

Religious Assimilation In Early American Fiction

John J. Salesses, Professor, Salve Regina University

In Susan Vreeland's novel, The Forest Lover, the artistic and historical accomplishments of Emily Carr (1870-1946) are portrayed.¹ Carr was a strongly independent woman, an amazing adventurer and painter who was born and raised in a well to do family in Victoria, British Columbia. As a young woman, she studied painting, first in London and later in Paris. Her art consists of modern and innovative representations of the rugged frontier villages and people of the Pacific Northwest, and the subject of her paintings ranges from pine trees and bear cubs to eagles and totem poles. In the novel, Halliday, a man described as "the Indian agent" expresses his concern about the First Nation People of British Columbia and their "heathenish ways, especially the potlatch," which he describes as a *Grand-Fetes* lasting days. Halliday continues "Potlaching requires outlandish expenditures of money for gift-giving, encourages vanity and fantastical competition, . . . and conflicts with Indian employment in logging, agriculture, and canneries and spreads disease, sloth, rowdiness, irresponsibility, and prostitution, if ye must know." When asked what the alternative might be, the "Indian agent" responds, "Why assimilation, of course."²

These lines reveal more than an attitude toward religion and competition between religious ideologies. Underlying this conflict about religious belief, one can observe an effort to control the economic, financial, and political freedom of these vulnerable native people. Their vulnerability is not a weakness but the result of their moral and ethical belief in treating others including animals, trees and other objects of nature with respect and in being prudent in their usage and behavior towards them.

The theme of assimilation or the forcing of the native peoples to be subjected to the religious beliefs and practices of others can be seen in the works of James Fennimore Cooper, Herman Melville, and other early American writers as the cause of continuing regional if not global conflict and strife. In almost every instance one can observe an assumption of superiority and close-minded righteousness that leads to conflict.

In James Fennimore Cooper's novel *The Deerslayer*, the last of the five novels to be published in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, the protagonist, Natty Bumppo, is characterized by a strong sense of

¹ Susan Vreeland, The Forest Lover, (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

² *Ibid.*, 213.

toleration through which he overcomes the prejudicial religious assimilation that Halliday represents in Vreeland's novel.

In Melville's short novel, *Billy Budd*, the central figure comes to a tragic end because of his inability to recognize the evil practiced and represented by petty officer and Master-at-Arms John Claggart and Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere. Billy Budd is unable to comprehend the rigid hierarchy and command structure of the Royal Navy in which he has little standing because he is at the lowest level of the chain-of-command. No matter what he says or does, he is insignificant, and he doesn't realize the lowliness of his position and the rigor of the system, especially when there is a threat to the "good of the order." In his impressment he has been assimilated into the rigid world of military hierarchy from his ideal and unreal world, coming as he does from the *Rights of Man* (named for Thomas Paine's book which urged political equality for all men based on their equality in the eyes of God.)³ "The Handsome Sailor," who is cheerful to all, and smiles at everyone, and thinks that all men are as good and kind as he would be, first reveals his dangerous innocence when he rises in the small boat as he is being transferred to the man-of-war.

The new recruit jumped up from the bow where the coxswain had directed him to sit, and waving his hat to his silent shipmates sorrowfully looking over at him from the taffrail, bade the lads a genial goodbye. Then, making a salutation as to the ship herself, "And good-bye to you too, old Rights-of Man."⁴

The glorious seaman Billy Budd cannot distinguish between the world of *The Rights of Man*, the merchant vessel from which he was impressed and the world of the *Bellipotent*, the ship of war to which he was transferred. Billy Budd does not recognize the difference in the two worlds of the sea that Melville would well have known, having served both in the merchant fleet as well as in the U.S. Navy. Billy becomes morally assimilated because he is unable to distinguish evil in the different settings of these two worlds. Billy is ignorant; we are told:

He possessed that kind and degree of intelligence going along with the unconventional rectitude of a sound human creature, one to whom not yet has been proffered the

³ Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Tales*. (New York: New American Library, 1998), 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

questionable apple of knowledge. He was illiterate; he could not read, but he could sing, and like the illiterate nightingale was sometimes the composer of his own song.⁵

And further:

By his original constitution aided by the co-operating influences of his lot, Billy in many respects was little more than a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane serpent wiggled himself into his company.⁶

In this paper these two reactions to religious assimilation will be discussed: the tolerant response in Cooper and the specter of ignorance in Melville.

James Fennimore Cooper (1789-1851)

Throughout *The Leatherstocking Tales* Natty Bumppo generally can be seen as a person of strong moral conviction, and one who consistently exhibits a sense of tolerance and respect for others. Robert Tilton writes “Through all of the twists and turns of the plot, Deerslayer emerges as a man of honor in an often-dishonorable world, who does his best to maintain his personal code, which had developed during his childhood with the Delawares.”⁷ Deerslayer remains constant in his conscious effort to do what he thinks is right and in asserting his beliefs. At the same time he is noticeably tolerant of the behavior of others, especially the Native Americans.

B.L.R. Smith writes:

Natty’s moral outlook and purity of purpose will prove to be incomparable with the march of civilization, and will cause an irreparable break between him and society. Natty’s acute moral awareness puts him at odds with the moral imperatives of civilization.⁸

His behavior and manner are in direct contrast to other characters in the novel. Tom Hutter and Harry Hurry, for example, have little regard for the Native Americans and constantly try to deceive and trick them and take advantage of their cultural and social differences. Hutter is a guff, local trapper, apparent father of Judith and Hetty, and a man of questionable background. Hurry is a fellow woodsman and guide for the local armies. They have little respect for the Native Americans and lack appreciation of their native culture.

⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁶ Ibid, 17.

⁷ Robert Tilton, “Introduction.” *The Deerslayer*. James Fennimore Cooper. (New York: New American Library, 2004), vii.

⁸ Bruce L.R. Smith, “Introduction.” *The Deerslayer*. By James Fennimore Cooper. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005), xxviii.

Numerous incidents reveal Deerslayer's character, moral strength, and independence and contrast his behavior to that of others in the novel. First, Deerslayer angrily condemns March for his merciless and random shooting of an Iroquois girl. Secondly, Deerslayer criticizes the massacre of the Indian women and children by the British soldiers. Thirdly, he angrily rejects the scheme devised by Hutter and Harry to move stealthily at night, when the Indian men are gone from their village, to scalp Indian women and children for bounty.

Deerslayer's tolerant attitude is shown in his careful distinction between white "gifts" and red "gifts." Natty refuses to get involved in Hutter and Harry's scalping scheme because as he tells Hutter: "My gifts are not scalper's gifts, but such as belong to my religion and color, I'll stand by you, old man in the ark or the castle, the canoe or the woods, but I'll not unhumanize my natur' by falling into ways that God intended for another race."⁹ Deerslayer believes that different behavior may be expected of the Native Americans and may be part of their cultural and religious belief, but such action is not acceptable to him, according to Robert Tilton:

Scalping was seen by Cooper's contemporaries as a particularly savage way to treat the body of one's enemy, and while the practice would have been understood to be the purview of the Indians, who, Cooper suggests, had a long tradition of bringing the scalps of their enemies home as trophies, there can be no doubt as to who is to blame for the proliferation of this practice on the frontier.¹⁰

Natty does not try to convert or coerce the Native Americans into his beliefs; he states that there are certain actions and beliefs that are red "gifts" that white men should not accept or practice. Tolerance and acceptance of different cultural beliefs and practices is his substitute for religious assimilation. Tilton notes "Natty's contentious differentiation of the 'red and white gifts' and 'his unshakeable reverence towards and growing understanding of the natural world' characterize the behavior of a courageous individual who shows a willingness to take a stand against the law if he thinks that the law is wrong. "As he puts it to Harry at the outset of their Adventure at Glimmerglass, 'When the colony's laws, or even the King's laws run ag'in the laws of God, they get to be unlawful and ought not to be obeyed.'"¹¹

⁹ James Fennimore Cooper, The Deerslayer. (New York: Barnes and Noble Classic, 2005), 75.

¹⁰ Robert Tilton, "Introduction." The Deerslayer. James Fennimore Cooper. (New York: New American Library, 2004), xi.

¹¹ James Fennimore Cooper, . The Deerslayer. (New York: Barnes and Noble Classic, 2005) 40.

Later in the novel, after Rivenoak and his warriors have captured Deerslayer, he is offered the opportunity to save his own life if he will marry Sumach, the widow of a warrior who Deerslayer had previously killed in self-defense. Deerslayer's response summarizes his personal beliefs: "Ought the young to wive with the old—the paleface with the redskin—the Christian with the heathen? It's ag'in reason and nature."¹² Deerslayer is a defender of moral and practical standards and tolerant behavior. He refuses to act like the Native Americans but he will not condemn them or harm them unless in self-defense. He tolerates their behavior because he believes it is natural to them, but he will not imitate or adopt their ways. He understands and respects the Native Americans and allows them the right to live according to their own beliefs.

Natty's actions are a reflection of Cooper's own thoughts, expressed in his introduction to *The Last of the Mohicans*

Few men exhibit greater diversity, or, if we may so express it, greater antithesis of character, than the native warrior of North America. In war, he is daring, boastful, cunning, ruthless, self-denying and self-devoted; in peace, just, generous, hospitable, revengeful, superstitious, modest, and commonly chaste. These are qualities, it is true, which do not distinguish all alike; but they are so far the predominating traits of these remarkable people, as to be characteristic.¹³

Cooper has been described as controversial and contentious; he is hardly reticent in his remarks and seems ready to do battle on the slightest provocation. One of the clearest examples of this attitude is in his political and social commentary found in his collection of essays, *The American Democrat*, first published in 1835. K. Edward Spezio states in the introduction to his 2004 edition of this collection:

The American Democrat by James Fennimore Cooper is a provocative expose on American politics that will amuse, shock, and offend contemporary readers -- just as it did when originally published in 1835. It depicts a country teetering on the edge of sacrificing the principles of the American Revolution on the altar of parochial interests.¹⁴

Cooper is not pleased with the political and social actions of his contemporaries. He is particularly critical of the religious practices of his day. In his essay "On Prejudice" he writes:

¹² Ibid., 464.

¹³ James Fennimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*. (New York: New American Library, 1962), v.

¹⁴ James Fennimore Cooper. *The American Democrat*. ed. K. Edward Spezio. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004). ix.

Prejudice is the cause of most of the mistakes of the bodies of men. It influences our conduct and warps our judgment in politics, religion, habits, tastes and opinions. We confide in one statesman and oppose another, and often from unfounded antipathies as from reason; **religion is tainted with uncharitableness and hostilities without examination**; usages are contemned, tastes ridiculed and we decide wrong, from the practice of submitting to a preconceived and an unfounded prejudice, the most active and the most pernicious of all the hostile agents of the human mind. ...**America owes most of its social prejudices to the exaggerated religious opinions of the different sects, which were so instrumental in establishing the colonies.**¹⁵

It is this narrow-minded religious attitude of the early Americans and their lack of toleration that Cooper is reacting to in his delineation of Natty Bumppo, the Deerslayer, in *The Leatherstocking Tales*.

In *The American Diplomat* Cooper clearly reveals his personal displeasure and frustration with what he sees as errors in the practices of his contemporary society. He regrets the lack of tolerance and understanding within his own society. His disillusionment and cynicism is revealed in the "Conclusion" when he cautions:

The disposition of all power is to abuses, nor does it at all mend the matter that's its possessors are a majority. Unrestrained political authority, though it be confided to the masses, cannot be trusted without positive limitations, men in bodies being but an aggregation of the passions, weaknesses, and interests of men as individuals.¹⁶

Further, Cooper expounds "The terms liberty, equality, right and justice, used in a political sense, are merely terms of convention, and of comparative excellence, there being no such thing, in practice, as either of these qualities being carried out purely, according to the abstract notion of theories."¹⁷ Finally, he suggests, "Every human excellence is merely comparative; there being no good with out alloy. It is idle therefore to expect a system that shall exhibit faultlessness or perfection."¹⁸ These are the same depressing thoughts revealed in the final comments of the narrator at the end of *The Deerslayer*:

¹⁵ Ibid., 63 (Emphasis added).

¹⁶ Ibid., 178.

¹⁷ Ibid., 177.

¹⁸ Ibid.

We live in a world of transgressions and selfishness, and no pictures that represent us otherwise can be true, though, happily for human nature, gleamings of that pure spirit in whose likeness man has been fashioned are to be seen, relieving its deformities and mitigating if not excusing its crimes.¹⁹

Herman Melville (1819-1891)

In her essay “Then All Collapsed: Tragic Melville,” Joyce Carol Oates states: “Melville’s themes are dark and intransigent: the helplessness of even the most assertive and defiant of human beings in confronting an unknowable, uncontrollable nature.”²⁰ Melville’s short novel, *Billy Budd*, written in his last years (1888-1891) and published posthumously in 1924, can be described as a moral allegory revealing much of his religious and philosophical belief. Andrew Delbanco in his recent biography states that while Melville cannot be described as a religious person, he “received the rudiments” of a religious education from his mother, Maria ...and while he was never what we would call ‘observant,’ the ultimate questions posed by religion never lost their hold on his imagination.”²¹ Indeed, there is considerable evidence of his mother’s knowledge of the Bible and its stories and certainly there is significant representation of religious belief and especially the question of evil in much of Melville’s writing, especially in *Billy Budd* and his major novel, *Moby Dick*.

In *Billy Budd* (and perhaps to a greater extent in *Benito Cereno*) there is an overwhelming sense of good being overcome, even destroyed, by evil. The evil is personified in Claggart and his jealousy of the young sailor’s good looks, popularity, physical strength, and the high regard in which his new shipmates, the sailors and officers of the *Bellipotent* hold him.

Aboard the *Bellipotent* our merchant-sailor was forthwith rated as an able seaman assigned to the starboard watch of the foretop. He was soon at home in the service, not at all disliked for his unpretentious good looks and a sort of genial happy-go-lucky air. No merrier man in his mess: in marked contrast to certain other individuals included like himself among the impressed portion of the ship’s company.²²

¹⁹ James Fennimore Cooper, *The Deerslayer*. (New York: Barnes and Noble Classic, 2005), 522.

²⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, Introduction. *Billy Budd and Other Tales*. Herman Melville. (New York: New American Library. 1998), vii.

²¹ Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and His Work*. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005), 21.

²² Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Tales*. (New York: New American

But along with this positive perspective, there is the other aspect to the character of Billy Budd, and that is his inability to discern evil in others or in the system and the world in which he lives. He is unable to recognize the unfortunate and unpleasant injustices and incongruities of life.

In Melville's *Billy Budd*, moral and religious assimilation is exposed through the use of a moralizing allegory. As Joyce Carol Oates notes, "Melville's characters are not flat, two-dimensional and ... stereotypical, but representations of ideas."²³ While the forcing of the military's societal norms on a vulnerable Billy Budd is the heart of the story, in this novel it is not tolerance and understanding that is used to reveal the evil actions, rather it is the "Mystery if Iniquity" or sin and lawlessness and the lack of understanding that are the cause the malevolence.²⁴

During the trial or what is rightly described as a "drumhead court," following the death of Claggart, Mr. Montford, the Captain of Marines asks Billy: "You tell us that what the master-at-arms said against you was a lie. Now why should he have so lied, so maliciously lied, since you declare there was no malice between you?" Capt. Vere's response is significant: "That is thoughtfully put, I see your drift. Aye there is a mystery; but to use the scriptural phrase, it is "a mystery of iniquity," a matter for psychologic theologians to discuss."²⁵

Captain "Starry" Vere thus labels 'a mystery of iniquity' as the cause of conflict between Billy Budd, and Claggart's death is a result of Billy Budd's inability to recognize or understand the evil, the iniquity of Claggart's actions. The lies, deceit, envy and jealousy of Claggart are beyond Billy's ability to comprehend. His mind and mentality could not comprehend such evil.

For Billy, though happily endowed with the gaiety of high health, youth, and a free heart, was by no means of a satirical turn. The will to it and the sinister dexterity were alike wanting. To deal in double meanings and insinuations of any sort was quite foreign to his nature.²⁶

Further, in the story we are provided additional insight to Claggart's nature.

Library, 1998), 14.

²³ Joyce Carol Oates, Introduction. *Billy Budd and Other Tales*. By Herman Melville. (New York: New American Library. 1998), xxiv.

²⁴ John Wesley has based his "Sermon 61" on this text (2 Thessalonians): "It is certain that 'God made me upright;' perfectly holy and perfectly happy: but by rebelling against God, he destroyed himself on himself and all his posterity."

²⁵ Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Tales*. (New York: New American Library, 1998), 69.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

With no power to annul the elemental evil in him, though readily enough he could hide it; apprehending the good, but powerless to be it; a nature like Claggart's, surcharged with energy as such natures almost invariably are, what recourse is left to it but to recoil upon itself and, like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted to it.²⁷

Upon the confirmation of Claggart's death, Captain Vere proclaims to the ship's surgeon, "It is the divine judgment of Ananias."²⁸ "But Captain Vere was now again motionless, standing absorbed in thought. Again starting, he vehemently exclaimed, 'Struck dead by an Angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!'"²⁹ The event of Claggart's death at the hand of Billy Budd is beyond the understanding of Captain Vere as well. He too is unable to comprehend or understand what has happened and attributes the blow and resulting death to supernatural powers.

The "Mystery of Iniquity" is the mystery of sin, which is the transgression or contravention of the law. It is, in the case of Billy Budd, the cause of his death because of his inability to recognize it. Man in the form of Claggart is jealous, vindictive, and evil in his treatment of his fellow man. Religion is ignored; Man is assimilated by evil, by his weakness and fatal flaw. As Joyce Carol Oates suggests in some situations man is "helpless."³⁰

Almost four hundred years ago Thomas Helwys, one of the founders of the Baptist faith, produced the first statement in English of absolute religious liberty, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1611-1612). The text of *The Mystery of Iniquity* reveals Helwys's commitment to complete freedom of conscience for all peoples—Christians, Jews, Muslims, and even atheists. Helwys even went so far as to defend the beliefs of Catholics, who were greatly despised during the reign of King James I -- to whom the work was sent. Helwys's plea for complete religious freedom is the cry for toleration seen in the writings of Cooper, but it is also a statement of the importance of thoughtful and conscious consideration of people and their actions, as seen in Melville's *Billy Budd*.³¹

²⁷ Ibid., 42.

²⁸ Bible, Acts 5:3-5.

²⁹ Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Tales*. (New York: New American Library, 1998), 63.

³⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, "Introduction." *Billy Budd and Other Tales*. By Herman Melville. (New York: New American Library, 1998), viii.

³¹ Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*. Ed. Richard Groves. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer Press, 1998.)

Roger Williams, American colonist and religious dissenter, preached tolerance and urged the separation of church and state. In the Preface to *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for Cause* (1644) Williams wrote:

First, that the blood of so many thousand souls of Protestants and Papists spilt in the wars of present and former ages, for their respective consciences, is not required nor accepted by Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. ... [and] it is the will and command of God, that (since the coming of his Son, the Lord Jesus) a permission [allowance] of the most paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian consciences and worships, be granted to all men in all nations and countries; and they are only to be fought against with that sword which is only (in soul matters) able to conquer, to wit, the sword of God's Spirit, the Word of God.³²

Conclusion:

For centuries, throughout the globe, indigenous people developed their own cultural and religious practices. Their beliefs resulted from their experiences and their imaginations, and became the basis of their culture and way of life. Religious assimilation was an attempt to “civilize” the native or first nation people by suppression and prohibition of their religious practices. In North America the European colonists were responsible for the abandonment of the traditional ways of worship and the destruction of the customs, religious practices, and way of life of the native people.³³ Both Cooper in his delineation of tolerant practice and belief in the character of the Deerslayer and Melville in his portrait of the sad ending of the “Handsome (but unintelligent) Sailor” expose and reject the malevolent goal of religious assimilation promoted by the Indian Agent, Halliday, in Susan Vreeland’s *The Forest Lover*.

Reference List

Beard, James Franklin. Afterword, *The Last of The Mohicans*, by James Fennimore Cooper. New York: New American Library, 1962. 417-427.

Cooper, James Fennimore. *The Deerslayer*. New York: Barnes and Noble Classic, 2005.

_____. *The Deerslayer*. New York: New American Library, 2004.

³² Roger Williams, “The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for Cause of Conscience,” *The American Tradition in Literature*, George Perkins and Barbara Perkins. (Boston: McGraw Hill. 2002), 79.

³³ Irene Vernon, “The Claiming of Christ: Native American Postcolonial Discourses.” MELUS 24, 1999. 77-78.

Forum on Public Policy

- _____. The Last of the Mohicans. New York: New American Library, 1962.
- _____. The American Democrat. Edited by K. Edward Spezio. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004.
- Delbanco, Andrew. Melville: His World and His Work. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005.
- Helwys, Thomas. A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity. Ed. Richard Groves. Macon, Georgia: Mercer Press, 1998.
- Melville, Herman. Billy Budd and Other Tales. New York: New American Library, 1998.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. Introduction. Billy Budd and Other Tales. By Herman Melville. New York: New American Library. 1998. vii-xxii.
- Smith, Bruce L.R. Introduction. The Deerslayer. By James Fennimore Cooper. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005.
- Vernon, Irene. "The Claiming of Christ: Native American Postcolonial Discourses." MELUS 24 (1999): 75-89.
- Vreeland, Susan. The Forest Lover. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.
- Williams, Roger. "The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for Cause of Conscience," The American Tradition in Literature. Eds. George Perkins and Barbara Perkins. Boston: McGraw Hill. 2002. 79-80.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy
Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2006.