

# Frontier Anxiety and the American Indian in the Fiction of Cooper and Simms

*Abida Benkhodja*

Magister in American Literature and Civilization, Lecturer of American Studies in the Department of Languages and English Literature  
Abderrahmane Mira University, Béjaia, Algeria

Doi: 10.19044/llc.v5no4a2

[URL:http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/llc.v5no4a2](http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/llc.v5no4a2)

---

## Abstract

This research examines the opposition between the American Indian and civilization in two selected nineteenth-century frontier romances: James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* (1823) and William Gilmore Simms's *The Yemassee: a Romance of Carolina* (1835). The proposed study represents the effects of civilization and its role in forming a collective anxiety within the American Indian community. It aims at depicting cultural anxiety as a product of the confrontation between man and civilization on the American frontier: on the margins of the settlements in the two novels. This paper is based on Sigmund Freud's assumption that civilization is largely responsible for the misery of humankind and that experiencing anxiety stems from the destructive forces of the external world or from man's relationship to man.

---

**Keywords:** Anxiety, civilization, frontier, American Indians.

## Introduction

The conflicts that arise in the selected novels of Cooper and Simms are mainly due to the intrusion of civilization in the American Indians' natural world and traditional life. This intrusion causes "anxiety" as a response to the tension occurring on the frontier: on the margins of the settlements in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* and in William Gilmore Simms's *The Yemassee*. Anxiety is a major part of American life. In this context, it shall not be considered as a symptom of clinical disorders but as "a mass cultural phenomenon". Collective anxieties are products of cultural dynamics, and my concern is on the dynamics that are at work in American society in the novels.

Bast et al (2014) contend that widespread anxiety is specific to the present and "that the contemporary moment in the United States is particularly prone to producing anxiety"; however, it was also present in the early centuries of the United States formation. The anxiety that is evoked in *The Pioneers* and

*The Yemassee* is constructed on a conflict between a yearning for the pastoral ideal and the actual violent intrusion of an external culture in the American Indians' world. This contention could be supported by Sigmund Freud's well thought assumptions about the discontents of civilization.

Freud (1962) discusses in *Civilization and its Discontents* the role of civilization and makes it responsible for the misery of humankind. "This contention holds that what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery, and that we should be much happier if we gave it up and return to primitive conditions"(p.33). Freud notes that at the origin of human suffering lie three historical factors which create disillusionment with human civilization: the victory of Christendom over pagan religions; the discovery and conquest of primitive tribes and peoples, who, to Europeans seemed to be living more happily in a state of nature; and the scientific identification of the mechanisms of neuroses, which are caused by the frustrating demands put on the individual by modern society (p.33). A reduction of those demands or the individual's withdrawal from the society that impose them would lead to greater happiness. In regard to the third factor, Freud contends "that the abolition or reduction of those demands would result in a return to possibilities of happiness" (p.34).

For the regulation of social relationships, a "decisive step" toward civilization lies in the replacement of the individual by the power of a community. Civilized societies place the rule of law over individual instincts, and this is one way by which civilization imposes restrictions on the liberty of the individual. In order to avoid anxiety, man employs various strategies for this purpose, among these, man voluntarily isolates himself as a reaction to the third source of unpleasure. But, according to Freud, another important way to steer clear of it is becoming a member of the human community (p.35). Thus, the behavior that should be adopted to achieve happiness and avoid anxiety depends on the interaction of the individual with his environment. From this perspective, in the analysis of the selected novels of Cooper and Simms, major research questions will be considered: How could civilization be responsible for anxiety as a mass cultural phenomenon? And how could civilization be particularly responsible for the misery of the American Indian?

The term 'frontier anxiety' is used by David M. Wrobel (1993) to refer to the anxiety that the closing of the frontier generated among white expansionists. In this study, I use the term to refer to the anxiety that results from the opening of the frontier, and that occurs on the margins of the settlements in the fiction of Cooper and Simms, but that majorly affects Native Americans. The following sections will be devoted to showing the anxiety that is engendered by the clash between man and civilization in the two novels. It stems from the external force that, according to Freud, may range against the

individual with merciless forces of destruction (p.20). It can also emanate from the individual's relations to other men.

### **Cooper and Simms's Fiction**

Nineteenth century historical romances are predominated by the frontier tale, the plantation romance and the western. The frontier romance encapsulates an important and predominant concern which is the theme of national identity as related to the prominent features of the territory and the people constituting the American nation. Other elements recurring in the 19<sup>th</sup> century historical romances are "melodramatic battles, love stories, rescues in the wild, settlers, newcomers, and skilled Boone-like woodsmen, and beautiful women" (Crane, 2007, p. 40). Frontier romances share plots centering on the conflict between white settlers and Indians and their interest lies in tracing positive and negative characterization of Indians. For example, in *The Pioneers* (1823), James Fenimore Cooper portrays Natty Bumppo or Leatherstocking "somewhere between savagism and civilization, *the beau ideal* of the frontiersman, with all the goodness and greatness that the pioneer could have in the circumstances of pioneering" (Pearce, 1953, p. 202). Cooper tells the story of Templeton, the actual "Cooperstown", governed by Judge Temple. The story centers on Judge Temple's acquisition of the land that the Effingham family had lost after the Revolutionary war, and it is constructed on the opposition between Natty Bumppo who is considered as the spokesman for natural law, and Judge Marmaduke Temple who represents civil law.

Another frontier romance which illustrates the conflict between white settlers and Indians is William Gilmore Simms' semi-fictional work: *The Yemassee: A Romance of Carolina*, first published in 1835. In this novel, the Southern American writer deals with Indian Enslavement, black slavery, and the clash between greedy white South Carolinians and the Yemassee, an unknown Indian tribe. The novel is structured on racial conflict and the inevitability of native displacement, and it is set on the South Carolina frontier. Simms' depiction of the American Indian is more realistic than Cooper's; his personal travels through Indian lands made him render Indian culture in greater depth. But though the title of the tale indicates that it is a frontier romance, it also tackles the most important issue for Simms that was much debated in the beginning of the nineteenth century: the future of black slavery.

Besides being a story about the extermination of an Indian race, *The Yemassee* is also a defense of slavery, and the relation between races in the novel also entails the master-slave relation. The intention of Simms in writing the novel is two-dimensional, defending the institution of slavery and foretelling the future of the American nation. He portrays "Sanutee", the Indian chief and major character, as a noble savage possessing the virtues that show this nobility. Sanutee refuses dependency; he is honorable and heroic

and denigrates degradation. He is depicted by Critic Joseph Kelly (2012) as a tragic hero, exerting “a heroic, ineffectual struggle against inescapable fate”(p.56).

### **Civilization and Anxiety in *The Pioneers* and *The Yemassee***

The monopolization of the wilderness by the white American settlers in Cooper's *The Pioneers* occurs on the margins of the settlement that is founded by Judge Marmaduke Temple. The rapid destruction of natural resources in the novel is causing a growing anxiety in Natty Bumppo, the major character and defender of America's natural resources. The latter expresses his worries about the loss of hunting grounds and the deforestation of the land as civilization spreads out. Rumbinas (2012) argues that “The European agrarian model of settlement made the clearing of the forest necessary in order for the settlers to survive. As more and more settlers arrived seeking land, the allure of felling and burning trees for ready cash was a great enticement for poor settlers to move to the frontier areas” (p.319). In the novel, Judge Temple saw the necessity of taming the frontier for agricultural use. As a land speculator, he profited from the clearing of forests and their transformation into agricultural lands.

James Cooper's view was already expressed by St John de Crèvecoeur. The pastoral ideal and the image of the growing American agricultural society that Crèvecoeur (1904) portrayed in his letters became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth century American culture. Henry Nash Smith (1950) notes that the pioneers “plowed the virgin land and put in crops, and the great Interior Valley was transformed into a garden: for the imagination, the Garden of the World”(Chapter XI, para.2). In James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* (1823), this garden is disrupted by civilization. As the frontier is pushed back, Natty Bumppo is always moving west. He can only survive on the margins of society. Natty urges the other settlers as the sheriff and Billy Kirby to use the wilderness only to sustain themselves and not to kill animals just for sport. He clarifies this view to Judge Marmaduke Temple in the beginning of the novel,

There's them living who say that Nathaniel Bumppo's right to shoot on these hills is of older date than Marmaduke Temple's right to forbid him”, he said. “But if there is a law about it at all, though who ever heard of a law that a man shouldn't kill deer where he pleased!-but if there is a law at all, it should be to be to keep people from the use of smooth-bores. A body never knows where his head will fly, when he pulls the trigger of one of them uncertain firearms.(Cooper, 1823, p.17)

Cooper shows man's predatory attitudes towards nature, he outlines “the pattern of protest” against the slaughter of birds and animals through “Judge Temple's advocacy of conservation and Natty's denunciations of the settlers' “wasty ways””(Philbrick, 1964, p.584). In the beginning of the tale,

Temple's notes on the past represent the image of an undisturbed wilderness; the later scenes, however, are different. The pioneers slaughter countless pigeons, and nature is abused by the settlers' extravagance. Natty's urge for the conservation of nature for practical use is exemplified in his reaction at the onslaught of pigeons. In April, the citizens of Templeton who are directed by Richard Jones, the Sheriff and cousin of Judge Temple, shot flocks of pigeons migrating northward. Accordingly, thousands of birds are slain wastefully and Natty Bumppo condemns the carnage as it represents an aggression against nature.

This comes of settling a country! he said. Here have I known the pigeon to fly for forty long years, and, till you made your clearings, there was nobody to skeart or to hurt them, I loved to see them come into the woods, for they were company to the body, hurting nothing-being as it was, as harmless as a garter- snake. But now it gives me sore thoughts when I hear the frighty things whizzing through the air, for I know it's only a motion to bring out all the brats of the village. Well, the lord won't see the waste of his creatures for nothing, and Right will be done to the pigeons, as well as others, by and by. (Cooper, 1823, p.216).

When Temple acknowledges all the extravagance of his townsmen in dealing with natural resources, he blames Billy Kirby, the woodchopper, for deforesting the country. "You are not exempt from the censure yourself, Kirby, he said, for you make dreadful wounds in these trees where a small incision would effect the same object. I earnestly beg you will remember that they are the growth of centuries, and when once gone none living will see their loss remedied"(Cooper,1823,p.199).As Temple's character demonstrates a susceptibility to the settlers' use of the land, he is also unable to establish laws to constrain this use. The landscape in Templeton is established by a civilization that imposes its traits of wastefulness and arrogance.

The anxiety that Natty Bumppo faces is related to the destruction of nature, and because he cannot overcome and avoid it, he voluntarily isolates himself. This anxiety is caused by civilization that Freud defines as majorly responsible for the misery of mankind. Natty Bumppo escapes this misery through his withdrawal from the society that imposes the demands of civilization. He is thrust from society and enjoys freedom only in the wilderness; in the end, he leaves to the west in a self-willed retreat and escapes the fallen world of civilization. According to Cheyfitz (1993), Bumppo exemplifies "the individualist who, relying upon himself and the wilderness around him, pursued without qualification the laws of Nature's God" (p.118).

Natty Bumppo, who lives in his cabin with the Delaware Indian Chingachgook, known as the white hunter John Mohegan, considers judge Temple as his enemy. This fact is illustrated in one discussion between Chingachgook and Bumppo. As Chingachgook gets drunk and brags of his

victories, Natty says: “Why do you sing of your battles, Chingachgook,... when the worst enemy of all is near you and keeps the Young Eagle from his rights ?” (Cooper, 1823, p. 143). Obviously in the tale, the Indian’s rights to the land are represented by Natty Bumppo and his Indian companion Chingachgook. Chingachgook’s death and Natty Bumppo’s retreat mark the inevitability of the alienation process that is produced by man’s relationship to the law and to civilization as a destructive force. Chingachgook’s death also parallels Leatherstocking’s retreat before the expansion of civilization. “.....now I thought was the time to get a little comfort in the close of my days”, Leatherstocking addressed Elizabeth Temple, “Woods! Indeed! I doesn’t call these woods, Madam Effingham, where I lose myself every day of my life in the clearings.” (Cooper, 1823, p.403).

In *The Pioneers*, the American Indian character’s experience of unhappiness stems from the external world with its definitely destructive forces which is the second contention Freud makes to explain the causes of unhappiness. Natty could not adapt to the external environment, to civilized life, and he is drawn into the outer edge of the extending forests ahead.

The frontier is also the setting of much of William Gilmore Simms’s work. It represents “the center of cultural confrontation” (Grantham, 1997, p.106). The existence of the American garden was in peril as landlordism was imposing itself on the American colonies, and this belief was much more engrained in the American Indian’s mind than in the white’s even before the westward movement began. The anxiety that the chief Indian character in Simms’ *The Yemassee* experiences is an expression of the American Indian’s concern over the future of his race in the light of an imposed civilization.

Grantham (1997) contends that “the frontier is a defining element of cultural confrontation”(p.108), it is this confrontation that engenders anxiety. The Indian in *The Yemassee*, represented by the character of Sanutee, is the one who must face and combat his inner fears as the fear of losing his identity, dignity, culture and land. Becoming part of the white man’s civilization is the ultimate choice that could save the Yemassee Indian, but this alternative is inconceivable to Sanutee as well as his tribe. Sanutee is determined to confront the expansion of the white settlers and could not accept the way his people were led to destitution as was his son Oconestoga. According to the chief, his people are bought “with painted glass, and red cloth, and strong water”( Simms, 1866, p.89). Sanutee laments this situation: “Manneyto be with my people”, he claims, “for the chiefs are slaves to the English; and they will give the big forests of my fathers to be cut down by the accursed axes of the pale-face. But they blind me not they buy not Sanutee! The knife must have blood the Yemassee must have his home with the old grave of his father”( Simms, 1866, p.89).

The anxiety of Sanutee starts growing at the intrusion of trade with the whites and ends at the novel's major resolution: the tragic war between his tribe and the English. Sanutee does not trust the English traders and unveils their treachery. When the chief of an English deputation, Sir Edmund Bellinger, wants to offer a coat to Sanutee, the latter replies skeptically: "Our English brother is good, But Sanutee asks not for the cloak. Does Sanutee complain of the cold?". "Does the white chief come to the great council of the Yemassee as a fur trader? Would he have skin for his coat?" (Simms, 1866, p.95). And as Bellinger admits at last that "the English do want to buy some of the land of (sanutee's) people", the Indian chief shows his strong determination not to sell the land of his people and addresses his tribesmen urging them to consider their situation:

It is good Chiefs of the Yemassee, now hear. Why comes the English to the lodge of our people? Why comes he with a red coat to the chief why brings he beads and paints for the eye of a little boy? Why brings he the strong water for the young man? Why makes he long speeches, full of smooth words why does he call us brother? He wants our lands. But we have no lands to sell. The lands came from our fathers they must go to our children. They do not belong to us to sell they belong to our children to keep. We have sold too much land, and the old turkey, before the sun sinks behind the trees, can fly over all the land that is ours ( Simms,1866,p.97).

The conflict between the Yemassee Indians and the Californians is extended in the second part of the novel as Simms moves to the description of the bloody war that opposed them. In this part, Simms describes the Indian warfare as merciless and savage in its ways. The struggle that Simms uses as the backdrop for *The Yemassee* dates back to the fifteenth century, to the struggle between Spain and England to take over the Californian coast. Different wars took place before the Yemassee war between the two rivals for the appropriation of the coast. Ann Mary Wimsatt (1989) notes for example that "there were recurrent battles between pioneers and Indians- the Westo War of 1673, the Stono War of 1674, and of course the Yemassee War in 1715" (p.41). In the second part of the novel, Sanutee's anxiety is heightened at the approach of his death as he tells Matiwan about the inescapable fate of his nation. Death seems to Sanutee the best resort because of the inevitable expansion of the whites' civilization. "It is good, Matiwan", Sanutee tells his wife,

The well-beloved has no people. The Yemassee has bones in the thick woods, and there are no young braves to sing the song of his glory. The *Coosah-moray-te* is on the bosom of the Yemassee, with the foot of the great bear of Apalatchie. He makes his bed in the old home of Pocota-ligo, like a fox that burrows in the hill-side. We may not drive him away. It is good for

Sanutee to die with his people. Let the song of his dying be sung.(Simms, 1866, p.453)

The description of Sanutee's death is brief and centers on the sad end of the Yemassee race. Sanutee's anxiety ends as he utters his last words, the song of death. His ultimate goal was to preserve his nation from extinction and stop the white flux westward, but as he dies, everything he represents also dies. "Life went with the last effort, when, thinking only of the strife for his country, his lips parted feebly with the cry of battle- 'Sangarra-me, Yemassee-Sangarra -me- Sangarra- me'!"(Simms, 1866, p.454).

The destruction of the Yemassee in the novel seems to be a part of the order of things that it becomes acceptable. Sanutee's experience stems mainly from the external world, as well as from his relations to the white man. The most dangerous society as Freud contends is the one in which the leader is "exalted" and individuals do not acquire a sense of identity. In the novel, Lord Craven is the 'exalted' leader while the other characters as Sanutee are subjects. The Indian chief's combat to surpass his anxiety is rather related to the fear of losing his identity, dignity and culture, and his death and alienation also result from this struggle.

## Conclusion

Simms and Cooper prescribe in their works the unique traits of the American character; however, the colonial settlements of the eastern seaboard had as their leaders the wealthy and educated hereditary aristocracy of old England as it is portrayed in the selected novels. Both Simms and Cooper depict the formation of "a mixed race" on the frontier and an advancing civilization that Freud defines as responsible for a widespread cultural anxiety. The two authors render the American Indian fatalistically lost and part of a mythic past. His withdrawal from the society that imposes the restrictions of civilization would lead him to greater happiness. In *The Pioneers* and *The Yemassee*, the authors attempt to romanticize Native American life in compensation for its destruction; the impossibility of the protagonists to adapt to the external environment generates a growing anxiety that majorly reflects the clash between nature and civilization. The frontier, in these novels, is a doorway through which expansion could become effective at the expense of the American Indian's distress and loss of his territory.

## References

1. Bast, F. et al.(2014).Introduction: American Anxieties.*aspeers* 7, 7-16. Retrieved from <http://www.aspeers.com>.
2. Cheyfitz,E.(1993). Savage Law: The Plot Against American Indians in Johnson and Graham's Lessee V.M'Intosh and The Pionners".In



- A.Kaplan & D. E.Pease (Eds). *Cultures of United States Imperialism* .  
Durham and London: Duke University Press.
3. Cooper, J.F.(1823). *The Pioneers*. Retrieved from <http://www.feedbooks.com>.
  4. Crane, C.(2007).*The Cambridge Introduction to the Nineteenth-Century American Novel*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
  5. De Crèvecoeur, S.J.(1904). *Letters from an American Farmer*. New York: New York, Fox, Duffield & Company.
  6. Freud, S.(1962). *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York, NY, US: W W Norton & Co.
  7. Goldberg, C.(2013). Classic Revisited: A Native Vision of Justice. *MICH. L. REV.* 835-854.
  8. Grantham, N. (1997).Simms's Frontier: A Collision of Cultures.In J.C.Guilds & C.Collins (Eds). *William Gilmore Simms and The American Frontier*.(pp. 105-117).University of GeorgiaPress.
  9. Kelly, J.(2012). The Evolution of Slave Ideology in Simms's *The Yemassee* and *Woodcraft*. *Simms and the Writing of Difference. The Simms Review* 20(1/2), 53- 68.
  10. Pearce R.H. (1953).*The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the Idea of Civilization*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press.
  11. Philbrick,T.(1964). Cooper's *The Pioneers*: Origins and Structure. *PMLA*, 79 (5) ,579-593.
  12. Rumbinas,B.(2012). Reflections of Environmental Anxiety in James Fenimore Cooper's *The pioneers*. Retrieved from [www.ejournals.eu/pliki/art/4675/](http://www.ejournals.eu/pliki/art/4675/).
  13. Simms, W.G.(1866).*The Yemassee : a Romance of Carolina*. New York: W.J. Widdleton, Publisher. Retrieved from <https://books.google.dz>
  14. Smith, H.N. (1950). *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*.Cambridge: HarvardUniversity Press.
  15. Wimsatt, M.A.(1989). *Major Fiction of William Gilmore Simms: Cultural Traditions and Literary Forms*. London: Louisiana State University Press.
  16. Wrobel, D.M.(1993).*The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety From The Old West To The New Deal*. University Press of Kansas.