

Article

The Construction of American National Identity in Cooper's *Spy*, a Revolutionary Historical Novel

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Abstract: As a pioneer of American national literature, James Cooper made national identity construction his life's mission. Set in the Revolutionary War, the novel *Spy* centres around the protagonist Harvey Birch, who travels through the neutral zone in the guise of a freighter to collect British intelligence. Birch travels through the neutral zone in the guise of a cargo man to obtain British intelligence, and is mistaken for a spy by the American army. But for the sake of his country, this truth will never be revealed. Cooper realises the construction of national identity in real historical events, and blends the beauty of harmony between man and nature. For Cooper, this work represents his first success in his entire literary career. At the same time, *Spy* became the seminal work of ethnic fiction in American literary history.

Keywords: American nationhood; identity; James Cooper; espionage

1. Introduction

The history of the American War of Independence can be traced back to the period from 1775 to 1783, when the people of the thirteen colonies in British North America began their struggle against British colonial rule and for national independence. The victory of the War of Independence heralded the formal departure of the United States from the British colonial attributes and won national independence. In this process, the United States established a relatively democratic political system. Nevertheless, it was not until the early 1820s that American literature gradually broke away from its dependence on Britain and gave birth to a national literature in the true sense of the word. In writing this literature, the Declaration of Independence, James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) became the "originator of the American novel". In fact, many novelists had attempted to write national novels before him, but these attempts were unsuccessful. However, these attempts were unsuccessful, as they failed to capture the core of the American spirit, and remained merely superficial in their use of American elements. Cooper began writing at the age of 31, and throughout his literary career, he pioneered the writing of revolutionary historical novels, maritime novels, and frontier novels. As one of the first novels to feature the Revolutionary War as an explicit theme, this eulogy of patriotism, *The Spy*, succeeded in kicking off a boom in the writing of American historical fiction. At the same time, its success also marked the formal emergence of writing set in the United States and featuring American life and American characters.

2. Dualists in the "Neutral Zone"

The story takes place in Westchester County in the late 1780's, in the midst of a battle between two armies. Instead of choosing Washington, the "Father of the American Revolution", as the central character, Cooper created a new character, Harvey Birch. His dual identity has been the subject of much controversy. On the surface, Birch is an impoverished "stock boy", but in reality he is under Washington's command, specialising in spying on the British and the Royalists, and carrying out his tasks under extremely dangerous

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circumstances. Prior to the publication of this novel, the existence of spies was not generally accepted or recognised. In the eyes of these people, spies meant lies, deception, planting of evidence, assassination; they defended the interests of a particular group of people, were in the relatively dark political realm, and disregarded the common ideals of mankind; their profession was dangerous and had no significance of existence. Literature in the traditional Western conception tends to assume the function of social and moral edification. Spies obviously do not meet this criterion, they are in a non-moral space, and the subject of spies has long been ignored by literary creators. In order to change the inherent impression that spies are shameful and dishonourable, Cooper attempts to portray Birch as a symbol of American patriotism.

Harvey Birch was of low status and was also wrongly suspected of being a British spy. Because Birch's work was so covert that only Washington himself knew his true identity, he was nearly hunted down several times, and was fortunate enough to receive covert assistance in escaping. When he chose to become a spy, he put his life behind the fate of his country. He was a true national hero who spent his life in anonymity for the cause of American independence. He gave up everything to see his father for the last time. After the end of the war, Washington prepared a bonus to try to compensate Birch for the harm he suffered in the war, but he politely declined. He is dismissive of this reward, claiming that his actions were not for financial reward. Cooper has categorised Birch as being in the same category as a warrior, and from a written character, Captain Lawton, a soldier of justice from Virginia, praises Birch, saying, "He may be a spy... he must be a spy... Yet he worries about the enemy and has the noble soul of a warrior" [1].

Despite the fact that in the entrenched social patterns of the era, a spy meant a liar, a traitor, a thief, or even worse, Cooper gradually changes the trauma of public opinion through a fictional storyline that looks at the dual role of the spy in a whole new light: that of the unsung hero. In fact, in Cooper's book, Birch is not a flawless character; as a peddler, he is very shrewd and greedy, with a focus on personal gain, and is therefore able to travel around the region and make a fortune. At the same time, like other Americans, Birch displays a strong sense of personal superiority and discrimination against the black community. However, despite the unmitigated weaknesses in Birch the Spy, he still puts his country first and becomes a representative figure of the American spirit.

In *Spy*, Cooper not only casts a spy as the protagonist for the first time, but also constructs the novel in the vaguest of areas, defined as "neutral ground". The county of Westchester is a transition area between opposing armies and is under the joint control of both. Birch's dual identity gives him the power to travel through this "neutral zone", a place of conflict and confrontation between Britain and the United States, due to its special geographical location. While selling goods as a "freight handler", Birch must navigate the gap between the two enemies. In doing so, Cooper presents the debate between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries as a reflection of the ideological and political clashes between Britain and the United States at the time, and explores his own views and perspectives on the American Revolution, such as the legality of the rebellion itself, the brutality and violence of the various groups, and the social and cultural prohibitions, including those on espionage.

Thus, Harvey Birch's dual identity gives him special rights; ostensibly, he is a freight handler who sells goods, but in reality he is a spy for the U.S. Army, whose true identity is known only to Washington, as he travels through Westchester County. Only Washington knows his true identity, and he travels through Westchester County, a "neutral zone" that provides a suitable narrative space for the whole spy story and helps to form the American national identity. In addition, Cooper not only has ulterior motives in the portrayal of the main characters and the choice of narrative space in the text, but also embedded the construction of American national identity in the historical and cultural process, which has given the whole work a thick historical connotation and a profound significance in reality.

3. The Construction of National Identity Embedded in History and Culture

Unlike other popular literature, the characters in spy literature have a dual identity, not only representing themselves, but also manifesting the identity of the nation-state. Therefore, their actions are only meaningful and believable when placed in a specific historical context. Born between the two American civil wars, Cooper's personal fate is closely related to that of his country. The representativeness of Cooper and his time has led many critics to call this period "the time of Cooper" [2]. Being in a complicated historical period, Cooper always stood in the forefront of the times, not only witnessed the balance of various forces in this history, but also participated in the exchange of ideas. Therefore, his novels and literary creations are of great significance to the understanding of American culture and history, and to the exploration of the origin of American thought.

In order to avoid writing Spy as a simple adventure story, Cooper integrates the whole story line into the historical process. As a nationalist, Cooper gives the novel historical accuracy and authenticity by paying attention to details, be it names, dates, places and historical facts, so that the whole process of the war described in the novel is full of reality. In the novel, there are real characters or groups such as "Delancey" (a royalist and New York landowner) and "Hess's Mercenaries" (a group of 18th-century German-born mercenaries), as well as "Burgoyne's surrender at the head of his army" and "Andre's surrender". Burgoyne's surrender of his army", "Andre's execution", "Tarleton's defeat of General Sumter at the Tyger", and "the Battle of White's Plains", among other historical events. In addition, scholars have argued that the archetypes behind the fictionalised text of Spy are also real. Harvey Birch's image is derived from Colosby, a spy under Jay during the Revolutionary War, while in the novel, Birch's allegiance is to Washington. Although they belong to different leaders, the essence of patriotic spirit is the same.

Meanwhile, the main plot of the novel focuses on the conflict and struggle between the American and British armies during the Revolutionary War. Cooper uses Harvey Birch, a "civilian hero," to dismantle the hierarchy and sense of identity that had long prevailed in Britain. Washington, the leader, exists only as a spiritual symbol. But Birch as the representative of the grassroots is the focus of Cooper's attention, they have noble sentiments, is the real subject of the American national spirit, but also the real protagonist of the novel. In being misunderstood, Birch had the opportunity to show his true identity through Washington's letter, but he refused to hand the note in and lost the only evidence of his identity. Cooper aims to show that any ordinary citizen has the potential to be a hero of a nation, and that, in his view, the nobility of humanity has nothing to do with either class or country. At the end of the novel, Cooper explains the end of the main character Birch. In the second Anglo-American war, the old Birch still sticks to his mission, collects intelligence everywhere, continues to serve the country, and even dies in the fire. Until the end, people found the box hidden in his body, inside the preservation of Washington's handwritten letter. At this point, the mystery of Birch's identity was finally unravelled.

Throughout the course of his narrative, Cooper maintains a more objective approach to narration. Although his language inevitably carries a certain emotional tendency in order to better construct the American national identity, he does not deliberately vilify the British characters or glorify the American characters for the purpose of constructing the American national identity. However, he does not deliberately vilify British characters or glorify American characters for the purpose of constructing American national identity. Chu has said, "Cooper has a good attitude towards the British officers within the book, and a righteous nonchalance towards the speculative American irregulars, and does not favour the Revolutionary Army or obliterate the merits of the British side, and this objective and generous portrayal and stance may be one of the reasons why the British critics admired Cooper." [3]. In the novel, Henry is a British officer who is arrested for entering the "neutral zone" to visit his family. But Cooper does not demean him because of his British background. At the same time, Cooper does not intentionally glorify all Americans

in order to construct an American national identity; he writes of a group of people (the American "Stripers") whose "sole object was to deprive their fellow-countrymen of whatever little happiness was deemed to be in excess of their limitations, in the name of patriotism and the love of liberty." [1]. In the novel, Henry is a British officer who is arrested for visiting his family in the "Neutral Zone" [1]. He exposes the brutality of these people and shows the danger they pose to society.

Cooper's rich knowledge and life experience enable him to develop a clearer and more definite image of himself and of the nations of the world. In *Spy*, he establishes the image of Birch, the American civilian hero, witnesses the formation of the American national character identity, and dispels the superstitions about identity and hierarchy prevalent in American society. When most Americans were ashamed of the advanced European civilisation, Cooper sharply criticised the shortcomings of the European aristocratic hierarchy in his novels, gradually dissolved the backward and ancient norms of the British tradition, and fused the advanced aspects of European civilisation to show the superiority of the civilisation over other nations. Appiah once pointed out, "The French and American revolutions brought about a patriotism which permits us to love a country with principles which are the way to some moral goals." [4].

4. American Ethnicity in the Natural Landscape

In the first half of the 19th century, the United States, then considered a "cultural desert," could hardly compete with culturally rich Europe, the only exception being its magnificent natural landscapes [5]. Cooper, like the early American landscape painters, examined the natural scenery of the American wilderness, put it into words, and internalised the American spirit in it. In Cooper's writing, the American people represented by Birch, Harper and others were able to live in harmony and coexistence with all things in nature. They achieve a benign relationship with each other, which also constitutes an important field for shaping the American national identity and constructing the American nationhood. Since the War of Independence, the United States has been emphasising its own characteristics that distinguish it from European countries such as Britain. This is the case with Cooper's novel *The Spy*, in which he creates a harmonious relationship between his characters and nature, and in doing so affirms the uniqueness of American nationhood. "One of the main reasons for Cooper's success was his predilection for visual description, and his graphic and vivid depictions of landscapes responded to the popular need for intuitive geographic information." [6]. For Americans and Britons, natural landscapes carried very different symbolic meanings. Special natural environments and geographic locations were obstacles that British soldiers could not cross, the "other" that had to be overcome with effort. For Harvey Birch and others, what Cooper describes as "the vastness and magnificence of the external landscape had an important moral symbolic significance. For them, the sublimity of the natural landscape moves the observer's mind to see his own insignificance in contrast to the omnipotent creator and to learn humility." [7].

Cooper's Washington is the ideal American Founding Father, who secretly infiltrated the "Neutral Zone" in disguise as Harper in order to find out what the people really thought about the Revolutionary War. Washington's familiarity with the natural environment and geographical terrain allowed him to travel freely through the valleys and dense forests. Despite his disguise as Harper, Washington shows his deep love for his country, his familiarity with the land, and his harmony with its natural beauty. Harvey, the representative of the common man, is also a man capable of perfect integration with the natural world, a son of nature far away from the worldly civilisation, who overcomes the greedy nature of man with a high moral civilisation. He has been hiding in a shack in the mountains, and because he knows the terrain around him like the back of his hand, he is able to use the cover of nature to fulfil his mission of serving his country. In addition, Frances is a strong female character who is intelligent, bold, and able to empathise with the natural landscape. When Old Birch died, Frances looked at the funeral procession, her heart was

full of sadness, “she saw the cold wind sweeping across the valley, blowing the trees have bent, and even the buildings are trembling” [1], this cold and bleak scene is a true reflection of her heart. In order to save her brother Henry’s life, she walks the mountain path alone at night without getting lost and successfully seeks help from Washington, which reflects that in Cooper’s novels, not only male characters, but also even slightly weaker women, are able to be self-compatible with the natural world, and that they are both courageous and capable of integrating into nature and utilising it.

As seen in the novel *Spy*, Cooper’s subjective efforts to reflect Native American characteristics and construct an American national identity in his work as a leader of American national literature. “Insofar as Rousseau advocated the return to nature and the externalisation of the gentleman’s sayings, in terms of literary expression and the understanding of human nature, its successor was not the English Scout but the American Cooper.” [3]. During the critical period of the emergence of American national consciousness, Cooper shaped the American nationhood in his works differently from the English tradition, rejecting hierarchy and racial discrimination, advocating the construction of an American national identity of equality, freedom, and communion and coexistence with all things in nature, and leading American literature to break away from the influence of English literature and manifest a different sense of independence and national identity from it.

5. Conclusion

According to Francis Parkman, “Of all the American writers, Cooper is the most original and the most national.” [8]. In the history of the development of American national literature, Cooper is credited with one of the earliest American writers to win international reputation in the history of American literature, but also the pioneer of American national literature. And the novel *Spy* occupies an important position in Cooper’s literary career and the history of American literature. Unlike traditional literary works, he portrayed a spy with dual identities in the “neutral zone”, constructed an American national identity in the course of real history, and realised a harmonious symbiosis with the natural world. In this process, Cooper had already discovered the problems that still existed in the American society at that time, only that he deliberately avoided them due to the critical period of the construction of the American national identity at that time. Therefore, in the novel, the revelation of the status quo and problems of the American society only remains on the surface, and still needs to be explored in depth in combination with other literary works.

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