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COOPER'S PRAIRIE AS WASTELAND

by Evans Harrington

In examining James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*, many critics have sensed a significant pattern of values, usually reflected in the characters. Howard Mumford Jones, for example, sees the central theme of the novel as the conflict between science and religion expressed by Natty Bumppo and Dr. Bat.[1] Donald Ringe thinks that the concept of religion is bound up with the attitude toward nature, and he finds a third significant character in Ishmael Bush, who violates Bumppo's religious creed as much by a heedless despoiling of nature as does Dr. Bat by an arrogant patronization.[2] Henry Nash Smith understands the novel almost wholly as a commentary on the Westward Movement and discovers an entire "spectrum of types representing the various possibilities of human character in the various environments of life in the new world."[3]

Though each of these views contains valuable insights, each also has serious shortcomings. The conflicts seen by Jones and Ringe are by no means the only important ones, and religion plays a more pervasive and explicit part in the book than either critic has maintained. Ringe's interpretation of Bush, moreover, ignores what seems the most significant part of the squatter's character. Smith's interpretation serves to emphasize Cooper's great concern with social theories, and those theories certainly play a part in *The Prairie*. But Cooper was an artist, and an artist's imag-

[1]Howard Mumford Jones, "Prose and Pictures: James Fenimore Cooper," *Tulane Studies in English*, III (1952), 145-147.

[2]Donald Ringe, "Man and Nature in Cooper's *The Prairie*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, XV (1961), 313-323.

[3]Henry Nash Smith (ed.), *The Prairie* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), introduction, pp. xiv-xv.

ination does not always conform to his theories. Bewley, indeed, has ably argued that Cooper's imagination, in the Leatherstocking series as a whole and in *The Prairie* especially, has transcended reality to solve a contradiction which existed in Cooper's ordinary thinking and to construct in Natty Bumppo "an apotheosis of an intellectual and spiritual attitude."[4]

It seems worthwhile, therefore, to set aside theories as much as possible, and let the work of imagination indicate its own patterns and values. When one does so, a new pattern of characters emerges, one much more inclusive than any noted before, and one integrated by a single controlling symbol. All the characters of any significance in *The Prairie,* Indian and white, rank in a hierarchy of religious values, and they are conceived as struggling in a moral wasteland, with only the hand of God to guide them.

That Natty Bumppo, despite his inferior social position, is the most admirable character in *The Prairie* will hardly be disputed. Nor will it be questioned that Natty's admirable nature stems primarily from his possession of an "excessive energy and the most meek submission to the will of providence"[5] together with the "choicest and perhaps rarest gift of nature, that of distinguishing good from evil" (p. 129). But who in the book is most like Natty? A careful reading indicates that in Cooper's imagination it is a character almost never mentioned in Cooper criticism, one indeed who plays a relatively minor role: the old Sioux chief Le Balafré. One may establish this fact both by elimination of other characters and by comparison of Cooper's treatment of Natty and Le Balafré. For among the white characters, even the most admirable, Middleton and Paul Hover, fall short of Natty's composure and mellow understanding; and among the Indians, even the noble Hard-Heart lacks the wisdom and magnanimity of the aged Le Balafré—who is willing, for example, to brook the hatred and prejudice of his own people to adopt Hard-Heart and thereby save him from torture.

Beyond the similarities of age and mellow tolerance, Natty and Le Balafré share many other qualities. When they first meet, Coop-

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[4]Marius Bewley, *The Eccentric Design* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 107.

[5]James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1877), p. 343. All references to *The Prairie* will be to this edition and will subsequently be indicated by page numbers in parenthesis within the text.

er makes an explicit comparison between their appearances. Natty is so ravaged by age and weather that it is difficult for the ancient eyes of Le Balafré ("the scarred one") to ascertain whether the trapper is a white man or "one like himself" (p. 72). Both men also spontaneously admire the Apollo-like Hard-Heart, though he is not of their own blood. Both offer to adopt him, and though Natty actually effects the adoption, La Balafré is left with Hard-Heart when Natty dies, is left indeed to speak the last words about Natty, "the just chief of the palefaces" (p. 60).

More strikingly, the two old men share what seems to be one of Fenimore Cooper's most significant images. This is the figure of the tree—"the oak or sycamore"—which is central to Natty's elaborate statement of the grandeur of God in the universe. In this passage Natty describes the life, death, and decay of the tree ("a sad effigy of a human grave") and concludes with a description of how "the pine shoots up from the roots of the oak" (p. 283). It is therefore of particular interest to find Le Balafré, in his attempt to adopt Hard-Heart, likening himself to a sycamore with its leaves gone, its branches falling, and "but a single sucker" springing from its roots (p. 369). It is interesting, too, that Middleton describes Natty as "a noble shoot from the stock of human nature," (p. 129) and that Natty says of himself to Le Balafré "though the bark be ragged and riven, the heart of the tree is sound" (p. 372).

Finally, these two are alike even in their past careers and their attitudes toward these careers. Natty, of course, has slain many a "red Mingo" and he is not ashamed of having done so. Le Balafré was for years the leading warrior of his tribe, as he does not hesitate to assert. But he now sees that "it is better to live in peace" (p. 368). Both, of course, have the utmost faith in their respective religions.

These two wise, tolerant, old men are clearly at the top of the moral scale in *The Prairie* and are paralleled with a precision which suggests deliberate intention on the part of the author. When we look for the characters next to them in virtue, moreover, we find the parallelism between races again striking. Middleton and Paul Hover, despite the discrepancies in their social rank, are both noble but narrow and overly-headstrong youths. In these qualities Hard-Heart is their exact counterpart. Just as the two white men will do rash, useless, and sometimes destructive things, Hard-Heart is

unyieldingly committed to the proud mores of his tribe, giving Natty occasion to philosophize sadly:

> Ah! such is mortal vanity and pride! . . . natur' is as strong in a red-skin as in the bosom of a man of white gifts. Now would a Delaware conceit himself far mightier than a Pawnee, just as a Pawnee boasts himself to be of the princes of the 'arth. And so it was atween the Frenchers of the Canadas and the red-coated English, . . . (p. 328)

In other ways these three young men are also paralleled. They are the characters who are bound and most seriously threatened by the tribe of Mahtoree. They are the male members in a triple-plotted love story, and each of their lovers is threatened (or, in the case of Hard-Heart's Tachechana, injured) by the villainous Mahtoree. Indeed in this respect Hard-Heart is paralleled more closely with Middleton than with Hover (and fittingly, since the young Indian is the aristocrat of his people as Middleton is of the whites on the Prairie). Hard-Heart clearly looks on Inez, Middleton's bride, with an emotion very much like a white man's love and respect (p. 220), and he eventually takes Tachechana, Inez' Indian counterpart, as his wife.

The parallelism between the two races, however, is by no means limited to these levels of moral worth. As one moves down the scale of values, in fact, one feels that Cooper's imagination is expressed in Natty Bumppo's words, "Red-skin or white-skin, it is much the same" (p. 328). For below Hard-Heart and the young white men are Mahtoree and Ishmael Bush. At first glance it would seem that Mahtoree is paired against Hard-Heart in the story. The latter is, after all, the greatest enemy of Mahtoree's tribe, he confronts Mahtoree in mortal combat, and he eventually takes Mahtoree's wife into his own lodge. But a comparison between these Indian chiefs is instructive primarily in demonstrating Hard-Heart's moral superiority.

Ishmael Bush, on the other hand, seems fashioned as the precise white equivalent of Mahtoree—with one major difference, which will be considered in another connection. Both men are physically powerful and brave. Both lead their clans. It should be noted,

moreover, that their clans are the principal combatants in the prairie war that develops. Though the Pawnees and the Siouxs are ancient enemies and fight the deadliest encounter in the book, the real issues lie between Ishmael's and Mahtoree's groups, beginning with Mahtoree's stealing Ishmael's horses and ending with Ishmael's turning the tide of battle in favor of Hard-Heart's Pawnees. Mahtoree's theft of the horses, however, rates scarcely worse than Ishmael's theft, by squatter's rights, of the Indian's entire land. Similarly, Mahtoree's kidnapping of Inez and Ellen Wade is only the identical crime which Ishmael has committed before coming to the prairie. Even on the subject of miscegenation there exists an interesting parallel between these two. Mahtoree, of course, firmly and arrogantly intends to cross the color line by taking Inez as his squaw; and though Ishmael never accepts Mahtoree's offer of Tachechana, still he is the only other man associated with the act, and Esther's immediate wrath and continuing uneasiness about it seem to indicate that such a development is not unthinkable (p. 413).

Miscegenation is certainly not unthinkable when one considers that Cooper has even utilized a theory of social evolution to make these men more nearly moral equals. Ishmael, the author makes clear, inhabits the very fringes of white society, being scarcely civilized at all (pp. 70-71). Mahtoree, he makes equally clear, is many centuries ahead of his race because of his contact with white men and his own quick-wittedness. But instead of really profiting from this enlightening contact, Mahtoree has merely relinquished many of the best virtues of his own people and taken on many vices of the whites. He does not believe, for example, either in his own people's "medicine" or the white man's God (pp. 340-341). Similarly, Ishmael goes through most of the novel scorning religion and law. As shall be seen, Ishmael differs basically from Mahtoree in being capable of moral regeneration, but through the major portion of the book both men are arrogant, selfish, ignorant, and irreligious; and these traits seem to cause the major struggles in the story. Indeed Mahtoree, the Indian demagogue, and Bush, the heedless white roughneck, seem central to Cooper's concept of the white-and-Indian wars of the Westward Movement.

Parallels among the minor characters are as striking and closely worked out as those already noticed, but here it seems unnecessary to do more than indicate them. Dr. Bat answers to the Indian

medicine man; he is, in fact, the "big medicine," a caricature of the white man's presumptuous science as equivalent to the Indian's superstition. The unregenerate Weucha—greedy, treacherous and cowardly—has his despicable equal in Bush's brother-in-law Abiram White. Even the Indian princess Tachechana, though lacking Inez's civilized refinement (as Hard-Heart lacks Middleton's), finds her moral equals in the two young white women. Finally, the Indian hags who incite their warriors to revenge are scarcely more passionate and bitter than Esther Bush when she defends her camp or searches for her son or upbraids Ishmael about Tachechana.

The Prairie certainly displays a hierarchy of values as seen in its characters. But is this hierarchy, as was earlier stated, a pattern of religious values? If so, what kind of religion may apply to a group of characters composed almost equally of pagans and Christians? Must we not, as Ringe does in the case of Hard-Heart, reject the Indians as having too primitive a concept of God?[6] Natty Bumppo himself rejects the Indian religion. At the end of the book, however, speaking to Hard-Heart, Natty gives his final word on religion in this manner:

> You believe in the blessed prairies, and I have faith in the sayings of my fathers. If both are true, our parting will be final; but if it should prove that the same meaning is hid under different words, we shall yet stand together, Pawnee, before the face of your Wahcondah, who will then be no other than my God (p. 456).

This view, of course, is a form of Deism common enough in Cooper's day, and it is the religious spirit which seems to animate *The Prairie.* Thus, Wahcondah or Christian God, the name little matters; the "Almighty" is behind all life, moving it for His inscrutable purposes. Even when Natty seems to forget this concept and to boast himself a Christian white man, one should remember that Natty is not invariably Fenimore Cooper. Frequently it is apparent at these moments that the author is artist, detached from his creation and chuckling at his human foibles: witness the fine touch of characterization where Natty talks to his dog about the folly of a "Red-skin's" talking to his horse (p. 332).

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[6]Ringe, "Man and Nature," p. 322.

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As indicated earlier, within these broad terms, religion—indeed God—dominates *The Prairie* more completely and explicitly than has apparently been before recognized. The importance of "The Lord" and his "natur'" to Natty and of the "Wahcondah" to Le Balafré and Hard-Heart is, of course, inescapable. Many have observed, furthermore, that Cooper, here as elsewhere, shares with the Hudson River School of painters the theme of the grandeur of God working in the universe.[7] The religious theme is also implicit in the conflicts among Natty, Dr. Bat, and Ishmael Bush, as noted by Jones and Ringe. Smith, moreover, has not overlooked the fact that Mahtoree is a "free-thinker."[8] Smith has also commented that Cooper uses the prairie somewhat as Shakespeare used the Elizabethan stage: as a neutral ground on which rather arbitrarily to assemble his characters for his own purposes.[9] It seems that no one, however, has called attention to the probability that, far from being a mere neutral ground, the prairie itself stood in Cooper's mind as a powerful image of the "wicked world," that is, the world of man's wickedness: thus, a moral wasteland. No one has pointed out, either, that the fate of Abiram White in this wasteland is an explicit dramatization of the wisdom, justice, and power of God. Nor has it been observed that Ishmael Bush, contrary to the prevailing concept of him—and contrary to the vast majority of Cooper characters—is not a static figure, remaining arrogant and irreligious to the end; but a dynamic one, who frees himself from the evil which has led him into this desert of wickedness and learns the humility which takes him out of it. An examination of the story of the Bush clan will bear out these assertions.

As Cooper presents it the prairie is a desert. From the moment that the Bush clan is seen "in that bleak and solitary place" (p. 4), it is described as such. Natty also speaks of it as a desert and fancies it God's mockery of the wastefulness of man (p. 82). Ishmael asks Abiram "Would you have me draw a cart at my heels, across this desert, for weeks . . . ?" (p. 95). He is also referring

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[7]See Jones, "Prose and Pictures"; Ringe, "James Fenimore Cooper and Thomas Cole: An Analogous Technique," *American Literature*, XXX (1958), 26-36; James Franklin Beard, "Cooper and His Artistic Contemporaries," *James Fenimore Cooper: A Re-Appraisal* (Cooperstown, N. Y.: New York State Historical Association, 1954), pp. 112-127.

[8]Smith, *The Prairie*, introduction, p. xx.

[9]*Ibid.*, p. ix.

to the arid nature of the desert when he tells Abiram " 'Tis time to change our naturs . . . and to become ruminators, instead of people used to the fare of Christians and free men" (p. 94). Even so, since Cooper is not Hawthorne or Melville, one is not prepared to see symbolism in Abiram's words less than a page below, where he discusses a travelling preacher he once heard speak: "the man might have been honest after all! He told us that the world was, in truth, no better than a *desert,* and that there was but *one hand* that could lead the most learned man through all its crooked windings" (p. 96—italics mine).

Here one immediately thinks of the most "learned" man in the book, Dr. Bat, who not only dramatizes this theme in his own existence but helps to continue its statement in his long arguments with Natty Bumppo. But Abiram's relationship with the deity is even more explicit and instructive. Like Weucha but significantly unlike even so ignorant a man as Ishmael, Abiram is grovelling and superstitious as well as guilt-ridden. These traits are most clearly seen when Natty reminds him and Ishmael, concerning their crime of kidnapping, that the "Judge of all" needs no knowledge from human hands and that their wish to keep anything secret from that judge will profit them little "even in this desert." At this solemn warning, Cooper tells us, "Ishmael stood sullen and thoughtful; while his companion stole a furtive and involuntary glance at the placid sky, . . . as if he expected to see the Almighty eye itself beaming from the heavenly vault" (p. 90).

It is toward the end of the story, however, when Abiram is exposed and punished, that his relationship to God is dramatized most clearly. Characteristically, he who has a tremendous dread of God, who in fact has wanted to pray for the success of his kidnapping adventure (p. 96), calls on God to curse Ishmael's sons who come to seize him. Then he attempts to run away but falls into an abject faint, which no less enlightened a man than Middleton believes "a manifest judgment of Heaven" (p. 420). When finally sentenced to death and put out of the wagon for his execution, he falls onto his knees and begins "a prayer in which cries for mercy to God and to his kinsman were wildly and blasphemously mingled" (p. 428). Esther sends him a Bible ("that . . . you may remember your God") and Ishmael arranges for him to hang himself. Then Ishmael explicitly leaves the culprit to his God. The

description of Abiram's dying moments, however, is fittingly the most complete and effective expression not only of Abiram's failure with God but of God's awful and pervasive presence and Ishmael Bush's awareness of it. Excerpts from the rather lengthy passage will make these matters clear. Ishmael, camped near the rock where Abiram is to hang himself, walks out alone into the night. Cooper writes:

> *For the first time,* in a life of so much wild adventure, Ishmael felt a keen sense of *solitude.* The *naked prairies* began to assume the forms of *illimitable* and *dreary wastes,* and the rushing of the wind sounded like the *whisperings* of *the dead.* It was not long before he thought a shriek was borne past him on a blast. It did not sound like a call from earth, but it swept frightfully through the upper air, mingled with the hoarse accompaniment of the wind. . . . Then came a lull, a fresher blast, and a cry of horror that seemed to have been uttered at the very portals of his ears. A sort of echo burst involuntarily from his own lips . . . .
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> Ever as he advanced he heard those shrieks, which sometimes seemed ringing among the clouds, and sometimes passed so nigh, as to appear to brush the earth. At length there came a cry in which there could be no delusion, or to which the imagination would lend no horror. *It appeared to fill each cranny of the air,* as the visible horizon is often charged to fullness by one dazzling flash of the electric fluid. *The name of God* was distinctly audible, but it was awfully and blasphemously blended with sounds that may not be repeated. The squatter stopped, and for a moment he covered his ears with his hands. When he withdrew the latter a low and husky voice at his elbow asked in smothered tones,—
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> "Ishmael, my man, heard ye nothing?"
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> "Hist!" returned the husband, . . . "Hist, wom-

> an! if you have the *fear of Heaven,* be still!" (pp. 431-432—italics mine.)

Fully to grasp the significance of this scene, for Ishmael and for the entire novel, one should recall not only that Abiram is Ishmael's brother-in-law but that he has been Ishmael's tempter, in fact the evil adviser who led him into the act of kidnapping and into this wicked desert itself. Early in the book Ishmael makes clear that he has promised Abiram to take Inez to a certain destination, presumably there in the desert (p. 95). In the same conversation he clearly states his regret at having listened to Abiram in the matter of the kidnapping (p. 103). Even before Abiram is revealed as the murderer of Asa, moreover, Ishmael has thrown off the brother-in-law's evil influence and made restitution to Middleton and Inez as best he could.[10] Esther's speech confirms his own assertion that his part in the crime was a result of yielding to temptation. "Poverty and labor bore hard upon him," she says, "and in a weak moment he did the wicked act; but . . . his mind has got round again into its honest corner" (p. 409).

Ishmael, in short, has been led into the desert of wickedness by the evil tempter Abiram, but he has been taught the necessity of honesty and even of justice by the sobering experience of his son's murder, of Indian treachery and warfare, and of the ultimate threat even of miscegenation and family deterioration. "An awful and a dangerous thing it is to be bringing the daughters of other people into a peaceable . . . family!" Esther declares, albeit with her own thoughts on Tachechana (p. 409).

But Ishmael's regeneration is still at this point incomplete. It is true, as has often been maintained, that his justice is of the crude Old Testament sort all through the "trial" and even through the execution of Abiram. It seems significant, however, that after the righting of all wrongs and after the awesome revelation of Abiram's guilt, Ishmael immediately starts out of the prairie, and Cooper describes the event as follows: "For the first time in many a day

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[10]Though, as pointed out elsewhere in this study, it is true that Ishmael's justice is crude, Cooper's handling of the trial by no means justifies the frequent interpretations of it as the author's condemnation of Ishmael. Even Ishmael's execution of Abiram is not necessarily in Cooper's mind an abominable form of revenge, as is often maintained (see Ringe, "Man and Nature," p. 322, Smith, *The Prairie,* p. xiv). Cooper himself speaks of how well Abiram merited his punishment (p. 426).

the squatter turned his back towards the setting sun. The route he held was in the direction of the settled country, and the manner in which he moved sufficed to tell his children . . . that their journey on the prairie was shortly to have an end" (p. 422). The end comes with the awful death of Abiram quoted above, a death which causes Ishmael to know for the first time solitude—the solitude greatly cherished by Natty Bumppo? the solitude of God in Nature? —and fills him not only with "the fear of Heaven" but with the genuine humility which causes him to bury Abiram with the following words: "Abiram White, we all have need of mercy; from my soul do I forgive you! May God in Heaven have pity on your sins!" (p. 433). This compassion is more than even the death of his son had wrung from Ishmael earlier; and, in context, there is little question that it represents, if not a full moral and spiritual regeneration of Ishmael, at least a long stride toward that state. Unfortunately, Cooper chose to dismiss the Bush clan in a brief and cryptic paragraph after the burial of Abiram. The group is said to blend in with other groups "within the confines of society." Some of the descendants of Ishmael and Esther are said to be "reclaimed from their lawless and semi-barbarous lives," but "the principals of the family themselves were never heard of more" (p. 434). Though this information yields nothing positive in the way of interpretation, it certainly does not deny Ishmael's regeneration. Indeed, he would seem much more likely to have been "heard of more" if he were unregenerate than regenerate.

The prairie is therefore not only an apt image of Abiram's and Ishmael's wickedness but it occurs consciously to each as a figure for the world's "crooked ways" or as "illimitable and dreary wastes" filled with "whisperings of the dead." But can it serve similarly for other characters? Natty Bumppo seems to think of it as a "judgement" on man (p. 281); and for once Dr. Bat seems to agree with him, speaking of human circumstances on the prairie as a descent to a "condition of second childhood" (p. 280). Beyond these pronouncements, there are Natty's comments that he thinks this "barren belt" God's warning to man's folly (p. 19) and even God's "very mockery of their wickedness" (p. 82). It should be remembered also that Natty is not a native of the prairie. He seems to have come here to await his death, sensing it as the proper place; and we have Cooper's word in the introduction that he dwells here "in a species of desperate resignation" (p. viii). That good men

like Natty, Le Balafré, and Hard-Heart are present is not incompatible with the image of prairie as wasteland; for, as Abiram's preacher pointed out, there is "one hand" always there to lead a man who will listen; that is, a religious man. The evil here, as in the whole world, is the man who does not follow God properly.

Natty's relationship to the prairie is scarcely more significant than those of other white characters. Dr. Bat comes there under impulse of his arrogant scientific materialism, and he becomes only partially humbled by his ordeal. Inez is dragged into evil against her will, though one wonders if her Catholic "submissiveness," to which Cooper often alludes, is not a flaw which made her liable to such trouble. Asa, like Inez, is primarily a victim, though again his angry striking of Abiram and his insolent near-revolt against his father suggest a heedless arrogance which invites destruction. Esther is very much of a piece with Ishmael and Abiram, and she seems to share Ishmael's regeneration, though not spectacularly. Middleton and Hover are drawn into the wasteland in pursuit of their lovers. Less removed from human emotion and weakness than the aged Natty and Le Balafré, they are in greater danger in this wasteland; they are indeed not wholly without blemish, for they transgress against Ishmael while stealing their lovers from him.

Among the Indian characters it is interesting to note that the Sioux, the tribe furnishing the worst people, dwell in the very heart of Cooper's prairie, while the good Pawnee's have their home in a "luxuriant bottom"—an oasis in Wasteland?—on the very edge of the desert. Weucha, the awful hags, the sadistic warrior left in charge of the prisoners before the final battle—all these are native to the prairie; and the leader of them all, Mahtoree, bids fair with his arrogance, cruelty, selfishness and mocking infidelism to serve as the devil. Interestingly too, he meets death and total defeat in his selfish skepticism, while his counterpart Ishmael wins victory in his growing sense of right. It is not a part of this study to draw inferences about Cooper's attitude toward the Westward Movement, but one may at least wonder if this contrast between Mahtoree and Ishmael was Cooper's version of Manifest Destiny—or, on the other hand, his hope for the moral awakening of the squatters who in 1827 had not yet completely overwhelmed the Indians and the frontier.

Concerning Hard-Heart and his Pawnees, with Le Balafré and Tachechana, one encounters a paradox in Cooper's concept of the

prairie, essentially the same paradox which Smith has noted in Cooper's attitude toward his good Indians,[11] and, perhaps significantly, a paradox widespread in Eighteenth Century social theory.[12] For it will be observed that, though the good Indians are left in a luxuriant bottom on the very edge of the prairie, they are nevertheless left on the prairie, while all the good whites are completely removed—except Natty Bumppo, who has his own reasons for remaining and who draws his own clear distinctions against "Redskins." Smith observes that, in Cooper's work, the assumptions which cause us to admire Hard-Heart and Tachechana are of another order altogether from those by which we admire Middleton and Inez. The former are Nature's products, as noble as any; but the latter are the inheritors of progress, and somewhat nobler than any. Thus though Indians and whites are moral equals, as seen earlier, they are at the same time kept distinct, and finally they are not quite equal. Hard-Heart may look at Inez, but part of his moral superiority, one gathers, is the "tact" with which he does not aspire to love her, as did the iniquitous Mahtoree—and this discreetness has little to do with the fact that she is already married. Similarly, Tachechana may be Inez' moral equal but she stares in awe at the refined "flower of civilization"; and, except for Mahtoree's wicked suggestion that she become Ishmael's squaw, there is never any question of her going out of the wasteland with her white equals, perhaps to find a noble, but unwed, young man like Middleton. One gathers also that this subtle but potent consideration did as much as the slaying of Asa or the carnage of the Indian battle to sober Ishmael, not to speak of Esther. Mahtoree's proposal to Inez and his offer of Tachechana to Ishmael possibly mark the nadir of Ishmael in moral corruption; it is certainly the point at which Ishmael begins to reform.

This important qualification made, however, it remains true that Cooper's *The Prairie* is a deeply religious book, presenting a large cast of characters in a religious hierarchy on a prairie conceived as a moral wasteland in which only God can guide men in their selfish struggles. God is conceived in the fashion of Eighteenth Century Deism, and he theoretically favors neither whites

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[11]Smith, *The Prairie,* p. xv.

[12]See, for instance, Lois Whitney, *Primitivism and the Idea of Progress in English Popular Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1934).

nor Indians; but, for the period of the novel at least, he seems to lean toward the whites, even the best of Indians remaining in a savage state on the edge of the moral desert. Bewley has demonstrated that Cooper used action in his books to dramatize his moral conceptions, and that in a novel like *The Deerslayer* he achieved a remarkably coherent form.[18] The same may be said of *The Prairie*.

[18]Bewley, *The Eccentric Design*, pp. 73-100.