

# Apocalyptic Imagery and Its Significance in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the meaning and significance of the apocalyptic imagery and metaphors used in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*. It examines the peculiar features and characteristics of the setting of Cooper's novel and studies the ways and techniques through which the prairie is portrayed as an apocalyptic place. Among these techniques is Cooper's use of ocean imagery, the gothic and apocalyptic scenes. This article also examines the importance of the setting of *The Prairie* in underlining Cooper's own attitude towards the causes and origins of the apocalypse. It suggests that the apocalypse is caused by mankind rather than by divine will and that human environmentally-hazardous practices and behaviour are the main causes of the earth's becoming a gloomy and uninhabitable place. In order to emphasize this idea, this paper analyzes two of the most powerful and apocalyptic scenes in Cooper's novel which are the buffalo stampede and the prairie fire. It suggests that these scenes highlight Cooper's warning about the threats and dangers of the thoughtless destruction of the natural environment. Due to the recurrent use of apocalyptic terms, imagery and metaphors, this article suggests that *The Prairie* is the most pessimistic of Cooper's novels and that it announces the death of the author's ideal myths.

**Keywords:** Apocalyptic, barrenness, bleakness, desolation, doom, dreariness, Fenimore Cooper, gloominess, *The Prairie*

## 1. Introduction

Published in 1827, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie* is the third of the Leatherstocking Tales which feature the life and adventures of the heroic frontiersman known as Natty Bumppo and frequently referred to by the name of Leatherstocking. In contrast to the four other Leatherstocking novels, *The Prairie* was not written in Cooper's home territory of north-eastern North America. It is set in the western territories acquired by the Louisiana Purchase and during the time of the Lewis & Clark expedition. Cooper, however, did not visit the Great Plains of the United States and he wrote the novel in Paris. To describe the remote western territories of America, he relied on some published accounts of this region which served as his primary source of information which influenced his conception of the plains. Among these accounts are Paul Allen & Nicholas Biddle's *The History of the Expedition under the Command of Captain Lewis and Clark* (1814) and Edwin James' *An Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains; Performed in the Years 1819 and '20 ... Under the Command of Major Stephen H. Long* (Mielke, 2008, p. 39). Cooper's lack of personal acquaintance with the American West undoubtedly accounts for the improbability of the setting and characters of *The Prairie*. The author himself acknowledges the fact that he was never among the Indians and that his knowledge of them depends exclusively on written materials. For this reason, many critics have argued that Cooper's descriptions of the scenery and natural landscapes in *The Prairie* significantly undermine the historical veracity and authenticity of the novel.

Despite the fact that Cooper's description of the setting in *The Prairie* undermines the historical accuracy of the novel, it evidently emphasizes the power of the writer's imagination and invention. One of the most peculiar features about the setting of *The Prairie* consists in the fact that the plot and actions of this novel do not take place in dense forests, charming woods and breathtaking natural scenery by which Cooper is most often remembered. The absence of the primeval, majestic and Edenic nature in *The Prairie* makes the atmosphere of this novel not only different but also significant due to the fact that it underlines Cooper's deep ecological consciousness and awareness. As White (2006) rightly suggests, "*The Prairie* remains, like other

Leather-Stocking Tales, an important text for ecological criticism” as it is “a pioneering text of ecological consciousness” (pp. 130-140). Cooper’s concern with the relationship between man and nature throughout the novel and his recurrent descriptions of the impacts of reckless settling and the advance of civilization throughout the novel largely justify this idea. In *The Prairie*, Cooper’s emphasis on human accountability to the natural environment and his focus on the changes, transformations and alterations that have happened to the natural world further highlight his ecological consciousness.

Cooper’s environmental awareness has been underscored by many scholars and critics over recent years. Valtiala (1998) claims that Cooper was one of the first native writers of fiction to have a conspicuous interest in the American wilderness and to have “a stake in the environmental undertaking” (p. 20). Despite the fact that Cooper cannot be considered as an environmental activist in the modern sense of the word, he argues, his concern with the health and welfare of the natural environment in *The Prairie* and in other Leatherstocking novels undoubtedly underlines his ecological consciousness. Valtiala further argues that Cooper might largely be considered as “an early precursor of the Green Movement” (p. 9) due to the fact that he introduced environmental ideas and philosophies ahead of their time. This idea has also been articulated by MacDougall (1999) who argues that Cooper has been a prophet of the modern Environmental Movement. In his article, MacDougall suggests that one of Cooper’s main contributions to this movement lies in the fact that the Leatherstocking Tales changed people’s view of nature and the wilderness. While nature was once conceived as evil and as the abode of the devil, Cooper thought that it was a primeval, fascinating and majestic place. Cooper’s novels, according to MacDougall, not only changed people’s attitude towards nature but also introduced many basic principles that are fundamental to the modern Environmental Movement. For example, they presented a view of the wilderness as having an intrinsic or inherent value irrespective of human needs and interests and largely contributed to the widespread consciousness of the necessity of protecting it. In *The Prairie*, Cooper’s environmental awareness is mostly noticeable through the apocalyptic imagery and metaphors that the author tends to use frequently throughout the novel.

## 2. The Prairie as An Apocalyptic Setting

*The Prairie* might be considered as one of Cooper’s most apocalyptic novels due to the fact that it describes numerous apocalyptic scenes and landscapes which denote the author’s own vision of doomsday or how the end of the world might look like in the future. From the beginning of the novel, this idea is noticeable through Cooper’s description of the prairie in which the actions and events of the story take place. Cooper describes it as a “bleak and solitary” (p. 11) place which seems to be not only dull but also frightening. Throughout the novel, Cooper’s emphasis on the bleakness and desolation of the prairie is evident. He portrays it as a “seemingly interminable waste” (p. 74) in which the “sameness and chilling dreariness of the landscape” (p. 13) are its main characteristic. It seems to be a lifeless region whose landscape emphasizes its bleakness and gloominess. All that can be found in this place is the meagre, withered and decaying herbage or grass which the author claims that even the sheep and cattle refused to eat despite their hunger. The situation of the Bush family that has just entered the place is described as being similar or worse than that of their cattle due to the fact that their search for food, water, fuel and fodder is fruitless. It necessitates a long and tiresome journey, Cooper implies, before the wishes of the humblest agriculturist can be satisfied. Despite his power and strength, Ishmael Bush himself is described as being highly astonished and shocked by the bleakness, barrenness and desolation of the place. Cooper’s recurrent use of many apocalyptic terms such as gloomy, naked and dreary makes the place seem as a real waste land.

The almost total absence of trees and verdure in Cooper’s prairie accounts for its nakedness and bleakness. As Cooper frequently suggests in his landscape descriptions of the place, trees are very rare in this region and one might travel for long distances before encountering a sign of verdure or vegetation. The animals, likewise, find it hard to look for their habitats in such a place. Even in the areas which exhibit signs of verdure, the trees seem to be so few that they seem to be like an illusion to the eyes of the beholder. It is interesting to notice, in fact, that Cooper often describes individual trees rather than dense forests and that he usually portrays small thickets and groves rather than immense woods in *The Prairie*. The trees seem to have mysteriously disappeared from this region. To illustrate this idea, Cooper’s description of the swale of low land near one of the naked rocks of the prairie is a good example. The thicket of alders and sumack that can be seen in the swale, Cooper states, represents an evidence of the fact that the place once nurtured a “feeble growth” (p. 85) of trees and wood. The few trees that can sometimes be seen in the prairie, moreover, do not seem to be in a good and healthy condition.

The scarcity and unhealthy condition of trees are recurrently emphasized in numerous scenes in *The Prairie*. Among these scenes is the one in which Cooper describes the landscape surrounding the area that Ishmael and his family chose as a resting place by the end of the novel. Due to peculiarity of the scene and to its significance

for the purpose of the present study, a passage a Cooper's lengthy description deserves to be quoted:

The water moistened a small swale that lay beneath the spot, which yielded in return for the fecund gift, a scanty growth of grass. A solitary willow had taken root in the alluvion, and profiting by its exclusive possession of the soil, the tree had sent up its stem far above the crest of the adjacent rock, whose peaked summit had once been shadowed by its branches. But its loveliness had gone with the mysterious principle of life. As if in mockery of the meagre show of verdure that the spot exhibited, it remained a noble and a solemn monument of former fertility. The larger, ragged and fantastick branches still obtruded themselves abroad, while the white and hoary trunk stood naked and tempest-riven. Not a leaf, nor a sign of vegetation was to be seen about it. In all things it proclaimed the frailty of existence, and the fulfilment of time. (p. 356)

Cooper's landscape description in this passage is undoubtedly important for many reasons. On the one hand, it highlights the scarcity of trees and verdure in the prairie. Despite the existence of a spring and the availability of water, only an individual tree and a little grass can be seen. Strangely enough, the place seems to be like a desert. On the other hand, Cooper's description underlines the contrast between the past and present state of the landscape. This contrast is noticeable mainly through the deep changes and alterations that have happened to the willow tree. Though it was once a lovely and healthy tree that towered above the rock near which it stands, Cooper claims, it is now dead and it has lost all its former glory and loveliness. The transformations that have happened to this willow tree from which Ishmael hangs his brother-in-law, Abiram White, are so striking that they make the scene even more terrifying. Ringe (1971) articulates this idea by claiming that this willow functions like one of the "blasted trees" (p. 138) in the paintings of the Hudson River School artists who use such trees as signs of age and death. In *The Prairie*, the function of the willow tree consists in underscoring the desolation and apocalyptic aspects of the place. In his description of the ragged branches and hoary trunk of the tree, in fact, Cooper uses apocalyptic imagery which underlines the barrenness of the whole region. This barrenness is further evident through Cooper's emphasis on the sterility of the land. By claiming that the willow tree remains as a noble monument of former fertility, Cooper implicitly suggests that the prairie has now become a sterile place. Throughout the novel, Ishmael often expresses his shock and disappointment at the sterility of the soil. The sterility of the land undoubtedly emphasizes the "doomsday theme" (Mani, 1980, pp. 81-92) in the novel.

The doomsday theme in *The Prairie* is underlined not only by the scarcity of the trees and the sterility of the land but also by the "ocean" (Overland, 1973, p. 152) imagery that Cooper tends to use when describing the prairie throughout the novel. In the opening pages of the tale, for instance, the author states that the prairie seems to be exactly like the ocean due to the sameness and dreariness of its landscapes and due to the large number of swells and vallies with which the place is mostly characterized. The boundless and seemingly interminable extent to the view further highlights the resemblance between the land and the ocean. The very few trees that could sometimes be seen in the prairie, Cooper claims, seem to be like solitary vessels sailing on water and even the two or three thickets that Ishmael and his family see from a long distance do appear like islands resting on water. This ocean imagery is further evident through Cooper's description of the prairie as a "sea of withered grass" (p. 236) which makes the similarity between the land and the ocean even more striking. Indeed, land and water are described as being so much like each other in *The Prairie* that they seem to be indistinguishable and the characters often fancy that they are sailing on water rather than journeying on land. Even the wagons of the Bush family do seem like small boats moving slowly in the sea. Doubtlessly, Cooper's use of ocean imagery in *The Prairie* is not purposeless. It underlines the barrenness of the prairie and further emphasizes its bleak, gloomy and dull atmosphere. Chase (1957) implicitly expresses this idea by claiming that Cooper's ocean imagery highlights the "autumnal" (p. 57) mood of the novel. Through this autumnal mood, Cooper underscores the apocalyptic aspect of the prairie and expresses his opinion about how doomsday might look like in the future.

In *The Prairie*, Cooper uses many other ways and techniques to emphasize the apocalyptic aspect of the setting in addition to ocean imagery. Among these techniques are the gothic images of death and desolation that the author tends to use frequently in his descriptions of the place. Mani (1980) suggests that these gothic images evidently reinforce the doomsday theme of the novel. One of the best scenes that underline Cooper's use of the prairie as a gothic setting is the one in which Ishmael executes Abiram for the murder of his son. After Ishmael leaves his brother-in-law bound by a cord that led from his neck to the limb of the tree on the ragged rock, the former thinks he hears unearthly cries and shrieks that swept through the air and mingled with the wind in such a way that they become frightful. The naked prairies, Cooper states, began to assume the forms of dreary and illimitable wastes and the rushing of the wind sounded like "the whisperings of the dead" (p. 362). Ishmael himself is depicted as being highly terrified by these unearthly sounds as he more than once ventures a glance at

the place of execution and believes he hears blasts and “a cry of horror that seemed to have been uttered at the very portals of his ears” (p. 362). During the scene, Cooper uses numerous other apocalyptic imagery and terms, such as frightful, hoarse and unnatural, which highlight the gothic dimension of the prairie. As Smith (2012) argues, this quasi-judicial execution scene might be considered as an instance of gothic realism in which Cooper describes the effects of American wilderness on the “primitive emotions of the rough settlers” (p. 167). Obviously, Cooper’s use of gothic terms and imagery in the present scene makes the bleakness and gloominess of the prairie even more terrifying.

The apocalyptic aspect of the setting of *The Prairie* is further emphasized through numerous other powerful and significant scenes in the novel. One of the most important of these scenes is the one in which Cooper describes a place which seems to be like “a peopled desert from the shores of the Maine sea to the foot of the Rocky Mountains, fill’d with all the abominations and craft of man and stript of the comfort and loveliness it received from the hands of the Lord!” (p. 188). Cooper claims that it is a sombre and gloomy place which is not only dull but also frightening. By describing this place as a peopled desert, Cooper uses an imagery of death which highlights the apocalyptic aspect of the place. It seems to be a lifeless region which has lost its original beauty and loveliness. Once again, Cooper’s prairie seems to be a metaphorical waste land. Another significant scene which underlines the apocalyptic aspect of the prairie is the one in which the author portrays a place which seems to be the opposite of the aforementioned one. Describing Ishmael’s search for a suitable place for his family and cattle in the prairie, for example, Cooper portrays a region which is “incomprehensibly stripped of its people and their dwellings” (p. 356). In contrast to the previous scene, there are no human beings in the place that is described here. They seem to have vanished from the earth. What the two scenes have in common, however, is that they both highlight the gloominess and desolation of the prairie. In both scenes, however, Cooper’s apocalyptic imagery seems to suggest that the apocalypse is caused by mankind rather than by any other factor.

### 3. The Apocalypse as A Human-Made Environmental Catastrophe

In *The Prairie*, Cooper’s belief that the apocalyptic aspect of the western territories is caused by mankind is evident. Despite the absence of visible human remains in the Great Plains, for instance, the fact that the bleakness and barrenness of the American prairies are caused by mankind is recurrently emphasized in Cooper’s novel. This idea is mainly noticeable through the conversation between the naturalist Obed Bat and Leatherstocking during which the former suggests that, unlike the deserts of Egypt and the Near East where the numerous monuments and ruins of ancient and great civilizations represent clear evidence that human beings are responsible for all the chaos and destruction, the case is different with the American deserts due to the absence of similar evidences. Leatherstocking, however, disagrees with his opinion and argues that humans themselves have done all the harm and evil in the plains of America. He suggests that if man has been responsible for the barrenness of the deserts of the Near East, it seems to be reasonable to claim that he has also been responsible for the bleakness of the American deserts. The fact that there have been palaces, riches, and too many people living in the prairies of the New World is very probable. Through the character of Leatherstocking, Cooper implicitly rejects the idea that apocalyptic events take place only through divine will as expressed in the *Book of Revelation* and suggests that environmental destruction and apocalypse might be caused only by mankind (MacDougall, 2001). In many ways, Cooper seems to have been influenced by the opinion of many European travellers to Egypt and the Near East such as Volney whose 1797 book suggested that the ignorance and cupidity of man are the “evil genii which have wasted the earth” (p. 26). As is the case with Cooper’s opinion about the total disappearance of the wilderness in *The Prairie*, Volney claims that mankind now has the ability and power of turning entire populous cities into bleak, solitary and barren deserts.

Cooper’s belief that the apocalypse is caused by mankind rather than by divine will is best articulated by his spokesman Leatherstocking. When asked about the reasons that might account for the gloominess, bleakness and apocalyptic aspect of the prairie, Leatherstocking replies as follows:

[I]t is their morals! Their wickedness and their pride, and chiefly their waste that has done it all! . . . And I have seen much of the folly of man; for his natur’ is the same, be he born in the wilderness or be he born in the towns. To my weak judgement it hath ever seem’d that his gifts are not equal to his wishes. That he would mount into the Heavens with all his deformities about him, if he only knew the road, no one will gainsay that witnesses his bitter strivings upon ‘arth. If his power is not equal to his will, it is because the wisdom of the Lord hath set bounds to his evil workings. (p. 240)

Leatherstocking’s statement evidently underlines Cooper’s belief that humans are responsible for the apocalypse due to their thoughtless destruction of the natural environment and their overexploitation of its natural resources.

Because of their environmentally-unethical behaviour, Cooper implies, humans are foolishly making the earth a barren and inhabitable place. The gloomy future of the world is further emphasized through the character of Leatherstocking who complains about the deep alterations and transformations that have happened to the land since the arrival of the settlers to the North American continent. The latter highlights the sombre future of the earth by claiming that he often “think[s] the Lord has placed this barren belt of Prairie, behind the States, to warn men to what their folly may bring the land!” (p. 24). Leatherstocking’s statement underlines not only Cooper’s anxiety and worry about the future of America but also his critique of the means through which the settlers have deformed and destroyed the land.

One of the main ways through which the settlers have been able to destroy the natural environment is the axe. To a large extent, the apocalyptic imagery and metaphors that Cooper uses in his descriptions of the prairie throughout the novel underscore the author’s dissatisfaction and disapprobation of the settlers’ use of this tool which, as Valtiala (1998) rightly suggests, might be considered as a metaphor of the “machine in the garden” (p. 84) in *The Prairie*. Despite the fact that it seems to be nothing but a primitive tool that cannot cause great damage or harm to the environment, the axe has been a very effective and powerful means by which the settlers carry out their aggression and violence against nature. Cooper recurrently refers to the effectiveness of this little machine through his descriptions of the extremely harmful impacts it has on the American wilderness. In *The Prairie*, Cooper expresses this idea from the beginning of the novel in which he describes the Bushes’ use of numerous axes in order to destroy a grove near one of the few springs that are to be found in the American prairies. The destruction of the cottonwood tree which is cut down by Ishmael’s eldest son, Asa, is perhaps the incident that is mostly attracting to the attention during the whole scene. The latter is described as effortlessly, mercilessly and contemptuously burying his axe in the body of the tree whose trunk is quickly severed “in submission to his prowess” (p. 19). The destructive power of the axe is emphasized through Cooper’s claim that this tool is more dangerous and environmentally-hazardous than the weapons used by the masters of the art of offense which, despite their lesser degree of efficiency and effectiveness in destroying the wilderness, he considers as better and even nobler than the machine used by the settlers. This idea is further expressed through Cooper’s description of the general attack launched by Asa’s brothers against the remaining trees which very quickly fall prostrate on the ground as if a “whirlwind” (p. 19) has passed along the place and has been responsible for all the environmental destruction.

Cooper’s comparison of the effectiveness of the Bushes’ axes in destroying the wilderness to the power of the whirlwind evidently highlights his opposition to their use of this machine which, as he recurrently argues, is the main cause of the alteration and “deflowering” (Pikus, 2001, pp. 77-81) of the New World. Through their use of the axe, in fact, the Bushes have metaphorically raped nature and reduced it from a state of loveliness and purity to a state of ugliness and corruption. Despite the fact that the Bushes’ destruction of the aforementioned grove might be justified by their purpose of making a camp, Cooper implies that this is a highly unethical deed which should have never been done. This idea is expressed mainly through the character of Leatherstocking whose melancholy and “bitter smile” (p. 19) at the clearings and vacancies in the heavens created by the removal of the branches of trees reflect Cooper’s high discontent and dissatisfaction with the Bushes’ behaviour. Despite the fact that the bleakness and barrenness of the American prairies represent clear evidence and warning about what the use of the axe would bring the land to, Leatherstocking complains, the settlers are obviously heedless of the warning due to their incessant use of this machine. In many ways, Leatherstocking’s rejection of civilization and his flight from the settlements of the east to the prairies of the west might be explained by his strong dislike of the axe and his consciousness about the dangers of this machine whose sounds he can no longer bear to hear. Despite his flight, however, he is unable to escape from this destructive tool as the settlers follow him even to the infertile plains of North America and the “wind seldom blows from the east, but [he] conceit[s] the sounds of axes, and the crash of falling trees are in [his] ears” (p. 24). Leatherstocking’s statement further highlights the environmentally-adverse impacts of the axe and emphasizes the fact that the European settlers on the North American continent are largely blamed for their use of this machine in *The Prairie*.

To a large extent, the settlers’ incessant use of the axe accounts for the bleak, gloomy and desolate landscape of American west described in *The Prairie*. To the eyes of Ishmael Bush and his family, the trees seem to be a sore and appalling sight which they cannot bear to look at. They seem to believe that trees are evil and that they should be attacked and uprooted rather than protected and left untouched. They also seem to believe that trees are a dangerous enemy which must be militarily attacked. In the aforementioned description of Asa and his brother’s attack against the cottonwood tree, for instance, the Bush family seems to be conquering an enemy or a hostile army rather than a single tree. Cooper’s use of war imagery during the scene makes the conflicting relationship between the Bush family and its surrounding natural landscape even more obvious. Through his

emphasis on the excessive violence and cruelty against the cottonwood tree, Cooper implicitly suggests that hatred and abhorrence of nature was the predominant attitude among the settlers during their colonization of the North American continent. This attitude largely accounts Cooper's claim that humans might have totally destroyed the western territories by their axes since the remote past.

Although Cooper might be suspected of having exaggerated the adverse and hazardous impacts of the axe on the environment, a look at certain historical facts may prove otherwise. During Cooper's lifetime, in fact, the destruction of the natural environment caused by the settlers' use of the axe was noticed by many people, writers and artists such as the landscape painters of the Hudson River School. Cole, Durand, Church and other painters, for instance, were appalled and disappointed by the great harm and damage caused to nature through the use of this tool. In his essay published in 1835, Cole remonstrated that "the ravages of the axe are daily increasing – the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation" (qtd. in Schuyler, 2012, p. 37). As this statement suggests, Cole disapproved of the use of the axe and lamented the degradation of the natural environment. In his aforementioned essay, Cole also expresses his disapprobation of the use of the axe by claiming that the beauty of nature is becoming "desecrated by what is called improvement" (qtd. in Schuyler, 2012, p. 37) and that many natural places are becoming shadeless and corrupted. In another generation, he states, they will be totally destroyed. Cole emphasized the destruction of nature through the axe not only in his writings but also in many of his paintings. In his 1843 painting, he expresses this idea by depicting a man holding an axe and looking back on the forest he had cleared for farmland (Hughes, 2012). Through his focus on the clearings and fallen trees surrounding the man, Cole blames the settlers for their use of the axe and suggests that deforestation is the main cause of the rapid disappearance of the American wilderness.

In *The Prairie*, the apocalypse is caused not only by the powerful tool of the axe but also by many other environmentally-unethical practices and behaviour. As MacDougall (2001) argues, the desolate landscape of the prairie is "the apocalyptic result of the 'wasty ways' of men, essentially the very ways that Natty had condemned in the pioneer settlers of Templeton" (pp. 66-71). Among these wasteful ways and hazardous practices are the misuse and overexploitation of natural resources, the killing of animals for fun and sport, the pollution of the natural environment and the corruption of the beauties of the wilderness. Although these practices are more evident in other Leatherstocking novels such as *The Pioneers* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, they are also noticeable in *The Prairie*. For example, Cooper frequently and implicitly expresses his dissatisfaction and disappointment at the lack of richness and diversity of life forms in the American west. He suggests that pollution and overhunting have been the main causes of the extinction of many animal species. He also claims that the natural landscape of the western territories might have been lovely and magnificent before it was corrupted and deformed by the civilized whites.

In *The Prairie*, Cooper's disappointment at the degradation of the natural environment underlines his opposition to the settlers' anthropocentric view of nature and to their belief in the superiority of the human over the nonhuman. Throughout the novel, in fact, the Bush family's attitude of disregard and contempt for the natural environment is evident. They believe that nature should not only be dominated and controlled but also overexploited and subdued. They seem to believe that the only reason behind God's creation of the nonhuman natural environment consists in the satisfaction of human needs and interests. This idea is articulated by the character of Abiram White who tells Leatherstocking that "[t]he 'arth was made for our comfort; and, for that matter, so ar' its creatur's" (p. 22). It is obvious that, in Abiram's opinion, the nonhuman natural environment has an extrinsic or instrumental value and that it should not be respected or protected. It is mainly by this belief that the Bush family's thoughtless and merciless assaults against nature through the powerful tool of the axe might be explained. Throughout *The Prairie*, however, Cooper expresses his disapproval of this belief and suggests that it has resulted in the degradation and destruction of the nonhuman natural environment.

Cooper's opposition to the settlers' belief in the superiority of humans over the nonhuman natural environment underlines his implicit criticism of the Christian religion for being one of the main factors behind the impending environmental crisis. Christianity, Cooper implies, has encouraged humans to dominate, overexploit and subdue nature for their own ends and interests. Abiram's aforementioned statement, for instance, is reminiscent of the passage in Genesis 1:28 which states that it is God's will that man dominate the fish, the birds and every other living organism. In *The Prairie*, Cooper implies that the Christian religion has largely been responsible for promoting the idea of the *scala naturae* or the great chain of being which consists in a view of the world as composed of hierarchical forms. God takes the position at the top of the chain which descends successively to angels, men, women and natural objects. Man, as his position in the chain indicates, is inferior to God and the angels but he is superior to the natural world. This superior position justified man's exploitation of the natural

world and explained the reasons of his domination over it. It is mainly for these reasons that Christianity is viewed as being the root cause of the degradation of the natural environment in *The Prairie*. The settlers' belief in the Christian idea of the superiority of humans over nature might largely explain their frequent and incessant use of the axe to dominate and subdue the natural environment. Cooper's apocalyptic imagery in his descriptions of the prairie, however, not only highlights his opposition to this idea but also underscores his belief that humans are endangering their own survival by thoughtlessly destroying nature.

#### 4. The Buffalo Stampede and the Prairie Fire

In *The Prairie*, the buffalo stampede might be considered as one of the most apocalyptic scenes of the novel due to the "apocalyptic grandeur and terror of the spectacle" (Mani, 1981, p. 87). Debating about the biblical version of creation and its scientific basis, Leatherstocking and his companions witness a sudden and almost magical exhibition of animal life near one of the thickets of the prairie. At first, Cooper describes the passage of the migratory birds which are so numerous that they blackened the heavens. These birds, however, do not seem to disturb the stillness and perfect solitude of the prairie. What do break its stillness are the enormous and stampeding buffaloes which at first appear to be very few but then become so numerous that the herbage of the prairie seems to be entirely lost. Cooper claims that the number of the buffaloes is extremely large and that these animals seem to be "as countless and interminable" (p. 198) as the leaves in the forests. He compares them to the migratory birds and suggests that wildness and grandeur are the things with which the scene is mostly characterized. However, the situation of Leatherstocking and his friends becomes more and more critical as the buffaloes rush in a straight line toward their hiding place and as they face imminent threat and destruction. During the scene, Cooper's apocalyptic imagery further underlines the intensity of the danger that the characters face. In fact, the author claims that the buffaloes ploughed the plain with their horns so furiously that clouds of dust shot up in little columns above the animals. A deep and hollow bellowing, furthermore, could also be heard "as if a thousand throats vented their complaints in a discordant murmuring" (p. 198).

Despite the fact that the death and destruction of Leatherstocking and his companions seem to be inevitable, they are finally able to survive and to avoid the dramatic consequences of the buffalo stampede. After failing to divert the direction of an approaching buffalo by shooting him with his rifle, Leatherstocking stretches forth his arms and advances towards the animals. As a result, the buffaloes immediately split into "two gliding streams of life" (p. 201) and the imminent danger faced by the characters seems to be removed. As the dust thickens and obscures their forms, however, the threat is renewed by the gradual approach of the animals. What decisively saves them is the voice of Asinus, the donkey of the naturalist named Obed Battius, which makes the buffaloes tremble and sets them into a swift flight. Although Cooper's description of the miraculous survival of Leatherstocking and his party highlights the mythic rather than realistic aspect of the scene, the significance of the author's apocalyptic imagery consists mainly in underlining God's greatness and omnipotence and man's feebleness and powerlessness. As Cooper explicitly indicates, all the efforts of the characters would have been fruitless without the intervention of Asinus. Through this statement, the writer seems to suggest that humans are not superior or more powerful than the nonhuman natural environment.

Through the scene of the buffalo stampede, Cooper implicitly criticizes the settlers for their wasteful ways and their environmentally-unethical behaviour. As soon as he looks at the approaching bison, in fact, Leatherstocking articulates this idea by claiming that here man can see the proofs of his "wantonness and folly!" (p. 198). In all the states, he suggests, the proudest and richest Governors cannot kill nobler buffaloes than those which are offered to everyone in the prairie. Likewise, he cannot enjoy the sweetness of their flesh as the one who killed them according to the laws of nature. Leatherstocking's comment highlights the settlers' misuse, overexploitation and thoughtless destruction of nature's resources. Throughout the scene, in fact, nature seems to be rioting and rebelling against their wantonness and short-sighted greed. The brutality, violence and fury of the buffaloes might justify this idea. In his description of the herd of bison, Cooper also underlines the settlers' thoughtlessness by comparing their wasteful manner of killing animals to the hunting philosophy of the Indians. Soon after the termination of the stampede, he states, some fifteen or twenty mounted Sioux Indians can be seen hovering around a grievously wounded buffalo, piercing its body with a hundred arrows and putting an end to its life with a thrust from the lance. Through his description of the way in which this buffalo is killed, Cooper seems to be praising the Sioux Indians for their hunting method. Unlike the settlers, the Indians seem to use natural resources in a wise and sustainable manner and promote the superabundance of animals rather than foolishly destroying it.

As is the case with the buffalo stampede, the scene of the prairie fire might be considered as one of the most apocalyptic scenes in Cooper's novel due to the fact that it is also a "horrificing and devastating" (Glanz, 1992, p. 72) spectacle. After the Sioux Indians set fire to the withered grass of the prairie in order to prevent Leatherstocking and his companions from escaping, the fugitives face imminent threat and destruction. Due to

the intensity, hugeness and strength of the fire, the death of Leatherstocking and his party seems to be inevitable. Cooper describes the high intensity of the fire in the following way:

Huge columns of smoke were rolling up from the plain, and thickening in gloomy masses, around the horizon. The red glow which gleamed upon their enormous folds, now lighting their volumes with the glare of the conflagration and now flashing to another point, as the flame beneath glided ahead, leaving all behind in awful darkness. (p. 246)

Cooper's use of apocalyptic terms and imagery in his description of the scene further underlines the greatness of the danger that Leatherstocking and his friends face. While the awful darkness represents the gloomy destiny of the fugitives, the glaring light seems to represent the impending destruction of the entire place. To a large extent, the contrast between light and dark underscores the apocalyptic aspect of the scene which seems to be like a doomsday. Cooper's repetition of the word conflagration highlights this idea.

In the scene of the prairie fire, Cooper's use of apocalyptic terms and imagery is further evident through the author's description of the dramatic and disastrous effects of the conflagration. The fire, Cooper claims, has largely destroyed plant and animal life in the area. As soon as Leatherstocking and his companions recommence their journey, in fact, they discover many damaged plants and numerous dead bodies of different animals. Among the latter is the "mutilated carcass of a horse" (p. 253) that lays more than half consumed on the ground. In his description of this horse, Cooper uses death imagery which emphasizes the apocalyptic aspect of the scene. The crackling bones, scorched hide and "grinning teeth" (p. 253) of the animal suggest lifelessness and desolation. The characters are portrayed as experiencing feelings of terror and fright when they look at the carcass of the horse. Commenting on this carcass, Cooper underlines the destructive and calamitous impacts of the fire by claiming that a "thousand winters could not wither an animal so thoroughly, as the element has done it, in a minute" (p. 253). Cooper's statement highlights not only the destructive power of the fire but also the gloominess of the whole scene.

Due to the intensity of the fire and its devastating effects, Leatherstocking and his companions' escape seems to be miraculous and highly improbable. Although Cooper accounts for their escape by the counter-fire which is made by Leatherstocking and which puts an end to the rapid progress of the flames, their survival still seems to be extraordinary and incredible. The characters themselves do not believe in their ability to avoid certain and inevitable death and destruction. As is the case with the buffalo stampede, the significance of Cooper's apocalyptic imagery in the scene of the prairie fire consists in underlining God's omnipotence and man's powerlessness. Cooper explicitly articulates this idea by claiming that the situation of the fugitives highlights their weakness and "helplessness" (p. 246). Even the brave and stout-hearted Captain Middleton expresses his feebleness and powerlessness such as when he seeks the help of the weak Battius and when he expresses his despair by a situation in which "human power is baffled by the hand of a mightier being" (pp. 246-247). Like the buffalo stampede, moreover, the scene of the prairie fire underscores Cooper's ecological awareness. His deep focus on the ecologically-adverse effects of the fire and on the destruction of many plant and animal species reflects his concern for the health and welfare of the nonhuman natural environment.

To a large extent, the scene of the prairie fire and that of the buffalo stampede might be read as a warning against an impending environmental disaster which would make the survival of both humans and nonhumans not only threatened but also impossible. Cooper's emphasis on the horrifying and devastating impacts of both scenes justifies this idea. Through these scenes, Cooper seems to suggest that the earth is on the way of becoming an uninhabitable place and that humans are endangering their own survival through their environmentally-unethical and hazardous practices and behaviour. This idea is clearly articulated by Cooper's hero and spokesman Leatherstocking in the following manner: "What this world of America is coming to, and where the machinations and inventions of its people are to have an end, the Lord, he only knows" (p. 250). As this statement denotes, the thoughtlessness and foolishness of humans are putting the future of the world highly at risk. Leatherstocking's complaint that the beauty of the wilderness has been greatly and irretrievably destroyed further highlights Cooper's critique of the settlers' behaviour and his gloomy vision of the future.

In many ways, the apocalyptic terms and imagery that Cooper uses in the scenes of the buffalo stampede and the prairie fire justify the claim that the author portrays "a vision of America as tending towards the doom rather than the millennium" (Mani, 1980, pp. 81-92). Through his apocalyptic imagery, as Mani (1980) argues, Cooper views the thoughtless destruction of nature and the arrogance of a mindless democracy as a "reenactment of the Fall" and suggests that the American Dream might turn out to be a "nightmare" (pp. 81-92). He expresses his belief that America is moving towards the wrong direction and he creates a portrait of man as an imperfect being that tends to destroy every Eden provided to him by God. Through his apocalyptic imagery, therefore, Cooper



describes a pessimistic rather than optimistic vision of the future in *The Prairie* which underlines the demise of the author's ideal myth of a wilderness paradise and of ideal America. According to Mani (1980), the death of Cooper's myth of ideal America represents a moving away from Jefferson's social and political ideology of a natural and worthy aristocracy supported by an agrarian society to Jackson's egalitarian democracy. The demise of Jeffersonianism certainly accounts for Cooper's pessimistic vision of the future and his belief that America is moving towards the doom rather than the millennium. This gloomy vision is most fully articulated through the character of Leatherstocking who becomes an "archetypal prophet of doom" (Mani, 1980, pp. 81-92).

Leatherstocking's inability to escape from the settlers' environmentally-hazardous practices and behaviour in *The Prairie* evidently underlines Cooper's pessimistic attitude throughout the novel. Despite Leatherstocking's rejection of civilization and his flight from the settlements of the east to the prairies of the west, the settlers follow him even to these infertile territories and the sounds of their axes seem to be increasing rather than decreasing. His inability to put an end to their thoughtless destruction of nature and to the rapid advance of civilization symbolizes his powerlessness and the gloomy future of America. His recurrent but unheeded warnings about the disastrous effects of the settlers' behaviour, likewise, emphasize the doomed fate of the wilderness and of America. Leatherstocking's stature as a prophet of doom is noticeable in numerous scenes such as the one in which he predicts that the settlers "will turn on their tracks, like a fox that doubles, and then the rank smell of their own footsteps, will show them the madness of their waste" (p. 76). Ironically, Leatherstocking's prophecy comes true by the end of the novel when Ishmael and his family are obliged to leave the prairie and to return to the settlements of the east because of the bleakness and desolation of the western plains. Cooper's gloomy vision of America's future, however, is mostly noticeable through Leatherstocking's death by the end of *The Prairie*. In many ways, Leatherstocking's "prophetic" (Martin, 1995, p. 92) death symbolizes Cooper's belief in the inevitable destruction of the wilderness, the collapse of the American Dream and the approach of the doom rather than the millennium.

## 5. Conclusion

Cooper's *The Prairie* is replete with the apocalyptic imagery that the author repeatedly uses in his descriptions of the landscape and scenes in the novel. For instance, the setting of *The Prairie* is portrayed as a bleak, barren and solitary place which seems to be not only desolate but also lifeless and frightening. Its nakedness, dreariness and gloominess are emphasized by the almost total absence of trees and verdure in the region which seems to be like an interminable waste. For this reason, the prairie of Cooper's novel might largely be considered as an apocalyptic setting which reinforces the doomsday theme in the story. This theme is further underlined by the ocean imagery that Cooper makes use of in his descriptions of the place. In fact, the prairie is frequently compared to the ocean and even the few thickets that can sometimes be seen in it are portrayed like islands resting on water. This ocean imagery highlights the apocalyptic aspect of the place and the gloomy mood of the novel. Furthermore, Cooper's use of gothic images of death and desolation makes the bleakness of the prairie even more frightening and terrifying. Through these images, Cooper makes the prairie seem like a gothic setting in which the characters experience feelings of terror and horror.

Although the dreariness and desolation of the prairie seem to be mysterious and incomprehensible, Cooper suggests that they are the result of a human-made environmental disaster. He suggests that the apocalypse might be caused by humans rather than by divine will and that mankind now has the power to destroy the natural environment totally. This idea is articulated mainly through Cooper's recurrent descriptions of the disastrous and catastrophic effects of the axe which the settlers ceaselessly use to deform and destroy the wilderness. Because of this tool, which might be viewed as a metaphor of the machine in the garden, humans might have been responsible for the barrenness and gloominess of the American plains. Cooper frequently expresses his disapprobation and protestation against the settlers' use of this machine through the character of Leatherstocking who complains that the changes and alterations that have happened to the land because of the axe have been so great and deep that they seem to be magical. In *The Prairie*, however, Cooper criticizes the settlers not only for their use of this tool but also for many other environmentally-unethical and hazardous practices such as the overexploitation and misuse of natural resources, pollution and the corruption of the beauties of nature. He rejects their anthropocentric view of nature and suggests that their belief in the superiority of humans over nature would ultimately and inevitably lead to an environmental apocalypse which would make the survival of both humans and nonhumans impossible.

Cooper's warning about humans' thoughtlessness and foolishness is mostly noticeable in the scenes of the buffalo stampede and the prairie fire which might be considered as the most apocalyptic scenes in the novel due to the fact that they are horrifying and terrifying spectacles. The threats and dangers described in both scenes are so great and imminent that the death and destruction of the characters seem to be inevitable. The apocalyptic

terms and imagery that Cooper uses emphasize the gloominess and desolation of both scenes. The significance of the author's apocalyptic imagery consists mainly in underlining God's greatness and omnipotence and man's helplessness and powerlessness. Through the scenes of the buffalo stampede and the prairie fire, in fact, Cooper seems to suggest that the settlers' attempts to dominate and subdue the natural environment are not only fruitless but also highly dangerous. Because of their continuous destruction of nature, the author implies, the settlers are endangering their own survival as they are making the earth an uninhabitable place. Cooper's emphasis on the chaos and destruction in these two scenes highlights not only his critique of the settlers' anthropocentric view of nature but also his gloomy vision of the future.

Cooper's recurrent apocalyptic imagery and metaphors in *The Prairie* justify the claim that this novel is the gloomiest and most pessimistic of the Leatherstocking Tales. Throughout this novel, in fact, Cooper expresses his belief that America is tending towards the doom rather than the millennium and that the American Dream might become nothing but a nightmare. He portrays humans as imperfect beings who tend to destroy every Eden offered to them by their creator. Thus, *The Prairie* suggests the demise of Cooper's ideal myth of wilderness paradise and ideal America. It also suggests a moving away from Jefferson's social and political ideology to Jackson's egalitarian democracy. Leatherstocking's inability to escape from the settlers' environmentally-hazardous practices and from the advance of civilization highlights Cooper's pessimistic attitude and his gloomy vision of the future. In many ways, the death of Cooper's hero by the end of the novel represents the demise of Cooper's ideals, the doomed fate of the wilderness and the gloomy future of America.

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