TWELVE ORIGINAL ESSAYS

EDITED BY CHARLES SHAPIRO

ON

GREAT AMERICAN NOVELS

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essays by

JOHN W. ALDRIDGE
RICHARD CHASE
MALCOLM COWLEY
DAVID BRION DAVIS
GEORGE P. ELLIOTT
HERBERT GOLD
GRANVILLE HICKS
ALFRED KAZIN
WALTER B. RIDEOUT
CHARLES SHAPIRO
MARK SPILKA
BERNARD WEISBERGER

TWELVE ORIGINAL ESSAYS

is a collection of critical essays on important American novels, including The Scarlet Letter, Moby Dick, Huckleberry Finn, The Ambassadors, The Great Gatsby *and* Light in August. *Among the contributors are such important contemporary critics as Malcolm Cowley, Granville Hicks, George P. Elliott, John Aldridge, Mark Spilka and Alfred Kazin. Each essayist had complete freedom in discussing his chosen novel, and the result is an eclectic volume of criticism characterized by the writers' enthusiasm for their subjects.*

Charles Shapiro, the editor, is a well known writer on the contemporary American scene. His articles have appeared in the New Republic *and* The Nation.

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INTRODUCTION

This collection of critical essays on twelve important American novels is a tribute to the variety and intensity of our contemporary critics. Each contributor has been given complete freedom to discuss his chosen book in any way he saw fit. As a result we have an eclectic approach, bound together only by each essayist's enthusiasm for his subject. These careful and often exciting studies should prove of value to those to whom literature is a vital part of life, offering new insights and, most important of all, stimulating a reading or rereading of the novels.

The American novel has survived being ignored, scorned, and cubbyholed. Communists, Neo-Humanists, super New Critics, scholars—all have been at work taking

from the books only that material which fitted their purposes. Yet, despite the nibblings of the special pleaders and the PhD candidates, the novels remain as part of our American experience—to be studied, discussed, and loved. For as George P. Elliott remarks in his essay on *Huckleberry Finn*, "a novel is not just a work of art: it is, somehow, a work of life as well."

Art, according to Edmund Wilson, "is that which gives meaning to experience," and as I hope to point out in my piece on *Jennie Gerhardt*, our experiences and their translation into fiction are many and diverse. A book such as *The Deerslayer*, for example, may seem oddly remote from us, yet David Brion Davis shows how some of our modern problems are boldly outlined in Cooper's novel. The avaricious trapper, the saintly, heroic Leatherstocking, symbolize "possible meanings of the American democracy." The trapper becomes "one of the unhappy concomitants to continental expansion," while Leatherstocking, crude and naive, demonstrates the potentialities of our frontier society.

Later on, the American hero would become more cunning, less innocent. An admirable contrast to Leatherstocking is found in F. Scott Fitzgerald's Gatsby, described by John Aldridge as "a major figure in the legend created by the complex fate of being American." Gatsby, a self-appointed modern agent for the American Dream, is "the hero of the tragic limitations of that fate in the modern, materialistic world." And Aldridge finds dramatic justification for a scene at the close of the novel where Nick tells of Gatsby's aspiration "to the feelings aroused in the early Dutch voyagers to America by their first glimpse of the 'fresh green breast of the new world.'"

We learn about America, but we also learn about our-

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selves. As Herbert Gold puts it in his discussion of *Winesburg, Ohio*, "We remember our fears and guilts, and are reminded of ourselves as great literature always reminds us." In Anderson's book, ". . . all of the people of Winesburg haunt us as do our neighbors, our friends, our own secret selves which we met one springtime in childhood."

And we learn about the changing problems of a fast moving society. In his essay on *The Sun Also Rises* Mark Spilka shows how Hemingway recognized a persistent tragedy of our lives, "caught it whole and delivered it in lasting fictional form." Out of an elaborate parable on the death of love in World War I, Hemingway constructs an allegory based on despair and hope, an allegory given life through "the most concrete style in American fiction."

Bernard Weisberger discusses how the timing of *The Red Badge of Courage* gives it "the status of a special problem in the sociology of art." We still glorify the era of Grant and Lee, sanctifying a bloody and brutal conflict, yet Crane's novel did much to expose the holy myth of the Civil War, and the fact remains that "a fundamental national experience such as war itself is translated into different kinds of art under different conditions."

Alfred Kazin follows a brilliant study of *Light in August* by speculating on what our contemporary novels tell us about man today. "More and more, not merely the American novel, but all serious novels, are concerned with men who are not real enough to themselves to be in serious conflict with other men. Their conflicts . . . are 'internal,' for they are seeking to become *someone*."

But these essays do more than tell us how the novels reflect our lives; they are also close studies of the novels themselves, textual analyses of style, form, and method. The

sharp readings of *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, and *The House of Mirth* prove how rewarding such an approach can be in teaching us about the art and architecture of the novel. Malcolm Cowley discovers in *The Scarlet Letter* "the first novel in English . . . that had the unity of effect and the strict economy of means of a perfect tale," for he sees Hawthorne's work as close to stage drama. Cowley believes that the novel can be read, and gains a new dimension from being read, as a Racinian drama of dark necessity, and he shows how the twenty-four chapters, considered as drama, fall into five acts (eight scenes in all). Granville Hicks studies *Moby Dick* and finds that Melville "was determined to employ, as Shakespeare had done, any style that served his purpose. . . . And he calls upon the democratic God to bear witness that one may find on any social level men worthy of such treatment." Walter Rideout states that Edith Wharton "unites a strong sense of form and a robust sense for the details of experience," and he goes on to demonstrate his contention with a careful study of *The House of Mirth.*

In selecting the contributors for this book, I have tried to represent many viewpoints, and I have tried to avoid choosing men who admire blindly. Our novels, like our novelists, are far from perfect, and able criticism should include censure. Richard Chase, after exploring the leading images of *The Ambassadors*, "the penetration into the labyrinth of life and of immersion in the flow of experience," properly praises and cleverly interprets a difficult novel. Yet he adds, "We wish that in the writing of the book James' automatic facility had encountered a more punishing opposition from an ever-renewed sense of reality."

Many people have kindly offered advice while this

volume was in the daydream stage. I would especially like to thank Dr. Richard Ellmann of Northwestern University, Dr. Newton P. Stallknecht of Indiana University, Professor Alexander Brede, Editor, and Dr. Harold Basilius, Director, of Wayne State University Press. Above all, I am indebted to the contributors who gave of their time, energy, and wisdom.

I am dedicating this book to the memory of Dr. Richard Hudson.

C. S.

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THE DEERSLAYER, A DEMOCRATIC KNIGHT OF THE WILDERNESS

COOPER, 1841

by DAVID BRION DAVIS

In the Leatherstocking series Fenimore Cooper hoped to create the Great American Epic. Like Cotton Mather and Joel Barlow in earlier generations, he was convinced that American history offered a theme equal, if not superior, to the themes of Homer and Virgil. For Cooper, as for many of his countrymen, there was no subject with greater drama and significance than the destiny of Christian morality in the American wilderness. More explicitly, he was concerned with the relation between Christian morality and the skills necessary in America for survival and exploitation, the skills esteemed and cultivated by the self-sufficient and individualistic woodsman hero. An attempt to com-

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bine Homeric heroism and Christian sainthood in the figure of the American pioneer was doomed to certain failure, but it was a magnificent failure, and, in a larger sense, America's failure. In spite of his serious faults as a convincing character, Leatherstocking stands as not only the greatest, but as the prototype, of American fictional heroes. With all his shortcomings as an artist Cooper must be taken as one of the few writers whose imagination gave form to American ideals, and whose plots, however juvenile, dealt directly with problems basic to the American experience.

Although *The Deerslayer* was the last of the Leatherstocking tales to be published (appearing in 1841, nineteen years after *The Pioneers*), chronologically it is the first of the five romances which trace the history of Leatherstocking from the first test of manhood to the noble exploits of an aged Odysseus on the American prairies. Thus Cooper concluded the saga by returning to his hero's youth, to "the first war-path" (the subtitle of the romance), and we must not forget that the callow hunter who exclaims in wonder at the shimmering expanse of Lake Otsego was conceived in the light of a mature Leatherstocking, whose character had been fully developed in previous tales. As a result, *The Deerslayer* is not the story of a youth showing promise of future heroism, but is rather a portrayal of the fresh innocence, spontaneous honesty, and supreme courage of a famous hero's early manhood.

It is impossible to understand Cooper, or for that matter the mass of popular adventure fiction indebted to him, unless we recognize that his narratives were intended to reveal ideal modes of action. Cooper was primarily a moralist, that is to say, an expounder of a particular code of morality, not a philosopher seeking moral truth in the am-

biguities of human experience. While he strove to arouse interest and suspense, his contrived episodes were but devices for conveying moral values in specific terms. The rather monotonous rhythm of capture and escape does not represent a genuine and unpredictable struggle between human beings. On the contrary, the intense concentration on physical action illustrates fixed differences in individual skill and morality. Cooper's characters are essentially unchanging, ideal types, and he was more interested in showing facets of each character as revealed by varieties of physical experience than in tracing the development or fulfillment of a given person. If his tales sacrifice psychological reality, they succeed in portraying the social significance of contrasting states of morality.

Before turning to the moral implications of the romance, however, we must first briefly summarize the action, for it is only in action that Cooper's characters reveal their fundamental differences. In his tale of the first war path Cooper's narrative covers only six days and the action is limited to the shores and surface of Lake Otsego, or the Glimmerglass. It is a summer in the early 1740's, and war has just broken out between the English and the French, leaving the Otsego country, though nominally British, a kind of no-man's land between hostile forces. Cooper incorrectly places the Hurons on the side of the French, while making the Delawares, who are supposed to be morally superior to the Iroquois, loyal to England. Deerslayer has been reared by the Delawares, but his Indian training in hunting and warfare has been softened somewhat by the Christian pietism of Moravian missionaries. Before the story opens, Deerslayer has set out alone through the forest for the Glimmerglass, where he plans a rendezvous with Chingachgook, an

Indian friend. The purpose of the expedition is to help Chingachgook rescue his betrothed, the beautiful Delaware maiden, Wah-ta!-Wah (the Wild Rose), who has been kidnapped by a Delaware traitor and taken to a Huron camp.

Traveling toward the Glimmerglass, which he has never seen before, Deerslayer meets and accompanies Hurry Harry, a gigantic young hunter bound for the same country. Harry is returning to the lake to woo Judith Hutter, a coquettish, beautiful, and high-spirited girl who is visited frequently by hunters and English officers from the settlements, and who lives at the lake with her father and half-witted sister Hetty. Tom Hutter is not, however, the real father of Judith and Hetty, but a former pirate who took the girls, their mother, and a chest of booty to the Glimmerglass, where he traps muskrat and lives securely beyond the reach of the law. The three Hutters (for the mother died) live in a "castle" built on a shoal in the lake, but spend part of their time in a houseboat or "ark" which is used for trapping and which in war-time gives the family command of the Glimmerglass.

On the first day of the narrative Deerslayer and Harry arrive at the lake, Deerslayer is introduced to the Hutters, and a band of Hurons makes a surprise attack on the ark. The Hurons, who are returning to the Canadas from a hunting trip, have just learned of the war and hope to take scalps to the French for bounties. If the Hutters and their friends can protect themselves for a few days, and keep the Hurons from capturing a canoe and gaining access to the castle, they are sure to be saved by British soldiers from the settlements. But while the men succeed in securing all available canoes, Tom Hutter and Hurry Harry are captured by the Hurons when they foolishly launch a night

scalping raid of their own. The British also offer bounties for scalps, and it is this official barbarism which arouses the woodsmen's greed, thereby igniting a chain reaction of violence.

On the second morning Deerslayer kills his first Indian. Left to defend the Hutter girls by himself, he attempts to retrieve a canoe which has drifted ashore, and is forced to shoot a Huron brave who attacks him. At sunset of the second day Chingachgook joins Deerslayer and helps him defend the castle and the Hutter girls. On the third day Deerslayer bargains with the Huron chief, who returns Tom and Harry in exchange for some ivory chess pieces which Judith and Deerslayer have taken from Hutter's pirate chest. But Deerslayer himself is captured by the hostile Indians when he helps Chingachgook rescue Wah-ta!-Wah. Although the Hurons already respect Deerslayer's prowess, they are furious over the loss of the Delaware maiden, and they become still more angered when Harry impulsively shoots a Huron girl. It seems only a matter of time, then, before Deerslayer will be tortured, killed, and scalped.

On the fourth day the Indians temporarily seize the castle and scalp Tom Hutter, but Hurry Harry escapes to the ark after a tremendous struggle. When Chingachgook, Harry, and the girls finally repossess the castle, Deerslayer arrives unexpectedly on a "furlough" granted him by his Huron captors. The Indians, knowing his reputation, accept his word that he will return by noon the following day. Harry, who has meanwhile been unsuccessful in courting Judith, leaves for the settlement, at once abandoning the Hutter girls and promising to send British troops as soon as possible. Judith has fallen in love with Deerslayer, but her provocative advances are either ignored or gently re-

pulsed. At noon the next day he manfully returns to face torture and death at the Huron camp.

The Hurons, impressed by Deerslayer's courage and integrity, offer to spare him if he will marry the widow of the brave he killed. But he refuses to be adopted into the tribe, and, free from his pledge of honor, he escapes into the woods, only to be recaptured after an exciting chase. Even the most vindictive of the Hurons admire his cool bravery during the preliminary torture, yet death is delayed only by the arrival of the feeble-minded Hetty Hutter, who preaches Christian forgiveness to the Indians, and by Judith, who arouses stupefied wonder among the savages when she poses as a queen, appearing in a magnificent brocaded gown taken from the pirate chest. But just as Deerslayer is finally about to be killed, Chingachgook, Harry, and the king's troops spring from the forest. Hetty is accidentally shot in the battle, and she dies urging Harry, whom she secretly loves, to be more like Deerslayer. In a final appeal Judith openly proposes marriage to the young hunter, but he loftily declines her offer. The first war path is over, and it is time for Deerslayer to move beyond the suspended and timeless arena where he has drawn his first human blood.

In the action we have just summarized, character types are differentiated according to moral adjustment to wilderness life and behavior toward the opposite sex. Judith Hutter represents the manners and values of civilization, isolated but essentially unchanged by the surrounding wilderness. Her beauty is entirely external and is thus divorced from natural moral purity. Indeed, before the story opens, her personal vanity and infatuation with fine clothes, gay parties, and handsome men had led to her seduction by Captain Warley, a British officer at the neigh-

boring fort. Though deeply repentant, Judith can never escape the limitations of her own nature. Cooper hints at the close of the tale that she ultimately became Warley's mistress in England. Yet she prefers Deerslayer's honesty to Harry's handsome physique, and would gladly forsake the comforts of civilization to become the loyal wife of Leatherstocking. Chastened by her unhappy affair with Captain Warley, Judith is cautious, rational, and practiced in her handling of men. Her resourcefulness, her pragmatic intelligence, and her frank sexuality make her Cooper's strongest heroine. She seems to typify the American woman who is forever torn between her enviable freedom and power over men and her passionate yearning for the security of a passive and domestic role. But despite her genuinely feminine impulses, Judith is hopelessly tainted by the values of an artificial civilization. Regardless of her desire, she must remain alienated from the divine harmony of nature.

Hetty Hutter lacks both the intelligence and brilliant attractiveness of her sister, but her beauty and morality rest upon an inner harmony and not upon a rational adjustment to external experience. Of all the characters in *The Deerslayer*, Hetty is least capable of manipulating her environment, for she utterly lacks a sense of expediency and self-interest, and cannot distinguish the actual from the ideal. But if isolation from the world of physical reality leaves her impotent and inarticulate, for Cooper she suggests the nobility of mute nature itself. Her naïve pronouncements, however unrealistic, are revelations from a source so pure that even the Hurons respect and try to understand her words. Hetty loves Hurry Harry because her inexperience and feeble understanding prevent her from seeing his serious faults, but unlike her more perceptive sister, she is saved

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