Karen Appelbaum

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Dr. Jolly

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Early American Environmentalism in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Prairie*

Although published in 1827 during the years of westward expansion and the belief in “Manifest Destiny” as the right of white Americans, *The Prairie* presciently foreshadows the eventual need for environmentalists to rein in the destruction of nature occasioned by the arrival of “civilization” on previously pristine landscapes. Throughout the novel, most frequently through the voice of the trapper, Cooper expresses the Romantic viewpoint regarding the loss of unspoiled nature and the differences between the effects of the natives and the effects of the white settler upon the land, which is to point out that while the land has survived eons of habitation by the natives without negative effects and with a balance being maintained in nature, everywhere that white settlers go they leave destruction and defilement of nature behind them. The trapper and Ishmael Bush represent two extremes of white Americans; for decades the trapper has lived in harmony with the environment and its native inhabitants, and now settlers such as Ishmael are encroaching on the unspoiled land to use it as they need and to challenge the rights of the natives to their ancestral grounds. In the characters of Hard-Heart and Mahtoree, Cooper portrays the extremes in the reactions of the natives to the incursions of the whites, which correlate to the extremes of whites depicted in the trapper and Ishmael.

As the story begins with the meeting of the trapper and the Bush family group, the reader is almost immediately introduced to the wasteful ways of the emigrating whites and the trapper’s opinion thereof. When the trapper brings the family to a camping place, he watches while “they stripped a small but suitable spot of its burthen of forest, as effectually, and almost as promptly, as if a whirlwind had passed along the place” (Cooper, p. 19), and “as tree after tree came whistling down, he cast his eyes upward, at the vacancies they left in the heavens, with a melancholy gaze, and finally turned away, muttering to himself with a bitter smile, like one who disdained giving a more audible utterance to his discontent” (Cooper, p. 19). The quick effect of white emigrants upon the land is contrasted with the lack of imprint left by the much larger band of Sioux toward the end of the novel, when “the ground which had so lately been alive with the bustle and life of an extensive Indian encampment was as still and empty as any other spot in those extensive wastes” (Cooper, p. 329). As Blake Nevius points out in his introduction to the 1987 Penguin Classics edition of the novel, “the thought that civilization was not an unmixed blessing, that it entailed the destruction of a benevolent and irrevocable nature” (xi) is a predominant theme in American Romanticism, and Natty Bumppo (the trapper) is its embodiment.

Throughout the novel, the trapper is the exemplar of the strangers that Hard-Heart, the Pawnee chief, pledges to not raise a hand against. When the trapper encounters Ellen looking for Paul and she inquires about his solitary life, he tells her “there are hundreds, nay, thousands of the rightful owners of the country, roving about the plains; but few of our own colour” (Cooper, p. 27), although he describes the Sioux (the people of Mahtoree) as “miscreants,” “reptiles,” and “imps” (Cooper, p. 38-39). At the beginning of Chapter IV, Cooper characterizes the Sioux as “people, who might, without exaggeration, be called the Ishmaelites of the American deserts” (Cooper , p. 40), drawing a clear connection between the belligerent character and reputation of the Sioux and the behaviors and attitudes of Ishmael Bush in terms of the Christian view of Muslims as war-like and godless. Even though the Sioux, as all native groups, can live in harmony with nature, they do not live in harmony with other men, and they encroach on the territories of their neighbors to hunt. In contrast, Hard-Heart provides the portrait of the Pawnee when he tells Mahtoree that “Hard-Heart has never struck the stranger. They come into his lodge and eat, and they go out in safety. A mighty chief is their friend! ...No. Teton. His arm will never be lifted against the stranger” (Cooper, p. 335). Unfortunately, the ways of the trapper and Hard-Heart are already vanishing in the onslaught of the ways of Ishmael and Mahtoree; Cooper expresses the lament of his contemporary Romantics and the future environmentalists in this novel by pitting the cooperative relationships of the pre-expansion era against the adversarial ones of the Manifest Destiny era. Mahtoree’s reply to Hard-Heart’s words is, “Fool; then die, with empty hands!” (Cooper, p. 335), indicating that there can be no co-existence between natives and whites, as the whites come to take the land and chase the natives from it.

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