

The Pathfinder Short Guide

The Pathfinder by James Fenimore Cooper

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| The Pathfinder Short Guide..... | 1 |
| Contents..... | 2 |
| Characters..... | 3 |
| Social Concerns..... | 5 |
| Techniques..... | 6 |
| Themes..... | 7 |
| Adaptations..... | 8 |
| Key Questions..... | 9 |
| Literary Precedents..... | 10 |
| Related Titles..... | 11 |
| Copyright Information..... | 12 |



Characters

It was never Cooper's intention to turn his Leatherstocking novels into a biographical account of Natty Bumppo; in fact, they were not written originally in a chronological sequence. The Deerslayer (1841), the story of Natty Bumppo's youth, was written after The Prairie (1827), which tells of his death as an old man. The result is that the character of the famous scout and frontiersman is different in each novel, and perhaps some of his inconsistencies are the reason he is a lively and interesting personality. In The Pathfinder, he is a middle-aged man, famous for his woodland skills. Cooper's characters do not display great complexity, and in true adventure fashion, are subordinated to the action of the tales. Hawkeye acts and reacts, but he rarely reflects. He is the superman in the woods, the unbeatable fighter, but the reader does not get to know him very much as an individual. This may be the main reason why the author's attempts to make him the center of a love story fail to convince. Natty Bumppo does not profess or even think about his love for Mabel, and she is scarcely aware of it, except for her father's attempt to make them a marriage. As in his earlier novels, when the adventure is over, Natty Bumppo melts back into the darkness and mystery of the frontier woods. He does not fit the role of settled husband and provider.

The role of the hero who gets the girl is played by Jasper Western, who is both instrumental in the early rescue of Mabel from the treachery of Arrowhead, and later as the person who brings the ship in on time to save the lives of the soldiers during their battle on the island. Jasper has many of the traits of Hawkeye: He is honest, reliable, modest, and skilled in his craft as captain of a ship on the inland lakes.

His love and eventual marriage to Mabel are acceptable, but as Hawkeye suspected, this marriage which will draw Jasper away from the life to which he is best suited, the life on the frontier — a sacrifice Hawkeye would never make.

Mabel is created in the mold of the courageous young women who appear in Cooper's earlier novels. Yet she is free of the moral taint of Judith in The Deerslayer. Without hesitation, she undergoes the most rigorous trials of the wilderness. Her strong sense of self-preservation allows her to save her life during the island massacre, and unlike her uncle and father, she is willing to suspend conventional thinking and trust the young Indian woman June who offers her advice and help.

Mable's uncle Cap is a slightly comical figure, personifying the conceit as well as the attitude of superiority Cooper criticized in the colonial representatives of England and France. Although he is ignorant of local conditions, he claims to have all the answers on the basis of his experience as a saltwater sailor on the ocean. He has nothing but disdain for the inland sea skills of young Jasper, the scouting and fighting practices of Hawkeye and Chingachgook, and the advice of the local pilot. Because he is blinded by his attitude, he is unable to judge the people around him, putting his trust in the worst villains such as the Tuscarora Arrowhead and Corporal Muir, while being suspicious of faithful Jasper. It has been suggested that Cooper created Cap as a revenge on Walter Scott's criticism of his writing, but the attitude and figure of the Scotsman grow naturally



out of the context and plot of the story. It should also be noted that while Cap has his ridiculous moments, his courage and fearlessness in situations of true danger are never in doubt.

The remaining characters can easily be divided into the two sides of the war — the British and the French with their Indian allies. They are generally stereotypes, such as the treacherous native Arrowhead, the crafty but also childlike June, and the stern and unbending father of Mabel who is honest and upright but lacks flexibility and independent thought. The French captain Sanglier receives the reluctant admiration of Natty because he is a brave and chivalrous adversary.

Social Concerns

In this Leatherstocking novel, Natty Bumppo, alias Hawkeye, works as a scout for a British garrison on Lake Ontario. A sergeant, who considers Natty a suitable husband for his daughter, has sent him out to meet her while she is traveling to visit her father. After a dramatic rescue of the travelers from Indian attack, Mabel, her uncle Cap, Hawkeye, and his friend Chingachgook arrive at the fort, only to be involved in another hostile action with the French and their Indian allies. The French-Indian war is probably the most significant social background for the Leatherstocking novels, and nowhere more so than in *The Pathfinder*. Since the war between French and British has aligned various Indian nations with their respective sides, the fighting serves as a credible excuse for Canadian tribes such as the Iroquois and Hurons to attack British settlers.

Hawkeye is firmly on the side of the British, as is his friend Chingachgook and his tribe, the Delawares. His author, Cooper, however, has sympathies for the French. He has, after all, spent time in Paris where he had become a friend of Lafayette. The French enemy captain in *The Pathfinder*, Captain Sanglier is an adversary, but a courteous and noble one.

A second issue in this novel is Hawkeye's infatuation with Mabel.

Hawkeye has grown in stature from a marginal figure in some of the earlier novels to the central character, and as hero of the story, he assumes the hero's role as the center of love and affection.

Yet he is a man of the wilderness who is not ready to settle down. Almost against his will, he admits emotions for the beautiful Mabel, almost seeming more to please her father than himself.

He is almost indecently relieved and eager to relinquish her after he discovers that his sailor friend Jasper loves her too. Natty Bumppo is the original model of the Western hero who kisses his horse and rides off into the sunset, unhampered by love or emotional bonds.



Techniques

The Pathfinder is comprised of two clearly defined parts, each developing an adventure in which Mabel is endangered, Hawkeye and Chingachgook come to the rescue, and James Western proves his bravery and skill. But both sections also develop the theme of Natty's growing interest in the girl and his resulting distraction and failures which are a result of letting considerations of infatuation and love override his habitual caution. Because he is spending time with Mabel instead of guarding the fort, Arrowhead and Sanglier succeed in approaching the garrison, where they plot with Lieutenant Muir. As Jasper tells his friend, if he "had been outlying that night, as usual, we would have secured one if not both of them." Later, Sergeant Dunham blunders into an ambush and loses his life because, as Natty states, "if I had stayed with the boats, this would not have come to pass." He has not done so because he was concerned for Mabel's safety. Natty in love fails for the first time to live up to his own mystique. After Mabel has married Jasper, and returns many years later to the frontier, she sees a man who might be Natty Bumppo. She is told that "he was the most renowned hunter of that portion of the state . . . a being of great purity of character, and of as marked peculiarities, and that he was known in that region of the country, by the name of Leatherstocking." The mystique of the frontier superman has been restored, and he has ridden off into the sunset.

Themes

The Pathfinder begins with a journey of a young woman to a frontier outpost. She nearly becomes a victim of the treachery of Arrowhead, her Indian guide, and is only saved by Hawkeye's quick intervention. Later, it is the evil Lieutenant Muir who plots to help the enemy, and again, Mable almost becomes a victim — as her father does — of his treachery, and she is saved in the last minute by Natty. Both Arrowhead and Lieutenant Muir let their greed overcome their loyalty and pay for their treachery with their lives. This concept of greed, found both in the civilized and uncivilized characters, is a destructive force in Cooper's novels.

The cruel practice of taking scalps for prize money brings about the capture of Tom Hutter and Hurry in *The Deerslayer*, and the desire of the Mingos to possess the carved ivory chess pieces leads to their downfall. Only Natty and Chingachgook seem to be free of greed — they are unhampered by and uninterested in acquiring possessions.

A second theme developing from the background of the French and Indian Wars is the foolish superiority of the colonial powers of Britain and France, who are seeking a foothold in the New World. This disdain for local ways and local experience is illustrated by the disdain of the British garrison for the American venison and salmon in favor of the traditional Scottish oatcakes. It is also shown in the lecture Corporal McNab gives to Mabel when she warns him of impending ambush: "This American mode of fighting that is getting into so much favor will destroy the reputation of His Majesty's army."

Cooper characterizes McNab as "an epitome though on a scale suited to his rank, of those very qualities which were so peculiar to the servants of the Crown, that were sent into the colonies, as these servants estimated themselves in comparison with the natives of the country, or in other words, he considered the American as an animal inferior to the parent stock, and viewed all his notions of military service in particular as undigested and absurd."

Major Duncan, too, trusts the treacherous Muir simply because he is British and suspects Jasper Western because he speaks French, and because he is native born.

Adaptations

There have been many motion picture adaptations of Cooper's novels about Hawkeye. The outstanding example of these is the 1992 version of *The Last of the Mohicans*. Michael Moran's direction is brilliant, capturing the frantic action scenes of the novel as well as the pacing of the story's events.

The cinematography is lush, full of the rich colors of forest and river. Its cast features a deadly serious Daniel Day-Lewis, as well as Madeleine Stowe, Russell Means, Eric Schweig, Jodhi May, Steven Waddington, Maurice Rooves, and Patrice Chereau. Audiences and critics received this rendition of tragedy and romantic love warmly.

Its main characters are almost supermen, as they are in the novel, and they fight with all the artistry depicted in Cooper's book. *The Last of the Mohicans* is also one of the rare adaptations of Cooper's work to accurately capture his interest in and sympathy for Native American cultures. If one sees only one adaptation of Cooper's work, this is the adaptation to see.



Key Questions

Cooper has created a world of freedom and adventure which has never lost its appeal for the modern reader.

An exploration into the elements that make Westerns so appealing even today will offer a valuable approach to the novels, their attitude — and ours — towards the myths of open space, wilderness and independence. That the westward expansion also led to bloody and tragic conflicts with the native Americans would later be rationalized as Manifest Destiny, a concept that will also lend itself to a wide range of discussion possibilities.

1. Why does Cooper develop two similar adventures in *The Pathfinder*, each of which deals with Natty rescuing Mabel? What does the first adventure establish that helps us understand the second — the sea battle and massacre on the Island?
2. What are Natty's true feelings for Mabel? Does he love her? Does he feel a marriage with her would be the right thing? Or does the idea make him uneasy? Why? Does the idea make the reader uneasy? Why?
3. What is the role of Chingachgook in this novel? He is less prominent than in *The Deerslayer* and *The Last of the Mohicans*? Does the setting — a British garrison, and the Inland Lake — limit his role and effectiveness?
4. Natty Bumppo has always considered himself primarily a part of the white world in spite of his Indian upbringing, but in this novel his conflicts are primarily with the social structure of the garrison. How does Natty fit into this civilized society?
5. Aside from Chingachgook, how does Cooper characterize the Indians in this novel? How does June, Arrowhead's wife, fit in? After all, she is the one who saves Mabel's life. Is she better than her people?
6. Why does Cooper go to such length to caricature Mabel's uncle Cap? What social commentaries does he make? Is Cap a representative of the colonial powers in America? Ridiculous characters are uncommon in Cooper's frontier stories. Most of his characters are fairly two-dimensional, but they are rarely deliberately overdrawn.

What is the purpose here of doing so?

7. In 1850, after a literary career of thirty years, Cooper wrote: "If anything from the pen of the writer is at all to outlive himself, it is, unquestionably, the series of "Leatherstocking Tales." Unfortunately for the author's reputation, his statement proved prophetic, since subsequent decades were to see him only as a teller of adventures for young people. Is this narrow view justified, or does Cooper transcend the purely narrative and suspense qualities of later frontier fiction?

Literary Precedents

The Leatherstocking Tales have been a point of cultural reference and a national monument. They are one of the first examples of a literary genre that has found imitators as well as innovators for more than 150 years. As action stories, they have suffered criticism and a negative connotation, yet the adventure story can claim such unquestioned works of literary merit as the novels of Joseph Conrad and Ernest Hemingway. Cooper himself was strongly influenced by the romantic stories of Walter Scott, and they became models for his narrative technique. He was also, like many of his contemporaries, fascinated and awed by the enormity of a large, seemingly endless continent full of adventure and incredible possibilities. He admired the men who braved this wilderness and their heroic stature, both good and evil. A nineteenth-century writer who brought the noble frontiersman and his red brother to a wide German audience is Karl May, who derived most of his information and inspiration directly from Cooper. His hero, Old Shatterhand and Indian sidekick Winnetou have been avidly read by German youngsters for almost a century.

Also during the nineteenth century, a large amount of pulp fiction was written about western heroes and outlaws, satisfying a public demand, and perpetuating the myth of a West as it never existed. More recent authors of the Western genre are Zane Grey, Louis L'Amour, and Larry McMurtry.

Dorothy Johnson, a Montana author, has written some insightful novels in a Western setting. Her characterization and treatment of themes are superior to the usual frontier fiction. More recently, Western authors have also taken up the plight of the Native American which was glossed over or ignored in the older novels. Instead of seeing the Indian as a villain, or at best, an obstacle to progress, recent fictional and factual accounts such as *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown (1970) illustrate the destruction of a culture and way of life which had the misfortune to stand in the way of progress.

Related Titles

The other four novels of The Leatherstocking Tales — The Pioneers (1823), The Last of the Mohicans (1826), The Deerslayer (1841), and The Prairie (1827), — are closely related to The Pathfinder, although they are complete and independent in themselves. The descriptions of shipping and naval warfare in The Pathfinder echo Cooper's sea novels such as The Water Witch (1830), The Wing-and-Wing (1842), and The Pilot (1823).



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994