Tis open before our eyes, returned the scout; “and he who owns it is not a niggard of its use. I have heard it said, that there are men who read in books, to convince themselves there is a God! I know not but man may so deform his works in the settlements, as to leave that which is clear in the wilderness, a matter of doubt among traders and priests. If any such there be, and he will follow me from sun to sun, through the windings of the forest, he shall see enough to teach him that he is a fool, and that the greatest of his folly lies in striving to rise to the level of one he can never equal, be it in goodness, or be it in power.”

The instant David discovered that he battled with a disputant who imbibed his faith from the lights of nature, eschewing all subtleties of doctrine, he willingly abandoned a controversy, from which he believed neither profit nor credit was to be derived.

The Last of the Mohicans, Ch. 12, pp. 604-605;
Cooper Edition: p. 117

Natty’s “simple religion” not only foreshadows the development of American transcendentalism but, due to its base in Nature, is attuned to the interests of maintaining a balance of Nature and heightening environmentalist awareness.

Destruction of the environment is equated to disobedience to God’s will:

“Ah’s! me – the things they call improvements and betterments are undermining and defacing the land! The glorious works of God are daily cut down and destroyed, and the hand of man seems to be upraised in contempt of his mighty will.”

The Pathfinder, Ch. VII, p. 101

IX. CHINGACHGOOK’S FINEST HOUR

When an ordinance is passed forbidding the killing of deer “out of season,” Natty and Chingachgook are preprogrammed to come in conflict with of the law. Added to the quagmire of the law, are absurd suspicions by the townspeople of Templeton that Natty’s hut may serve as a horde of hidden treasure. Here the Gothic element is transferred from a cathedral or castle to a hut, or – particularly in *The Last of the Mohicans* – the mysterious cave on the rocky island immediately above Glenn’s Falls on the Hudson, which Cooper himself visited. The result of the clash of values and the encroachment of settlers upon both the Native American and Natty Bumppo is that both their livelihood and their homes are endangered. Natty, rather than to allow uninvited whites to enter his and Chingachgook’s cabin without their consent, burns it to the ground. He does this even though he has lived in this one place for forty years. At the end of the novel, he feels he has no other choice than to pull up stakes and move west into the endless prairie. Chingachgook, on the other hand, has reached a completely different decision. Instead, he will remain where he is and die where he is. Yet few men could choose a more spectacular death. Seated on a log, on top of Mount Vision [28], surrounded by the flames, he prepared for his death:

“The flames danced along the parched trunk of the pine, like lightning quivering on a chain, and immediately a column of living fire was raging on the terrace. It soon spread from tree to tree, and the scene was evidently drawing to a close. The log on which Mohegan was seated lighted at its farther end, and the Indian appeared to be surrounded by fire. Still he was unmoved. As his body was unprotected, his sufferings must have been great, but his fortitude was superior to all. His voice could yet be heard, even in the midst of these horrors.”

The Pioneers, Ch. XXXVII, p. 417.

Although Natty is able to extricate the old warrior from approaching doom, Chingachgook has already bade this world adieu:

“Why should Mohegan go?” returned the Indian, gloomily. “He has seen the days of an eagle, and his eye grows dim. He looks on the valley; he looks on the water; he looks in the hunting-grounds – but he sees no Delawares. Every one has a white skin. My fathers say, from the far-off land, come. My women, my young warriors, my tribe, say, come. The Great Spirit says, come. Let Mohegan die.”

“But you forget your friend,” cried Edwards.

“’Tis useless to talk to an Indian with the death-fit on him, lad,” interrupted Natty, who seized the strips of the blanket, and with wonderful dexterity strapped the passive chieftain to his own back; when he turned, and with a strength that seemed to bid defiance, not only to his years, but to his load, he led the way to the point whence he had issued.

The Pioneers, Ch. XXXVIII, p. 422.

Before Chingachgook's death, there is the intercession of a divine who hopes to perform Christian rites on the old warrior and earnestly inquires whether his final thoughts are attuned to Christian doctrine. As it turns out, the dying Chingachgook has again embraced the religion of his Fathers, and is singing, not "the Redeemer's praise," but (as Natty terms it) "his own."

Chingachgook's "voice" (cf. *The Pioneers*, Ch. XXXVII, p. 417) heard on the burning mountain top was no doubt his death song. Without a single groan escaping from his lips and in spite of his burns, which, it may be assumed, were not the ultimate cause of his death [29], the dying Delaware's message was his promise to return to his God:

"I will come! I will come! To the land of the just I will come! The Maguas I have slain! – I have slain the Maguas! And the Great Spirit calls to his son. I will come! I will come! To the land of the just I will come!"

The Pioneers, Ch. XXXVIII, p. 426.

The question whether the desire to be reunited with loved ones who have passed away can in any way be regarded as Christian is thorny. Can "Our Heavenly Father" replace our own father and forefathers? In *The Pioneers*, Elizabeth Temple calls Chingachgook's longing for a place where "all just red-men shall live together as brothers" *outright superstition*: "John! This is not the heaven of a Christian!" (- *The Pioneers*, Ch. XXXVI, p. 409.) On the other hand, Natty himself hardly shares Elizabeth's rather dogmatic convictions. *The Deerslayer* even airs open criticism of the necessity of churches:

"Then as to churches, they are good, I [=Natty] suppose, else wouldn't good men uphold 'em. But they are not altogether necessary. They call 'em the temples of the Lord; but, Judith, the whole 'arth is a temple of the Lord to such as have the right mind. Neither forts nor churches make people happier of themselves. Moreover, all is contradiction in the settlements, while all is concord in the woods. Forts and churches almost always go together, and yet they're downright contradiction; churches being for peace, and forts for war. No, no – give me the strong places of the wilderness, which is the trees, and the churches, too, which are arbors raised by the hand of natur'."

The Deerslayer, Ch. XV, p. 745.

And in *The Pioneers*, Natty's comment on "meeting again" is indistinguishable from Chingachgook's own "superstition:"

"You mean all for the best, lad; I know it; and so does Madam, too; but your ways isn't my ways. 'Tis like the dead there, who thought, when the breath was in them, that one went east and one went west, to find their heavens; but they'll meet at last; and so shall we, children. – Yes, ind as you've begun, and we shall meet in the land of the just, at last."

The Pioneers, Ch. XLI, p. 462.

Even the creation of Gothic cathedrals is thought of as an imitation of the beauty of Nature:

“The arches of the woods, even at high noon, cast their somber shadows on the spot, which the brilliant rays of the sun that struggled through the leaves contributed to mellow, and, if such an expression can be used, to illuminate. It was probably from a similar scene that the mind of man first got its idea of the effects of gothic tracery and churchly hues, this temple of nature producing some such effect, so far as light and shadow were concerned, as the well-known offspring of human invention.”

The Deerslayer, Ch. XXVII, pp. 948-949

In *The Pathfinder; or, The Inland Sea*, Nathaniel provides a fascinating response to the question as to which “sect” he belongs to. The response is simple: to none.

“What sect do you hold out for? What particular church do you fetch up in?”

“Look about you, and judge for yourself. I’m in church now; I eat in church, drink in church, sleep in church. The’arth is the temple of the Lord, and I wait on Him hourly, daily, without ceasing, I humbly hope. No, no, I’ll not deny my blood and colour; but am Christian born, and shall die in the same faith. The Moravians tried me hard; and one of the king’s chaplains has had his say, too, though that’s a class no ways strenuous on such matters; and a missionary sent from Rome talked much with me, as I guided him through the forest, during the last peace; but I’ve had one answer for them all – I’m a Christian already, and want to be neither Moravian, nor Churchman, nor Papist. No, no, I’ll not deny my birth and blood.”

The Pathfinder, Ch. XXVII, p. 446.

In the *Leatherstocking Tales*, one is apt to forget that Natty has been drawn to the mediation of Christ for his salvation. The reader will be continually impressed by the way Natty can “see” God in all of Nature, by the way he can *feel* God’s presence; as such, Natty is filled with humility on the one hand and awe on the other for the infinite power and mercy of his God:

“An open spot on a mountain side, where a wide look can be had at the heavens and the ‘arth, is a most judicious place for a man to get a just idee of the power of the Manitou, and of his own littleness.”

The Deerslayer, Ch. XXVI, p. 938

The paramount importance of a belief in Christ and Christ’s mediation is to be found in *The Pioneers*, when the divine, Rev. Grant, asks John [=Chingachgook] just before he expires whether he realizes that his heroic deeds (here expressed as “good works”) in this life are worthless without the intervention of his Saviour:

“John! You have enjoyed the blessings of a gospel ministry, and have been called from out a multitude of sinners and pagans, and, I trust, for a wise and gracious purpose. Do you now feel what it is to be justified by your Saviour’s death, and reject all weak and idle dependence on good works, that spring from man’s pride and vain-glory?”

The Pioneers, Ch. XXXVIII, p. 426

Nathaniel's reply on Chingachgook's state of mind not only indicates that John has returned to the Faith of his Fathers but also indicates the quiet heroism of the old warrior as he prepares for his death – a death which will overcome the many losses he has suffered throughout his life:

“...he knows his end is at hand as well as you or I, but, so far from thinking it a loss, he believes it to be a great gain. He is old and stiff, and you've made the game so scarce and shy, that better shots than him find it hard to get a livelihood. Now he thinks he shall travel where it will always be good hunting; where no wicked or unjust Indians can go; and where he shall meet all his tribe together again. There's not much loss in that, to a man whose hands be hardly fit for basket-making. Loss! If there be any loss, 'twill be to me. I'm sure, after he's gone, there will be but little left for me but to follow.”

The Pioneers, Ch. XXXVIII, pp. 426-7.

For Natty, the important question is no longer what will become of John, who, to Natty's mind, is returning to his people, but what will become of Natty *without* John. Yet the apparent insensitivity of Natty to the question of salvation, can be dispelled by turning to *The Deerslayer*:

“You'll be Christianized one day, I make no doubt, and then 'twill all come plain enough. You must know, Sarpent, that there's been a great deed of salvation done, that, by God's help, enables all men to find a pardon for their wickedness, and *that* is the essence of the white man's religion.” *The Deerslayer*, Ch. XXVI, p. 939

Perhaps *The Chainbearer*, the novel Cooper was working on when “*The Helmsman*” was first circulated, provides the most heartening confirmation of Christian convictions:

“Dus mourned her uncle in sincerity, and she long continued to mourn for him; but her mourning was that of the Christian who hoped. Chainbearer's hurt had occurred several days before; and the first feeling of sorrow had become lessened by time and reflection. His end had been happy; and he was now believed to be enjoying the fruition of his penitence through the sacrifice of the Son of God.”

The Chainbearer, Ch. XXX, p. 463

**X. THE DEATH OF GOD'S CHILD-MISSIONARY –
HETTY HUTTER, IN *THE DEERSLAYER*,
AND THE DEATH OF AMERICA'S GREATEST LEGENDARY FIGURE,
LEATHER-STOCKING, IN *THE PRAIRIE***

At first sight, it may seem strange to place a young woman, who is called “feeble-minded,” and often described as “simple-minded,” on a similar level as that of an old man “who has acted his part honestly near ninety winters and summers” (cf. *The Prairie* in *Leatherstocking Tales*, vol. I, Ch. XXXIII, p. 1300), and then to attempt to describe their deaths. And yet, the two individuals have more in common than may at first meet the eye. But first, a description of Hetty:

“An idiot she could not properly be termed, her mind being just enough enfeebled to lose most of those traits that are connected with the artful qualities, and to retain its ingenuousness and love of truth. It had often been remarked of this girl, by the few who had seen her, and who possessed sufficient knowledge to discriminate, that her perception of the right seemed almost intuitive, while her aversion to the wrong formed so distinctive a feature of her mind, as to surround her with an atmosphere of pure morality; peculiarities that are not infrequent with persons who are termed feeble-minded; as if God had forbidden the evil spirits to invade a precinct so defenceless, with the benign purpose of extending a direct protection to those who had been left without the usual aids of humanity. Her person, too, was agreeable, having a strong resemblance to that of her sister’s, of which it was a subdued and humble copy. If it had none of the brilliancy of Judith’s, the calm, quiet, almost holy expression of her meek countenance seldom failed to win on the observer, and few noted it long that did not begin to feel a deep and lasting interest in the girl. She had no colour, in common, nor was her simple mind apt to present images that caused her cheek to brighten, though she retained a modesty so innate that it almost raised her to the unsuspecting purity of a being superior to human infirmities. Guileless, innocent, and without distrust, equally by nature and from her mode of life, providence had, nevertheless shielded her from harm, by a halo of moral light, as it is said ‘to temper the wind to the shorn lamb.’”

The Deerslayer, Ch. IV, p.544

Hetty, like Guert and so many others, was mortally wounded with a rifle bullet. The question of “friendly fire” or simply a freak shot is never answered. With death approaching, “*the pure, excellent, sinless creature*” [my emphasis] told her sister Judith, “I don’t suffer” (*The Deerslayer*, Ch. XXXI, p. 1011). Cooper, himself, seems to link *two kindred spirits* in the conclusion to *The Deerslayer*, his final volume in the *Leatherstocking Tales*. To Deerslayer, portrayed as a young man [30], the dying Hetty revealed the following premonition:

“I feel, Deerslayer,” she resumed – “though I could n’t tell why – but I feel that you and I are not going to part for ever. ’Tis a strange feeling! – I never had it before – I wonder what it comes from!”

“’Tis God encouraging you in extremity, Hetty; as such it ought to be harbored and respected. Yes, we *shall* meet ag’in, though it may be a long time, first, and in a far distant land.”

“Do you mean to be buried in the lake, too? If so, that may account for the feeling.”

“’Tis little likely, gal; ’tis little likely – but there is a region for christian souls, where there’s no lakes, nor woods, they say; though why there should be none of the *last*, is more than I can account for; seeing that pleasantness and peace is the object in view. My grave will be found in the forest, most likely, but I hope my spirit will not be far from yourn.”

The Deerslayer, Ch. XXXI, p. 1015

The “childish simplicity of character” that characterizes both individuals need not be regarded as weakness. In fact, it reinforces their highly developed sense of honesty and personal integrity. The archaic use of “fatuity” may be understood in the sense of “feeble-mindedness:”

“You are an unaccountable being, Deerslayer,” returned the girl, not a little puzzled with the childish simplicity of character that the hunter so often displayed – a simplicity so striking that it frequently appeared to place him nearly on a level with the fatuity of poor Hetty, though always relieved by the beautiful moral truth that shone through all that this unfortunate girl both said and did. . . .”

The Deerslayer, Ch. XXII, p. 865.

Although Hetty Hutter is not the prettier of the two sisters and certainly not the brightest, her honesty, inherent courage and deep-seated love of all mankind make her a young woman to be reckoned with. Indeed, the very question of her apparent “feeble-mindedness,” though frequently stated, is often to be viewed with skepticism, as her purity of character makes up for any deficiencies of intellect. In addition, she enjoys a “handicap” with the Iroquois Indians from Canada, who are invading the region: for the Native American, being “retarded” is not something to be ashamed of (as is the case with whites) but is instead seen as a special sign of God’s favour. Such individuals, “God’s fools,” if you will, were held in reverence and given special protection by all members of the tribe. In other words, little Hetty had absolutely nothing to fear at the hands of the white man’s enemies. And, indeed, she was fearless, anyway! Her absolute honesty allowed her to speak her mind and even to attempt to convert the red man to Christianity.

It should not be forgotten that Natty Bumppo had no formal education and was illiterate. Hetty, on the other hand, had “some education” [31]. Nathaniel, himself, although certainly not “feeble-minded,” is often referred to as “simple-minded,” though in a positive sense of a simple and honest individual (quite reminiscent of Hetty). This is even taken as a reason for Sergeant Dunham to wholeheartedly attempt to get Natty (in *The Pathfinder*) to marry his daughter Mabel:

“The fact was; few knew the Pathfinder intimately without secretly believing him to be one of extraordinary qualities. Ever the same, *simple-minded* [my emphasis], faithful, utterly without fear, and yet prudent, foremost in all warrantable enterprises, or what the opinion of the day considered as such, and never engaged in anything to call a

blush to his cheeks or censure on his acts, it was not possible to live much with this being and not feel respect and admiration for him which had no reference to his position in life. The most surprising peculiarity about the man himself was the entire indifference with which he regarded all distinctions which did not depend on personal merit. He was respectful to his superiors from habit; but had often been known to correct their mistakes and to reprove their vices with a fearlessness that proved how essentially he regarded more material points, and with a natural discrimination that appeared to set education at defiance. In short, a disbeliever in the ability of man to distinguish between good and evil without the aid of instruction, would have been staggered by the character of this extraordinary inhabitant of the frontier.”

The Pathfinder, Ch. IX, p. 139

Both characters, Hetty and Natty, possess what may be termed an “intuitive feel” for what is “good and evil.” Both are also, *by their simple-minded nature*, able to steer a course which may be regarded as virtuous. Neither Hetty nor Natty are in any way “fallen” – there is really very little for which they need repent. Although unchurched, both, in their own simple ways, exhibit strong Christian convictions. In *The Prairie*, when the Pawnee warrior Hard-Heart (the associations “Stout Heart” and “Maynard” invariably come to mind) tells his dying adopted father Natty that “A hundred Loups shall clear his path from briars,” the old man responds:

“Pawnee, I die, as I have lived, a Christian man,” resumed the trapper with a force in his voice, that had the same startling effect on his hearers as is produced by a trumpet, when its blast rises suddenly and freely on the air, after its obstructed sounds have been struggling in the distance. “As I came into life, so will I leave it. Horses and arms are not needed to stand in the Presence of the Great Spirit of my people! He knows my colour, and according to my gifts will he judge my deeds.”

“My father will tell my young men, how many Mingoës he has struck, and what acts of valour and justice he has done, that they may know how to imitate him.”

“A boastful tongue is not heard in the heaven of the white man!” solemnly returned the old man. “What I have done, he has seen. His eyes are always open. That which has been well done will he remember. Wherein I have been wrong, will he not forget to chastise, though he will do the same with mercy. No, my son; a pale-face may not sing his own praises, and hope to be acceptable before his God!”

The Prairie, Ch. XXXIV, pp. 1311-1312

Although perhaps superficial, another aspect linking Hetty and Natty may be mentioned in passing. Neither were thought to possess physical beauty. Hetty Hutter is the “ugly duckling,” whereas her sister Judith has apparently been able to attract soldiers like flies. Hurry Harry is a handsome, if dissolute, young rogue, whereas Deerslayer, even when portrayed as a strapping young man, is already “sun burnt” from exposure to the elements, just as old John Maynard in “*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*.” As Hurry Harry blurted out:

“No, no, Deerslayer, you’re no beauty, as you will own yourself, if you’ll look over the side of the canoe....”

The Deerslayer, Ch. III, p.531.

And yet the beautiful, though possibly less than virtuous Judith saw in Deerslayer a man with inner integrity whom she would gladly have married, had he been willing.

There is also the very clear “outsider role” played by Bumppo. As he stated at the end of *The Pioneers*, just before departing, never to return:

“I’m weary of living in clearings, and where the hammer is sounding in my ears from sun-rise to sun-set.”

The Pioneers, Ch. XLI, p. 462.

The Leather-stocking was not a friend of settlements or of the spread of “civilization,” even though he generously speaks of “the Lord that lives in clearings as well as in the wilderness” (*The Pioneers*, end of final chapter). Beyond the pale of settlement, he can judge its effects impartially. Referred to as a “squatter” in *The Pioneers*, although he had already built his log cabin before Judge Temple had ever obtained a (questionable) deed to the land, the old hunter can easily be termed a renegade, just as the luckless Indians were branded. The Hutterers also live as “squatters” on Lake Otsego before 1760, long before Cooper’s father established Cooperstown right beside it. Hurry Harry, however, would jokingly call old Tom a “floater” because of his island “Castle,” which stood on piles. And Hetty, unlike Judith, was never eager to leave her home in the wilderness.

The numerous parallel characteristics exhibited by Hetty and Natty may serve to show an underlying moral fabric. Hetty is not a heroine in the traditional sense because she does not even *realize* that her life is heroic. Yet this may be the purist act of heroism. She is also not aware of the salient aspects of her character which elevate her far beyond the more mundane aspects of an uncaring humanity. Her final heroism is her quiet death, accepted cheerfully, her hope to meet Deerslayer in her future state of existence, and her vision of her mother “and bright beings around her in the lake.” Cooper’s eulogy of Hetty is worth quoting:

“Thus died Hetty Hutter, one of those mysterious links between the material and immaterial world, which, while they appear to be deprived of so much that is esteemed and necessary for this state of being, draw so near to, and offer so beautiful an illustration of truth, purity, and simplicity of another.”

The Deerslayer, Ch. XXXI, p.1017.

Leaving *The Deerslayer* (1841), let us wonder back fourteen years in time to *The Prairie* (1827), in which the young man of *The Deerslayer* has been transformed into a man who has rounded ninety and is quietly preparing for his end. Nathaniel Bumppo had often wracked his brains trying to fathom the mysteries of a Christian heaven. Was it a place of boredom and “eternal rest?” How could a frontiersman like himself *stand* such a place? As Natty often

characterized himself, he was a doer, not a talker – a man of action, who could make a quick decision in the event of danger:

“But as for me, the Lord has made me for a doer and not a talker....”

The Prairie, Ch. XXXIII, p.1301

Just as the Leather-stocking evinced little patience in talking when danger was threatening, so John Maynard felt no compunction in chastising the frightened womenfolk on board the burning *Jersey*:

[“*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*:”] “But, to speak the truth,” he added, “we are all in great danger; and I think if there was a little less talking and a little more praying, it would be the better for us, and none the worse for the boat.”

The concept of the Happy Hunting Ground of Native Americans was much more to the taste of a man who had spent his entire active life outside, surrounded by the beauty of Nature. In *The Last of the Mohicans* (cf. Ch. 19, p. 692), the scout deliberates on this thorny question without finding an answer.

In *The Prairie*, Hector, the old trapper’s hound (still fondly called “the pup”), is – like his master – of advanced years. The dog dies without Natty realizing what has happened because the Pawnees, sensing Natty’s deep attachment to his hound, stuffed it and placed it at his master’s feet. When the old man finally sees through the well-meant ruse, he immediately considers what should be done:

“...it will not do to set forth the opinion that a Christian can expect to meet his hound, again, still there can be little harm in placing what is left of so faithful a servant nigh the bones of his master?”

“It shall be done as you desire.”

“I’m glad you think with me in this matter. In order then to save labor, lay the pup at my feet – or for that matter put him, side by side. A hunter need never be ashamed to be found in company with his dog!”

The Prairie, Ch. XXXIV, p.1314

In other words, a latent hope may also be detected in this passage in that there might possibly be a “heaven” for a white hunter, much like the heaven of the Native American, in which he – and his faithful dog – might continue to pursue an active life in a new state of existence.

The last moments of Nathaniel Bumppo, the scout, the hunter, the trapper, may not be termed “heroic” in the sense of overcoming pain through the strength of his faith. Yet he was able to overcome death through his strong Christian convictions. Like Chingachgook, Natty, too, considers himself the last of his tribe. The question of *worthiness*, that “we have always proved ourselves,” is uppermost in his mind:

“I am without kith or kin in the wide world!” the trapper answered. “When I am gone there will be an end of my race. [32] We have never been chiefs; but honest and useful in our way, I hope it cannot be denied we have always proved ourselves. My father lies buried near the sea, and the bones of his son will whiten on the Prairies.”

The Prairie, Ch. XXXIV, pp. 1314-1315

In *The Last of the Mohicans*, the central question of “having no kin” is shown to be vacuous in one of the most poetic passages Cooper ever penned. Here Natty realizes and feels with all his heart that ties of friendship are stronger than race:

“My [=Chingachgook’s] race has gone from the shores of the salt lake [=the Atlantic], and the hills of the Delawares. But who can say that the serpent of his tribe has forgotten his wisdom! I am alone — ”

“No, no,” cried Hawk-eye, who had been gazing with a yearning look at the rigid features of his friend, with something like his own self-command, but whose philosophy could endure no longer; “no, Sagamore, not alone. The gifts of our colours may be different, but God has so placed us as to journey the same path. I have no kin, and I may also say, like you, no people. He [=Uncas] was your son, and a red-skin by nature; and it may be, that your blood was nearer; — but if ever I forget the lad, who has so often fou’t at my side in war, and slept at my side in peace, may He who made us all, whatever may be our colour or our gifts, forget me. The boy has left us for a time, but Sagamore, you are not alone!”

The Last of the Mohicans, Library of America, Ch. XXXIII, p. 877; **Cooper Edition**: p. 349

At this point, the reader will recall that Natty, too, was hardly alone in his final hours. The attentive and caring Pawnees were gathered about “a sage and counselor whom they had begun both to love and to respect” [*The Prairie*, Ch. XXXIV, p. 1311]. Natty’s adopted son Hard-Heart was present. And Duncan Uncas Middleton, descended from Major Duncan Heyward and Alice Munro, and perhaps in a metaphysical sense from Uncas and Cora in *The Last of the Mohicans*, was also present. His middle name

“is the appellation of a native chief, that both my uncle and myself bear with pride; for it is a memorial of an important service done my family by a warrior in the old wars of the provinces.”

The Prairie, Ch. X, p. 1003

Natty’s American *family* was present – and not racially homogeneous at all. Perhaps the most touching aspect is that it even transcended race, for old Hector was going to sleep by his master’s side.

After the question of a grave and gravestone was settled, the final moment of Nathaniel Bumppo’s life achieved a dramatic climax in the following portrayal:

...Middleton felt the hand which he held, grasp his own, with incredible power, and the old man, supported on either side by his friends, rose upright to his feet. for a moment, he looked about him, as if to invite all in presence to listen, (the lingering remnant of human frailty) and then, with a fine military elevation of his head, and with a voice that might be heard in every part of that numerous assembly he pronounced the word –

“Here!”

A movement so entirely unexpected, and the air of grandeur and humility which so strikingly united in the mien of the trapper, together with the clear and uncommon force of his utterance, produced a short period of confusion in the faculties of all present. When Middleton and Hard-Heart, each of whom involuntarily extended a hand to support the form of the old man, turned to him again, they found that the subject of their interest, was removed forever beyond the necessity of their care.

The Prairie, Ch. XXXIV, pp. 1316-1317.

Fully aware of the final instant of his life, the old man’s “Here!” signaled the beginning of his journey to the heaven he had envisioned. Although his grave was placed “beneath the shade of some noble oaks” and was known as “a spot where a just white-man sleeps,” the reader can picture Natty and his “pup” Hector out hunting for some venison, the Deerslayer under the canopy of God’s sacred forest. To Cooper, it is clear that Natty did not die, for he was resurrected in 1840 and 1841 in two of his best novels, *The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer*.

The legacy of Nathaniel Bumppo has been far-reaching: an idealization of the virtue of self-reliance; the belief that Nature has healing qualities and is a revelation of God’s Creation; the spin-off that the environment – as God’s temple – is holy and must consequently be protected; the whole genre of historical romances “set in the West/frontier,” in which the hero is capable of “setting things right” without the meddling help of civil law and order – because there are *higher* laws than those of man (also, along the same lines, the right to engage in civil disobedience); the belief that it is our destiny and behooves us spiritually to move “westwards,” for there we shall find our own Garden of Eden and be closer to God; the notion that book-learning is superficial – we must learn from Nature, the true Bible of the Lord; the emphasis upon a multilingual Leather-stocking, who effortlessly communicates with Native Americans in their own tongues, to achieve racial harmony and coexistence; a general belief in cultural relativism – each race having its own “gifts,” or strengths – as a result, a *mixed society* cannot be bad, just as a deep friendship between men of different races can only *add* to what they can achieve; a common-sense approach to religion based upon the kind of life one has led and the ethnic roots one has (with all paths leading to *the same God* and *the same heaven*) – and characterized by *deep humility* and *love of God*. Certainly American transcendentalism’s roots must also extend back to the simple-minded beliefs of America’s first great fictional frontiersman – a guileless, innocent and thoroughly honest representative of the best of mankind, a wilderness saint.

XI. TRIALS OF COURAGE

Cooper's frequent use of pain as a means to establish the courage and worthiness of the Good Man may well have been at least partially based on the Native American's use of torture, which, it will be remembered, plays such a predominant role in *The Deerslayer*. The notion of "furlough" or "parole" as a paradigm example of honesty based upon an agreement

between the believer and his God has also been considered in this connection. That Cooper had long experience as a writer in dealing with scenes of agony also becomes clear when considering the dreaded practice of scalping. In this instance, not the painless scalping done posthumously is meant, but rather the agonizing scalping done *before* the victim is dead. The villain Floating Tom in *The Deerslayer* is scalped and stabbed. Interestingly, "it was the blow of the knife that proved fatal" (Ch. XXI, p. 837), not the fact that he was scalped. In other words, it was – in some cases – possible to survive scalping. Although one may well feel that Old Floating Tom has finally got his just desserts, the very thought of being scalped alive must strike the general reader as ghastly. Dying Floating Tom Hutter describes his agony to Hurry Harry, his partner in scalping:

"Have you got any scalp? Mine's gone – How does it feel to have a scalp? – I know how it feels to lose one – Fire and flames about the brain – and, a wrenching at the heart – no – no – kill *first*, Hurry, and scalp, *afterwards*."

The Deerslayer, Ch. XXI, p. 843

In a footnote appended to *The Last of the Mohicans*, the importance of the scalp for a successful warrior is explained:

"The scalp was the only admissible trophy of victory. Thus it was deemed more important to scalp than to kill a man."

The Last of the Mohicans, Ch. III, p. 500, fn.; **Cooper Edition**: p. 29

"A long and heavy groan" is heard from a young Frenchman who is sadly mistaken for the enemy by Chingachgook. The description of the Delaware following the deed is indicative:

"As the chief rejoined them, with one hand he attached the reeking scalp of the unfortunate young Frenchman to his girdle, and with the other he replaced the knife and tomahawk that had drunk his blood. He then took his wonted station, with the air of a man who believed he had done a deed of merit."

The Last of the Mohicans, **Library of America**, Ch. XIV, p. 628; **Cooper Edition**: p. 138

The scalp was thus held in esteem by a Delaware, in this instance, as *proof* of the bravery and heroism of the victor. The scout's comment is suggestive of cultural relativism based on the "gifts and nature" of different races:

Then shaking his head in a mournful manner, he muttered –
" 'Twould have been a cruel and an unhuman act for a white-skin; but 'tis the gift and nature of an Indian, and I suppose it should not be denied! I could wish, though, it had befallen an accursed Mingo, rather than that gay, young boy, from the old countries!"
The Last of the Mohicans, Library of America, *ibid*;
Cooper Edition: *ibid*.

Yet the trial of torture was held in even higher esteem than scalping:

"The American Indian always deemed his moral victories the noblest, prizing the groans and yielding of his victim under torture, more than the trophy of his scalp; and the trophy itself more than his life. To slay, and not to bring off proof of victory, indeed, was scarcely deemed honorable, even these rude and fierce tenants of the forest, like their more nurtured brethren of the court and the camp, having set up for themselves imaginary and arbitrary points of honor, to supplant the conclusions of the right and the decisions of reason." *The Deerslayer*, Ch. XXVII, p. 947

Without providing a few glaring examples, Cooper nonetheless challenges the prejudice that only the moral code of the Native American is "imaginary" or "arbitrary:" the moral code of the red man's white counterpart also "supplant[ing] the conclusions of the right and the decisions of reason."

XII. A MAN WITHOUT A CROSS

A second consideration for Deerslayer's commitment to parole deserves mention:

"...Deerslayer however, by his peculiar notions of the duty of the white man...had stoutly made up his mind to endure everything, in preference to disgracing his colour."
Deerslayer, Ch. XXIX, first page

Particularly in *The Last of the Mohicans*, the contemporary reader may even be shocked by Natty's pride in his own racial purity:

"Come on, ye bloody minded hell-hounds! Ye meet a man without a cross [*in blood*]!"
The Last of the Mohicans, Ch. VII, p. 550

When speaking to Uncas, Hawk-eye states:

“Let us remember, we are men without a cross, and let us teach these natives of the forest, that white blood can run as freely as red, when the appointed hour is come.”

The Last of the Mohicans, Ch. VIII, p. 557

In other words, *both* the young Delaware Uncas *and* Natty are “men without a cross,” who have a *sacred obligation* not to disgrace their respective races and what those races stand for.

As *The Last of the Mohicans* may be regarded as a call for racial tolerance and respect for all races, Natty’s stubborn rejection of *interracial marriage*, which is clearly alluded to in the funeral ceremonies of Cora and Uncas, must contain a religious component. Terms like “spirit of Christianity” and “sinful” are at play. And Cora, “the dark-eyed woman,” is praised by Natty for speaking words that are “wise” in spite of her youth. The following lines convey the complexity:

“There is reason in her [=Cora’s] words!” at length broke from his [=the scout’s] compressed and trembling lips; “ay, and they bear the spirit of christianity; what might be right and proper in a redskin, may be sinful in a man who has not even a cross in blood to plead for his ignorance.”

The Last of the Mohicans, Ch. VIII, p. 559

Natty, like Long Tom Coffin, is far from perfect. As Donald A. Ringe puts it:

“Superstitious, ignorant, and prejudiced though he may be – qualities critics have tended to ignore in him – he perceives as no other white character does his true relation to the immensity of the nature that surrounds him; and his humility lets him see good even in his enemies.”

Donald A. Ringe, *James Fenimore Cooper*, p. 44

As Edwards puts it in *The Pioneers*:

“He [=Natty] is simple, unlettered, even ignorant; prejudiced, perhaps, though I feel that his opinion of the world is too true; but he has a heart, Judge Temple, that would atone for a thousand faults; he knows his friends, and never deserts them, even if it be his dog.”

The Pioneers, Ch. XXXI, p. 349

Yet in spite of any failings, both Long Tom and “La Longue Carbine” actually shine forth as legendary figures, which are clearly role models of heroic proportions. Perhaps we can say that their character flaws actually add color to avoid “flat” characterization. Even in “*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*,” old John Maynard had very little patience with the frightened women who were bombarding him with questions. He *knew* that it was time to act and not talk – and for the women, it was time to pray. Neither Long Tom Coffin, Nathaniel Bumppo or John Maynard, regardless of imperfections, can be called to account for unworthy deeds or thoughts. And even if Natty initially balked at the notion of a posthumous wedding of Cora and Uncas, it cannot be denied that he loved Uncas as if he were his own son and that Cora Munro is treated with the highest respect.

The inconsistency in Natty's behavior may have been determined not so much by the character of Natty himself as by the social climate at the time, which Cooper sought to mollify by allowing Natty to "shake his head." That the "mixed marriage" was consigned to the "spirit world," or – if you will – a hypothetical ethereal realm beyond the imagination of many mortals, may also be seen as a clever Cooperian ploy to defuse what God-fearing citizens back in Cooper's days might have regarded as "unthinkable." Only three pages later, we see Natty fervently reassuring his life-long friend, Chingachgook, that he, the Great Serpent, in spite of the terrible loss of his only son, who was his only hope for the resurrection of his proud tribe, is "not alone." It should be borne in mind that *The Last of the Mohicans* is very much an indictment of racial prejudice in all its ugly forms rather than a defense of the status quo in the United States in the 1820's, let alone "*A Narrative of 1757*," as its subtitle craftily implies. If one only considers the reluctance of Hollywood to portray Cooper's novel with a "half-breed" Cora in the 20th century, then the climate of bigotry with which Cooper was forced to contend in the early 19th century becomes all too clear.

In the combustible days of the Early Republic, duty to one's race can be seen as duty to its values, which are embraced in its religion. And the white man's religion as viewed by Natty could only be Christian, the passage in *The Prairie* still ringing in the reader's ears:

"Pawnee, I die, as I have lived, a Christian man . . . "As I came into life, so will I leave it. . . He [=God] knows my colour, and according to my gifts will he judge my deeds."
The Prairie, Ch. XXXIV, pp. 1311-1312

George Dekker comments on Natty's views on miscegenation and what Dekker terms "the divine origin of races." It must be borne in mind that *The Last of the Mohicans* is a tale of the tragic extinction of a race: only Uncas' father, Chingachgook, the Great Serpent, survives, a pitiable remnant of a proud race. The question thrust in the foreground is thus, "What is to become of this "battle-ground of races, nationalities, and tribes?" [33] Dekker transfers emphasis on the thorny question of interracial marriage or a "crossing" of the races to the far-reaching question of America's potential development, as implied by Cooper, into a multiracial society. In this sense, the critic may move from accusations of Natty's simple-minded prejudice or ignorance (or Cooper balancing himself on an ethereal tight-wire so as not to trample upon the sensibility of his biased readers) to profound questions of the viability of an America, which – like Cora – possessed "rich blood that seemed ready to burst its bounds." [34]

In *The Pioneers*, Chingachgook perhaps explains the notion of "colour" best:

"Daughter, the Great Spirit made your father with a white skin, and he made mine with a red; but he colored both their hearts with blood. When young, it is swift and warm; but when old, it is still and cold. Is there a difference below the skin? No."
The Pioneers, Ch. XXXVI, p. 408

In summary, this writer is inclined to take a generous view of Natty, "the man without a cross," i.e., a man with no mixed racial antecedents, and regard him as both guileless and

guiltless, yet – the Cooperian touch, which is necessarily Christian – far from perfect. His sense of duty to his “colour” may be seen in the light of his duty to his religion and to his God. As a play on words and the loaded concept “cross,” the man *without a cross* can be viewed as an intensely religious individual whose “missing cross” is not a strange way of insinuating the necessity of “racial hygiene,” i.e., an absolute ban on interracial intermarriage and a moral injunction to maintain a homogeneous race of God’s “Chosen People.” Instead, emphasis should be laid on the notion of the *power* of Natty’s simple faith which does honor to the race he represents. The missing “cross,” the symbol of that faith, is not worn externally around Natty’s neck but in his heart, which, as Chingachgook so aptly pointed out, is the same colour for all human beings. The question of actual colour seems to fade in *The Prairie* when Natty, now a man of “fourscore and seven winters” and hardly distinguishable from an Indian, is looked upon with uncertainty as to his race. Here again, the “heart of the tree” is what counts, not its “bark:”

Some moments elapsed before the Teton spoke, and then it was in doubt whether he addressed one like himself, or some wanderer of that race who, he had heard, were spreading themselves, like hungry locusts, throughout the land.

“The head of my brother is very white,” he said; but the eye of Le Balafré is no longer like the eagle’s. Of what colour is his skin?”

“The Wahcondah made me like these you see waiting for a Dahcotah judgment; but fair and foul have coloured me darker than the skin of a fox. What of that! Though the bark is ragged and riven, the heart of the tree is sound.”

The Prairie, Ch. XXVIII, p. 1235

XIII. DAVID GAMUT, GOD’S STANDARD-BEARER

Perhaps one of the most singular of all Cooper’s creations is the minor character David Gamut in *The Last of the Mohicans*. David’s heroism is his absolute disregard of impending danger because of the absolute trust he places in God. Indeed, his “absolute ignorance” is often mistakenly taken for “feeble-mindedness,” which, to this writer’s mind, misses the mark. Although David Gamut does not die in the novel, he is, due to his unbridled courage, never far from a speedy termination. David himself is essentially religious and, as one of those infrequent instances in which Cooper was almost notoriously humorous, a seemingly tender plant to be sprouting in the wilderness. David does not fight Goliath with his sling – instead he “slings” hymns at his enemies. Perhaps it can be said that Gamut represents the true “gamut” of Christianity: if he fights for his faith as a soldier of God, he will not use a knife or carbine, but his “little tooting instrument,” to find the proper pitch. His sudden and unlikely appearance in the middle of the wilderness must simply be accepted – just as his pacific character in such wild places must place him in the highest jeopardy. He is the reverse of a Don Quixote: instead of doing battle against harmless windmills while thinking them to be dragons, David hurls volleys of song at amazed Indian warriors in the firm belief that his hymns can actually tame the “savage dragons” in native hearts.

When David is taken prisoner, Natty finds him, but notices that he may go wherever he pleases, unattended. When asked how this should be possible, David proudly and naively responds:

“Little be the praise to such a worm as I. But, though the power of psalmody was suspended in the terrible business of that field of blood, through which we passed, it has recovered its influence, even over the souls of the heathen, and I am suffered to go and come at will.”

The scout laughed, and tapping his own forehead significantly, he perhaps explained the singular indulgence more satisfactorily, when he said —

“The Indians never harm a non-composser” [=non compos mentis: one not of sound mind].

The Last of the Mohicans, Library of America, Ch. XXII, p. 729; **Cooper Edition**, pp. 223-224

The “wild savages,” in other words, show far more respect for the “feeble-minded” (or supposed “feeble-minded”) than the white man. Hetty Hutter had even considered suicide because she felt she was too great a psychological burden upon her foster father, Floating Tom, and her sister Judith. There is a definite link between Hetty Hutter and David Gamut in their steadfast belief in the absolute worth of a human being, regardless of race. And, although it was David who felt it incumbent to assure a Christian burial for Cora, his “soul was enthralled” by the choruses of the Delawares during their own funeral (and wedding) ceremony for Cora and Uncas.

Although David is an advocate of Calvinistic predestination, (“he that is to be saved will be saved, and he that is predestined to be damned will be damned,” Ch. XII, p. 603; Cooper Edition: p. 116), Natty rejects the doctrine categorically. David then calls Natty to account:

“Name chapter and verse; in which of the holy books do you find language to support you?”

The Last of the Mohicans, Library of America, Ch. XII, p. 604; **Cooper Edition**, p. 117

When Natty responds to the effect that the only “book” he has ever had need of was the Book of Nature, David immediately desists:

“The instant David discovered that he battled with a disputant who imbibed his faith from the lights of nature, eschewing all subtleties of doctrine, he willingly abandoned a controversy from which he believed neither profit nor credit was to be derived.”

The Last of the Mohicans, Library of America, Ch. XII, p. 605; **Cooper Edition**, p. 117

In spite of the fact, as Cooper puts it, that David was “deeply tintured with [the] subtle distinctions,” it would seem that he had suddenly realized that questions of dogma in a frontier setting were secondary to “the beautiful simplicity of revelation” [Ch. XII, p. 604; Cooper Edition: p. 117]. **[35]**

An undercurrent of humor with more than a pinch of romantic bravery is provided by David when Natty, almost assuming the unaccustomed role of an impatient schoolmaster, warns him, before the failed attempt to release Cora from her captivity, not to raise his voice in song:

“Remember,” added the scout, tapping his own head significantly on that spot where Gamut was yet sore, “we come to fight, and not to musickate.”

The Last of the Mohicans, Library of America, Ch. XXXII, p. 851; *Cooper Edition*, p. 328

That David is able to survive while “fighting” with his music may suggest that he indeed wears the true armor of the Lord. When Natty solemnly promises David that, in the event of his death, he will be revenged, David responds:

“Hold!” said David, perceiving that with this assurance they were about to leave him; “I am an unworthy and humble follower of one who taught not the damnable principle of revenge. Should I fall, therefore seek no victims to my manes, but rather forgive my destroyers; and if you remember them at all, let it be in prayers for the enlightening of their minds, and for their eternal welfare.”

The scout hesitated, and appeared to muse.

“There is principle in that,” he said, “different from the law of the woods; and yet it is fair and noble to reflect upon. . . . God bless you, friend, I do believe your scent is not greatly wrong, when the matter is duly considered, and keeping eternity before the eyes, though much depends on the natural gifts, and the force of temptation.”

The Last of the Mohicans, Library of America, Ch. XXVI, p. 788; *Cooper Edition*, p. 274

At Cora’s funeral, it was the scout who “glancing an eye at David,” announced

“that one who better knows the Christian fashions is about to speak.”

The Last of the Mohicans, Library of America, Ch. XXXIII, p. 873; *Cooper Edition*, p. 346

Is David Gamut an asset to the novel? Certainly, even in very early reviews, there were some uncharitable assertions:

“He [=David Gamut] is, beyond comparison, the most stupid, senseless, useless, and unmeaning monster we remember ever to have met with. He does nothing towards the conduct of the piece, which could not have been better done without him; and performs no feat in the world for our amusement, save uplifting a New England psalm whenever he, or any one else, is in danger of being scalped.”

W. H. Gardiner, *North American Review*, xxiii (July 1826), 150-97 [36]

Gamut may in fact be likened to the Socratic gadfly, well knowing when to prick Natty’s conscience (e.g., the issue of retribution), and when to leave well enough alone (i.e., the

doctrine of predestination). Gamut is fully capable of reminding Natty in no uncertain terms of his duty to his God and to humanity, even in times of warfare. Natty seems to have grasped this when he introduces David as “one who better knows the Christian fashions.” David is a standard-bearer, and standard-bearers do not fight but walk fearlessly ahead, looking death in the eye and representing in their persons the values that their fellow soldiers are prepared to die for. As such, the ill-considered labels “unmeaning monster” or “useless” simply do not apply. As one of the strongest and most original minor characters in Cooper’s works, David Gamut deserves more critical acclaim than he has sometimes been accorded.

XIV. AT ONE WITH THEIR GOD

Just as the reader of “*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*” is told that “his [=John Maynard’s] spirit was commended into his Father’s hands,” so *The Prairie* relates:

“The voice of the old Indian, seemed a sort of echo from that invisible world to which the spirit of the honest trapper had just departed.” (- Final page of novel)

The spirits of all of Cooper’s heroes (and, of course, Hetty Hutter) “depart,” “take flight,” “dwell,” embark upon a “final passage,” and will “soon know [their] God.” [37] All of his heroes and heroines are filled with religious thoughts while dying. All of them are honest, and the foundation of that honesty is their *love of God*. None of them are churched. If it is their *duty* to suffer pain, they will do so because they *love God*. If that pain becomes bearable, it does so because they *love God*. The strength of their faith in the Deity, in other words, serves as a yardstick with which they can measure what they are capable of achieving and enduring.

Without God, they die wretched deaths like Thousandacres of *The Chainbearer* or Christopher Dillon of *The Pilot*.

Even the notion of civil disobedience is based on divine law superseding civil law. When Natty in *The Pioneers* (Ch. XXXIII) is sent to jail for killing a deer without shooting it, and given no opportunity to be released unless an additional fine is paid – money which he had no way to obtain – he decided to escape, and did so with a clean conscience.

Certainly *The Pioneers* foreshadows Henry David Thoreau’s immortal *Walden or Life in the Woods* (1854) in that, for Natty, life in the wilderness was not a mere experiment of two years’ duration but a way of life. The transcendentalist movement, environmentalism and civil disobedience are vibrant motifs. No wonder Ralph Waldo Emerson could look back upon *The Pioneers* as a cornerstone in the development of America’s budding literary culture:

“I never had the good fortune to see Mr. Cooper; but I have, in common with almost all who speak English, an old debt to him of happy days, on the first appearance of *The Pioneers*.”
- *Memorial of Cooper*, 25 February 1852 [38]

An anonymous British critic made the following observation on Natty Bumppo and Long Tom Coffin in July 1826:

“Both [Natty and Long Tom] are original conceptions of men engaged in hardy and adventurous pursuits, but as undebased by the contact of their species as was Adam in his primitive simplicity, and imbued with that intuitive sense of the sublimities of nature and religion which often exists in the minds of men too illiterate to give it utterance. ‘For Tom often prayed,’ we are told, ‘though he did it on his watch, standing and in silence;’ and Natty appears to have only learnt lessons of gratitude to Providence, and humanity towards the meanest of its creatures, from the life of constant danger and vicissitude to which he has been exposed. Though both take as local and peculiar a tinge from the objects with which they have been conversant, as the aphis or chameleon, the cockswain is as unlike to a jolly jack-tar as the Leatherstocking is to a thoughtless whooping huntsman.”

- “*Notice, British Critic*,” ii (July 1826), 437, Extract from an unsigned article on ‘American Novels’ [39]

Just as Long Tom and Natty are “undebased by the contact of their species,” so John Maynard remains an “Adam in his primitive simplicity” when we consider what effect John had on those elements he associated with:

“He had, in the worst time, a cheerful word and a kind look for those with whom he was thrown; cast, often enough, into bad company, he tried, at least, and generally succeeded, to say or do something for its good.”

“*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*”

The poetic treatment of Natty, Long Tom and John Maynard, placing them on a moral pedestal far above their associates and, at the same time, remaining credible to the general reader, can only be the work of a master craftsman of the language. Cooper was greatly indebted to Sir Walter Scott, the father of the historical romance. Theodor Fontane, in his essay “Sir Walter Scott,” points out:

“Apart from Scotland, there is hardly another small country, perhaps with the single exception of Switzerland, whose fortunes, since the beginning of this century, have so captivated and still captivate the imagination of the world. . . . It was Sir Walter Scott, who unfolded for us Scotland’s history, incomparable landscape, sagas and traditions to such a degree that the assertion can be made that the fate of the Stuart Pretenders of 1715 and 1745 is now regarded as one of the best known and most popular chapters world history has to offer. This is not due to the weight these things carry, but lies in the *poetic* significance which Scotland’s national poet attached to them.”

“*Walter Scott*”, *Der Salon für Literatur, Kunst und Gesellschaft*, vol. VIII (Leipzig: Ernst Dohm & Julius Rodenberg, 1882), p. 618 [My translation].

Just as Scott was able to move the hearts and minds of so many of his readers by creating a poetic history of his native country, so James Fenimore Cooper, following in Scott's footsteps, sought historical events in his virgin country, which could also receive a *poetic* adaptation in literature. The Gothic elements were no longer the ruins of abbeys and castles, but a lonely log cabin hidden away in the wilderness, a cave beside a waterfall, a clearing which encased the remains of fallen soldiers, and, if conjecture may be allowed full sway, a burning steamer on her way from Buffalo to Erie [40].

Perhaps the greatest obstacle in accepting "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*" as a sketch by Cooper is its very brevity. Cooper has often been regarded as a long-winded writer, intentionally weaving intricate and outmoded expressions into his sentences to discourage any but the most determined reader. Although hardly guiltless on this charge, he can also soar to literary heights that can inspire, thrill and enlighten. It is in this sense that "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*" can, as a mere fragment of his great literary corpus, yet serve to illustrate what Cooper was capable of *in only a few lines*. With the exception of the allegorical "*Lake Gun*" (1850), Cooper was not a short story writer. Yet his creative genius was instrumental in developing important literary genres and in laying the foundation of a truly American literature: the first American maritime novel (*The Pilot*), the first American spy novel and America's first historical novel (*The Spy*, 1821), the legend of Natty Bumppo giving birth to the American frontier or wilderness romance, now commonly termed the western. None of this sounds like a timorous writer who would be reluctant to launch an anonymous trial balloon to a hostile, yet unsuspecting press just to see what public reaction might be. Regarding *The Lake Gun*, written five years after the appearance of "*The Helmsman*," he could write:

"I am finishing off the '*Lake Gun*' which earns \$100, that lies untouched in my trunk. I should like to work at this rate, the year round. I believe this miscellan[e?]ous writing pays best, just now."

1107. *Letter to Mrs. Cooper, Monday, Nov. 25th 1850* in *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, Vol. VI, p. 239

That thematic parallels between Cooper and "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*" abound, that "*a kinship of convictions*" can easily be made out, and that "*underlying hypotheses held in common*" are all too apparent should establish beyond all doubt that "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*" is, if not written by the master himself, certainly *in the tradition* of Cooper's work. The fascinating question, however, is whether there could possibly have been an individual capable of matching Cooper's skill at dialogue and plot development to create such a thrilling maritime tale. The wording, grammar, and idiom is, with very few exceptions, identifiably Cooper's. [41] The parenthetical introductory remark cited below deserves mention:

"You know, I dare say, that Erie is one of those sea-lakes, for which America is so famous; and as you stand on its shore, and see the green waves dashing in one after another, you might well think you were looking at the green ocean itself!

"The Helmsman of Lake Erie" (1845)

The Pathfinder: or, The Inland Sea (1840), which takes place on Lake Ontario, contains a similar parenthetical comment, which one might think would already have been common knowledge for most Americans. Even the introductory "you must know" in *The Pathfinder* is resurrected in "You know, I dare say" in "*The Helmsman*."

"The great lakes, you must know, make a chain, the water passing out of one into the other, until it reaches Erie, which is a sheet off here to the westward, as large as Ontario itself. Well, out of Erie the water comes, until it reaches a low mountain like, over the edge of which it passes."

The Pathfinder, Ch. XII, p. 185

A goodly portion of *The Pathfinder* is taken up with a rather involved debate on the actual size and salinity, or lack of salinity, of The Great Lakes, with "dogmatic and obstinate" Uncle Cap, appropriately nicknamed Saltwater. In other words, what might now be thought of as common knowledge back then, may in fact be wishful thinking.

Perhaps Uncle Cap's saving grace is his observations on the wide expanses of the open sea, where a sailor can commune with God. Natty, of course, opts for the forests:

"The sea is what my poor sister Bridget used to call a 'purifying place,' and one is out of the way of temptation when out of sight of land. I doubt if as much can be said in favor of your lakes up hereaway."

"That towns and settlements lead to sin, I will allow; but our lakes are bordered by forests, and one is every day called upon to worship God in such a temple."

The Pathfinder, Ch. II, p. 26

In *The Prairie*, a sharp distinction between land and sea becomes ever more difficult to discern:

"The earth was not unlike the Ocean, when its restless waters are heaving heavily, after the agitation and fury of the tempest have begun to lessen. There was the same waving and regular surface, the same absence of foreign objects, the same boundless extent to the view. Indeed so very striking was the resemblance between water and the land, that, however much the geologist might sneer at so simple a theory, it would have been difficult for a poet not to have felt, that the formation of the one had been produced by the subsiding of the other."

The Prairie, Ch. I, p. 892

Whether the forest, the sea, or the prairie is taken as a "purifying place," it is the solitude of such a setting that can give birth to men of high moral stature. Although unlettered and, in many cases, not given to "talk," such men can take action based on their sense of duty to their God: "the secret of his honesty was his love of God" (*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*). Such a

man does “not repine [42] at his hard labor and scanty pay” (“*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*”). Money is not their driving force. When Elizabeth Temple attempted to give old Natty English gold guineas in *The Pioneers* because he had saved her from the jaws of a panther, the response was characteristic:

“...why should you give me this treasure?” said Natty, looking earnestly at the maiden. . . .”Here, child, take back your gold. . . . I wouldn’t rob you so for twenty rifles.”

The Pioneers, Ch. XXXV, p. 396.

The occupation of the characters often points to their role as allegorical paradigms: e.g., Natty, the wilderness guide [43]; John Maynard, the helmsman, Long Tom, the cockswain. All of these men are “guileless” and “honest.” Although men of “scanty pay” and in no way “intellectual” or sophisticated, they are men of great physical strength (in spite of their advanced years), who, fortified by their religious convictions, do not shun sacrifice, even should this entail forfeiting their own lives. They are the stuff legends are made of.

Just as Andries Coejemans, like John Maynard, was able to cast off the chains of his earthly existence with the help of his Christian faith, and in so doing, endure the agony of death without a groan, the dynamic characters Cooper creates as heroes and heroines, whether Christian or non-Christian, are all deeply religious and, when dying, do not groan, but instead die peacefully with an eye riveted upon something much higher and far beyond the curtain of this world, with a vision of the blessings yet to come.

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ANNOTATIONS

1) Cf. Cooper’s “*Preface to The Leather-Stocking Tales,*” *The Deerslayer* in *Leatherstocking Tales*, vol. II, Library of America, p. 492:

“It is the privilege of all writers of fiction, more particularly when their works aspire to the elevation of romances, to present the *beau-idéal* of their characters to the reader.

That it is which constitutes poetry, and to suppose that the red man is to be presented only in the squalid misery or in the degraded moral state that certainly more or less belongs to his condition, is, we apprehend, taking a very narrow view of an author's privileges. Such criticism would have deprived the world of even Homer."

2) Cf. "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*" online:

http://homepage.mac.com/joel_huberman/JohnMaynard/Compared.pdf

3) For further research on the Cooper-"*Helmsman*" connection, cf.

a) Norman Barry, "*The Author's Signature: The Good Ship Jersey in 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie,' and the Significance of the Geography of New Jersey in the Works of James Fenimore Cooper:*" http://homepage.mac.com/joel_huberman/JohnMaynard/Jersey.pdf

b) Norman Barry, "*The Legend of John Maynard, 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie,' in the backdrop of the year 1845:*"

http://homepage.mac.com/joel_huberman/JohnMaynard/MaynardJackson.pdf

c) Norman Barry, "*James Fenimore Cooper and 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie: A Textual Comparison*" This textual comparison is in progress and, consequently, incomplete. Several years will be required to achieve completion. The reason for the delay is quite simply the prodigious amount of writing Cooper was able to turn out. Admittedly, search machine checks are of invaluable help, but – at the end of the day – a close reading of all of Cooper's works remains an absolute necessity.

http://homepage.mac.com/joel_huberman/JohnMaynard/COOPER.pdf

4) Cooper did not follow a logical chronology when creating the *Leatherstocking Tales*: *The Pioneers* (1823) may be viewed as **Stage IV** in the life of Nathaniel Bumppo; *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), **Stage II**; *The Prairie* (1827), **Stage V**; *The Pathfinder* (1840), **Stage III**; and *The Deerslayer* (1841), **Stage I**.

5) Cf. **Franklin, Wayne** (Professor of English and Director of American Studies at the University of Connecticut), *James Fenimore Cooper: The Early Years* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), "Introduction," pp. xxvi-xxvii. Professor Franklin's monumental biography is in progress and will no doubt be of great service in bridging the gap of decades of irresponsible academic neglect of Cooper's life and works. In his essay "*James Fenimore Cooper, 1789-1851: A Brief Biography*" (in *A Historical Guide to James Fenimore Cooper*, edited by **Leland S. Person**, 2007), Franklin notes on p. 51 that Cooper may have even considered expanding the saga: "...Cooper in fact toyed with the idea of writing a sixth Leatherstocking tale, this one set during the Revolution."

6) Cf. *The Portage County Advocate*, Wednesday, September 13, 1854, Ravenna, Ohio, New Series: Vol. I, No. 24, p. 2, c. 6. Online:
http://homepage.mac.com/joel_huberman/JohnMaynard/PCA.pdf

7) Cf. **Donald A. Ringe**, *James Fenimore Cooper* (New Haven, Connecticut: College and university Press, Paperback Division, 1962), p. 155.

8) *Ibid.* [Annotation 7], p. 161.

In a paper significantly entitled “*Cooper Today: A Partisan View*,” presented at the 7th Cooper Seminar at the State University of New York at Oneonta in July 1989, Ringe again renewed his appeal to scholars and critics to give Cooper’s treatment of religion serious attention, particularly as a possible unifying aspect of his diverse fiction.

9) That little has been done to consider the role of religion in Cooper’s works may be gathered from Craig White’s comment in *Student Companion to James Fenimore Cooper* (Westport, Connecticut & London: Greenwood Press, 2006), p. 11:

“One major Cooper scholar, Donald Ringe, interprets the author’s concern with Christian morality as a unifying theme throughout his career. The diverse voices that form a novel as well as the vast complexity of religion as a subject make it difficult to confirm this view conclusively.”

Ringe, in his 1989 “Partisan View,” pointed out, “True religion, on the other hand, can appear, in Cooper’s view, even among the unchurched.” A consideration of religion in Cooper’s fiction as based solely on orthodox “Christian morality” could well lead to a distortion of Cooper’s “unchurched” position, which, in its general rejection of the dogma of individual sects and its fundamental acceptance of the validity of other religions as “paths to the same goal,” is broader-based than Christianity.

10) Another aspect of Chainbearer’s reputation is his sense of righteousness, which he is not afraid to stand up for even in the face of the squatter who has taken him prisoner:

“I’m an enemy to all knaves, T’ousantacres, ant I ton’t care who knows it,” answered old Andries, sternly; “t’at ist my trate [=trade], ast well ast carryin’ chain; ant I wish it to pe known far and near. Ast for pein’ your enemy by callin’, I may say as much for yourself; since there coul’t pe no surveyin’, or carryin’ of chain, tit [=did] all t’e people

help t'emselves to lant, as you haf tone your whole life, wit'out as much as sayin' to t'e owners 'Py your leaf [=‘By your leave’].” (*The Chainbearer*, Ch. XXII, p. 321)

11) Prudence's exhortation for her husband to forget personal possessions and even his own children, and instead turn his heart and soul towards eternity, is presented in *The Pilgrim's Progress* in the form of questions, asking Christian how successful he is in forgetting “the things of this world:”:

Prud. Do you not bear away with you some of the things that then you were conversant withal?

Chr. Yes, but greatly against my will; especially my inward and carnal cogitations, with which all my countrymen, as well as myself, were delighted; but now all those things are my grief; and might I but choose mine own things, I would choose never to think of those things more; but when I would be doing of that which is best, that which is worst is with me.

Prud. Do you not find sometimes as if those things were vanquished, which at other times are your perplexity?

Chr. Yes, but that is seldom; but they are to me golden hours in which such things happen to me.

John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress, From this World to That Which Is to Come* (Norwalk Connecticut: The Easton Press, 1979 – the first part was licensed for publication February 18, 1678), p. 58

Both Aaron and Andries are roughly the same age, but Aaron is three years older. The following passage indicates that Prudence was only “rounding off:”

“Chainbearer is about seventy,” returned Newcome, after musing a moment on the character of his companion's last remark. “Yes, about seventy, I should judge from what I've heerd, and what I know of the man. It's a good old age, but folks often live years and years beyond it. You must be suthin' like that yourself, Thousandacres.”

“Seventy-three, every day and hour on't, 'squire; and days and hours well drawn out, too. If you count by the old style, I b'lieve I'm a month or so older.”

(*The Chainbearer*, Ch. XIX, pp. 275-276)

12) That Thousandacres, like “some old people,” is unable to “let go,” is succinctly alluded to by the dying Andries in the following lines:

“T'ey haf shot t'rough my ribs and t'rough my vitals; ant life is impossible. But t'at does not matter much to me, for I am an olt man now, hafin' lifet my t'reescore ant ten – no, t'at is no great matter, t'ough some olt people cling to life wit' a tighter grip t'an t'e young. Such ist not my case, howsefer; ant I am reaty to march when t'e great wort of commant comet'.” (*The Chainbearer*, Ch. XXVI, p. 388)

13) As Cooper's graphic portrayal of the death of Aaron effectively demonstrates, physical strength alone is insufficient to cope with the trauma and agony of dying, for Thousandacres was endowed with "an iron frame:"

"It [=Thousandacres' last breath] came, drawing aside the lips so as to show every tooth, and not one was missing from that iron frame;..."

(*The Chainbearer*, Ch. XXVIII, last paragraph of chapter)

On the other hand in *The Pilot*, Cooper does allow that a sense of obedience to duty during combat may suffice to stifle a groan among the wounded:

"He [=Griffith] found six of the marines, including the sentinel, lying dead on the ragged pavement, and four others wounded, but stifling their groans, by order of their commander, that they might not inform the enemy of his weakness."

(*The Pilot*, Ch. XIX, p. 222)

14) The very name "Maynard," viewed etymologically, is "Stout Heart." In this sense, "John Stout Heart," like the Chainbearer, may also be placed on an allegorical level.

15) Both "Helmsman" and "Chainbearer" have allegorical attributes allowing a reading of their personae on different levels. The description of John Maynard's death in "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*" characterizes Andries Coejemans' as well:

"He [=John Maynard] had died the death of a Christian hero – I had almost said, of a martyr."

16) It will be recalled that in *Satanstoe*, Corny Littlepage is the first-person narrator. In *The Chainbearer*, Morty Littlepage assumes the same role. The tale of "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*" is presented by an unidentified first-person narrator, whose vision blurs between omniscience and myopia. Dialogue between the Captain and his taciturn steersman was, as might be expected, kept to the minimum; yet the degree of suspense generated in the few words exchanged was overpowering. The question of whether the steersman could "hold on for another five minutes" was rendered all the more uncertain due to the belching smoke that served as a screen, effectively placing the helmsman in an ethereal dimension beyond the reach of crew and passengers and any first-person narrator. No longer visible to those on board, only Maynard's clipped responses to the Captain can be heard. The drama of Maynard's Passion is heightened through the mysterious first-person narrator, suddenly zooming in on the scene, and like a Celestial Being peering through the dark shrouds of smoke to offer graphic close-up testimony of the agony of the dying hero. Yet only a few minutes later, that same narrator is amazingly incapable of revealing what the exact cause of

Maynard's death is and, instead, engages in idle speculation after having minutely described the manner in which the stout-hearted helmsman was being literally roasted alive:

“How he perished was not known; whether, dizzied by the smoke, he lost his footing in endeavoring to come forward, and fell overboard, or whether he was suffocated by the dense smoke, his comrades could not tell.”

Rather than to consider such narrative “gaps” as a weakness or unforgivable inconsistency, one should consider the free rein they allow the imagination of the reader and the scintillating suspense they allow the reader himself to create. In this sense, Cooper's description of the fatal wounding of Andries and then Aaron, while only at first *hinting* at the likely perpetrator, allows the reader's imagination the necessary “elbow room” to play an active role in solving the mystery. Paul Auster's delightful postmodern novel of initiation, *Moon Palace*, presents this technique of creative description when Marco attempts to describe what he sees to the blind Mr. Effing (who turns out to be his grandfather): “I discovered that the more air I left around a thing, the happier the results, for that allowed Effing to do the crucial work on his own: to construct an image on the basis of a few hints, to feel his own mind traveling toward the thing I was describing for him”. Under the assumption that the reader is “blind,” not only the writer must use his imagination – the “blind reader” must be allowed to use his own imagination to fill out and give shape to what the writer intentionally does *not* say.

17) An additional fascinating explanation of Mary's “wavering mind,” which alludes to the role of “prudence,” and thus reminds the reader of Aaron Thousandacres' faithful and allegorical wife Prudence, reads as follows:

“Perhaps to-morrow may bring her [=Mary's] wavering mind to something like decision, for these late events have proved greatly Mr. Ten Eyck's friends. But Mary is an orphan, and prudence has been taught her, as her great protection.”

(James Fenimore Cooper, *Satanstoe, or The Littlepage Manuscripts, A Tale of the Colony*, Cooper Edition (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), Ch. XXVIII, p. 404.

Guert was so fond of his horses Jack and Moses that they were even given his surname: Jack Ten Eyck and Moses Ten Eyck (*SATANSTOE*, Ch. XIV, p. 209).

The role played by “education” or “book-learning” in Cooper's dying heroes is generally minimal. Neither Chainbearer nor Thousandacres had book-learning. The Leather-stocking openly boasted of his lack of book-learning, claiming that there was only *one book* which a man needed, and that was Nature. From this premise, two great themes arose: firstly, Transcendentalism and the belief that Nature *is* God's Church, and, secondly, environmentalism, the need to protect God's creation.

18) Cf. *Letter 533. To Richard Bentley. Otsego Hall, Cooperstown, June 18th 1839* in *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, Edited by James Franklin Beard, vol. III, p. 393:

Dear Sir,

Your idea has been followed, and I have got to work on a nautico-lake-savage romance — The scene is on Lake Ontario, the Niagara river, the cataract &c &c &c. This book, in all probability will be completed and printed, in all October. I have some idea of visiting the falls of Niagara, which are about three days journey from me, or I should get through sooner. I have not absolutely decided on the name, though I have thought of the Inland Sea. As this name may be changed, however, it is better not to announce.

19) “Long” in “Long Tom Coffin” will always be capitalized in this paper although Cooper generally does not do so.

20) The adjectives “sunburnt” and “weather-beaten” representing exposure to the elements (and not a device to camouflage racial intermixing) occur often, not only in “*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*,” but also in a long row of novels by Cooper:

a) *The Deerslayer*: “Deerslayer’s sun burnt cheek flushed as he continued...” -
The Deerslayer, Ch. V, p. 566.

b) *Pathfinder; or The Inland Sea*: As this remark, a sort of half interrogatory, was made, Pathfinder looked behind him; and, though the most partial friend could scarcely term his sunburnt and hard features handsome, even Mabel thought his smile attractive, by its simple ingenuousness and the uprightness that beamed in every lineament of his honest countenance.” *Pathfinder*, Ch. III, p. 40

c) *The Prairie*: “The old man turned towards her, with a look of kindness and interest, that was even more conciliating than the ordinary, upright, and benevolent expression of his weather-beaten countenance.” *The Prairie*, Ch. II, p. 907 [Here “the look of kindness” is strongly reminiscent of “*The Helmsman*.”]

d1) *The Last of the Mohicans*: “While one of the loiterers [Chincachgook] showed the ^ red skin and wild accouterments of a native of the woods, the other [Natty] exhibited, through the mask of his rude and nearly savage equipments, the brighter, though sunburned and long-faced complexion of one who might claim descent from a European parentage.” *The Last of the Mohicans*, Library of America, Ch. 3, p. 499; Cooper Edition: p. 28

d2) “...the weather-beaten form of the scout...” *Ibid.*, Ch. 29, p. 819; CE: p. 300

e1) *The Pioneers*: Oliver and Elizabeth approached the graves with a light tread, unheard by the old hunter, whose sunburnt face was working, and whose eyes twinkled as if something impeded their vision. *The Pioneers*: Ch. XLI, p. 458

e2) “...the weather-beaten features of the Leather-stocking...” *Ibid.*, Ch. XXIV, p. 267

f1) *The Chainbearer*: “His head was as white as snow, while his face had the ruddy, weather-beaten color of health and exposure.” *The Chainbearer*, Ch. X, p. 138

f2) "...and the red, wrinkled, and sun-dried countenance of Chainbearer,..."

The Chainbearer, Ch. XXV, p. 369

21) Another interpretation of Maynard's behavior towards the frightened women passengers could simply be that he was *incapable* of not telling them the plain truth. Consider Natty's character ("with the simplicity of a child") in *Pathfinder* and his "unpolished sincerity" in *The Deerslayer*:

a) "He was, in fact, one of those who was so unaccustomed to fear, that he never bethought him of the constructions of others might put on his conduct. But while in moments of danger he acted with the wisdom of the serpent, it was also with the simplicity of a child." - *Pathfinder*, Ch. XXIV, p. 411

b) "...but even the unpolished sincerity, that so often made this simple minded hunter bare his thoughts, had a charm for the girl" [Judith Hutter]. - *The Deerslayer*, Ch. XII, p. 682

22) This could well be likened to a blueprint for "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*."

23) Cooper provides a vignette of superstition among British soldiers when Long Tom was in the process of returning Christopher Dillon to Barnstable after discovering that Dillon had broken his promise to have the American prisoners released in return for his own freedom. While Long Tom forced Dillon to dangle from the side of a cliff so as to avoid detection, Dillon was unable to suppress "an involuntary shriek," not unlike "the screeching of the spirit of the storm." One of the soldiers on the edge of the cliffs observed, "They say, that such cries are often heard, in storms, along this coast. . .and they are thought to come from drowned seamen." The general reaction to this statement "did not fail to produce its effect on even the most sturdy among the unbelievers in the marvellous..." (*The Pilot*, Ch. XXIII, pp. 268-269)

On the other hand, Long Tom may have indeed sensed something "supernatural" in the power of song. Consider, for example, David Gamut's strong belief in the spiritual efficacy of New England hymns, Chingachgook's death song to prepare himself for another existence, the Delaware girls' moving funeral and wedding song, uniting Cora and Uncas posthumously.

24) When the Chainbearer was also taken prisoner by Thousandacres, Susquesus chose to forfeit his parole. The notion of "freedom" as stipulated in "parole" or "furlough" is a highly deceptive concept, as can be seen from the following quote:

"T'e Injin fount I [=Chainbearer] was alone, so he took pack his parole, and ist a close prisoner like t'e rest of us, put in one sense a free man. You can tig up t'e hatchet agin t'ese squatters whenever you please now; is it not so, Sureflint?"

“Sartin – truce down – Susquesus prisoner like everybody. give T’ousandacres p’role back ag’in – Injin free man, now.” *The Chainbearer*, Ch. XXIV, p. 354

The Deerslayer provides yet another example that *once in captivity*, one is free to escape.

25) The “dark-eyed,” “noble-minded” Cora Munro (“of a blood purer and richer than the rest of her nation” – Ch. 23, p. 870) is the daughter of a Scot, Colonel Munro, and a woman of mixed race whom he met, “formed a connection with,” and married in the West Indies:

“I [=Munro] had seen many regions, and shed much blood in different lands, before duty called me to the islands of the West Indies. There it was my lot to form a connection with one who in time became my wife, and the mother of Cora. She was a daughter of a gentleman of those isles, by a lady whose misfortune it was, if you will,” said the old man, proudly, “to be descended, remotely, from that misfortunate class who are so basely enslaved to administer to the wants of a luxurious people. Ay, sir, that is a curse, entailed on Scotland by her unnatural union with a foreign and trading people. But could I find a man among them who would dare to reflect on my child, he should feel the weight of a father’s anger! Ha! Major Heyward, you are yourself born at the south, where these unfortunate beings are considered of a race inferior to your own.”

The Last of the Mohicans in *Leatherstocking Tales*, vol. I, Library of America, Ch. 16, p. 653.

26) When Uncas discovers “the green riding-veil of Cora,” who has been abducted by Magua, her father appeals to Uncas for help:

“My child!” said Munro, speaking quickly and wildly; “give me my child!”

“Uncas will try,” was the short and touching answer.

The Last of the Mohicans in *Leatherstocking Tales*, vol. I, Library of America, Ch. 18, p. 682.

Uncas’ response is reminiscent of John Maynard’s moving statement in “*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*.”

“John Maynard! cried the captain.

“Aye, aye, Sir! said John.

“Could you hold out five minutes longer?”

“I’ll try, Sir.”

27) The orthography in the new *Cooper Edition* (e.g., “wasty” and “wastey”) may be viewed by some as inconsistent and confusing.

28) The name of the mountain suggests the complexity of Cooper's imagery. On the one hand, it can hardly be viewed as coincidence that the mountain on which Chingachgook awaited his death was called Mount Vision – a "vision" of the new state of existence the old warrior was entering. On the other hand, the mountain was named by Judge Temple, apparently because from its summit he was able to look down upon the valley where his future town of Templeton was "envisioned" (cf. *The Pioneers*, Ch. XXXVI, pp. 404-405).

Two additional elements in burning "Mount Vision" are identifiable in "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*" and the burning *Jersey*. The first is a similar *cause* of the fire.

a) "*The Helmsman*:" "Some sparks had fallen on a bundle of tow [my emphasis], no one had seen the accident; and now not only much of the luggage, but the sides of the vessel were in a smouldering flame."

b) *The Pioneers*: "There's a foolish man, the comrade of that varmint who has given me [=Natty] all this trouble, digging for ore on the east side. I told him that the kearless fellows, who thought to catch a practysed hunter in the woods after dark, *had thrown the lighted pine-knots in the brush, and that 'twould kindle like tow* [my emphasis], and warned him to leave the hill. But he was set upon his business, and nothing short of Providence could move him. If he isn't burnt and buried in a grave of his own digging, he's made of salamanders." *The Pioneers*, Ch. XXXVIII, pp. 420-421

Although the ill-starred *Erie*, which sank in 1841, has often been referred to as a possible model upon which "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" was based, tow was not the cause of the conflagration of the *Erie*.

The second element, a detail which is easily forgotten due to concern for Chingachgook, is the condition of Natty when he appeared:

a) *The Pioneers*: "At the next instant Natty rushed through the steams of the spring, and appeared on the terrace, without his deer skin cap, *his hair burnt to his head* [my emphasis], his shirt of country check, black, and filled with holes, and *his red features of a deeper colour than ever, by the heat he had encountered*" [my emphasis].

The Pioneers, last page of Ch. XXXVII, p. 419.

b) "*The Helmsman*:" "...the flames came nearer and nearer; a sheet of smoke would sometimes almost suffocate him [=John Maynard]; *his hair was singed; his blood seemed on fire with the great heat*" [my emphasis].

29) Cf. Edwards' cryptic statement: "An Indian burn! Who ever heard of an Indian dying by fire! An Indian cannot burn; the idea is ridiculous." (- *The Pioneers*, Ch. XXXVII, p. 412).

30) Deerslayer's age in *The Deerslayer* may be placed roughly between 24 and 26:

“Both these frontiersmen were still young, Hurry having reached the age of six or eight and twenty, while Deerslayer was several years his junior.”

The Deerslayer, Ch. I, p. 499.

31) Hetty had had some schooling. She had no difficulty in fearlessly reading Scripture to the Indians. Her education is indirectly alluded to in the following quote:

“Yes, I'm Hetty Hutter,” returned the girl in a low, sweet voice, which nature, aided by some education, had preserved from vulgarity of time and utterance – “I'm Hetty; Judith Hutter's sister; and Thomas Hutter's youngest daughter.”

The Deerslayer, Ch. IV, pp. 544-545.

32) The notion of Natty being the “last of his race” should also point to Natty as the “man without a cross,” i.e., a man with no racial intermixing. To this writer, it is far from clear that Natty was “a mixed-blood man desperately ‘passing for white,’” as is asserted in **Barbara Alice Mann's** provocative article entitled “*Race Traitor*” in *A Historical Guide to James Fenimore Cooper*, edited by **Leland S. Person**, p. 157. Although it is clear that as a result of his fair (the word “poetic” might be more appropriate) fictional treatment of the Native American, white racists might label Cooper an “Injin lover,” and thus engage in a systematic assault of his person and his works, a Natty of mixed blood would suggest dishonesty, dissimulation and artifice in the man, in effect stripping him of any credibility and severely compromising his strongly religious character. With regard to Natty's “self-consciously tedious declarations about his own ethnic origins,” Wayne Franklin, in his *James Fenimore Cooper: The Early Years*, points out:

“Cooper purposely made Natty's ‘Indianness’ a matter of values and skills rather than literal heritage.” - p. xxx

The fact that, even as a young man, Natty was “ugly” and “sun burnt” need not be taken as reflecting upon a possible “mixed” lineage, for most of Cooper's heroes *are* weathered through exposure to the elements. A consideration of Long Tom Coffin in *The Pilot* must also reveal a man of great physical strength yet hardly a handsome Hurry Harry:

“When erect, he [=Long Tom Coffin] stood nearly six feet and as many inches in his shoes, though, when elevated in his perpendicular attitude, there was a forward inclination about his head and shoulders that appeared to be the consequence of habitual confinement in limited lodgings. His whole frame was destitute of the rounded outlines of a well-formed man, though his enormous hands furnished a display of bones and sinews which gave indication of gigantic strength. On his head he wore a little, low, brown hat of wool, with an arched top, that threw an expression of peculiar solemnity and hardness over his hard visage, the sharp prominent features

of which were completely encircled by a set of black whiskers that began to be grizzled a little with age.”

- *The Pilot*, Ch. II, pp. 19-20

The motif of “the last of his race” is also alluded to in *The Chainbearer*, when Susquesus (who has perhaps for unaccountable reasons simply left his tribe) says:

“Susquesus got tribe no longer. Quit Onondagos t’irty summer, now; don’t like Mohawk...Got no squaw – got no papoose – little corn do for Susquesus. No tribe – no squaw – no papoose!” *The Chainbearer*, Ch. VIII, pp. 106-107

As for scalps, Susquesus states:

“...don’t want to take scalp at all,” answered the Indian, with an emotion he could not altogether suppress. “Got no tribe – got no young men; what good scalp do? Nobody care how many scalp Susquesus take away – how many he leave behind. All dat forgot long time.” *The Chainbearer*, Ch. XXI, pp. 314

Although in *The Chainbearer*, the reader is told, “Susquesus was drawing near the decline of his life” [Ch. VIII, 2nd paragraph], in *The Redskins* (1846), both Susquesus and Jaap (Corny’s black playmate as a child way back in *Satanstoe*) outlive Natty by attaining the august age of one hundred and twenty-five years! - *The Redskins or Indian and Injin*, (New York, John W. Lovell Company, undated), Ch. XIX, p. 283.

As John Maynard in “*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*” and Nathaniel Bumppo in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, “Susquesus was a man of action and not of words” (*The Chainbearer*, Ch. XVI, p. 232).

33) Cf. Dekker, George. *James Fenimore Cooper: The Novelist*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 68-74.

The question of either the survival or creation of some races and the extinction of others may foreshadow profound questions of evolution. Certainly, in *The Prairie* (1827), a mocking reference to Man as descended from the Ape is to be found, thirty-two years before Charles Darwin’s publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and roughly forty-four years before Darwin risked publication of *The Descent of Man* (February 1871):

“...and the natural sciences have irretrievably lost an important link in that great animated chain which is said to connect earth and heaven, and in which man is thought to be so familiarly complicated with the monkey.” - *The Prairie*, Ch. VI, p. 959

34) Cf. “Her [=Cora’s] complexion was not brown, but it rather appeared charged with the colour of the rich blood, that seemed ready to burst its bounds.” (*The Last of the Mohicans*, final paragraph of Ch. I). **George Dekker** sees this metaphor as an “image of transgression” (*ibid.*, p.

68). The metaphor can, however, be expanded to encompass the future of yet another lovely lady, America personified.

35) Cf. **James Fenimore Cooper**, *The American Democrat*, “**On Religion**,” (originally published in 1838) Liberty Classics Edition (New York: 1981), p. 239:

“Religion’s first lesson is humility; its fruit, charity. In the great and sublime ends of Providence, little things are lost, and least of all is he imbued with a right spirit who believes that insignificant observances, subtleties of doctrine, and minor distinctions, enter into the great essentials of the Christian character.”

Cooper’s *A Residence in France*, Letter X (Paris: Baudry’s European Library, 1836), p. 59 [on CD: *53 Ebooks of James Fenimore Cooper*, vol. I] provides a similar thought:

“In point of fact, when the proper spirit prevails, forms, of themselves, become of little account; and when men begin to deem them otherwise, it is proof rather of the want, than of the excess, of the humility and charity which are the inseparable companions of faith.”

Thus not only Natty, but also Cooper, had little use for “subtleties of doctrine.”

36) Reprinted in **Dekker, George and McWilliams, John P., Editors**, *Fenimore Cooper: The Critical Heritage* (London & Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 110.

37) a) Natty in *The Prairie*: “The voice of the old Indian, seemed a sort of echo from that invisible world to which the spirit of the honest trapper had just departed.” (Ch. XXXIV, p. 1317)

b) Chingachgook in *The Pioneers*: “Mohegan raised himself, as if in obedience to a signal for his departure, and stretched his wasted arm towards the west. His dark face lighted with a look of joy; which, with all other expression, gradually disappeared; the muscles stiffening as they retreated to a state of rest; a slight convulsion played, for a single instant, about his lips; and his arm slowly dropped by his side; leaving the frame of the dead warrior reposing against the rock, with its glassy eyes open, and fixed on the distant hills, as if the deserted shell were tracing the flight of the spirit to its new abode.” (Ch. XXXVIII, p. 429)

c) Andries Coejemans in *The Chainbearer*: “All eyes were turned on the other bed [that of Aaron Thousandacres], which presented a most impressive contrast to the calm scene that surrounded the parting soul of him [=Andries] about whom we had been gathered.” [Ch. XXVIII, p. 434]

d) Guert Ten Eyck in *Satanstoe*: “Thus prematurely, terminated the earthly career of as manly a spirit as ever dwelt in human form.” [Ch. XXIX, p. 425]

e) Serjeant Dunham in *The Pathfinder*: “Mabel – my child –” he at length uttered, in a voice that seemed to be reviving – “Mabel – I’m quitting you –” The spirit, at its great and final passage, appears ever to consider the body as nothing – “I’m quitting you, my child –

where is your hand?” [Ch. XXVIII, p. 456]

f) Hetty Hutter in *The Deerslayer*: “The last words were uttered after a pause, and her sister had hung over her some time, in anxious watchfulness, before she perceived that the gentle spirit had departed.” [Ch. XXXI, p. 1017]

g) Long Tom Coffin in *The Pilot*: “He [=Dillon] will soon know his God, and learn that his God knows him!” murmured the cockswain to himself. As he yet spoke, the wreck of the *Ariel* yielded to an overwhelming sea, and, after a universal shudder, her timbers and planks gave way, and were swept towards the cliffs, bearing the body of the simple-hearted cockswain among the ruins.” [Ch. XXIV, p. 288]

38) “*Extracts from letters written to the Cooper Memorial Committee*,” published in the *Memorial of Cooper* (New York, 1852), pp. 7, 16, 32, 33, 34 in **George Dekker and John P. McWilliams** (Editors). *Fenimore Cooper: The Critical Heritage*. (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan, 1973, p. 246.

39) “**Unsigned Notice, British Critic.**” ii (July 1826) in **George Dekker and John P. McWilliams** (Editors). *Fenimore Cooper: The Critical Heritage*. (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan, 1973, p. 73.

40) The genesis of abridgments and adaptations of the original sketch, which was reprinted throughout the years from 1845 to 1860, had led to an *unnamed* steamer heading in the *reverse* direction, i.e., *to* Buffalo, in the 1860 rendering by the great temperance crusader and orator, John Bartholomew Gough:

a) “John Maynard was a pilot on a steamer from Detroit to Buffalo.” *Janesville Democrat* (Janesville, Rock County, Wisconsin), Oct. 26, 1860, Vol. I, no. 8, p.1, c. 1

b) “He had charge of a steamer from Detroit to Buffalo.” *The British Workman*, (London, England) No. 107, Nov. 1863, p. 426: http://homepage.mac.com/joel_huberman/JohnMaynard/GoughBW.pdf

The historical linkage of the sketch was, on publication in 1845, thought to hearken back to the conflagration of the *Erie* on August 9, 1841, the only spectacular disaster on the Erie up to 1845. Although the number of human casualties was staggering and the *Erie* could not be towed to shore but sank, the unconfirmed testimony of Captain Titus of the *Erie* that his resolute steersman, Luther Fuller, had apparently faithfully remained at his post until burned to death was immediately the center of focus for those interested in a possible “historical core.”

41) The knowledgeable use of nautical terminology, particularly with reference to signal flags, would also seem to indicate a writer of Cooper's caliber: a) "the blue peter, the signal of immediate sailing;" b) "the American flag was run up, and reversed, in token of distress." Particularly striking is a verbatim two-line match from *Homeward Bound* using nautical slang "How's her head?" and amazingly providing the same course:

- 1) "*The Helmsman*:" "How's her head? shouted the captain.
"West-sou-west, sir," answered Maynard.
"Keep her sou' any by west," cried the captain. "We must go ashore any where."

Cooper's *Homeward Bound; or, The Chase*:

"How's her head?"
"West-south-west, sir."
Homeward Bound, Ch. VI (1838)

As pointed out in **Annotation 3**, a Language Comparison, a rather tedious project, is in progress: "*James Fenimore Cooper and 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie: A Textual Comparison.*" The initial results may be viewed in the negative: if they do *not* completely confirm, they definitely do *not* rule out.

42) James Fenimore Cooper's *The American Democrat*, printed in 1838, in the section on "*Religion*," points out that the "notion of "repining" is, to Cooper, not Christian:

"In a religious point of view, it may be permitted to endeavor to improve our temporal condition, by the use of lawful and just means, but *it is never proper to repine* [my emphasis] Christ, in the parable of the vine dressers, has taught us a sublime lesson of justice, by showing that to the things which are not our own, we have no just claim. To this obvious truth, may be added the uncertainty of the future, and the ignorance in which we exist of what is good, or what is evil, as respects our own wants."

(Liberty Classics Edition, pp. 236-237)

43) Whether overtly intended by Cooper as a parallel reference to Christ as "a fisher of men," [Mt. 4.19 & Mk. 1.17] or merely a playful flight of fantasy, the episode in *The Pioneers* in which Natty is able to save the life of Benjamin by pulling him from the depths of Lake Otsego with his spear deserves mention (*The Pioneers*, Ch. XXIV, p. 274). It will be recalled that Benjamin Penguillan (nicknamed "Ben Pump") did everything in his power to "repay" the old hunter for saving his life: from attempting to pay part of Natty's fine (Ch. XXXIII, pp. 377-378), to sharing the stocks with him (Ch. XXXIV, p. 380), and finally, perhaps most amusing, his helping Natty to break out of jail and hide in Billy Kirby's ox-cart, which, in his state of "half-seas-over," he likens to a ship with himself as the "helmsman" (Ch. XXXV, p. 400). In other words, Benjamin became a "disciple." The comic relief provided by Benjamin, a former sailor in the Royal Navy, yet unable to swim, was an effective technique employed by Cooper (cf. David

Gamut in *The Last of the Mohicans* and, unfortunately with less success, Dr. Bat in *The Prairie*).

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