

LECTURE NOTES: 01

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Paper III: Prose (B)

Unit-III

**The American Democrat Or, Hints on the Social and Civic Relations of the
United States of America : James Fenimore Cooper**

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(Please download the prescribed text from [here](#)).

Written by James Fenimore Cooper (Sep 15, 1789 – Sep 15, 1851) and published in 1838 *The American Democrat* is a political tract on Americans' political responsibilities and a reaction to the political excesses of his era. Cooper was against the levelling effect of democracy's downgrading of intellectual excellence; he believed that democracy is the best of the worst as all forms of government yet devised are tyrannical to some extent and hostile to individual liberty. "Yet Cooper, says H. L. Mencken ¹, "was probably the first American to write about Americans in the really frank spirit... a simple, sound and sensible tract, moderate in tone and extraordinarily astute in its conclusions."

Novelist and social critic James Fenimore Cooper was a prolific and popular American writer of the early 19th century who pioneered the New World Frontier, sea adventure, spy, war-romance and polar-exploration genres; allegorical and satirical fantasy tales; and works of urban and rural realism. His historical romances of frontier and Indian life in the early American days created a unique form of American literature. He lived most of his life in Cooperstown, New York, founded by his father William on his own estate. He attended Yale University for three years, where he was a member of the Linonian Society², but was expelled for misdemeanour .

Before embarking on his career as a writer, he served in the U.S. Navy as a midshipman, which greatly influenced many of his novels and other writings. Among naval historians, Cooper's work on the early U.S. Navy *History of the Navy of the United States of America* (1839) Cooper is a meticulously researched and highly readable work .English writer Anthony Burgess recalls an interesting anecdote of how Cooper became a novelist in his article- "Said Mr. Cooper to His Wife: "You Know, I Could Write Something Better Than That" in *The New York Times* dated May 7, 1972:

¹ Mencken wrote 'Introduction' to *The American Democrat*.

² The Linonian Society was founded in 1753 at Yale College by a few undergraduates with an enthusiasm for literature, independent means of study and self-education beyond the curriculum.

James Fenimore Cooper, country gentleman, 30 years old, married to Susan Augusta De Lancey, belle of New York, living in Westchester, surrounded by land and children, was in the habit of reading aloud to his wife in the evening after dinner. She got on with the sewing and darning while she was regaled with the latest novel—something pretty and domestic and genteel, usually imported from England. One evening Cooper read from a book in the Jane Austen style, thought, and then said: “You know, I could write you something better than this.” So he did, and he called the book “Precaution.” Into it he packed all the genteel bourgeois Englishry that had, in his view, been bedevilling American writing. It was parody, it was an act of criticism, but it was unquestionably a novel, an English novel by an American.

This novel soon established him as an exciting new presence on the emerging American literary scene. His best novels are: *The Leatherstocking Tales*—comprised of *The Deerslayer*(1841), *The Last of the Mohicans*(1826), *The Pathfinder*(1840), *The Pioneers*(1823), and *The Prairie*(1827)—all of which featured Natty Bumppo, Cooper’s quintessential American hero. His love for the Italian coast is seen in his novels such as *The Bravo* (1831) and *Wing-and-Wing* (1842) and signs of Europe in *The Water-Witch* (1830). Among all his works the romantic novel *The Last of the Mohicans*, is often regarded as his masterpiece. Wilkie Collins said - “Cooper is the greatest artist in the domain of romantic fiction. However, Cooper’s fiction was criticised for lack of “the technical aspects of verisimilitude that contemporary novel readers have come to expect” by Mark Twain in his famous essay "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses" (1895) but his fiction captured the romantic landscape and imagination of the American Frontier like no other. Cooper’s experiences abroad were captured in a series of five travel books based on his travels notes between 1836-38: *Sketches of Switzerland* (1836) 2 vols , *Gleanings in Europe: Paris* (1837), *Gleanings in Europe: England*(1837), *Gleanings in Europe: Italy*(1838)

To continue reading on Cooper in *The New York Times* click [here](#).

The American Democrat

[To find the complete volume of *The American Democrat*, click [here](#)]

The American Democrat was published by H.& Phinney in Cooperstown in 1838, and Cooper originally hoped that it would be adopted by the New York State as a civics textbook. This work was written in response to Alexis de Toqueville's (1835) *Democracy in America*³. Although the two men never met, Cooper had provided Toqueville with letters of introduction to New York politicians for use on his famous trip. *The American Democrat* is a short and readable volume of 45 essays containing Cooper's social and political views and offers both a diagnosis and a remedy.

In his 'Introduction', Cooper states that this work was written as a result of his observation that "the principles that are of the last importance to the happiness of the community are getting to be confounded in the popular mind". People complain about such impractical and widely prevalent notions which will produce only disorganization, but don't tend correct them. His work attempts to discriminate "between truth and prejudice". He asserts that that this work was written in "the spirit of censure than of praise, for its aim is correction; and virtues bring their own reward, while errors are dangerous."

Political Background of the Nineteenth Century

In the year 1800 the United States was a fledgling nation. By the time the century ended it had expanded westward exponentially, stamped its imprint as the major power in the Western hemisphere, revolutionized its economy from agriculture to manufacturing, and suffered the trials of a civil war that nearly brought the nation as conceived by its forefathers to an end. The most cataclysmic events of this century were : the [Louisiana Purchase](#), the [War of 1812](#), the [Monroe Doctrine](#), [Jacksonian Democracy](#), [Abolition of slavery](#), the [war with Mexico](#), the [Civil War](#), the Industrial Revolution, the [closing of the Frontier](#), and the [Spanish-American War](#).

American Democracy

One of the most remarkable political developments in the years before the Civil War was the rise of American democracy. For some, the rise of democracy in the United States raised troubling questions about the new power of the majority to silence minority opinion.

³ French sociologist and political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) travelled to the United States in 1831 to study its prisons and returned with a wealth of broader observations that he codified in "Democracy in America" (1835), one of the most influential books of the 19th century.

In 1838 James Fenimore Cooper was worried about American democracy. He was apprehensive, writes Melissa Matthes⁴, “not about American’s democratic institutions during the Jacksonian era so much as he was concerned that features of American civil society—especially newspapers, religion, and political economy—which were becoming the greatest threats to the maintenance of American democratic legitimacy. Although Cooper, like Thomas Jefferson, believed that natural rights were a given, he feared that “the young republic’s post-revolutionary culture might not be able to preserve those natural rights because of an increasingly conformist and fatuous⁵ public sphere⁶”.

To read more here is the link:

<https://old.lawliberty.org/liberty-classic/james-fenimore-cooper-and-the-american-experiment/>

Rise of American Democracy: Key Points

- The founders of the new nation envisioned the United States as a republic, not a democracy, and had placed safeguards such as the Electoral College in the 1787 Constitution to prevent simple majority rule.
- The early 1820s, however, saw many Americans embracing majority rule and rejecting old forms of deference that were based on elite ideas of virtue, learning, and family lineage.
- Voting rights were expanded to include most white adult men; however, this expansion of political power did not extend to women, free blacks, or American Indians.
- Supporters of Andrew Jackson called themselves “Democrats” or the “Democracy,” giving birth to the Democratic Party. When Jackson was elected president, political authority appeared to rest with the majority as never before.
- To some observers, the rise of democracy in the United States raised troubling questions about the new power of the majority to silence minority opinion.

From Lumenlearning.com

⁴ Matthes, Melissa. “James Fenimore Cooper and the American Experiment”, *Law and Liberty*, Feb 19, 2020. <https://lawliberty.org/classic/james-fenimore-cooper-and-the-american-experiment/>

⁵ Silly and pointless

⁶ “The ‘public sphere’ is generally conceived as the social space in which different opinions are expressed, problems of general concern are discussed, and collective solutions are developed communicatively. Thus, the public sphere is the central arena for societal communication. In large-scale societies, mass media and, more recently, online network media support and sustain communication in the public sphere. The English term “public sphere” is a translation of the German *öffentlichkeit*...” From: oxfordbibliographies.com

After a stay⁷ of seven years abroad, Cooper found himself to be a “foreigner in his own country.” He noted two alarming features, “the disposition of the majority to carry out the opinions of the system to the extremes and a disposition of the minority to abandon all to the current day, with the hope that this current will lead, in the end, to radical changes.” He believed that “the democratic panacea, after all, was a fraud like any other... There were no kings and nobles, but the country swarmed with demagogues, and the more Cooper studied them, the less he admired them” (Mencken viii)

Cooper believed that like monarchs who suffer from the adulation of the parasites, people in democracy also suffer from a similar false sense of power. He thought himself to be a good American democrat, but his democracy was not impractical. He preferred democracy to other systems of Monarchy and Aristocracy, “on account of its comparative advantages and not on its account of its perfection” despite its “great and increasing evils”, peculiar to itself- but he believes Monarchy and Aristocracy have more. He was not in favour of “raising men very far above their natural propensities” which depresses others too low. Democracy meant an equal right to participate in community affairs.

According to Mencken, Cooper clearly saw “how democracy warred upon the free functioning of genuinely superior men- how it kept them out of public life, and so forced them into silence and sterility, and robbed the commonwealth of their sense and decency.” He also saw as clearly how the rule of the majority must tend toward “a witless and malignant tyranny, anti-social in its motives and evil almost beyond endurance in its effects.” These are the chief burdens of the democratic form of government under which it breaks down. Despite all this, he had confidence in the fundamental democratic scheme of things and even if democracy failed it would end up offering “its dogma of equality, even though false, had certain uses for human dignity.”

Equality

The concept of equality came to the Founding Fathers of America from the intellectual climate created by the Enlightenment⁸ and from colonial experience resulting in a common

⁷ Cooper travelled in Europe from 1826 to 1833.

⁸ European politics, philosophy, science and communications were underwent radical changes during the “long 18th century” (1685-1815) as part of a movement known as the Age of Reason, or the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers in Britain, in France and throughout Europe questioned

desire for equal opportunity. The Enlightenment advanced ideals of liberty, freedom and equality. French Enlightenment writer, historian, and philosopher Voltaire(1694-1778), an advocate of freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and separation of church and state, had observed that equality must have been part of the State of Nature, yet it was something that men give up when they enter human society. French political philosopher Montesquieu(1689-1775) agreed, but stressed the fact that since only a very limited degree of equality was possible in human society, men are left to ponder how they may reduce the inequalities. The most powerful and most direct influence on American thinking about equality was Enlightenment thinker, John Locke(1632-1704) who argued in his *Treatise on Civil Government*(1689) that each man is born according to the rights and privileges of the law of nature "equally with any other man or number of men in the world." Differences and inequalities were, therefore, not from nature, but were artificial creations. Thus, Enlightenment thinkers and writers were devoted to the ideals of justice, liberty, and equality as the natural rights of man.

When Thomas Jefferson, the Founding Father and the third president of the United States(1801 -1809)wrote that "all men are created equal," he did not mean that all men were equal in all respects because even a casual observation of human nature reveals ineradicable differences among them. Though Cooper was suspicious of much of the day-to-day politics, he reflected upon the place of equality in the reform movements of that period. For him, equality meant neither reducing all men to the lowest level of mediocrity nor raising all men to the highest level of superiority. Equality was a matter of civil and political rights than equality of talent or property. In short, Cooper embraced a view of equality like that of the Founders.

traditional authority and embraced the notion that humanity could be improved through rational change. The Enlightenment produced numerous books, essays, inventions, scientific discoveries, laws, wars and revolutions. The American and French Revolutions were directly inspired by Enlightenment ideals and respectively marked the peak of its influence and the beginning of its decline. The Enlightenment ultimately gave way to 19th-century Romanticism.

Instructions:

1. Read the prescribed text against this political background.
2. Summarise the ideas present in them.

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Suggested Reading:

Clark, Robert, ed. *James Fenimore Cooper: New Critical Essays*. Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books, 1986.

Louras, Nick. *James Fenimore Cooper: A Life*. John Hunt Publishing, 2016.

Person, Leland S., ed. *A Historical Guide to James Fenimore Cooper*. OUP, 2007.

Spiller, Robert Ernest. *Fenimore Cooper: Critic of His Time*. Russell, 2013

Verhoeven, W.M. *James Fenimore Cooper: New Historical and Literary Contexts*. Rodopi, 1993.

YouTube Resources:

James Fenimore Cooper

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzwMg3NgP2M&t=55s>

A Short History of Democracy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6jgWxkbR7A&t=23s>

Enlightenment Thinkers

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CP8k_f3PFq8&t=115s

For all queries, questions, discussions, please drop in a request at msingh02@rediffmail.com.