

The Prairie

by James Fenimore Cooper



ABOUT THE READING James Fenimore Cooper wrote about the American frontier experience. *The Leatherstocking Tales* (a collection of five novels including *The Prairie*) portrays the life of a character named Natty Bumppo. In *The Prairie*, Natty gave up his life as a trapper to live with Hard-Heart, a young Pawnee chief. In the following excerpt, Middleton has returned to the Pawnee village to pay his respects to his old friend, The Trapper, who is dying.

VOCABULARY

deference respect

arms weapons

rude made roughly



As you read the passage below, pay attention to the details that Cooper uses to set the scene.

The Death of Leatherstocking

When they entered the town, its inhabitants were seen collected in an open space, where they were arranged with the customary **deference** to age and rank. The whole formed a large circle, in the center of which were perhaps a dozen of the principal chiefs. Hard-Heart waved his hand as he approached, and as the mass of bodies opened he rode through, followed by his companions. Here they dismounted; and as the beasts were led apart, the strangers found themselves environed by a thousand grave, composed, but solicitous faces.

Middleton gazed about him in growing concern, for no cry, no song, no shout welcomed him among a people from whom he had so lately parted with regret. His uneasiness, not to say apprehensions, was shared by all his followers. Determination and stern resolution began to assume the place of anxiety in every eye, as each man silently felt for his **arms**, and assured himself that his several weapons

Circle the words that reveal the story's setting and the tone.

Why do you think they felt uneasy?

Source: *Adventures in American Literature*, Harcourt.

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were in a state of service. But there was no answering symptom of hostility on the part of their hosts. Hard-Heart beckoned for Middleton and Paul to follow, leading the way towards the cluster of forms that occupied the center of the circle. Here the visitors found a solution of all the movements which had given them so much reason for apprehension.

The trapper was placed on a **rude** seat, which had been made, with studied care, to support his frame in an upright and easy attitude. The first glance of the eye told his former friends that the old man was at length called upon to pay the last tribute to nature. . .

“Pawnee, I die, as I have lived, a Christian man!” resumed the trapper, with a force of voice that had the same startling effect on his hearers as is produced by the trumpet when its blast rises suddenly and freely on the air after its obstructed sounds have been heard struggling in the distance; “as I came into life, so will I leave it. Horses and arms are not needed to stand the presence of the Great Spirit of my people. He knows my color, and according to my gifts will he judge my deeds.”

Note the description of the trapper's voice. Can you imagine the sound? Describe the sound in your own words.

ANALYZING LITERATURE

1. Main Idea What is the trapper's last tribute to nature?

2. Critical Thinking What can you learn about life in the prairie by reading a novel such as this?

3. Activity James Fenimore Cooper used American history to write his action-packed novels about the frontier. Select a period in American history and develop a character based on that time period. Write a descriptive paragraph introducing your character to the class.