James Fenimore Cooper

Cooper, James Fenimore, 1789–1851, American novelist, b. Burlington, N.J., as James Cooper. He was the first important American writer to draw on the subjects and landscape of his native land in order to create a vivid myth of frontier life.

In 1790 Cooper's family moved to Cooperstown, N.Y., a frontier settlement founded by his father near Otsego Lake. The landscape and history of the area was to greatly influence many of his most famous works. Sent to Yale at 13, Cooper was dismissed for a disciplinary reason in his third year. Soon after he went to sea; commissioned as a U.S. midshipman, he served until 1811, at which time he married and settled into life as a gentleman farmer.

Cooper's literary career, which covers a period of 30 years and includes more than 50 publications, began in 1820 with the appearance of Precaution. Imitative of the English novel of manners, this book failed to gain an audience; but his next work, The Spy (1821), a patriotic story of the American Revolution, was an immediate success. With The Pioneers (1823), the first of the famous Leatherstocking Tales, and The Pilot (1823), an adventure of the high seas, Cooper's reputation as the first major American novelist was established.

In 1826 Cooper went to France, nominally as American consul at Lyons. He spent several years abroad, publishing such novels as The Red Rover (1827), The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish (1829), and The Water-Witch (1830), romances of American life on land and sea. In Notions of the Americans (1828) he defended his country to European critics; but upon his return home, repelled by what he saw as the abuses of American democracy, Cooper became the staunch social critic of American society. Such works as The American Democrat (1838) and the fictional Homeward Bound and its sequel, Home as Found (both 1838), express the conservative, aristocratic social views that made him quite unpopular; his later life was filled with many quarrels and lawsuits over his works.

In his most important novels, the group comprising the Leatherstocking Tales—which in order of the narrative are The Deerslayer (1841), The Last of the Mohicans (1826), The Pathfinder (1840), The Pioneers (1823), and The Prairie (1827)—Cooper skillfully dramatized the clash between the frontier wilderness and the encroaching civilization. Named for their chief character, the forthright frontiersman Natty Bumppo, nicknamed Leatherstocking, the Leatherstocking Tales are notable for their descriptive power, their mastery of native background, and their romanticized portrayal of the Native American.

Cooper's later works include the novels Afloat and Ashore and its sequel, Miles Wallingford (both 1844), and the Littlepage trilogy—Satanstoe (1845), The Chainbearer (1845), and The Redskins (1846)—a study of the conflict between the landholding and the propertyless classes in New York state, in which Cooper shows himself a traditional defender of the rights of property.

Cooper has been criticized for his extravagant plots, his conventional characters, and his stilted dialogue. Nevertheless, he remains the first great American novelist, a prolific writer in the popular romances of the sea and the wilderness, and a harshly astute critic of the growing and stumbling American democracy.
Cooper, James Fenimore


Cooper studied at Yale University and served in the navy (1806–11). He won world renown with his cycle of five novels, written around a central character, Natty (Nathaniel) Bumppo, who appears under various names: Deerslayer, Pathfinder, Hawkeye, Leatherstocking, and La Longue Carabine. The novels are The Pioneers (1823; Russian translation, 1832), The Last of the Mohicans (1826; Russian translation, 1833), The Prairie (1827; Russian translation, 1829), The Pathfinder, Or The Inland Sea (1840; Russian translation, 1841), and The Deerslayer, Or The First War Path (1841; Russian translation, 1848). Cooper's seafaring novels are also of great interest, including The Pilot (1823) and The Red Rover (1828).

After his initial eulogizing of the "American freedoms," Cooper turned to harsh criticism of American reality in the second half of the 1830's with such works as the social and political satire The Monikins (1835; Russian translation, 1953). The antibourgeois utopian novel The Crater (1847) expressed Cooper's pessimism.

While tied in many ways to the literature of the 18th-century Enlightenment, Cooper's works belong to the early period of American romanticism. By vividly depicting the social and racial conflicts of the USA, Cooper introduced new ethnographical motifs that revealed the life and customs of the American aborigines. He also reflected the typically romantic antagonism between nature and civilization in a specifically American context.

The Cooper heritage has become part of the golden treasury of juvenile literature.

WORKS


In Russian translation:


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A. N. NIKOLUIKIN

Cooper, James Fenimore

(1789–1851), writer; born in Burlington, N.J. Raised in prosperous circumstances in his father's frontier settlement at Cooperstown, N.Y., he attended Yale University (but was expelled for a prank) and spent several years in the navy (1806–11). Living as a country gentleman, he wrote his first novel, *Precaution* (1820), allegedly after his wife challenged his claim that he could write a better one than what she was then reading. His second, *The Spy* (1821), is regarded as the first major American novel. He moved to New York City and achieved great popular success with *The Pilot* (1823) and his first three Leatherstocking tales, *The Pioneers* (1823), followed by *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and *The Prairie* (1827), a series that offered for the first time a heroic vision of the American frontier. From 1826 to 1833 he lived in Europe, where he wrote several American and European romances and other works revealing his deep homesickness for an unspoiled American wilderness. But his return to Cooperstown in 1834 was followed by years of bitter disillusionment with the U.S.A. He wrote many satires and virulent criticism that were largely ignored by readers; he also engaged in libel suits against some of his critics and this only further alienated the American public. The prolific output of his last years included a scholarly history of the U.S. Navy (1839), and, among other novels, two final Leatherstocking tales, *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841).

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