JAMES FENIMORE COOPER
1789–1851

Cooper's literary importance, like Herman Melville's, is largely a rediscovery of our own time. Although his novels were often immensely popular when they were published, they were read as adventure stories. As the taste for adventure fiction declined, so did his reputation, and his novels were regarded as suitable only for adolescent readers. In the 1920s, however, critics began seriously to reconsider Cooper's work and to find that his themes reached deep into the emerging American character and the social questions of his time. Today his stature as a major writer is firmly established.

Cooper, who wrote more than thirty novels, a naval history, and several volumes of social comment and travel observations, had no early intention of becoming a writer. Born the son of a prominent judge and wealthy landowner, he was raised on his family's enormous estate in what is now Cooperstown in upstate New York. He attended Yale but was expelled for lackluster performance as a student and for repeated pranks, which included bringing a donkey into a classroom. He then worked as a seaman on a merchant vessel and, in 1808, was commissioned an officer in the United States Navy. He would later draw upon his naval experiences in several sea novels. Following the death of his father, he resigned his commission, married, and settled into the life of a gentleman landowner. The pleasant legend is that he began his first novel after being challenged by his wife to write a better book than the British novel he was then reading—and loudly condemning. The result, *Precaution* (1820), was a bad imitation of the society novels popular at the time in England. But he had caught the writing fever he was never to lose. The next year he published *The Spy*, a novel about the American Revolution, a subject much more suited to his talent for depicting exciting action in a vast natural setting. It was immediately acclaimed as a fresh and original work, the first novel to make serious use of American history. Two years later, in 1823, Cooper turned to the frontier experience in *The Pioneers*. He had found his greatest theme.

James Fenimore Cooper by John Wesley Jarvis (1780–1840).

The Pioneers was the first of five related novels, called the Leatherstocking Tales, that became Cooper's masterwork. They portray the life of a wilderness figure, Natty Bumppo, from adolescence to his death more than sixty years later. His life parallels America's wilderness experience. In his youth, western New York State is still wilderness. In his old age, he must walk a thousand miles to escape the sound of the settlers' axes and the smoke of their fires as they cut and burn the great forests to make farms. He spends his last years on the treeless prairies five hundred miles beyond the Mississippi River. But President Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase has recently made even this vast wilderness a part of the United States. At the moment of Natty's death, the explorers Lewis and Clark are completing their survey of a land route to the Pacific Ocean, and settlers will inevitably follow.

The meeting point of wilderness and civilization is the constantly moving frontier, and Cooper's subject is the effect of the frontier upon the American character. Westward expansion was the great social

fact of the age, but its meaning for our national development was far from clear. Cooper knew that the wilderness, by freeing men from the restraints of civilized life, could bring out the worst in human nature, creating lawless violence and a senseless waste of natural resources. Each novel has its renegades and outlaws and its scenes of terrible waste to show the destructive effects of the frontier experience. But a magnificent primeval wilderness also offered America the opportunity to return to the natural moral law that is the basis of morality in human life, and to recover those natural virtues that are obscured or corrupted by society. This is the theme that Cooper explores through the character of Natty Bumppo.

That character, except for some childhood impressions of religion, is formed by the wilderness. From early youth Natty leads the life of a hunter and warrior, usually with only Indian companions. He cannot read or write. He has no family ties, no need for money or material goods, and no use for the "wasty ways" and troublesome laws of the settlements. Yet he is not an outlaw or a barbarian. From nature he has learned a deep reverence for the Creator, for the wise use of nature's gifts, and for justice and truth in dealing with others. As a hunter and warrior he must often shed blood, but he preserves an essential innocence, taking animal life only for food and human life only for self-protection and in warfare. He is proof that the inevitable cruelties and violence of America's frontier experience need not corrupt the American character. Leatherstocking is the original wilderness hero in our literature: solitary man in the presence of only nature and God. In his purity and innocence, his self-reliance and sense of justice, he reveals humanity's basic moral nature and represents Cooper's hope for the moral renewal of American society.

Natty's life does not follow a normal course in Cooper's books. He is an old man when we first meet him in *The Pioneers,* and his death occurs in *The Prairie* (1827), the third of the five novels. Having brought his hero to an appropriate end at the moment when America's last frontier was crossed, Cooper thought of his story as closed. But thirteen years later he resurrected Leatherstocking and started him on a reverse journey toward youth, and in the last of the Tales, *The Deerslayer* (1841), we see Natty at his youngest and most innocent. This strange pattern expresses an important theme for Cooper's imagination and represents a vital aspect of America's conception of itself. America began old, a society formed by the ideas and values of Europe. But under the influence of a wilderness environment America became young, the new land of the second chance and fresh beginnings. It is our most cherished myth. Through the wilderness, America could begin again and again. Natty Bumppo is the idealized wilderness hero whose life enacts that basic myth of a return to innocence and eternal youth.

Otsego Lake, New York, the setting for *The Deerslayer.* The hill in the background is Mount Wellington, known locally as the "Sleeping Lion."

The Deerslayer

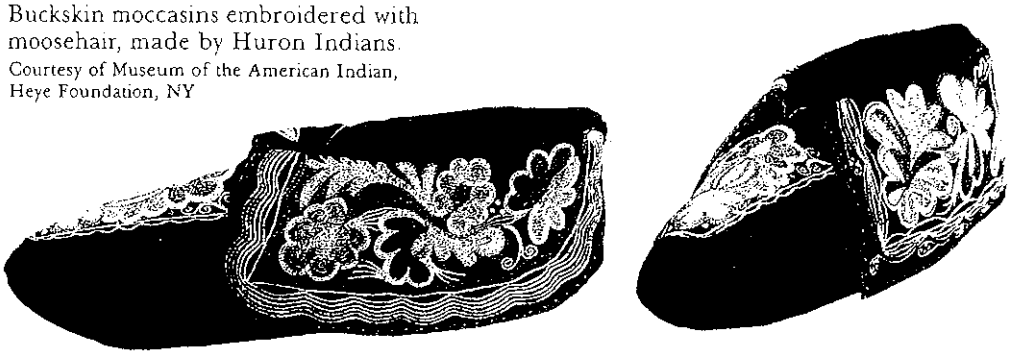
This last of the five Leatherstocking Tales completes the portrayal of Natty Bumppo's life by showing his passage from adolescent hunter to full manhood as a wilderness warrior. In that process Natty must define himself in relation to both Indian and white ways of life. From his upbringing among the Delaware Indians he has learned the forest skills, physical courage, and strict code of honor that are now being tested on his first warpath against their enemies, the Hurons. But this self-definition must also test his feelings about the white civilization he is leaving behind, especially his feelings about marriage and family as the fundamental relationships of social existence

Just hours before this scene, Natty has acted decisively on both these matters. Facing a Huron warrior in a single combat that has the ritual quality of a duel, he has for the first time taken a human life, and then received a new name from his fallen foe. "Deerslayer," the dying Huron points out, is a good name for a "boy." But the Indian way is to name a man again for his special qualities as a warrior. Henceforth, Natty will be called "Hawkeye" for his quick, keen sight in battle.

Shortly thereafter, as a mark of his new manhood and the solitary life he will lead in the wilderness, Natty rejects a basic social bond by twice refusing marriage, first to a white woman and then, in the scene that follows, to the widow of the Huron warrior he has slain. Providence, he believes, brought him to the Delawares as a child because he was meant to "live single" in the wilderness, bridging the white and Indian worlds. He will keep certain moral beliefs (Natty calls them "gifts") from his white background but will act as a Delaware "in all things touchin' Injins."

Both parts of this double heritage lead to the following chapter. Having captured Natty in warfare, the Hurons have released him on a brief parole, to carry a message to a nearby group of whites, because they know him as a warrior like themselves who will keep his promise to return to captivity. And Natty has accepted the mission because he feels responsible to people of his own race and would save those lives if he could. He is both Indian and white. Once he has fulfilled his parole by returning to the Hurons, the rules of Indian warfare allow him to escape by any means if he can.

Buckskin moccasins embroidered with moosehair, made by Huron Indians.
Courtesy of Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, NY



It was an imposing scene, into which Deerslayer now found himself advancing. All the older warriors were seated on the trunk of the fallen tree, waiting his approach with grave decorum. On the right stood the young men, armed, while the left was occupied by the women and children. In the center was an open space of considerable extent, always canopied by leaves, but from which the underbrush, dead wood, and other obstacles had been carefully removed. The more open area had probably been much used by former parties, for this was the place where the appearance of a sward was the most decided. The arches of the woods, even at high noon, cast their somber shadows on the spot, which the brilliant rays of the sun that struggled through the leaves contributed to mellow and, if such an expression can be used, to illuminate. It was probably from a similar scene that the mind of man first got its idea of the effects of Gothic tracery[1] and churchly hues; this temple of nature producing some such effect, so far as light and shadows were concerned, as the well-known offspring of human invention.

As was not unusual among the tribes and wandering bands of the aborigines, two chiefs shared in nearly equal degrees the principal and primitive authority that was wielded over these children of the forest. There were several who might claim the distinction of being chief men, but the two in question were so much superior to all the rest in influence that, when they agreed, no one disputed their mandates, and when they were divided, the band hesitated, like men who had lost their governing principle of action. It was also in conformity with practice—perhaps we might add, in conformity with nature, that one of the chiefs was indebted to his mind for his influence, whereas the other owed his distinction altogether to qualities that were physical. One was a senior, well known for eloquence in debate, wisdom in council, and prudence in measures, while his great competitor, if not his rival, was a brave, distinguished in war, notorious for ferocity, and remarkable, in the way of intellect, for nothing but the cunning and expedients of the warpath. The first was Rivenoak, who has already been introduced to the reader, while the last was called le Panthère, in the language of the Canadas, or the Panther, to resort to the vernacular of the English colonies. The appellation of the fighting chief was supposed to indicate the qualities of the warrior, agreeably to a practice of the red man's nomenclature: ferocity, cunning, and treachery being, perhaps, the distinctive features of his character. The title had been received from the French, and was prized so much the more from that circumstance, the Indian submitting profoundly to the greater intelligence of his paleface allies, in most things of this nature. How well the sobriquet[2] was merited will be seen in the sequel.

Rivenoak and the Panther sat side by side, awaiting the approach of their prisoner, as Deerslayer put his moccasined foot on the strand; nor did either move or utter a syllable until the young man had advanced into the center of the area, and proclaimed his presence with his voice. This was done firmly, though in the simple manner that marked the character of the individual.

"Here I am, Mingos,"[3] he said, in the dialect of the Delawares, a language that most present understood; "here I am, and there is the sun. One is not more true to the laws of natur' than the other has proved true to his word. I am your prisoner; do with me what you please. My business with man and 'arth is settled; nothing remains now but to meet the white man's God, accordin' to a white man's duties and gifts."

A murmur of approbation escaped even the women at this address, and for an instant there was a strong and pretty general desire to adopt into the tribe one who owned so brave a spirit. Still there were dissenters from this wish,

1. **Gothic tracery**: the lacy openwork characteristic of medieval architecture.

2. **sobriquet** (sō'brĭ-kā', -kĕt') nickname.

3. **Mingos**: Deerslayer's general term for any enemies of the Delawares; here, the Hurons.

Three Delaware Indians (1857–1869) by George Catlin (1796–1872). Oil on cardboard.
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Paul Mellon Collection

among the principal of whom might be classed the Panther, and his sister, le Sumac, so called from the number of her children, who was the widow of le Loup Cervier,[4] now known to have fallen by the hand of the captive. Native ferocity held one in subjection, while the corroding passion of revenge prevented the other from admitting any gentler feeling at the moment. Not so with Rivenoak. This chief arose, stretched his arm before him in a gesture of courtesy, and paid his compliments with an ease and dignity that a prince might have envied. As, in that band, his wisdom and eloquence were confessedly without rivals, he knew that on himself would properly fall the duty of first replying to the speech of the paleface.

"Paleface, you are honest," said the Huron orator. "My people are happy in having captured a man and not a skulking fox. We now know you; we shall treat you like a brave. If you have slain one of our warriors and helped to kill others, you have a life of your own ready to give away in return. Some of my young men thought that the blood of a paleface was too thin, that it would refuse to run under the

Huron knife. You will show them it is not so; your heart is stout as well as your body. It is a pleasure to make such a prisoner; should my warriors say that the death of le Loup Cervier ought not be forgotten, that he cannot travel toward the land of spirits alone, and that his enemy must be sent to overtake him, they will remember that he fell by the hand of a brave, and send you after him with such signs of our friendship as shall not make him ashamed to keep your company. I have spoken; you know what I have said."

"True enough, Mingo, all true as the gospel," returned the simple-minded hunter; "you *have* spoken, and I *do* know not only what you have *said*, but, what is still more important, what you *mean*. I dare to say your warrior, the Lynx, was a stouthearted brave, and worthy of your fri'ndship and respect, but I do not feel unworthy to keep his company, without any passport from your hands. Nevertheless, here I am, ready to receive judgment from your council, if, indeed, the matter was not determined among you afore I got back."

"My old men would not sit in council over a paleface until they saw him among them," answered Rivenoak, looking around him a little ironically; "they said it would be like sitting in council over the winds; they go where they will and come back as they see fit, and not otherwise. There was one voice that spoke in your favor, Deerslayer, but it was alone, like the song of the wren whose mate has been struck by the hawk."

"I thank that voice whosever it may have been, Mingo, and will say it was as true a voice, as the rest were lying voices. A furlough is as binding on a paleface, if he be honest, as it is on a redskin; and was it not so, I would never bring disgrace on the Delawares, among whom I may be said to have received my edication. But words are useless and lead to braggin' feelin's; here I am; act your will on me."

Rivenoak made a sign of acquiescence, and then a short conference was privately held among the chiefs. As soon as the latter ended, three or four young men fell back from among the armed group and disappeared. Then it was signified to the prisoner that he was at liberty to go at large on the point until a council was held concerning his fate. There was more of seeming than of real confidence, however, in this apparent liberality, inasmuch as the young men mentioned already formed a line of sentinels across the breadth of the point, inland, and escape from any other part was out of the question. Even the canoe was removed beyond this line of sentinels, to a spot where it was considered safe from any sudden attempt. These precautions did not proceed from a failure of confidence, but from the circumstance that the prisoner had now complied with all the required conditions of his parole, and it would have been considered a commendable and honorable exploit to escape from his foes. So nice, indeed, were the distinctions drawn by the savages, in cases of this nature, that they often gave their victims a chance to evade the torture, deeming it as creditable to the captors to overtake, or to outwit a fugitive, when his exertions were supposed to be quickened by the extreme jeopardy of his situation, as it was for him to get clear from so much extraordinary vigilance.

Nor was Deerslayer unconscious or forgetful of his rights and of his opportunities. Could he now have seen any probable opening for an escape, the attempt would not have been delayed a minute. But the case seemed desperate. He was aware of the line of sentinels, and felt the difficulty of breaking through it unharmed. The lake offered no advantages, as the canoe would have given his foes the greatest facilities for overtaking him; else would he have found it no difficult task to swim as far as the castle.[5] As he walked about the point, he even examined the spot as to ascertain if it offered no place of concealment, but its openness, its size, and the hundred watchful glances that were turned toward him, even while those who made them affected not

5 castle: short for "Muskrat Castle," an ironically named modest log house standing on piles some distance out in the lake.

to see him, prevented any such expedient from succeeding. The dread and disgrace of failure had no influence on Deerslayer, who deemed it ever a point of honor to reason and feel like a white man, rather than as an Indian, and who felt it a sort of duty to do all he could that did not involve a dereliction from principle in order to save his life. Still he hesitated about making the effort, for he also felt that he ought to see the chance of success before he committed himself.

In the meantime the business of the camp appeared to proceed in its regular train. The chiefs consulted apart, admitting no one but the Sumac to their councils; for she, the widow of the fallen warrior, had an exclusive right to be heard on such an occasion. The young men strolled about in indolent listlessness, awaiting the result with Indian impatience, while the females prepared the feast that was to celebrate the termination of the affair, whether it proved fortunate or otherwise for our hero. No one betrayed feeling, and an indifferent observer, beyond the extreme watchfulness of the sentinels, would have detected no extraordinary movement or sensation to denote the real state of things. Two or three old women put their heads together, and it appeared unfavorably to the prospect of Deerslayer, by their scowling looks and angry gestures, but a group of Indian girls were evidently animated by a different impulse, as was apparent by stolen glances that expressed pity and regret. In this condition of the camp an hour soon glided away.

Suspense is, perhaps, the feeling of all others that is most difficult to be supported. When Deerslayer landed, he fully expected in the course of a few minutes to undergo the tortures of an Indian revenge, and he was prepared to meet his fate manfully, but the delay proved far more trying than the nearer approach of suffering, and the intended victim began seriously to meditate some desperate effort at escape, as it might be from sheer anxiety to terminate the scene, when he was suddenly summoned to appear, once more, in front of his judges, who had already arranged the band in its former order in readiness to receive him.

"Killer of the Deer," commenced Rivenoak, as soon as his captive stood before him, "my aged men have listened to wise words; they are ready to speak. You are a man whose fathers came from beyond the rising sun; we are children of the setting sun; we turn our faces toward the Great Sweet Lakes when we look toward our villages. It may be a wise country and full of riches toward the morning, but it is very pleasant toward the evening. We love most to look in that direction. When we gaze at the east we feel afraid, canoe after canoe bringing more and more of your people in the track of the sun, as if their land was so full as to run over. The red men are few already; they have need of help. One of our best lodges has lately been emptied by the death of its master; it will be a long time before his son can grow big enough to sit in his place. There is his widow! She will want venison to feed her and her children, for her sons are yet like the young of the robin before they quit the nest. By your hand has this great calamity befallen her. She has two duties; one to le Loup Cervier, and one to his children. Scalp for scalp, life for life, blood for blood, is one law; to feed her young another. We know you, Killer of the Deer. You are honest; when you say a thing, it is so. You have but one tongue, and that is not forked like a snake's. Your head is never hid in the grass; all can see it. What you say, that will you do. You are just. When you have done wrong, it is your wish to do right again as soon as you can. Here is the Sumac; she is alone in her wigwam, with children crying around her for food—yonder is a rifle; it is loaded and ready to be fired. Take the gun; go forth and shoot a deer; bring the venison and lay it before the widow of le Loup Cervier; feed her children; call yourself her husband. After which, your heart will no longer be Delaware but Huron; le Sumac's ears will not hear the cries of her children; my people will count the proper number of warriors.

In declining this offer, Natty makes it clear that both his white and Indian heritages prevent such a marriage: his belief that Providence intended his life to be solitary, and his upbringing as a Delaware, which would not permit marriage to a Huron.

These words were scarcely out of the mouth of Deerslayer before a common murmur betrayed the dissatisfaction with which they had been heard. The aged women, in particular, were loud in their expressions of disgust, and the gentle Sumac herself, a woman quite old enough to be our hero's mother, was not the least pacific in her denunciations. But all the other manifestations of disappointment and discontent were thrown into the background by the fierce resentment of the Panther. This grim chief had thought it a degradation to permit his sister to become the wife of a paleface of the Yengeese[6] at all, and had only given a reluctant consent to the arrangement—one by no means unusual among the Indians, however—at the earnest solicitations of the bereaved widow; and it goaded him to the quick to find his condescension slighted, the honor he had with so much regret been persuaded to accord condemned. The animal from which he got his name does not glare on his intended prey with more frightful ferocity than his eyes gleamed on the captive, nor was his arm backward in seconding the fierce resentment that almost consumed his breast.

"Dog of the palefaces!" he exclaimed in Iroquois, "go yell among the curs of your own evil hunting grounds!"

The denunciation was accompanied by an appropriate action. Even while speaking his arm was lifted and the tomahawk hurled. Luckily the loud tones of the speaker had drawn the eye of Deerslayer toward him, else would that moment have probably closed his career. So great was the dexterity with which this dangerous weapon was thrown, and so deadly the intent, that it would have riven the skull of the prisoner, had he not stretched forth an arm and caught the handle in one of its turns with a readiness quite as remarkable as the skill with which the missile had been hurled. The projectile force was so great, notwithstanding, that when Deerslayer's arm was arrested, his hand was raised above and behind his own head, and in the very attitude necessary to return the attack. It is not certain whether the circumstance of finding himself unexpectedly in this menacing posture and armed, tempted the young man to retaliate, or whether sudden resentment overcame his forbearance and prudence. His eye kindled, however, and a small red spot appeared on each cheek, while he cast all his energy into the effort of his arm and threw back the weapon at his assailant. The unexpectedness of this blow contributed to its success, the Panther neither raising an arm nor bending his head to avoid it. The keen little ax struck the victim in a perpendicular line with the nose, directly between the eyes, literally braining him on the spot. Sallying forward, as the serpent darts at its enemy even while receiving its own death wound, this man of powerful frame fell his length into the open area formed by the circle, quivering in death. A common rush to his relief left the captive for a single instant quite without the crowd, and willing to make one desperate effort for life, he bounded off with the activity of a deer. There was but a breathless instant, then the whole band, old and young, women and children, abandoning the lifeless body of the Panther where it lay, raised the yell of alarm and followed in pursuit.

Sudden as had been the event which induced Deerslayer to make this desperate trial of speed, his mind was not wholly unprepared for the fearful emergency. In the course of the past hour, he had pondered well on the chances of such an experiment and had shrewdly calculated all the details of success and failure. At the first leap, therefore, his body was completely under the direction of an intelligence that turned all its efforts to the best account and prevented everything like hesitation or indecision at the important instant of the start. To this alone was he indebted

6. **Yengeese**: Yankees.

for the first great advantage, that of getting through the line of sentinels unharmed. The manner in which this was done, though sufficiently simple, merits a description.

Although the shores of the point were not fringed with bushes, as was the case with most of the others on the lake, it was owing altogether to the circumstance that the spot had been so much used by hunters and fishermen. This fringe commenced on what might be termed the mainland, and was as dense as usual, extending in long lines both north and south. In the latter direction, then, Deerslayer held his way, and as the sentinels were a little without the commencement of this thicket before the alarm was clearly communicated to them, the fugitive had gained its cover. To run among the bushes, however, was out of the question, and Deerslayer held his way for some forty or fifty yards in the water, which was barely knee deep, offering as great an obstacle to the speed of his pursuers as it did to his own. As soon as a favorable spot presented, he darted through the line of bushes and issued into the open woods.

Several rifles were discharged at Deerslayer while in the water, and more followed as he came out into the comparative exposure of the clear forest. But the direction of his line of flight, which partially crossed that of the fire, the haste with which the weapons had been aimed, and the general confusion that prevailed in the camp prevented any harm from being done. Bullets whistled past him, and many cut twigs from the branches at his side, but not one touched even his dress. The delay caused by these fruitless attempts was of great service to the fugitive, who had gained more than a hundred yards on even the leading men of the Hurons, ere something like concert and order had entered into the chase. To think of following with rifle in hand was out of the question, and after emptying their pieces in vague hopes of wounding their captive, the best runners of the Indians threw them aside, calling out to the women and boys to recover and load them again, as soon as possible.

Deerslayer knew too well the desperate nature of the struggle in which he was engaged to lose one of the precious moments. He also knew that his only hope was to run in a straight line, for as soon as he began to turn, or double, the greater number of his pursuers would put escape out of the question. He held his way, therefore, in a diagonal direction up the acclivity, which was neither very high nor very steep, in this part of the mountain, but which was sufficiently toilsome for one contending for life to render it painfully oppressive. There, however, he slackened his speed to recover breath, proceeding even at a quick walk, or a slow trot, along the more difficult parts of the way. The Hurons were whooping and leaping behind him; but this he disregarded, well knowing they must overcome the difficulties he had surmounted, ere they could reach the elevation to which he had attained. The summit of the first hill was not quite near him, and he saw, by the formation of the land, that a deep glen intervened before the base of a second hill could be reached. Walking deliberately to the summit, he glanced eagerly about him in every direction in quest of a cover. None offered in the ground, but a fallen tree lay near him, and desperate circumstances required desperate remedies. This tree lay in a line parallel to the glen, at the brow of the hill; to leap on it, and then to force his person as close as possible under its lower side, took but a moment. Previously to disappearing from his pursuers, however, Deerslayer stood on the height and gave a cry of triumph, as if exulting at the sight of the descent that lay before him. In the next instant he was stretched beneath the tree.

No sooner was this expedient adopted than the young man ascertained how desperate had been his own efforts by the violence of the pulsations in his frame. He could hear his heart beat, and his breathing was like the action of a bellows in quick motion. Breath was gained, however, and the heart soon ceased to throb as if about to break through its confinement. The footsteps of those who toiled up

the opposite side of the acclivity were now audible, and presently voices and treads announced the arrival of the pursuers. The foremost shouted as they reached the height; then, fearful that their enemy would escape under favor of the descent, each leaped upon the fallen tree and plunged into the ravine, trusting to get a sight of the pursued, ere he reached the bottom. In this manner, Huron followed Huron, until Natty began to hope the whole had passed. Others succeeded, however, until quite forty had leaped over the tree; and then he counted them, as the surest mode of ascertaining how many could be behind. Presently all were in the bottom of the glen, quite a hundred feet below him, and some had even ascended part of the opposite hill, when it became evident an inquiry was making as to the direction he had taken. This was the critical moment, and one of nerves less steady, or of a training that had been neglected, would have seized it to rise and fly. Not so with Deerslayer. He still lay quiet, watching with jealous vigilance every movement and fast regaining his breath.

For several minutes Natty's ruse works, and he is able to reverse his course and so gain precious distance in his flight. But when he is seen again by the Hurons, he realizes that he cannot escape so many pursuers in the woods. He turns instead to the lake, running through the Huron camp itself to reach the only canoe on the shore. If he can get beyond the nearby point and out into the open lake, he will be seen and, he hopes, rescued by friends who are in a log house built on pilings well out in the lake. (The house was built that way for defense.) When he reaches the canoe it has no paddle, but he pushes off anyway, lying flat in the canoe and hoping to be carried by the breeze beyond the point and out into the lake.

Perhaps the situation of Deerslayer had not been more critical that day than it was at this moment. It certainly had not been one half as tantalizing. He lay perfectly quiet for two or three minutes, trusting to the single sense of hearing, confident that the noise in the lake would reach his ears, did anyone venture to approach by swimming. Once or twice he fancied that the element was stirred by the cautious movement of an arm, and then he perceived it was the wash of the water on the pebbles of the strand; for, in mimicry of the ocean, it is seldom that those little lakes are so totally tranquil as not to possess a slight heaving and setting on their shores. Suddenly all the voices ceased, and a deathlike stillness pervaded the spot, a quietness as profound as if all lay in the repose of inanimate life. By this time the canoe had drifted so far as to render nothing visible to Deerslayer, as he lay on his back, except the blue void of space, and a few of those brighter rays that proceed from the effulgence of the sun, marking his proximity. It was not possible to endure this uncertainty long. The young man well knew that the profound stillness foreboded evil, the savages never being so silent as when about to strike a blow, resembling the stealthy foot of the panther ere he takes his leap. He took out a knife, and was about to cut a hole through the bark in order to get a view of the shore, when he paused from a dread of being seen in the operation, which would direct the enemy where to aim their bullets. At this instant a rifle *was* fired, and the ball pierced both sides of the canoe, within eighteen inches of the spot where his head lay. This was close work, but our hero had too lately gone through that which was closer to be appalled. He lay still half a minute longer, and then he saw the summit of an oak coming slowly within his narrow horizon.

Unable to account for this change, Deerslayer could restrain his impatience no longer. Hitching his body along with the utmost caution, he got his eye at the bullethole, and fortunately commanded a very tolerable view of the point. The canoe, by one of those imperceptible impulses that so often decide the fate of men as well as the course of things, had inclined southerly, and was slowly drifting down the lake. It was lucky that Deerslayer had given it a shove sufficiently vigorous to send it past the end of the point ere it took this inclination, or it must have gone ashore

again. As it was, it drifted so near it as to bring the tops of two or three trees within the range of the young man's view, as has been mentioned, and, indeed, to come in quite as close proximity with the extremity of the point as was at all safe. The distance could not much have exceeded a hundred feet, though fortunately a light current of air from the southwest began to set it slowly offshore.

Deerslayer now felt the urgent necessity of resorting to some expedient to get further from his foes and, if possible, to apprise his friends[7] of his situation. The distance rendered the last difficult, while the proximity to the point rendered the first indispensable. As was usual in such craft, a large, round, smooth stone was in each end of the canoe for the double purpose of seats and ballast; one of these was within reach of his feet. The stone he contrived to get so far between his legs as to reach it with his hands, and then he managed to roll it to the side of its fellow in the bows, where the two served to keep the trim of the light boat, while he worked his own body as far aft as possible. Before quitting the shore, and as soon as he perceived that the paddles were gone, Deerslayer had thrown a bit of dead branch into the canoe, and this was within reach of his arm. Removing the cap he wore, he put it on the end of this stick, and just let it appear over the edge of the canoe, as far as possible from his own person. This ruse was scarcely adopted before the young man had a proof how much he had underrated the intelligence of his enemies. In contempt of an artifice so shallow and commonplace, a bullet was fired directly through another part of the canoe, which actually raised his skin. He dropped the cap, and instantly raised it immediately over his head, as a safeguard. It would seem that this second artifice was unseen, or what was more probable, the Hurons, feeling certain of recovering their captive, wished to take him alive.

Deerslayer lay passive a few minutes longer, his eye at the bullethole, however, and much did he rejoice at seeing that he was drifting gradually further and further from the shore. When he looked upward, the treetops had disappeared, but he soon found that the canoe was slowly turning, so as to prevent his getting a view of anything at his peephole but of the two extremities of the lake. He now bethought him of the stick, which was crooked, and offered some facilities for rowing, without the necessity of rising. The experiment succeeded, on trial, better even than he had hoped, though his great embarrassment was to keep the canoe straight. That his present maneuver was seen soon became apparent by the clamor on the shore, and a bullet entering the stern of the canoe, traversed its length, whistling between the arms of our hero, and passed out at the head. This satisfied the fugitive that he was getting away with tolerable speed and induced him to increase his efforts. He was making a stronger push than common when another messenger from the point broke the stick outboard and at once deprived him of his oar. As the sound of voices seemed to grow more and more distant, however, Deerslayer determined to leave all to the drift, until he believed himself beyond the reach of bullets. This was nervous work, but it was the wisest of all the expedients that offered; and the young man was encouraged to persevere in it by the circumstance that he felt his face fanned by the air, a proof that there was a little more wind.

7. **friends:** Natty's closest friend, the Delaware brave Chingachgook, and several others are waiting at Muskrat Castle.

Reading Check

1. Which of the Hurons is Deerslayer's foremost supporter? Which one is his most dangerous enemy?
2. Why has Deerslayer been summoned to stand trial?
3. What offer of conciliation is made by the Huron chief?
4. How does the Panther receive his death wound?
5. Where does Deerslayer head after leaving the woods?

For Study and Discussion

Analyzing and Interpreting the Selection

1. In the Leatherstocking Tales, nature often serves as a solemn, dignified setting for important human actions. How is the natural setting given religious significance as Natty first approaches the gathered Hurons?
2. Authority among the Hurons is divided between two chiefs. What different qualities of leadership are illustrated in Rivenoak and the Panther?
3. Why do the Hurons, after meeting in council, invite Natty to join their tribe and to change his "heart" from Delaware to Huron?
4. Natty, in his escape, cannot hope to simply outrun so many pursuers. **a.** What tricks show his wilderness skills? **b.** What particular trick fails to fool the Hurons?
5. You have seen that John Smith's account of the Indians in Virginia (page 16) reveals an *ambivalent* attitude. There are qualities about the Indians that he liked and others he disliked. Do you find a similar ambivalence in Cooper's presentation of the Hurons?

Focus on Literary Analysis

Examining Elements of Fiction

Reading a work critically helps you to explore ideas for a literary analysis. As you read, look for the elements of the work. The following list includes the basic **elements of fiction:**

Setting: the time and place of a story
Character: a person (sometimes an animal or a thing) in a story
Plot: the ordered sequence of events
Point of View: the vantage point from which a story is told
Theme: the main insight or idea that a story reveals about life

Reread the excerpt from Cooper's *The Deerslayer*. As you read, note how Cooper uses the literary elements listed above. Then hold a discussion with a friend or a small group of classmates to compare notes. Save your writing.

Connecting Cultures

Truth or Fiction? Portrayals of American Indians

Although Cooper was famous for his portrayal of American Indians, it is unlikely that he had much, if any, direct contact with Native Americans. Many readers have noted that Cooper's characterizations of American Indians tend to be too good (Rivenoak) or too vicious (Panther) to be believable. In portraying individuals either as "noble savages" or "savage fiends," Cooper capitalized on popular stereotypes of American Indians. Such stereotypes, widely accepted by white settlers, created many problems between the two cultures.

Making Connections: Activities

Form a group to discuss how movies and television shows have depicted Native Americans. (Recent films you or your classmates might have seen include *The Last of the Mohicans, Dances with Wolves,* and *Geronimo.*) Are the depictions stereotypical? If so, in what way? Think about possible motives of the scriptwriter, the producer, and the director. Might they have wanted to heighten contrast, draw an explicit moral, present myths—or debunk them? Prepare a written or oral report of the group's conclusions.