



THE ROLE OF JAMES FENIMORE COOPER IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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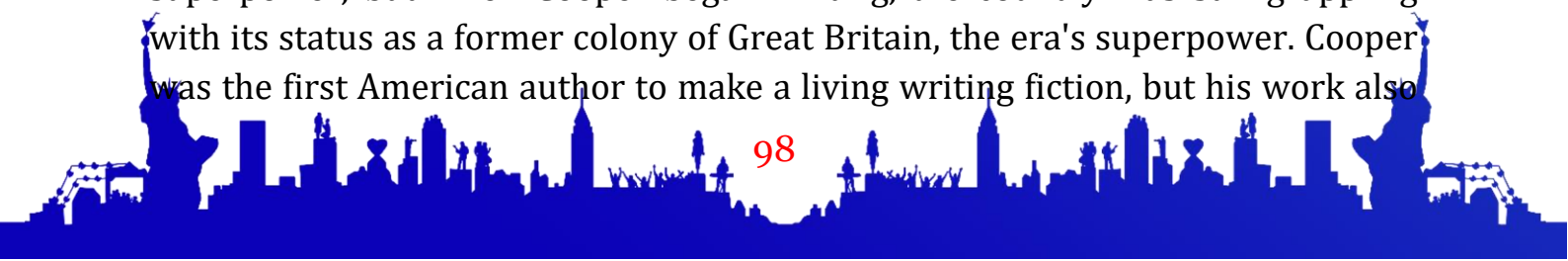
Abstract

James Fenimore Cooper was a writer who lived in the nineteenth century. Cooper's place in the annals of American literature is a mystery. For the better part of three decades, he captured the attention of the American reading audience by writing a staggering number of novels (32 in total). Over the last two centuries, his novels have been widely read by scholars and the general public, and in some cases, such as the frontier thesis, he has played a key role in American cultural origins narratives. Cooper, on the other hand, is a bit of a sidekick to more famous writers like Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and Dickinson.

Key words: James Fenimore Cooper, American literary hero, Chingachgook, Leather-Stocking Tales, Pioneers, Cooper's language

Introduction

James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) wrote his first novel in 1820 and his last novel in 1850. He was one of the world's most recognized and widely read writers during the majority of his three-decade career. He was best known in the twentieth century as the author of The Leather-Stocking Tales, a series of five novels about Natty Bumppo, a hunter, woodsman, and frontier warrior whose closest buddy is Chingachgook, a dispossessed Delaware tribal chief (E. Larkin, 2009). Natty, also known as Leather-stocking, Hawkeye, Pathfinder, and Deerslayer, is widely regarded as the first quintessentially American literary hero, and the Tales, set against historical backdrops ranging from pre-Revolutionary War fighting between England and France to the Lewis and Clark Expedition, have been hailed as a kind of prose epic of early American life by many. Natty's forays into the woods are frequently filled with violence and suspense. Cooper's personal bravery is more difficult to discern, especially so long after the event. We conceive of the United States as the world's greatest superpower, but when Cooper began writing, the country was still grappling with its status as a former colony of Great Britain, the era's superpower. Cooper was the first American author to make a living writing fiction, but his work also





demonstrates how difficult it is for a postcolonial culture to find its own identity (Franklin, W. (2007). Cooper's third novel, *The Pioneers*, published in 1823, was his first Leather-Stocking Tale (E. Larkin, 2009). The story begins on Christmas Eve, the day when Christian history shifts from the old world defined by Adam's fall and Mosaic law to the new world ushered in by the birth of a messiah who opens the door to redemption (Stephen R, 2009). The novel's setting is Templeton, a small town in upstate New York that is modeled on Cooperstown, the settlement founded by the novelist's father in the 1780s and where he spent his boyhood. Natty first appears in the opening chapter of the novel. He is an old man who soon disappears into the woods, while the narrative moves forward into the town where "the pioneers" are busy civilizing the wilderness (Stephen R, 2009). This initial appearance gives little hint of the role he ended up playing in either Cooper's career or American literature: he is an old man who soon disappears into the woods, while the narrative moves forward into the town where "the pioneers" are busy civilizing the wilderness (M. Peprník, 2016).

Cooper's contribution in American literature

The first successful popular novelist in the United States was James Fenimore Cooper. James Cooper, the son of notable federalist William Cooper, the founder of the Cooperstown colony, was educated at Yale in preparation for a life as a refined federalist gentleman (M. Peprník, 2016). Cooper swiftly wasted his money following his father's murder in a duel in 1809, and by the age of thirty, he was bankrupt. He decided to pursue literature as a vocation, emulating Sir Walter Scott's popular *Waverley Novels*. Cooper's first novel, *Precaution* (1820), a home comedy set in England, was a financial failure, but it was clear that he had found his calling (Franklin, W. (2007).

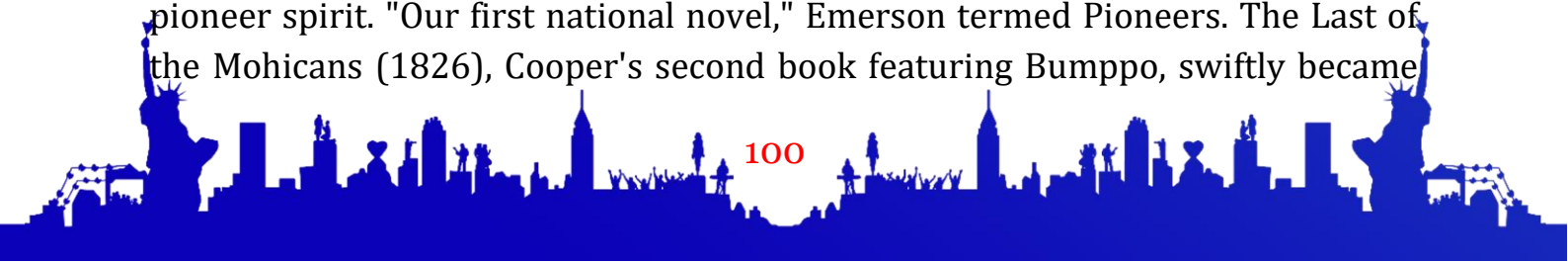
Cooper's fame has risen and fallen over the years, but he has never been entirely discarded or completely enshrined in the American literary canon. As a result, Wayne Franklin's new biography of Cooper is remarkable in that it is the first scholarly account of the life of such a pivotal writer (Franklin, W. (2007). We can debate the quality of Cooper's language, the politics of his representations, and the amount of Cooper's influence on American cultural creation, but Cooper is unquestionably an important character in American literature (M. Peprník, 2016). Franklin's comprehensive and exhaustive account of Cooper's life is a welcome addition to scholarly understanding on this premise alone. Franklin chronicles Cooper's life from childhood until his departure for Europe in 1826 in





this first chapter of what is expected to be a two-volume endeavor. In Franklin's description of Cooper, the year 1826 is significant because it marks the conclusion of the first phase of Cooper's career as a writer and serves as a significant milestone in Franklin's narrative of American publishing history. Cooper is only allowed to leave for Paris in 1826, according to Franklin, because he has reached a deal with Carey & Lea, "one of the nation's pioneering publishers," that gives him considerable autonomy (xx). Cooper had never used a traditional publisher before that. "He produced his earliest works fully at his own risk, utilizing first one and then a second New York bookshop as his agent," Franklin recounts of Cooper's publishing procedure for his first five novels. Those men were in charge of making all of the practical arrangements with paper suppliers, printers, binders, and wholesale and retail merchants, but they weren't in charge of "editing" the books, reading proofs, or offering Cooper any kind of regular guidance" (xx). Franklin's Cooper biography is, in reality, heavily invested in a story about the author's role in the history of American publishing. Cooper is a literary hero in this history, both for his artistic output and for his contributions to the still-developing publishing landscape in the United States in the 1820s. As a result, most of Franklin's description of Cooper's "early years" is devoted to following Cooper's and his agents' labors in the production of *Precaution*, *The Spy*, *The Pioneers*, *The Pilot*, and *Lionel Lincoln*. *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper's first work with Carey and Lea, is an important transitional piece. Franklin's intriguing account of Cooper's efforts to regulate the publishing of these early books will appeal to book historians. Cooper not only copied Walter Scott's books, but also learnt from the way Scott "sought to preserve control over his creative property and thereby milk it for all it was worth," according to Franklin (250). Cooper emerges as a literary impresario as much as a novelist in this scene. His achievements and struggles navigating the publishing process are a prominent feature of the biography, often replacing the traditional literary biography's emphasis on the creative process. Franklin's biography is refreshing in the way it avoids an overemphasis on Cooper's "genius" in favor of a more matter-of-fact engagement with the mechanics of authoring and writing in the 1820s (Stephen R, 2009).

After his second novel, *The Spy*, Cooper established a name, and in his third book, the autobiographical *Pioneers* (1823), Cooper introduced the character of Natty Bumppo, a uniquely American symbol of rugged individualism and the pioneer spirit. "Our first national novel," Emerson termed *Pioneers*. *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), Cooper's second book featuring Bumppo, swiftly became





the most famous work of the day, cementing Cooper's popularity in the United States and Europe (E. Larkin, 2009).

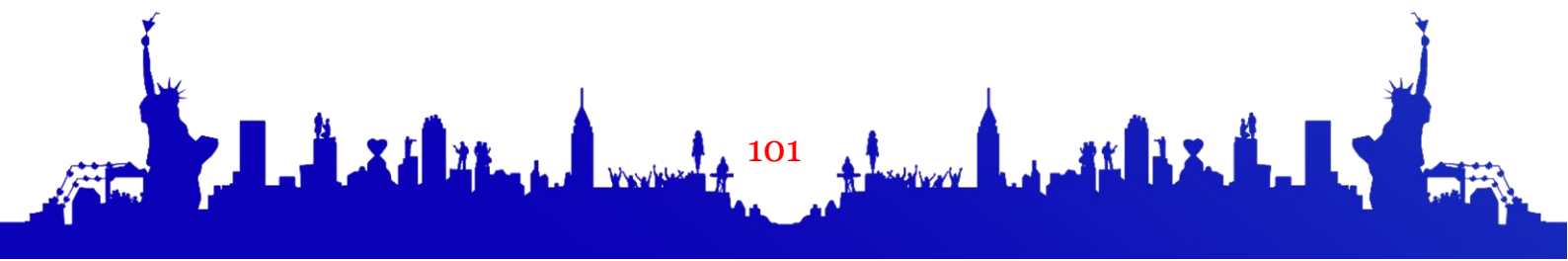
The Last of the Mohicans is a film set during the French and Indian War that tells the story of the killing of the colonial troops at Fort William Henry and the mythical kidnapping of two pioneer sisters (McWilliams, J, 1993). Cooper had no experience with Native Americans, so he relied on a Moravian missionary's description of two rival tribes: the Delawares and the "Mingos." Despite its errors, Cooper's dual image of the competing tribes allowed him to establish a lasting image of the "Indian" that has remained in the American psyche for nearly two centuries. His audience was both romantically moved by the destiny of the doomed Indians and justified in aiding their extinction (M. Peprník, 2016). The voracious Magua, who fit Gothic convention and was associated with Milton's Satan, wowed readers. Natty Bumppo was a popular hero; a hero who never married or changed his convictions, he was a rebel valiantly opposed to industrial society.

Conclusion

Cooper was a prolific author, having written 32 novels, 12 nonfiction works, a drama, and countless pamphlets and essays (E. Larkin, 2009). His five volumes about Natty Bumppo, ranging in genre from improbable romantic adventure to realistic narration, are his most enduring contributions to American literature. The Pioneers (1823), The Last of the Mohicans (1826), The Prairie (1827), The Pathfinder (1840), and The Deerslayer (1840) are best read in the sequence they were written: The Pioneers (1823), The Last of the Mohicans (1826), The Prairie (1827), The Pathfinder (1840), and The Deerslayer (1840). (1841) (McWilliams, J, 1993). Cooper's popularity waned in his later years as he became embroiled in the Jacksonian era's nationalistic and party battles, becoming increasingly combative with critics and the general public.

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