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# *The Deerslayer*

*Or The First Warpath.*

by

**James Fenimore Cooper  
1841**



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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The years covered in *The Deerslayer* are pre-Revolutionary, about 1740-1745, and the action takes place almost exclusively in the area of a lake, "Glimmerglass," in the New York colonies, near the Hudson River. It is worth noting that this book is one of several concerning the adventures of Natty.....

### CHARACTER LIST

#### Main Characters

**Natty (Nathaniel) Bumppo** - A white man who has been partially raised with natives, Natty takes to native ways, and to the wilderness. In *The Deerslayer* Natty is in his early twenties or so, and has recently left his tribal friends to test himself in the wilderness. He is portrayed as very clever--mixing the.....

**Hurry Harry (Henry March)** - A frontiersman, a bounty hunter (seeking Indian prey), a man of the wilderness, Hurry Harry is a fine physical specimen of manhood. Twenty-six or eight, he is.....

**Judith Hutter** - Unmarried daughter of Thomas Hutter, Judith and her sister are recently motherless and live with their father on the lake for part of the year. Judith, twenty years old, is renown for.....

**Hetty Hutter** - Judith's sister Hetty is "on the verge of ignorance"--i.e. she is somewhat mentally impaired. Hetty is very able, physically, and Cooper has given her the role of "idiot-savant." Hetty has an uncanny ability to "see" and understand situations. Her father has given her information which he.....

**Chingachgook** - Natty's native friend (of the Delaware tribal group--Natty calls him "Serpent") is a young man who is stalwart, loyal, and a man of few words. He has all the amazing prowess and bravery of a.....

**Wah-ta!-Wah ("Hist")** - A young woman of great resourcefulness and simple beauty, Wah-Ta!-Wah has a queenly carriage and a sharp eye. She is in love with Chingachgook, and she befriends.....

#### Minor Characters

**Thomas Hutter** - The father of Judith and Hetty is a secretive man, living much of his life with his daughters (and previously his wife, who has died in recent years) in the remote wilderness outside of the .....

**Rivenoak** - An Iroquois who leads the group around the lake, Rivenoak is a representative "Indian," both understandable in his prejudices, and ruthlessly vicious. He understands what the land-grabs mean.....

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - The protagonist of a story is the main character who traditionally undergoes some sort of change. Natty Bumppo, the Deerslayer, is Cooper's fictional frontiersman-hero through several books. Natty is young here--chronologically this is the earliest part of his life to be recorded. He understands both .....

**Antagonist** - The antagonist of a story is the force that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. The antagonist does not always have to be a single character or even a character at all. Thomas Hutter and Hurry Harry come off worse than the "bad" Indians in *The Deerslayer*. Cooper suggests that Tom and Harry are their own worst enemies they embody all that was wrong in the early frontiersmen. They are greedy,....

**Climax** - The climax of a plot is the major turning point that allows the protagonist to resolve the conflict. There are several tense moments of near-death for Deerslayer, as he remains a captive of the Iroquois. But the final moment comes when the women's attempt at rescue fail and Chingachgook bounds into.....

**Outcome** - Hetty is buried near her parents in the lake (Tom Hutter is killed long before the end of the story) and Chingachgook and Wah! head out to their tribe. Hurry disappears into the landscape, same as he ever was. Judith returns to "civilization" with the regiment and the Deerslayer goes on his way into.....

## **SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)**

Hurry and Deerslayer head toward a lake where Hurry wants to visit a man with a beautiful daughter, and Deerslayer wants to meet up with his friend Chingachgook. The French and Indian wars have just been declared, and they must be careful--which Hurry never is. They find the man, Tom Hutter, and his daughters, Judith and Hetty, in their houseboat at the lake's mouth. Deerslayer, always a man of simple principles, comments on all the people and action, constantly. There is also a band of unfriendly Iroquois, a hunting expedition, on the shore of the lake. Hurry and Hutter decide to go after scalps--Deerslayer won't join them and doesn't approve of the mission--and get themselves captured. Chingachgook arrives, meets up with Deerslayer, and finds out that this band of Iroquois also holds captive his beloved, the Indian maiden Hist (or Wah). His object is to rescue her. Simple-minded Hetty tries to free her father and Hurry with her reasoning from her Bible, and when it doesn't work, Judith and Deerslayer open Tom Hutter's secret chest and find items to trade for the two white men. It works. Afterwards, Chingachgook and Deerslayer manage to kidnap Hist at night, but Deerslayer is taken captive in the ensuing chase. Hurry and Hutter, once freed, decide to try scalping again, and this time Tom Hutter is scalped and dies of his wounds.

The two sisters are orphaned, but also Judith and the others want to work to free Deerslayer, who has already killed one of the Iroquois and angered the remaining tribe. The Iroquois (or Mingos, or Hurons) let Deerslayer out on furlough--he gives them his word that he will carry their message to the others .....

## **THEMES**

### **Main Themes**

The white man in the wilderness is a heroic but ultimately sad figure. In Cooper's books about the life of Natty Bumppo, Cooper addresses some early nineteenth century concerns about the early history of the American colonies. There is a realization that the natives were treated terribly, and there is a .....

### **Minor Themes**

Female characters take up a significant part of narrative time in *The Deerslayer*, though it is clear that Cooper sees female concerns as secondary to the action of the male figures. Woman have a.....

## **MOOD**

*The Deerslayer* is a deadly serious account of early American frontiersmen in the wilderness. The mood is somber, sometimes lofty, and always dramatic. Cooper's veneration for the "uncivilized" landscape is very clear. There is also a note of sadness at the end, for the outcome of the conflict .....

## **AUTHOR INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY**

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) was born on September 15, 1789, in Burlington, New Jersey. His family soon established itself near Lake Otsego New York, in what is now called Cooperstown--his father Judge William Cooper, was a wealthy landowner and judge, but the Cooperstown of the time was something akin to a frontier settlement. James attended Yale at the age of thirteen, but was expelled in his third year (1805) for committing several pranks. He worked on sailing ships, merchant vessels and then in the U.S. Navy. After seeing some of the world, he returned home in 1811 to marry Susan De Lancey, a woman from New York's social elite. The De Lancey's were Loyalists during the Revolution, and lost a lot of property with the British defeat. As a young married man, Cooper strove to overcome the meager resources of his own family, as well. He took up writing, apparently, on a challenge from his wife. By the mid-1820s he was an .....

## James Fenimore Cooper - Timeline

1789 - September 15, born to William Cooper and Elizabeth Fenimore.

1790 - Moved with his family to Cooperstown, New York, lived in the village founded by his father on Otsego Lake.

1803 - Entered Yale College at age 13.

1805 - Expelled from Yale for committing pranks and a series of violent confrontations.....

## LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Cooper wrote two Prefaces to *The Deerslayer*, one in 1841 and another in 1850. In the first, Cooper makes an author's usual explanation of events--in this case, he states the structure of the five books, or "acts" of Natty's life--and makes the usual disclaimers about historical fact (he tried to present the frontier life as well as he could) and characters (they are all, definitely, fictional). In the second Preface, he does the same in more detail, focusing on the construction of Natty as a character of his imagination, but with referents to men he had known as a boy. He also takes exception, in this second Preface, to those who would argue with his assessment of "Indian character" in the *Leatherstocking Tales*. Cooper's underlying complaint is that critics who think he has given the natives a too-human side are themselves rather blind to the awful circumstances the natives have been thrust into by the U.S. government.

To a reader in the twentieth century, Cooper's portrayal of "Indian character" presents another.....

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

### CHAPTERS I - III

#### Summary

The Dutch settlers had been on the shores of America for only a few generations when the action of this story begins. There is not much settlement in the area around the Hudson, and in all seasons the woods look undisturbed by mankind. It is June, and the peace is broken by the call of a man, a very large and loud frontiersman named Hurry Harry, calling to his friend Deerslayer. They stop in their travels to eat.

Hurry's name comes from his restless nature. Of noble physique, Hurry is handsome and rough and a fine specimen of the backwoods. Deerslayer is somewhat younger, and though tall he is slight. He is very agile, and his face is uncommonly open, with an unmistakable air of integrity. He is not handsome, but his dress is picturesque. Hurry is more careless in dress--but this hardly matters on such a fine frame.

They talk of the Indian tribes thereabouts, and the deer--Deerslayer has a sharp eye and has killed a doe, which he is not proud of. Hurry wants to know if Deerslayer has tested his manhood against abler foes--such as humans. Deerslayer is proud to say that he has never shed human blood, and Hurry finds such naiveté very unbecoming--there are plenty of Indians and Frenchmen worth shooting if one has the chance.

Deerslayer has traveled to meet an Indian friend at the foot of a lake. The area is claimed by two native tribes, but the area of this lake has been a treaty ground between tribes, a place shared in times of peace. Hurry points out that there are three claims the two tribes, and Thomas Hutter's claim. There are no written treaties concerning this area, and Tom Hutter will fight to his death to defend what he considers his territory by rights of occupancy. Tom was a sailor, once, and might be a woodsman now in order to enjoy his plunder in peace. Deerslayer points out that there is no peace in plunder. Hurry continues Tom has two daughters, and his wife died two years ago--he buried her in the lake. She was somewhat of flint, too, and both husband and wife together seemed to have a secret past life. The daughter Judith is graceful and comely--Hurry has his eye on

her. Deerslayer says he has heard of her, and doesn't think he would like such a creature.

Hurry is annoyed. Judith has had suitors galore--any real man would honor her. Though she has the reputation of being light-minded and "over-given to admirers" Hurry believes she also knows that she may not have him. Hurry says that he swears to stay away from her, but always comes back. Deerslayer thinks that a poor man's daughter has no business flirting with gallants. Hurry admits there is one captain. . .but it is Judith's fault. Deerslayer says Hurry should think no more about such a woman.

Hurry explains that the other daughter is simple-minded. Hetty may be noble enough for such a man as Deerslayer. Deerslayer admits that the Indians find simple-minded creatures gifted, and they honor them. Hurry notes that both Tom and Judith have great feeling for Hetty. He also hopes that he does not find Judith has been married in the six months since he's seen her. If she were, he would kill her husband.

Deerslayer is against such behavior. They argue--Hurry picks of Deerslayer and shakes him, but Deerslayer is unperturbed. He says he wants to hear no more of Hurry's "secrets." Hurry laughs, and Deerslayer expounds his theory of man's feeling towards women in the woods they need protection. The two decide to end their meal and continue to the lake.

As they travel, Hurry has a hard time identifying the area where he was instructed to stop and look for the hidden canoe, which will carry them out on the lake. He and Deerslayer discuss methods of marking trails--the best and worst. Deerslayer mentions the best trail-readers his friends the Delawares, Chingachgook, and Uncus. Hurry thinks Deerslayer does not see the true natures of the scoundrel Indians, but Deerslayer has partly grown up with the Mohicans and he sees their natures as noble--despite the fact they may be boastful. This is their nature.

Deerslayer locates the tree in which the canoe is hidden, and they unpack it. Hurry carries it to the lake. Deerslayer finds the lake breathtakingly beautiful "'Tis an edication of itself, to look upon!" Judith must be a fine woman, if she has been raised here. Not just here, but at the forts in winter, Hurry says. Still, says Deerslayer, this landscape is a school to set her right again.

The Hutters have two abodes, a fort in the middle of the lake, "Muskrat Castle," built on sunken pilings and serving as protection from attack, and a floating boathouse, "The Ark," which they can travel about the lake on. As they paddle out to the castle, they discuss the merits of the place, and it's vague status as colony or native land. They get to the castle, and indeed it is heavily fortified and Hurry remarks that Tom Hutter keeps quite an arsenal, after having been attacked three times. Though Deerslayer is not practiced in arts of war, he can see that it is a fine fortification. Hurry Harry knows all about it, and helped build it.

They land on the broad dock in front, and go inside. No one is home. Deerslayer is struck by the usual mix of frontier furniture, both fine pieces and rough ones. A clock keeps the wrong time. Deerslayer goes into a bedroom--women sleep here, and he goes into a reverie of his past, his own mother and sister long ago, and feels sad.

Outside, Hurry notices that Tom is now trapping, for skins to sell. Deerslayer believes one should only take the life of another creature when it is absolutely necessary. Harry counts Indians, Frenchman, and wild game as the same thing worth killing.

Deerslayer looks out at the lake and hopes it has no white-man's name. Hurry says how he gave a British mapmaker the wrong directions, so he'd keep the lake free from settlers. The frontiersmen call the lake "Glimmerglass." The outlet keeps its Indian name, the Susquehanna. With the heart of a poet, Deerslayer leans

on his rifle and looks out across the lake with innate love, and a soothed spirit.

Hurry Harry is anxious to get a glimpse of Judith, and so the two men take to the canoe in order to find the Ark and the Hutter family. They look and talk. Hurry explains his theory of race, how the whites are superior and the others don't really have souls. Deerslayer thinks the races all have souls, and are equal, except that they each have special "gifts." A red man can scalp, but a white man is not true to his nature or his gifts when he scalps. He also allows that there are wicked and good Indians, as there are with whites. Hurry says that the laws of the colony allow him to scalp Indians, for bounty. Deerslayer says that God's law is sometimes above man's law--and maybe he and Hurry had just better allow themselves to disagree.

Certainly Hutter is hiding--it is good to be cautious in this country. Deerslayer talks about his lack of looks--Hurry has admitted that Deerslayer is not handsome--and how he has had moments of vanity, and envy, but in the end a man must look evil in the face and not mistake his gifts. Hurry says that Judith certainly finds herself lovely, and Deerslayer allow that event he Indians are known to be vain. They continue to look for the Ark--maybe they are down the river? They check another cove, at the bottom of the lake, and hear the sound of a footstep. Deerslayer leaves the canoe with his rifle to investigate. Then Hurry sees a fine buck emerge from the trees to drink from the lake. He raises his rifle to shoot, and misses. The echo resounds. The deer shakes his head, then swims to the other shore. Deerslayer is unhappy with Hurry's rash action--now their cover is blown, and they certainly didn't need the deer meat. Hurry is only mad at himself for missing--he'd like to see Deerslayer's steady hand if a Mingo were aiming at him! They argue again about the idea of Indians being human beings. Hurry thinks Deerslayer has missionary ideas, is just a boy, and will soon learn that Indians are not brothers. Judith and Tom won't like an Indian-lover in their camp!

They get to the lake's outlet, the top of the river, and find it perfectly hidden. They start down--it looks like a canoe will barely fit--and find the thick cover so dense that when they start discussing the relative merits of Judith Hutter they are surprised to find her answering them, barely an arm's length away, leaning out the window of the well-concealed Ark.

## Notes

In these three chapters, Cooper sets up the background of the tale. We find basic information about the major characters, and we hear quite a bit about Deerslayer's moral theories, as well as Hurry's. We know that Hurry is likely to get them in some trouble--he is rash--and that Deerslayer's calm and kind Christian feelings will get some exercise. We get a lot of information about how the men think of women, via discussions on Judith. Cooper's ideas, voiced by Deerslayer, about a woman's ideal moral purity are strictly standard for his time. Also, we get their theories on race. Hurry is clearly an unthinking racist, and Deerslayer has his theory of "gifts"--not equality, exactly, but an idea about each race's "nature." For the time, Cooper's Natty Bumppo is rather radical in this respect. Cooper felt that the natives and the wilderness were treated horribly by the early white settlers. However, in the twentieth century, we might find his "separate but equal" doctrine a little suspect.

We get the set-up of the lake, and the background of Hurry's affection for Judith. We haven't gotten to the books action-provoking conflict yet--there is only the background threat of warring interference lurking behind the two frontiersmen's travels--but we have all the information we need for what is coming up a battle of hearts, and white against native. ....

## OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Nathaniel Bumppo** (Natty Bumppo, Deerslayer, Hawkeye, etc.) - In *The Deerslayer*, Cooper's main character--and the hero of four other novels by Cooper--is a young man on his "first warpath." Deerslayer is pure of

heart, basically innocent, and somewhat mild-mannered. He is white, but raised since mid-boyhood by the Delaware tribe, and is therefore well versed in frontier learning. He claims to ....

**Chingachgook (Sarpent, Serpent)** - Natty's friend since childhood--and close companion in most of the other books as well as this one--Chingachgook is a stereotyped "good" Indian of North America. His .....

**Judith Hutter** - Judith is one of the only characters in this novel who supposedly develops she begins a vain and lighthearted flirt, and ends as a learned, moral, and chastened woman. In fact, most of her changes are reported, rather than shown. Judith is a stereotype of womanhood-gone-wrong, but with a.....

**Hetty (Esther) Hutter** - Hetty is an idiot savant, an intelligent innocent, and a thoroughly Christianized young woman. Handsome, though not as beautiful as her sister, it becomes apparent after her father dies that she will be prey to men, much like her sister has been, without the protection of her father or .....

**Tom Hutter** - The father of Hetty and Judith turns out not to be their father at all, but the last (and maybe only) husband of their mother. He is a gruff frontiersman--we also find out that he was.....

**Harry "Hurry" March** - Hurry is impatient and always brash, uncontrollable and uncontrolled. Time and again, his anger and greed get the better of him, and he makes a series of rash mistakes which sometimes lead to the death of others. He is an example of the new frontiersman, devil-may-care and.....

**Wah-ta!-Wah (Hist-oh!-Hist)** - A Delaware maiden, captured years ago by the Iroquois and rescued during the course of the novel, Hist is the ultimate Indian princess. Again, Cooper writes her as a stereotype. She is sturdy and delicate, hot tempered and understanding--in short, she is whatever the action of.....

**Rivenoak** - As spokesperson for the Iroquois, Rivenoak is cunning. He is Cooper's "bad" Indian in the sense that he is on the wrong side in the action of the story, but insofar as he is a noble enemy, he is a worthy opponent. Rivenoak and *Deerslayer* understand each other, because they admire some .....

## **PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS**

The plot of *The Deerslayer* is amazingly simple, as most adventure plots are, and gracefully woven, as not all of Cooper's are. The other Natty Bumppo novels often take wide leaps and depend upon wild coincidence--much more so than this book. *The Deerslayer's* plot is very simple at the beginning of the French and Indian wars, a frontiersman and his daughters are caught on the frontier lake where they reside.....

## **THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS**

Social codes are a large part of the message of *The Deerslayer*. At the time of Cooper's writing the Natty Bumppo books (1822-1841), there existed a great desire for a truly American literature, which Cooper produced it concerned the American landscape. The Indians were part of the landscape for writers like Cooper, and though he had sympathy for their plight and was aware of the history of their .....

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