

Arcadian Wilderness in James Fenimore Cooper - An Exploration of Environmental Issues

Abstract

The paper examines the idea of Arcadian wilderness in the Leather stocking tales of James Fenimore Cooper in the light of eco-criticism. What exactly is eco-criticism? How can we define it? Eco-criticism is a study of literature that focuses on the relationship between humans and their natural world. It believes that humanity's disconnection from the natural world is the reason for the environmental crisis today. Eco-criticism believes that nature, non-human beings have been sidelined because of our anthropocentric biases, which tends to exploit the non-human as a resource for our personal gains and comforts. Eco-criticism also values bio-ethics above cultural ethics. It values tribal, aboriginal values as these people lived close to the soil. The American Indian despite all his violence was steeped in his environment in a way modern man never can be. As Cheryl Glotfelty has said in 1994 that eco-criticism has one foot in literature and one in land (Glotfelty). Therefore, Cooper, this 19th century novelist, said to be the father of American fiction, will be evaluated in the context of the current day environmental concerns.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Environment, Nature, non-human, animals, red Indians, wilderness

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Introduction

Eco-criticism primarily examines the nature of our interaction with our environment and its non-human inhabitants. Do we have a disparaging attitude to the environment and its sentient life forms or do we respect them? If we are callous in our morality toward other life forms including plant life, do we need another ethic to teach us differently? Eco-criticism believes that humanity's dis-connectedness from the natural world is the reason for the environmental crisis today. This has come about as we have failed to see ourselves as environmental beings dependent on the earth just as any other species. Our separation from the environment around us has led us astray, away from our roots in nature. We have become supremely arrogant thinking that the environment, the birds and the beasts revolve around us, just as ancient man thought that the sun revolved around the earth, we too think that all non-human lives (animals and plants) have no value only in that they serve us.

How does Cooper fit in with all this? Cooper's Leather stocking saga is the most enduring tale in American fiction. In fact, it is almost mythical. It is a tale which tells of the American wilderness and its laying waste by hordes of incoming immigrants from Europe. In these, he laments the fate of the Indian. He tries to search for a via media, caught between two cultures and two faiths, the Christian and the so-called savage. Ultimately, his hero Natty Bumppo sees more value in the Indian way, which is more in harmony with the rhythm of nature and the primitive faith of the Indian, which has taught him to regard the beasts of the forest as his brethren rather than creatures to be subdued. Cooper's hero Natty Bumppo prefers the nomadic life in the wilderness with his Indian friend Chingachgook to life in the settlements with his white kin. This in itself is a scathing indictment of the settlers' way of life and the inevitable destruction of nature which it involves. Although Cooper was not born in an age which was aware of the effects of global warming and blatant consumerism has had on planet Earth yet just like a prophet he decries the wastrel ways of the settlers even then. The issue is a highly charged one for Americans because they have always been encouraged to believe in a manifest destiny by their ancestors as also by the simple Christian faith, which taught them to subdue the earth and multiply. The frontier mentality created

a greedy rapacious culture, which was encouraged by the ancestors. On the one hand, they always thought of the Pilgrim Fathers as the chosen ones who had discovered a New Eden and on the other, they exploited this Eden ruthlessly. Many centuries later Leo Marx sings a funeral hymn to the death of nature due to increased technology in his *Machine in the Garden*. In 1962, Rachel Carson wrote *The Silent Spring*, which opened the eyes of the public to the ill effects of DDT and other pesticides on plant, insects and fish life. Her book is still highly relevant because modern day pesticides are highly poisonous in their efficacy and enter living immune systems.

Captain John Smith who penned the Autobiographical *Pocahontas* where he was rescued and loved by an Indian princess was one of the first romances of the period. This tale has now acquired mythic proportions partly because of the real life love affair between a white officer and an Indian princess surpassing barriers of race, language, and culture. It was the same Captain John Smith who was the first to create the myth of America as a New Eden. He gives a summary of the settlement of Jamestown, started as early as 1607. As scholars have noted this is the first instance of a non-religious statement and secular statement and it is in fact a vision of America as a land of infinite promise. Captain Smith's statements on Virginia are poetic to say the least 'Heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for man's habitation, here are mountains, hills, valleys, rivers, brooks, all running pleasantly into a fair bay, encompassed with fruitful and delightsome land, full of divers kinds and colours and vines in abundance, fruits as strawberries, four times bigger and better than ours in England, great plenty of fish of all kinds many great and fair meadows.'¹ In Smith's essay we see the birth of an important myth of America as a land of infinite promise and here too we see the incorporation of the Arcadian myth of European tradition in an American setting. The myth of Arcadia had a strong hold over the western imagination and here it is transported to America through the European immigrants. Hence the new Arcadia is none other than America. Although recently critics have noted that America was not really an Eden because the red Indians had been living here for many centuries. This again is noteworthy because it points to the fact that Indian society was hardly exploitative of the land and its ecological footprint was small. Their lives were in tune with the rhythm of Nature. Although the Europeans felt they had discovered a New Eden, they were quick to exploit this land by cutting up forests and putting this land to cultivation. The scientific ideas of the Enlightenment had given rise to ideas of exploiting nature; in addition, nature was desacralized losing its mythical status and becoming a common harlot in the words of Francis Bacon. In addition, they justified this exploitation by believing in the biblical injunction of subduing the earth and multiplying. We see here the roots of man's conflict with nature. The notion of a manifest destiny, combined with a rapacious culture made for vast exploitation of the land. Cooper believed in the purity of man in his

natural state like Adam and this he contrasted with the corruption of politics. Another antithesis he constructs is the almost spiritual grandeur of unspoiled virgin rural scenes, which are Edenic and the ruthless exploitation that ultimately degrades them; it is with this in mind that Cooper writes his *Leather stocking* tales. His most popular tales are the *Leather stocking* saga, which consist of—*The Pioneer*(1823), *The Last of the Mohicans*(1826),*The Prairie*(1827), *The Pathfinder*(1840), and *The Deer slayer*(1841).In these he created Natty Bumppo, a character who assumes many avatars in his series. The paper will explore the main theme of the tales, which is the slow and insidious encroachment of the wilderness by so-called civilization. It will also explore the multifarious consequences of settlement mainly through the eyes of a frontiersman, variously named *Deerslayer*, *Hawkeye*, *Pathfinder*, *Leather stocking*, and the trapper. The tales are set in the early 1740's, when the British America was only a queue of squatters along the East coast. Other important years are 1805 and 1806. This was the year when the first famous Lewis and Clark expedition crossed the continent.(Ringe 179)They are not written strictly in the order of the events they portray. Natty gets younger in the second volume. More importantly, Cooper succeeds in creating an American epic. This epic sings of loss of a paradise lost just as Eden was lost so is America. During the opening of the west we find count less negative costs which go with this way of life, such as the indiscriminate felling of the forests, the unnecessary and often cruel killing of animals, and the eventual decimation of the Indian(due to imported diseases like smallpox and ruthless elimination by the whites) , who is another casualty at ground zero so to speak. *Leather stocking*, a simple woodman, wants to preserve the natural environment and use it as and when required But because he is white and Christian he helps his fellow whites who unfortunately do not respect the wilderness, neither do they value the hunter gatherer society of the Indian. Magua while appreciating the carefree red Indian ways says, "Some the Great Spirit made with skins brighter and redder than yonder sun, and these did he fashion in his own mind. He gave them this island as he made it, covered with trees, and filled with game. The wind made their clearings; the sun and rains ripened their fruits; and the snows came to tell them to be thankful. What need had they of roads to journey by! They saw through the hills! When the beavers worked they lay in the shade, and looked on. The winds cooled them in summer; in winter skins kept them warm. If they fought among themselves it was to prove they were men. They were brave; they were just; they were happy."(*The Last of the Mohicans*; A Narrative of 1757 820)

Natty is a man of divided loyalties. Being white, he helps his white brethren but abhors life with his kind in the settlements. Although he acts as pathfinder and scout, he realizes that the hordes of incoming whites are destroying the life of the Indian tribes who live in complete harmony with the beasts. Magua, the so called bad Indian discourses in ecological terms on

the white race "some he made with faces paler than the ermine of the forests: and these he ordered to be traders; dogs to their women, and wolves to their slaves. He gave this people the nature of pigeon; wings that never tire; young, more plentiful than leaves on a tree, and appetites that devour the earth. He gave them tongues that like the false call of the wild cat; hearts like rabbits; the cunning of a hog, (But none of the fox) and arms that are longer than the legs of a moose. With his tongue he stops the ears of the Indians, his heart teaches him to pay warriors to fight his battles; his cunning tells him how to get together the goods of the earth; and his arms enclose the land from the shores of the salt water, to the islands of the great lake. His gluttony makes him sick. God gave him enough, and yet he wants all. Such are the pale-faces."(The Last of the Mohicans; A Narrative of 1757 820) Although far removed from the blatant consumerism of today Cooper is almost prophetic in his critique of gluttony or what is now referred to as consumerism. A greedy consumerism which has led to indiscriminate exploitation of the land by humans who in the name of progress and development, make endless roads in forest lands, and fill marshes with concrete, take up wild bio-regions because of an ever burgeoning human population and a disregard for other species which in turn has led to their extinction.

Cooper seems to believe in America as the New Eden and Natty and the Indians are undoubtedly Rousseau's noble savage. Rousseau was critical of existing mores in the age of the Enlightenment. He sought a design to reconstruct society. In his Discourses he challenged the belief that better technologies, material wealth, and knowledge would lead to improvement of humanity and morality. Large commercial centres he warned were bad for the human spirit. He prescribed instead the formation of cooperative agrarian communities. Agrarian societies of old were supposed to protect and preserve domesticated animals and be steward like in the care of the environment and the animals who were useful to man. But with the coming of industrial society the sacred unwritten contract with the domesticated animals and their caretaker man was broken, now these animals were only reproductive machines used for milk, meat or leather. And with the development of industrial methods of farming, we find large corporations treating animals like goods in a factory, a thoroughly deplorable attitude to farm animals. Farm animals are now confined, their tails docked, kept in concrete rooms to save space, given hormones all their short lives, all because agribusiness want to maximise profits and reduce costs, along with this we see modern city dwellers totally alienated from the sources of their food. The birth of cities gave rise to a new breed of city dwellers totally indifferent to nature and alienated from it. As Aldo Leopold says "There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace." (Leopold) This indifference and ignorance has resulted in immense cruelty to farm animals, a

condition which is unethical and needs to be addressed immediately by changing our mindset and renewing the ancient unwritten contract where man was the caretaker of dumb creatures and not their exploiter.

Like Rousseau, the purity of savage man vis-à-vis the corruption of political society upsets Cooper. Natty says bitterly, "You've driven God's creature's from the wilderness, where providence had put them for his pleasure, and you've brought tin the troubles and diviltries of the law, where no man was known to disturb another...you've driven him to wish that the beasts of the forest, who never feast on the blood of their own families, was his kindred and race."(The Pioneers, or the Sources of the Susquehanna; A Descriptive Tale 362) And the Red Indian is also portrayed as a noble savage even the bad Indians are noble in the tragic lives they lead. A recurrent theme in Cooper is the ruthless exploitation of Nature that degrades the wilderness and the men who practice it. He calls them the 'wasty' ways of the settlers. In one episode in The Pioneers, fish are wasted by the thousands. The problem the papers will explore is the gradual encroachment of the wilderness by civilization and its consequences. Relevant for us is the loss of habitat for megafauna or large animals and the loss of primitive Indian society, Indian society although brutally violent but is more authentic than the greedy acquisitive one of the white man. The novels question the alternative to Indian life which western man is propounding. While leaving the settlements and setting off into the woods, Natty says, "I'm weary of living in the clearings, and where the hammer is sounding in my ears from sunrise to sundown... our ways don't agree. I love the woods, and ye relish the face of man; I eat when hungry and drink when a dry, and ye keep staid for hours and rules; nay, you even over-feed your dogs, lads."(The Pioneers, or the Sources of the Susquehanna; A Descriptive Tale 462-3) Repeatedly Cooper goes back to the devastation western society and those who imitate it have brought upon Nature. Cooper firmly believes that the works of God are superior to the works of man. Man for all his zeal in helping his fellow man overlooks the fact that in the process of setting up new townships etc, he degrades the environment and exploits animal world to such an extent that it is a sin. Far from being a vegetarian Natty is a hunter, whose staple diet is deer meat, but his strong ethics prevent him from killing a second one when the first one will satiate his appetite. However, his fellow Americans are not so punctilious; the men around him have emptied the forests of its creatures and killed of countless pigeons heartlessly in the name of sport. All these events make Natty reject the so-called civilized life of the whites and embrace the savage life of the Indians. In The Deerslayer, there is an episode where Natty because of his youth and high spirits kills an eagle to prove to others the perfection of his aim. "a careful sight followed, and was repeated again and again and the bird continuing higher and higher, then followed the flash and the report. The swift messenger sped upward, and in that instant the bird turned on its side

and came swooping down, now struggling with one wing and then with the other, sometimes whirling in a circuit, next fanning desperately as if conscious of its injury, until, having described complete circles around the spot, it fell heavily into the end of the Ark. On examining the body it was found that the bullet had pierced it about half way between one of its wings and the breast bone. 'We've done an unthoughtful thing Serpent-yes Judith, we've done an unthoughtful thing in taking a life with an object no better than vanity!' exclaimed Deerslayer, when the Delaware held up the enormous bird, by its wings, and exhibited the dying eyes riveted on its enemies with the gaze the helpless ever fasten on their destroyers. 'twas more becoming two boys to gratify their feelings, in this unthoughtful manner, than two warriors on a warpath, even though it be their first. Ah's! me; well, as a punishment I'll quit you at once, and when I find myself alone with them bloody-minded Mingos it's more than like I'll have occasion to remember that life is sweet, even to the beasts of the woods and the fowl of the air.'.....The listeners were confounded with this proof of sudden repentance in the hunter, and that too for an indulgence so very common, that men seldom stop to weigh its consequences or the physical suffering it may bring on the unoffending and helpless."(The Deerslayer 928-9)At times Natty cannot see that his rifle is responsible for the death of many martins, beavers, his attitude is typical of his time, but overall his pantheistic outlook on life sees Nature including the animal world as Sacred. The paper reveals Natty's attitude to animals and trees through various episodes in the novels is sometimes ahead of his time but on rare occasions is in consonance with the prevalent exploitative attitude. Other aspects pondered are the absolute Indian values that lay a premium on Bravery, Courage in warfare and unflinching boldness in the face of Death. The metaphoric, exquisite language of the Indians speaks volumes to Natty rather than the dull, scientific language of the whites. This language is full of references to nature. On the face of it Natty seems to be a Christian who espouses forgiveness but in reality we see him rejecting forgiveness as cowardly and embracing the Indian ideal of vengeance. It is this ideal of Revenge as a sacred duty which resulted in the downfall and near extinction of this noble war like race. Natty Bumppo straddles both the worlds i.e. the Christian and the Indian one, he wants a Christian burial even though he has lived all his life amongst the Indians. He is rumoured to be a 'scalper' ,by the whites, meaning one who removes the scalps of his enemies, a practice commendable amongst the Indians but deplored by whites. His inability to fit into the ways of the settled life is an indictment of him in the eyes of Richard Jones, the newly appointed sheriff. But in reality, an indictment of the settlers and society of Judge Templeton's way of life. For Natty the Indian life is more authentic for all its savagery and so called dark practices, because it does not exploit Mother Nature, but reveres animals as totem symbols, or as sacred creatures worthy of worship, and care. Magua, the so called bad Indian reverses his tribes

totem, the beaver, Cooper has this to say, "The beaver, as his peculiar symbol, or totem. There would have been a species of profanity in the omission, had this man passed so powerful a community of his fancied kindred, without bestowing some evidence of his regard. Accordingly, he paused, and spoke in words as kind and friendly as if he were addressing more intelligent beings. He called the animals his cousins, and reminded them that his protecting influence was the reason they remained unharmed, while so many avaricious traders were prompting the Indians to take their lives. He promised a continuance of his favours, and admonished them to be grateful. After which he spoke of the expedition in which he himself was engaged, and intimated, though with sufficient delicacy and circumlocution, the expediency of bestowing on their relative a portion of that wisdom for which they were so renowned."(The Last of the Mohicans; A Narrative of 1757 800)There is room for man in the divine scheme of things in the Indian worldview, just as there is a place for beasts too. The beasts are man's relatives. In contrast, the Biblical and Grecian tradition placed man not only on top of the pyramid but also in a different category altogether as not beast like but as divine. It took a Darwin to convince us of our affinity to animals and of our descent from apes. Moreover, today because of better science and ruthless exploitation of nature and the animal world modern human has dwindled to a mere statistic because of population explosion. Living in an overcrowded planet has resulted in modern humans being cut off from wilderness and the therapeutic effect of a solitary hike through natural surroundings. He is divorced from Nature and from his own feelings groping in the dark because he is unable to believe in Nature because he has desacralized Nature. The bloodthirsty savagery of the natives is more authentic to Natty because it answers ancient, primeval impulses, which the veneer of civilization can never tame. For Natty the more heroic world of the Indians is more authentic even if it be bloody. With the death of the Indian way of life Natty too dies, unable to stand the sanitized but sterile life in the colonies. Part of the charm of Indian society is that it was a heroic martial one, but it also had gradations. Moreover, its hierarchies were based on war like qualities like bravery, athletic prowess, physical strength, or physical beauty. In addition, the more scalps a warrior took the more he was valued. These martial qualities clashed badly with Christianity on a fundamental level. In addition, this clash resulted in the destruction of one by the other. Natty bemoans this loss of native Indian society. Moreover, celebrates the more heroic race of the Indians to the acquisitive white race which values peace because it promotes trade. Cooper shows us how the white man has degraded himself when he acted from purely economic motives. The native Americans had regarded the land as commons or common property of all whether human or beast for at least ten thousand years. The 100 million or so hoofed animals that grazed the commons-the bison, deer, elk, caribou, antelope, wild sheep, goats, and boar-were the peoples livestock, to be hunted

whenever needed for food and clothing. The desire to eliminate them and replace them with domestic animals kept in fenced pastures confined was alien to the natives. However, the Europeans imported these ideas with them and saw no reason to change. Hence the commons were enclosed and the native tribes pushed into reservations or driven to extinction with the loss of their hunting ground and the animals in it. The welfare of domestic animals in modern day industrial society is another aspect which needs to be ruminated on. The Europeans brought with them the cow, pig, goat, sheep, and the horse. The red man never believed in domestic animals, they were primarily hunter gather society which believed in the values of hunting rather than domesticating and then slaughtering. Hunting may seem cruel at first but as a way of treating animals it is much better than modern day factory farming which restrains all domestic animals from grazing or foraging, where animals meant for roaming are forcibly confined and subject to unnatural lives, injected with hormones to produce milk, meat or leather. In the widespread prevalence of factory farming, we have the classical example of speciesism. Speciesism is described as akin to racism because it deems as unworthy of consideration any other species except the human one. It believes that interests of all other species are subservient to the human one and hence only human welfare matters and no other. We can see the red Indians strong identification with animals led them to hunting only as and when absolutely required to keep body and soul together. In contrast, the modern method of industrial farming being copied by developing countries such as China and even India, which was earlier, primarily a vegetarian country are bringing endless cruelty to farm animals, and a society which ignores the welfare of farm animals can never be either truly ethical or sustainable. (Singer) To paraphrase what Mahatma Gandhi said long ago, the greatness of a nation can be judged in how they treat their animals.

As early as the seventeenth the entire beaver population of New England was wiped out by the Anglo Dutch fur trade. In the eighteenth century, Jefferson hoped for a population which would be large enough to cover the northern if not the southern continent. On the Great Plains bisons were slaughtered by the million and left to rot. One of the primary reasons for killing the bisons was that the generals knew that without bisons the Indians would starve and hence be subdued. Hence, the seeds of environmental degradation were laid early and all was destroyed in the name of progress. The paper will explore Cooper's thoughts about the cost of civilization which results in the extinction of wild animals and the destruction of their habitat and in the process destroys the Indian way of life too which is dependent on hunting. The stories repeatedly pit the values of civilization against those of the wilderness and raise more questions than they answer on these issues. Susan Cooper's *Rural hours* also examined the importance of the forests in our lives. This text is a faithful representation of life in the country where one can get more pleasure from awalk in the woods than

from all the artificial pleasure of urban life. Living at a time when wild flowers, birds, and bees were not an endangered species as they now are, Susan Cooper teaches one to be thankful to God for the beauty and wonder of all creation. Hence Cooper is a launching pad to several issues on environmental ethics, deep ecology, the place of animals and wild flowers in our lives, the need for sustainability and conservation and the environmental impact of a consumer society, issues including habitat preservation; sustainability and focus on the need for a new environmental ethic as existing ethics do not adequately answer the dangers of a planet under assault from the forces of human development. It will also critique the anthropocentric point of view which regards man as the measure of all things and only considers the good of man to be the be all and end all of all ethics. It is due to this myopic mentality that we live in an environmentally degraded planet where other species are under assault and face extinction due to man. When man becomes the measure of all things we find that the non-human is ignored at all levels be it government policy or personal ethics and undue emphasis is laid on growth. In addition, what comes about because of this growth oriented policies is environmental degradation. As they presuppose an endlessness of resources for human exploitation. In such an ethical system where nature is not appreciated for what it is but as a resource to be exploited, human prejudices and claims do not allow other plant and animal species to flourish. To conclude concludes with the assertion that environmental issues are global in nature transcending national boundaries. In addition, world leaders who have a narrow parochial take on these issues, which will not be able to solve them. A broad consensus amongst nations will be required to get anywhere. The paper shows its relevance in modern day India by examining how farmland and wilderness have been usurped in Noida and Greater Noida by real estate giants and other forces of development causing ecological collapse of the flora and fauna of the region in addition to loss of livelihood of the indigenous people who lived close to the land and depended of subsistence agriculture. Also worth mentioning, is the struggle of the indigenous people of Orissa who disallowed mining giant Vedanta to ruin their Nayamgiri hills for bauxite mining. As Susan Fenimore Cooper realized long ago in 1887 'No perfection of tillage, no luxuriance of produce can make up to a country for the loss of its forests, you may turn the soul into a very garden with the richest crops, but if shorn of woods like Samson shorn of his locks, it may wear a florid aspect but the noblest fruit of the earth, that which is greatest proof of her strength will be wanting.' (S. F. Cooper)

Suggetions

The paper critiques notions of progress development and growth all of which lead to clear cutting of forests and elimination of endangered species and result in endless urban sprawls. It proposes a need for a new ethics, which will include the benefit of all four-footed denizens of earth not just

humans. The need for a new ethic will be explored which encompasses the good of all the inhabitants of earth including the non-human ones and states that land use should be governed with this in mind too.

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