

Natty Bumppo: An Interpreter of the other's Civilization in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* from the Perspective of Literary Anthropology

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Abstract—In the novel *The Pioneers*, James Fenimore Cooper shows the overwhelming conflicts between the civilized society built by the white pioneers and the primitive and barbarous life style of the native Indians. Meanwhile, he successfully constructs the image of “Leather Stocking,” Natty Bumppo, the ideal white hero who is white in the skin but “red” in the mind. In doing so, Cooper fully expresses his disappointment with the white pioneers’ arrogance and brutality in their dealing with the Indians as well as his longing for the ideal of simple living in harmony with nature. This ideal is invested in the characterization of Natty Bumppo, who embraces the culture of the Indian by demonstrating the noble qualities of loving freedom, upholding justice, being industrious and brave, and immersion with nature. He is an example of the “noble savage” that answers to the need of the 19th century white America.

Keywords—*The Pioneers*; Natty Bumppo; *The Other's Civilization*; nature in literature; “noble savage”

I. INTRODUCTION

American Westward Movement can be said to be a romantic legend of human beings’ conquest of nature in American history, which plays an indelible role in the enlargement of the territory of the United States as well as in shaping the nationality of the United States. From then on, this has deeply influenced many American writers and thus has also become a common favorite topic described much in their writings, which also has a very vital significance throughout American history. As a popular and prolific American writer in the early 19th century, James Fenimore Cooper (September 15, 1789 – September 14, 1851), who was born in New Jersey, is just one of the most outstanding representatives. As one of the real pioneers and founders in American literature, Cooper can be said to be one of the first American writers who has become famous in the world mainly for his historical frontier series, known as

The Leather-stocking Tales: The Pioneers(1823), *The Last of the Mohicans*(1826), *The Prairie*(1827), *The Pathfinder*(1840), *The Deer-slayer*(1841), which is a particular and outstanding interpretation of the Westward Movement history happening on the western frontier of the United States.

In this series, Cooper mainly describes the legendary life of a white hunter nicknamed “Leather-stocking”, Natty Bumppo, who lives from young to old in the western frontier woods, and depicts the thrilling struggles and complicated social changes for about sixty years which have happened in the process of the Westward Movement in the large span from the Great Lakes in the north and New York in the east to the western prairie. To some extent, this series reproduces the early pioneering history of the American society and paints a giant historical picture of the early development in America.

It is this series that has got Cooper a good reputation and established his good position in the American literature as well as in the world literature, which also has much influence on the latter American frontier fiction writings. Today this series is still attracting many readers in the world. Meanwhile, the beautiful and enchanting scenery of the charming west frontier nature unfolded in this series also attracts many modern literary critics to interpret, analyze and appreciate it from different perspectives, such as cultural studies, post-colonialism, eco-criticism. This paper is going to analyze the first novel of this series, *The Pioneers*, from the perspective of literary anthropology with the aim of finding the infinite historical and cultural connotations which have been poured into the vivid and successfully portrayed image of the protagonist, Natty Bumppo.

In *The Pioneers*, Cooper describes the changes of life in the small western frontier town in America just after the Civil War and tells the inevitable conflicts between the free and simple hunting life style and the natural moral principles of the Leather-stocking, Natty Bumppo and the native

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Indians and the civilized society built by the white pioneers. And it is in the beautiful and unlimited western prairie with rich natural resources that Cooper finds not only the inexhaustible and promising future of America but also the true reasons for the conflicts between the so-called advanced civilization of the civilized pioneers and the primitive, barbarous, uncivilized and simple life style of the native Indians. Meanwhile, by showing the conflicts between the so-called advanced civilization of the civilized pioneers and the primitive, barbarous, uncivilized and simple life style of the native Indians, Cooper successfully creates the ideal heroic image of "Leather Stocking", Natty Bumppo, the ideal white hero who is white in the skin but red in the mind.

Here this paper is mainly going to analyze the novel in three aspects from the perspective of literary anthropology, that is, the comparison between the advanced and civilized life style of the civilized pioneers and the primitive, barbarous, uncivilized and simple life style of the native Indians as well as the ideal heroic image of "Leather Stocking", Natty Bumppo, the ideal white hero who is white in the skin but red in the mind. Therefore, we may find the anthropological connotations of the novel.

II. THE BRUTALITY OF THE ADVANCED AND CIVILIZED WHITE PIONEERS

With its foundation to the first half of the 19th century, the United States of America developed at a very high speed and its territory also expanded quickly from the earlier 13 eastern states to the deep west, till to the east coast of the Pacific Ocean. It finally became a big power in the world. The remote but wide western frontier gave the new-born country not only beautiful and attractive natural scenery in a vast territory, but also rich natural resources. Meanwhile, this let the civilized white pioneers have more chances to get the wealth that they were longing for all the time. Maybe because of the influence of Puritanism, in the eyes of the white pioneers, nature was merely the opponent that they had to defeat just for the inexhaustible resources. Therefore, many of them came to the western frontier in an endless stream for realizing their sweet and greedy wealth dreams. They did take the advanced civilization to the frontier in effect, but what they did most was to exploit the west without any restraint and plundered the west recklessly and greedily. What's more, they damaged the beautiful natural scenery and broke the balance of the ecological environment as well. In the novel, the rich Judge Temple and his daughter Elizabeth were the outstanding representatives of the white pioneers. They had got an advanced school education and were the symbols of the advanced white civilization. Here Judge Temple was a humorous, scholarly man and had "particularly a pair of expressive, large, blue eyes, that promised extraordinary intellect". (Cooper, 1964, p.16) His daughter, as the younger generation who grew up in a modern civilization, was gentle, quiet, and polite. They were pious Christians who had carefully read *the Bible*, prayed daily, and went to church on

time. Moreover, they were proud of their religious belief. As white pioneers, they were on the frontier of the times; they were gorgeously dressed and brightly ornamented; they had the most advanced traffic vehicles at that time and dwelled in the most splendid houses luxuriously, which looked like palaces and were built by large stones and high-grade lumber and circled by beautiful white poplars which were transported back from the faraway Europe. It usually took several years only to design one house like this. To much extent, the luxurious residences also actually symbolized the advanced civilization of the white pioneers.

However, many so-called advanced white pioneers, such as Billy and Richard, showed their true colors when they were dealing with nature as well as the creatures in nature. For example, when Billy who considered the woods as his enemy was cutting down trees, he would never be irresolute. In his eyes, it was nothing but a devil, and the trees in the woods were nothing but obstacles which hindered or blocked his advancement. Only when these stumbling blocks were removed, could he plant crops and then lived a much better life. So the trees which were cut down by Billy were upon several thousands. Therefore, it was no wonder that the local people called him "boisterous woodchopper". Besides that, in order to get sap from maple trees, he relentlessly cut a lot of holes in the trees, which almost destroyed the trees. Even Judge Temple could not tolerate this kind of action and scolded Billy:

It grieves me to witness the extravagance that pervades this country, where the settlers trifle with the blessings they might enjoy, with the prodigality of successful adventures. You are not exempt from the censure yourself, Kirby, for you make dreadful wounds in these trees where a small incision would affect the same object. I earnestly beg you will remember they are the growth of centuries, and when once gone, none living will see their loss remedied. (Cooper, 1964, p.176)

Judge Temple realized that the natural resources were decreasing day by day. They should try their best to conserve resources for their future generations rather than waste the limited natural resources. Judge Temple also severely criticized his cousin Richard and his servant because they always used maple trees as fuel. He said:

How often have I forbidden the use of the sugar-maple in my dwelling! The sight of that sap, as it exudes with the heat, is painful to me, Richard. Really, it behooves the owner of woods so extensive as mine, to be cautious what example he sets his people, who are already felling the forests, as if no end could be found to their treasures, nor any limits to their extent. If we go on in this way, twenty years hence we shall want fuel. (Cooper, 1964, p.82)

Here Judge Temple's words clearly reflected his concern for the increasingly reduce of the natural resources. In order to protect the woods, he constantly dispatched people to look for coal for the villagers as fuel.

Besides this, every spring, countless migratory birds would fly across the place of residence of the pioneers. At this time, the pioneers would kill these innocent lives without restraint. They thought that the birds would do great damage to the crops, and they took this as an excuse to organize a large-scale hunting. They held a huge pigeon-shooting competition every year, undoubtedly, which was the bloodiest scene that the environment spoilers performed.

In the competition, people were eager to use powerful weapons for the sake of winning the shooting game. The novel described it as the following:

The reports of the firearms became rapid, whole volleys rising from the plain, as flocks of more than ordinary numbers darted over the opening, shadowing the field like a cloud; and then the light smoke of a single piece would issue from among the leafless bushes on the mountain, as death was hurled on the retreat of the affrighted birds, who were rising from a volley, in a vain effort to escape. Arrows and missiles of every kind were in the midst of the flocks; and so numerous were the birds, and so low did they take their flight, that even long poles in the hands of those on the sides of the mountain were used to strike them to the earth. (Cooper, 1964, p.189)

When innumerable pigeons were falling to the ground with the sound of the guns, the greedy killers became extremely excited and agitated. For Richard and Billy who were the organizers of the competitions, they thought that they not only drove away the “devil”, but also provided enough food and feathers for the villagers. But, in fact, most of the contestants just took away some pigeons as food only, and left thousands of pigeons either struggling in pain or lying on the ground dead. The final fates of these pigeons were not different, that is, rotting on the ground. This kind of savage and wasteful action immediately drew Judge Temple’s attention. When people were hailing about their victory, Judge Temple couldn’t tolerate it any longer. He sighed:

The field is covered with them. ... I see nothing but eyes, in every direction, as the innocent sufferers turn their heads in terrors. Full one of those that have fallen are yet alive; and I think it is time to end the sport, if sport it be. (Cooper, 1964, p.193)

Therefore, he was determined to abolish the barbarous massacre by law enforcement. However, the same barbarous and wasteful behaviors continued to appear in Otsego Lake. Local residents liked to use large fishing net to catch fish in Otsego, because in this way people could get the largest number of fish which would bring the strongest stimulus to the fisherman. Usually, the fisherman could catch thousands of fish at a time. However, only a small number of these fish were to be eaten, and most of them were left on the ground and rotted away. Judge Temple lamented about this extreme uncivilized action:

This is a fearful expenditure of the choicest gifts of the Providence. These fish, which thou seest lying in such piles before thee, and which by tomorrow evening will be rejected food on the meanest table in Templeton, are of a quality and flavor that, in other countries, would make them esteemed a luxury on the tables of princes or epicures. The world has no better fish than the bass of Otsego: it unites the richness of the shad to the firmness of the salmon. But, like all the other treasures of the wilderness, they already begin to disappear before the wasteful extravagance of man. (Cooper, 1964, p.201)

Here Judge Temple’s sigh fully demonstrated his concern for the dwindling natural resources, which was in obvious contrast to the other pioneers’ action. Thus, on the basis of the above analysis, it’s easy to find that the writer, Cooper, was very disappointed and angry with the brutal behavior of the white pioneers. Therefore, in the novel, he fully expressed his anxiety and disapproval not only by the way of Judge Temple, a wise pioneer with real foresight, but also by successfully making up the other civilization of the native Indians, the other party in the conflicts.

III. THE CIVILIZED AND FRIENDLY BEHAVIOR OF THE PRIMITIVE AND BARBAROUS NATIVE INDIANS

In *The Pioneers*, the obvious opposite party of the civilized white pioneers were the native Indians. They were primitive and barbarous in the white pioneers’ eyes. However, Cooper gives a kind, friendly and favorite description of the native Indians. For example, in the 23rd Chapter of the novel, there is a beautiful description of the changing of the seasons:

The advance of the season now became as rapid as its first approach had been tedious and lingering. The days were uniformly mild, while the nights, though cool, were no longer chilled by frosts. The whip-poor-will was heard whistling his melancholy notes along the margin of the lake, and the ponds and meadows were sending forth the music of their thousand tenants. The leaf of the native poplar was seen quivering in the woods; the sides of the mountains began to lose their hue of brown, as the lively green of the different members of the forest blended their shades with the permanent colors of the pine and hemlock; and even the buds of the tardy oak were swelling with the promise of the coming summer. The gay and fluttering blue-bird, the social robin, and the industrious little wren were all to be seen enlivening the fields with their presence and their songs; while the soaring fish-hawk was already hovering over the waters of the Otsego, watching with native voracity for the appearance of his prey. (Cooper, 1964, p.194)

Here Cooper gave us a beautiful and ecologically harmonious picture of nature which was not damaged by the industrial civilization yet. This leisurely satisfying nature provided the native Indians with a kind of pure, fresh and poetic living environment as well as rich food, water and other necessities. It let the native Indians live a peaceful and

happy life. Hence the Indians respected nature and lived in harmony with her and never went against the ecological laws of nature, who were completely different from the civilized white pioneers. On the one hand, nature provided the Indians with a beautiful living environment and satisfied their basic living requirements. On the other hand, it was the natural resources not the quest for economic profits that were the Indians' basic requirements as well as the truth they were searching for, so they had a very special feeling for nature. They loved nature, respected nature and liked to safeguard nature. Their relationship with nature was natural and harmonious.

In Cooper's writing, the native Indians were the true and lovely children of nature and nature was their kindly and loving mother. They loved and respected nature from their hearts because nature was holy and pure in their belief. So they lived in harmony with all the creatures in the world. They treated the woods as their own home and took it as the necessary part of the ecological system. They tried their best to protect it. Although they also cut down some trees, they did this only for one objective, that is, for building their living accommodations. They never cut more trees than what they needed and they never planned to make use of the woods for economic profits. Though nature could provide them with many sufficient resources, they only took some necessities from nature. They limited their hunting numbers and only hunted what they needed in order to survive. They were never greedy for more than what they needed.

However, the native Indians became homeless and had to live a vagrant life because of the wars and the unlimited endless exploitation which had been done by the white pioneers. For example, as one of the typical representatives among the native Indians, Indian John lived a simple and primitive life. He lived with the animals together in the forest and had no fixed residence. In the white pioneers' eyes, he was merely barbarous and ignorant and looked like a disheveled monster:

a profusion of long, black, coarse hair concealed his forehead, his crown, and even hung about his cheeks... the eyes were not large, but their black orbs glittered in the rays of the candles, as he gazed intently down the hall, like two ball if fire... from his shoulders, suffering it to fall over his leggings of untanned deerskin, where it was retained by a belt of bark that confined it to his waist. (Cooper, 1964, p.67)

Actually he was once the tribal leader of the Indians, but he believed in Christianity. However, after he became a Christian, he was always violating the doctrines of Christianity. He knew nothing about the modern civilization. Comparing with Judge Temple, who was learned, wise and far-sighted and Elizabeth, who was gentle and well-bred and had received advanced education, he was much far away from them. However, in the end of the novel, Indian John had a talk with Elizabeth before the forest fire, in which he first reviewed his happy life in the tribe with much grief

when he was young. Then he bitterly denounced the brutality and violence that the white pioneers had done to the Indians:

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 difference below the skin? No. Once John had a woman. She was a mother of so many sons,—he raised his hand with three fingers elevated—and she had daughters that would have made young Delawares happy. She was kind, daughter, and what I said she did. You have different fashions; but do you think John did not love the wife of his youth—the mother of his children? (Cooper, 1964, p.308)

But all his happy days ended when the white pioneers came there. Therefore, Indian John was solemnly determined to die with his own tribe with dignity and gave the chance of survival to Elizabeth, a civilized white pioneer. Here the bitter experience of Indian John and his last unselfish choice obviously showed the selfishness and mercilessness of the white pioneers. Meanwhile, the instinctive kindness of old John was a big bitter satire to the so-called advanced and civilized white pioneers.

It is with the aid of successfully constructing the Other's civilization of the native Indians that he left the advanced civilization of the white settlers in sharp contrast with the primitive and simple life of the native Indians. Thus, Cooper further highlighted the flaws and insufficiency of the so-called mainstream civilization of the white settlers. Meanwhile, he sharply showed his deep worry and bitter sadness about the advanced civilization of the white. Perhaps that is why Cooper carefully portrays the ideal white hero, Natty Bumppo, who is white in the skin but red in the mind.

IV. THE IDEAL HERO: NATTY BUMPPPO, WHITE IN THE SKIN BUT RED IN THE MIND

As the protagonist that Cooper carefully carved in *The Pioneers*, Natty Bumppo was a white man full of wisdom who lived among the native Indians and had already learned the living habits and surviving techniques of the Indians. He was just like a sage in the wilderness and a protector of the large western frontier. By portraying this typical character, Cooper expressed his ideas of simply living in harmony with nature and with the people around. If we read through the novel, we can find that almost all the main characters in *The Pioneers* had gone through the times of war and revenge, and they usually took the native Indians as their enemy. However, as a white hunter, Natty Bumppo became intimate friends with Indian John, "the son of nature". Although Natty Bumppo was illiterate and had no ideas about a civilized man, he knew much about the world and had his own fundamental moral principles in dealing with nature. He wandered alone between the native Indians and the white pioneers. As a white man, he was always living an Indian life with the native Indians together. Therefore, we can say, to some

extent, he was a mixed man who was white in the skin but red in the mind. In *The Pioneers*, Natty Bumppo had a life style which was typically Indian. He lived in a simple little hut, not in a big house built by using many big trees. As a hunter, he only killed the animals as food for surviving and never killed more animals than what he needed. As a matter of fact, he felt guilty about killing too many animals. So he refused to take part in the pigeon-shooting competitions because, in his mind, it was awful to kill more pigeons than what he needed. He cherished the original beauty of nature and opposed the humans' intruding on nature. To do this, the white hunter believed that humans should live a simple life and try to gain from nature as little as possible.

In *The Pioneers*, Natty Bumppo firmly stuck to his typical views on the environment, and he practiced environmental protection in his unique way. He resisted continuously being tempted to waste natural resources. He also refused to cooperate with the other white pioneers in exploiting nature. As more white pioneers poured into the town, the old hunter became worried. To him, the more settled and developed the region was, the worse would the environment be spoiled and damaged. He denounced his fellows who did great harm to the environment when they pushed their settlement westward.

Although Natty Bumppo was a white man, he did well in hunting and had many good Indian friends such as Indian John. He was at home when he stayed with the Indians. He had an intimate relationship with nature. He grew up in the woods and was educated by nature, which also showed him the only book that he had read, such as the dense woods, the wide lake. This was also the only book that he was interested in, because he felt rather relaxed and satisfied when he was bathed in the fresh air in the woods. He felt nature was full of wisdom and knowledge and he could learn much from it. So here before the readers, Natty Bumppo was a man who had sensitive senses and had learned much from nature without the help of science. He was like a philosopher of nature and was deeply influenced and educated by nature even though he was almost illiterate. In his eyes, all the artificially printed things were not as true and beautiful as the creatures of nature in the sky, in the woods as well as on the earth. He thought that nature was the show of the creator's love and dignity, which was a mixture of beauty and authority. All in nature was charming and attractive to him. For example, when he heard the sounds of nature, he thought they were the most beautiful and the sweetest in the world. He even took nature as his lover, who was existing everywhere in the world. She might be the branches in the drizzle, or the glittering dewdrops on the grassland, or the flying clouds in the blue sky, or the singing birds in the woods, or the cool spring water which relieved his thirst.

In the meantime, though Natty Bumppo did not oppose the using of the natural resources, he thought that overfishing, overhunting, overdeveloping, or destroying the other creatures aimlessly were quite wrong. Here Natty Bumppo's ideas of nature preservation were vividly shown

in the novel. For instance, as an old hunter, he frankly admitted: "for my part, although I am a poor man, I can live without the venison." (Cooper, 1964, p.18) So he was very angry at the settlers' driving away the quarries from the woods and killing them indiscriminately. When the settlers massacred the annual flight of migratory passenger pigeons, Natty exclaimed:

... but it's wicked to be shooting into flocks in this wasty manner, and none to 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 creatures, 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 the feather of another, though there might be a hun-dred on the same tree. (Cooper, 1964, p.191)

According to Natty Bumppo's fundamental principles, it was all right to use the gifts of nature, but waste was definitely wrong. If someone was craving for pigeon flesh in order to survive, it was all right, since he had the right to meet his demand for eating something like all creatures in nature. However, it was wrong to kill twenty pigeons but eat only one. He not only believed in this doctrine, but also carried it out in his life. So when Natty wanted eating pigeon flesh, he would go into the woods till he found "one" to his liking, and then he shot it off the branches "without touching the feather of another, though there might be a hundred on the same tree". (Cooper, 1964, 191).

Thus, by carefully portraying the protagonist, Natty Bumppo, the writer, Cooper also expressed his disapproval on the so-called civilization of the white settlers. With the invasion of the white and the establishment of the settlements, Natty Bumppo constantly retreated westwards to the wilderness, away from the dwellings and towns of his fellow white people. He would rather live in the wilderness than in the settlements. Because he thought the settlements were wicked while the wilderness was pure and sincere, and he loved all the things in the wilderness.

So, to some extent, we can say that Natty Bumppo was a faithful environmentalist who attached great importance to the ecological balance of nature. He wanted to protect the natural resources and keep the natural environment in balance. As for him, if humans killed and ate animals according to the laws of nature, it didn't mean disrespecting life. On the contrary, it meant respecting the whole ecosystem, because it really balanced the ecosystem.

Through the above analysis of the novel, we can find that: in the novel, *The Pioneers*, the so-called "advanced civilization" of the white settlers has been in sharp contrast with the "primitive barbarism" of the native Indians. By showing the conflicts between the civilization of the advanced white settlers and the simple life of the native Indians in *The Pioneers*, Cooper showed the brutality of the white settlers. Although the native Indians lived a simple and even primitive life and knew nothing about the advanced

civilization, they loved nature and protected the natural resources from the bottom of their hearts. They were the children of nature indeed. On the contrary, though the white settlers had their advanced science and technology, they were cruel and merciless to nature as well as other humans. They didn't care about their damage to nature, because what they needed were more profits, more wealth and they believed they could control nature with the help of science and technology. So they exploited and wasted the natural resources in a reckless way and they killed the native Indians only for grabbing the Indians' land and their wealth. Besides the direct damage to the natural environment, the advent of the white pioneers also broke the harmonious relationship between the native Indians and nature.

In the contrast of the two parties, it is easy to find out which one is better. Therefore, Cooper's dissatisfaction and even disappointment with the former and his favorite to the latter, which looks like simple, primitive and barbarous life style, are very obvious. However, why does Cooper still spend much effort in redundantly creating an ideal white hero, Natty Bumppo, who is white in the skin but red in the mind?

Here we may borrow Amy Fass Emery's concept of "anthropological imagination". (Emery, 1996, p.4) Actually, after finishing reading the whole novel, it is not hard to find that as a white writer, Cooper is deeply immersed in the background of the mainstream white culture. Although, by making up the image of Natty Bumppo, who was white in the skin but red in the mind, Cooper wanted to express that we humans should live a simple life and live in harmony with nature and damage her as little as possible, his deep sense of the superiority of the white culture makes him unwilling and unable to identify with the inferior civilization of the native Indians. As a matter of fact, even if Cooper himself can agree with the inferior civilization of the native Indians, the white readers that his novel will have to face can't totally accept it or agree with it. That is a question that Cooper, as the writer of the novel, has to take into account.

Meanwhile, by shaping the ideal white hero, Natty Bumppo, who is white in the skin but red in the mind, Cooper not only fully shows his deep dissatisfaction and even disappointment at his own advanced white civilization which is represented by the white settlers' brutality in the Westward Movement, but also expresses his favorite ideal in favor of a simple natural life as part of the white mainstream civilization represented by himself. In other words, we can say that what Cooper endows the protagonist, Natty Bumppo, is just the noble qualities of loving freedom, justice, both the industrious and brave, and living in harmony with nature which he himself favors much and hopes that his own fellow communities should also have.

As we all know, the rapid development of science and technology in the 21st century has tremendously brought us

much wealth and greatly improved our living standards. However, this kind of development has also worsened the situation of environment and led to more ecological crises, which will bitterly endanger the existence of human beings. By analyzing the novel from the perspective of literary anthropology, the speaker hope that it may shed some light on today's protection of our living environment.

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