

Periodic Research

Figurative Language of James Fenimore Cooper in the Deerslayer

Abstract

Figures of speech enrich language and give it a poetic quality. Some language analysts' feel that quality of language can be judged by use of figures of speech in other words the more the figures of speech the more evocative the language. Figures of speech used in this way can evoke emotions and communicate straight from the writers heart to the reader's directly. Hence, talking in images make the matter easier to comprehend and remember. It no longer remains dead block letters or monotonous sound waves but rather living communication with a life of its own. Patrick J.Groff has done a study analysing the poetry of children in a study on figures of speech in poems by children, it would be no long stretch of imagination to say that just as children speak in metaphors easily so too the child-like Red Indians spoke in figurative language. As they too had an elemental affinity with nature as do children. In Groff's study too, nature was the favourite subject of children.(Groff 139)

Keywords: Figures of Speech, Forests, Pines, Lake, Wolf, Bird, Flowers.

Introduction

The authors have ventured to analyse the use of figures of speech in the Deerslayer of James Fenimore Cooper. Some are used in the narrative by Cooper himself and some he puts in the mouth of his eloquent Indians. Heckwelder was Cooper's main source on the Indian language and elsewhere he says, "The Indians . . . have many figurative expressions in use, to understand which requires instruction" (Heckwelder 109). And again there is an humorous anecdote of Alexander Henry mentioned in John T Frederick's paper Cooper's Eloquent Indians where Henry blamed Indian figurative expressions for the miscommunication between himself and his well meaning Indian friend. This resulted in a strategic failure to avoid the bloody uprising at Ft. Mackinac, 2 June 1763. A friendly Indian tried to warn him. "I had made," Henry says, "at the period to which I am now referring, so much progress in the language in which Wawatam addressed me as to be able to hold an ordinary conversation in it; but the Indian manner of speech is so extravagantly figurative that it is only for a very perfect master to follow and comprehend it fully. Had I been further advanced in this respect I think that I should have gathered so much information from my friendly monitor as would have put me in possession of the design of the enemy . . . as it was, it unfortunately happened that I turned a deaf ear."(Henry 76)The Leatherstocking novels thus abound in the use of widespread use of metaphors and figures of speech prominently through the mouths of the Indians and also weaved in through the narrative. According to John T Frederick, "The most varied of the figurative expressions employed by Cooper's Indians are those drawn from the animal life of the forests and plains, which played so great a part not only in the Indians' economy but in their culture as a whole"(Frederick 1009).

The novel speaks of a time when the colonial expansion into the virgin continent has begun. The hunter's frontier is giving way to the agricultural frontier. In other words the forests are being cut for pasture lands. All these form a background to the novel but are never talked of openly. But this was the main reason for the wars between the Indians and the whites, with the Europeans rejecting the hunter-gatherer life of the Indians and imposing their settled ways on to nomadic tribes and pushing the Indians into reservations. The forests giving way to towns and settlements gives rise to feelings of nostalgia for a life in the woods and the woods are personified in different ways for example "the matted and wild luxuriance of a virgin American forest, more especially in a rich soil" (Cooper 543) The lake where the action takes place is called an Indian name, Glimmerglass, christened by the Deerslayer who decries the white names saying that they always foretell of waste and destruction. He gives it an Indian name Glimmerglass, "calling the place Glimmerglass so fringed



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with pines cast upward from its face, as if it would throw back the hills" (Cooper 524). This is an instance of personification. Glimmerglass is akin to a paradise, an Eden but a threatened Eden none the less. It is under threat from land surveyors who seek to parcel the land and sell it to settlers. Although this is not the dominant theme of the novel, it is mentioned in passing and sticks in the memory, Natty and Chingachgook set out on the first warpath to prove their manhood and rescue Hist, Chingachgook's betrothed who has been kidnapped by the Huron tribe. The plot verges on Tom Hutter and Hurry Harry who hatch a plan to take a few scalps of the women and children of the Huron tribe, a plan opposed by Juliet and Hetty Hutter (daughters of Tom Hutter). Ultimately Hutter is scalped by the Huron tribe and left to die. "Hutter was simply scalped, to secure the usual trophy, and was left to die by inches, as has been done in a thousand similar instances, by the ruthless warriors of this part of the American continent. His death is no better or no worse than that of thousands of others over whom we stop not to shed a tear or a passing sigh" (Cooper 836). The novel has an elegiac tone of writing. A nostalgic feeling as if the pristine beauty of the woods may not last in this way forever. This elegiac tone and a feeling for nature, a world under threat from forces beyond one's control gives rise to a profoundly poetic quality in the writing. Similes abound such as, "Smooth as glass, and limpid as pure air, throwing back the mountains, clothed in dark pines... It was the air of deep repose, the solitude that spoke of scenes and forests untouched by the hand of man. that gave so much pure delight... He was not insensible to the innate loveliness of such a landscape, either, but felt a portion of that soothing of the spirit which is a common attendant of a scene so thoroughly pervaded with the holy calm of nature." (Cooper 528). We find an emotional longing for the pure loveliness of nature untouched by the filthy hand of man. Cooper evinces a desire for a pristine wilderness, without the defiling effects of humans have on the environment. Personifications abound such as "The whole earth apparently being clothed in a gala dress of leaves." (Cooper 515). And again "The boundless woods were sleeping in the deep repose of nature; the heavens were placid, but still luminous with the light of the retreating sun.... It was a scene altogether soothing, and of a character to lull the passions into a species of holy calm." (Cooper 559) All these personifications, similes, and metaphors are an instance of the religious longings of the author who finds the forest surrounded by a holy calm. He finds all of nature sacred and like Wordsworth is a believer in pantheism or in the sacred component in Nature. "The lake seems made to let us get an insight into the noble forests and land and water, alike, stand in the beauty of Gods providence." (Cooper 515). The Lake is often called a glittering gem. "The surface of this beautiful sheet of water was now glittering like a gem, in the last rays of the evening sun, and the setting of the whole, hills clothed in the richest forest verdure, was lighted up like a radiant smile" (Cooper 626).

At times the waters are gloomy, the gloom is closely linked to solitude and the gloom is soothing

rather than appalling "The placid water swept round the general curve, the rushes bent gently towards its surface, and the trees over-hung it as usual, but all lay in the soothing and sublime solitude of a wilderness". Hence the novels are also called wilderness novels. Further instances of solitude abound. "A stillness and darkness, as complete as if the silence of the forest had never been disturbed, or the sun had never shone on that retired region, now reigned on the point, and on the gloomy water, the slumbering wood, and even the murky sky." (Cooper 798). The personifications are full of adjectival phrases such as gloomy water, slumbering woods and murky skies. The skies are often referred to as the heavens and stars as the signs of the heavens. An interesting way of referring to a dark night is "but now the whole vault of heaven seemed a mass of gloomy wall." (Cooper 740) The tall trees are often compared to columns-"It was principally covered with oaks, which, as is usual in the American forests, grew to a great height without throwing out a branch, and then arched in dense and rich foliage. Beneath, except the fringe of thick bushes along the shore there was little underbrush; though in consequence the trees were closer together than is common in regions where the axe has been freely used, resembling tall straight rustic columns, upholding the usual canopy of leaves." (Cooper 762). Numerous references to trees abound. Hurry Harry is named Big Pine by the Indians on account of his tall stature, Judith's beauty is described thus: "Boy not a tree that is growing in these hills is straighter, or waves in the wind with an easier bend, nor did you ever see the doe that bounded with a more natural motion" (Cooper 504) and commenting on her uncertainty. "And yet the clouds that drive among the hills are not more unsartain" (Cooper 504). Brotherly love is expressed through a simile relating to trees "there is another beech and hemlock, as loving as two brothers or for that matter more loving than some brothers." (Cooper 510). And again Cooper has an uncommonly good eye for the woods. "Pines had the stature of church steeples" (Cooper 539). Someone that is playing dead in the middle of a battle lies "as motionless as one of the pines on the hills." (Cooper 575) Carpets are not woollen rugs but a carpet of leaves. There is a feeling for the changing seasons. "The seasons come and go, Judith, and if we have winter, with storms and frosts, and spring with chill and leafless, we have summer with its sun and glorious skies, and fall with its fruits, and a garment thrown over the forest, that no beauty of the town could rummage out of all the shops in America." (Cooper 932) But it would be a mistake that these woods are a peaceful place. There is a systematic violence practised against animals and Indians. "As for scalping, or even skinning a savage .I look upon them, pretty much the same as cutting the ears of wolves for the bounty or stripping the bear of its hide." (Cooper 528) Such an attitude reveals a speciesism which considers it acceptable to exploit animals. If we look at the historic roots of extinction of species we can find them here, mass extinctions of other species are caused not by natural disasters but by a systematic expunging of other species by man

himself. Images of the hunt abound "He lay on his back motionless, but his eyes, now full of consciousness, watched each action of his victor, as the fallen bird regards the fowler, jealous of every movement." (Cooper 599) "The noises that now so suddenly, and unexpectedly even to the Delaware, broke the stillness within could not be mistaken. They resembled those that would be produced by a struggle between tigers in a cage" (Cooper 815) and again "I'm young in war, but not so young to stand on an open beach to be shot down like an owl by day light" (Cooper 595) and again "black eyes glistened like on him, like the balls of the panther or those of a penned wolf." (Cooper 637) All instances reveal man's exploitation of the animal kingdom, be it shooting an owl, or caging a tiger or penning a wolf. At times Deerslayer shows a hunting ethics which is not seen too often. "they can't accuse me of killing an animal when there is no occasion for the meat, or the skin. I may be a slayer, it is true, but I'm no slaughterer." (Cooper 535) Like deep ecologists he seems to believe that killing is justified only to satisfy one's vital need. There is an episode in the novel when an eagle is killed needlessly. Religious philosophies like Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism go further and denounce violence of any kind especially that which the human practise on the non-human. Human beings from the beginning have been responsible for the mass extinction of other species. There is an episode in which an eagle is killed needlessly. In keeping with the figurative style the rifle is called the swift messenger of death and "when the Delaware held up the enormous bird, by its wings, and exhibited the dying eyes riveted on its enemies with the gaze that the helpless fasten on their destroyers. " It was more becoming two boys to gratify their feelin's, in this on thoughtful manner, than two warriors on a war path, even though it be their first. Ah's me; well, asa 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." (Cooper 928) Although hunter-gatherer lifestyle may seem cruel for their hunting, they are less cruel than factory farms who seek to make living creatures automaton and consider them only meat producing machines, curtailing their natural need to roam about because sprawling meadows have been replaced by the urban sprawl.

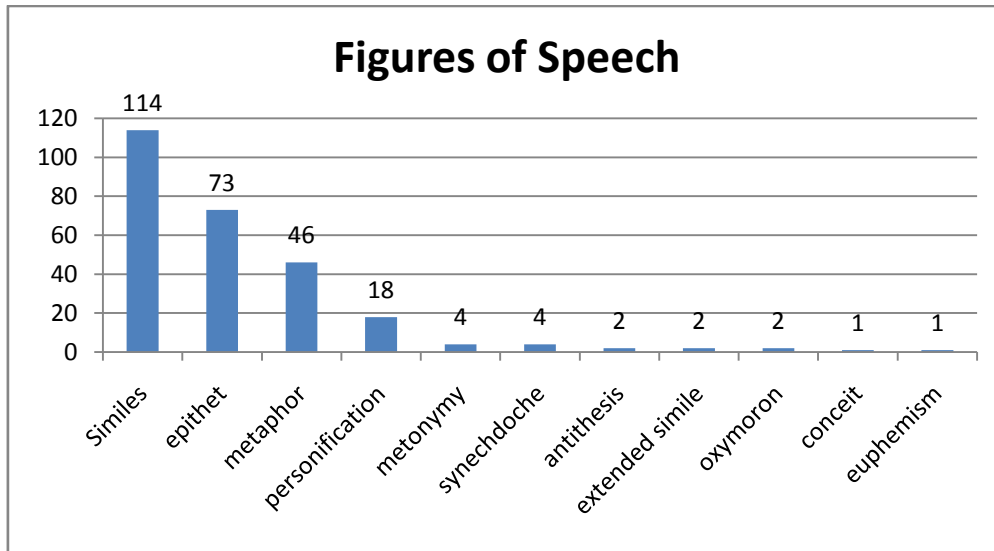
The novel is full of skirmishes and battles, between the warring Indian tribes, further complicated by the whites such as Tom and Harry who seek to scalp the Indians in return for the bounty that is offered by the king. Chingachgook and the Deerslayer's purpose of going on the warpath is to win back Hist from the Huron tribe which has kidnapped her. The Deerslayer is a white man with a Delaware heart, more comfortable with the Indians in the woods than the whites in the settlements. And yet his uncompromising morality results in a widespread massacre of the Indians. When he returns from his furlough and leads the soldiers to massacre the Hurons. In the combats between the two parties, language is full of animal imagery. Numerous similes

abound in Cooper's fertile imagination "For half a minute there was a desperate struggle, like the floundering of an alligator that has seized some powerful prey." (Cooper 770). The women too are killed freely, "he left her on her back, moved towards the bushes, his rifle at a poise, his head over his shoulders, like a lion at bay." (Cooper 768) and when they lose their enemy "The Hurons now resembled a pack of hounds, at fault. Little was said, but each man ran about, examining the dead leaves, as the hound hunts for the lost scents." (Cooper 958) The manner in which the Indian approached the place that was supposed to contain enemies "resembled the advances of a cat on the bird". (Cooper 743). "Old Tom. you look'd amazingly like a tethered bear, as you stretched the hemlock boughs, and I only wonder that you didn't growl more." (Cooper 738) And when they have to speak against the enemy: "A wolf is forever howling; a hog will always eat. They have lost warriors they will call out for vengeance. The pale face has the eyes of an eagle and can see into a Mingo's heart; he looks for no mercy. There is a cloud over his spirit, though not before his face" (Cooper 911).

Proper names are also metaphorical. Indian nicknames abound in the novel. The names of men are: Briarthorne, Rivenoak, the Panther, le loup cervier or the lynx, Chingachgook is the Great Serpent, Deerslayer has a varied history of names, he explains "I was not given to lying, and they called me, firstly, Straight-tongued. After a while they found out that I was quick of foot, and then they called me 'the Pigeon,' which you know has a swift wing and flies in a direct line...I was quicker and surer at finding the game than most lads, and then they called me lap ear, as they said I took the sagacity of a hound. Not after I was rich enough to buy a rifle. Then it was seen I could keep a wigwam in venison, and in time, I got the name of Deerslayer." (Cooper 546). He is renamed Hawkeye by the Indian whom he shoots on account of his superior aim. All nicknames show a close link with animals or plants, except for Floating Tom which is linked to water and even Bounding Boy is supposedly as frolicsome some a goat or puppy. The women are usually named after flowers or birds. Judith is Wild Rose, Hetty is Drooping Lilly, Hist is sometimes Wren of the woods, sometimes she is Honeysuckle of the hills, an instance of alliteration. When the Mingo chief Rivenoak implores Judith to speak, he uses hyperbolic language, "Let the flower of the woods speak. If her words are as pleasant as her looks, they will never quit my ears; I shall hear them long after the winter of Canada has killed all the flowers and frozen all the speeches of summer (Cooper 992). Hence we see metaphoric language is plentiful in James Fenimore Cooper's Deerslayer. Leonard R Ashley has examined the names in the Deerslayer and to quote him, "Early in the story The Deerslayer kills his first Indian; the redskin's French (or enemy) connections are seen in his name, Loup Cervier (Lynx), which also underlines his sharp eye, but his is no match for our hero who, in killing him, proves his claim to the title Hawkeye. This is one of many names given him in Indian style in the long career which

begins in this novel and ends in *The Prairie*, which involves Leather stocking (Deerslayer, Hawkeye, Long Rifle, The Pathfinder) with still another Esther (this time a formidable pioneer woman, well deserving the name for "star" and the Biblical resonances of "queen") and good and bad redskins (especially Hard Heart the Pawnee and Mahtoree the Sioux). Other Indian names in *The Deerslayer* are those of Great

Serpent's Delaware relatives (Tamenund, a chief and prophet; Uncas, a name given to chiefs, Chingachgook's father) and enemy Injins (Rivenoak; Catamount; Le Panthère or Panther; Le Sumach (acidic berry), wife of the Lynx shot by Hawkeye, whom he almost has to marry; Corbeau Rouge or Red Crow; Raven; Moose; Bounding Boy; Briarthorn.) (Ashely)



Analysing it in a more scientific manner, we find leads to the following result: this is from a sample of 345 different observations. We have attempted to include all the references to nature and natural life forms in the *Deerslayer*.

Although as Carolyn Eastman has pointed out that language theorists of the eighteenth century had labeled the Indian speech as primitive claiming that Indians had few abstract ideas compared with more complex European civilizations. "Labeling their speech primitive, however, did not detract from Europeans' admiration. Indeed commentators suggested that the Indians' singular facility for metaphor and other vivid figures of speech made them all the more eloquent." (Eastman 545). She quotes British rhetorician Hugh Blair argument that the language of civilized society, having "proceeded from vivacity to accuracy; from fire and enthusiasm, to coolness and precision," had "become, in modern times, more correct . . . and accurate; but, however, less striking and animated" (Blair quotation 72) than the speech of so called "primitive societies." In attempting to recreate the lost era of the Indian dominion over the American continent Cooper has created a living, breathing text which speaks volumes of the inclusion of nature in its imagery and in the minds of the characters, and sensitises us to what is lacking in our speech today.

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