

## The Images of American ‘Ladies Aboard’ in the Novels by J.F.Cooper

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*The report sheds light on a number of features characteristic of Cooper’s depiction of his countrywomen travelling on board of ships. The analysis is primarily based on the novels “The Red Rover” (1827), “Homeward Bound, or the Chase” (1838), “The Pathfinder, or the Inland Sea” (1840) and “Afloat and Ashore” (1844). This article attempts to combine the study of women’s images with the theme of the sea novel. In Russian literary critical studies, special attention has been paid to the exploration of Cooper’s marine novels, while the image of a lady in his writings has been overlooked par excellence. There are articles on the issue of Cooper’s female characters in American literary studies that tend to harshly criticize the author’s heroines for them being hardly distinguishable. This proposition is seen as only partially true, as the author of the present paper claims that the uniqueness of the female images created by J.F. Cooper lies in their natural existence aboard a ship, which was quite uncommon in American literary tradition. The article attempts to explore Cooper’s unique approach to the creation of female protagonists dwelling aboard from the perspective of the historical and cultural reasons why women were banned from ship travels in America.*

**Keywords:** Female characters, American literature, J.F. Cooper, American lady, women on ships

### Introduction

Being not only a prolific writer, but an extensive traveler and a father of six daughters, James Fenimore Cooper is best known for his male hero Natty Bumppo with his Indian friend Chingachgook from the Leatherstocking Tales. The image of the former is widely labeled as the one of ‘New Adam’ reflecting the core aspects of American national identity. Every Adam has his Eve, and, thus, Cooper creates female characters who successfully fulfil the image of a typical American lady of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The writer systematically chooses ships as settings of his narratives where the characters exist and develop. Though sea tales are one of the major trends of American literary tradition, female images can hardly be spotted in such environment in the vast majority of American fiction. The aim of the research is to shed light on the number of features characteristic of Cooper’s depiction of his countrywomen travelling on board of ships. The analysis is primarily based on the following novels by Cooper: “The Red Rover”, “Homeward Bound, or the Chase”, “The Pathfinder, or the Inland Sea” and “Afloat and Ashore”. The paper would present an overview of Russian and American critical tradition on Cooper’s

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writing, precisely the research works concerning female images created by the writer and discuss the specificity and the function the young ladies' images the writer creates in his literature.

## **Literature Review**

The image of American lady in Cooper's writings has been overlooked par excellence in the Russian literary critical studies, which have primarily focused on the two aspects of the writer's creative work: his social criticism and the issue of the American frontier with his Adamic hero, Natty Bumppo. In 2004 the Effingham dilogy became the subject matter of the dissertation "The artistic features of Dilogy JF Cooper about Modernity "Homeward bound" and "Home as found" by the Russian scholar E.E. Rosé (2004). The research work analyses the irony the dilogy contains in relation to American society of the first half of the 19th century. It must be noted that Cooper's satire in the abovementioned novels refers to the male characters solely, whereas it does not apply to female images as they are considered to have been idealized by the author. In recent times, the vector of Russian studies on Cooper has shifted towards the writer's marine novels (e.g. "Linguoculturological Potential of the "Ocean" Concept (by the Material of the Works of J.F.Cooper "The Red Rover" "Around the World on the Korshun" by K.M.Stanyukovich" by Istomina S.S. (2023), "Representation of the Concept "Body of Water" in the artistic space of Fenimore Cooper" by Egoshina N.G. and Lashmanov A.K. (2021), while the attention to female images created by the author is still hardly noticeable.

Conversely, there is a number of articles on the issue of Cooper's female characters in American literary studies of the 19-20 centuries which tend to harshly criticize Cooper's heroines. One of the reviewers, the American poet and essayist James Lowell (2021), writes in "A Fable for Critics": "the Women he draws from one model don't vary, all sappy as maples and flat as a prairie." Accordant, is the opinion of the American literary critic Leslie Fiedler (1988), who characterized Cooper's female images as "the scarcely distinguishable." The former opinion as well as the latter has the right to exist due to the fact that a lot of Cooper's females are highly comparable. The major part of feminine figures from the Cooper's novels can be nominally divided into two types, namely: an image of a religious and pious mother (Ruth Harding Heathcote from "The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish: a Tale" (1829), Wilhelmina Willoughby from "The Wyandotte, or the Huttet Knoll" (1843); a character of a young outrageous young lady (Judith Hutter from "The Deerslayer, or the First Warpath" (1841), Mabel Dunham from "The Pathfinder, or the Inland Sea" (1840). However, it is claimed that the uniqueness of the female characters created by Cooper lies in their natural existence aboard of a ship, which is quite uncommon: in the novels by H. Melville (e.g. "Moby Dick, or The Whale") and M. Twain (e.g. "The Old Man and the Sea"), a vessel was exclusively the men's world. Interestingly, both types of women characters mentioned above are undertaking voyages in Cooper's novels.

In 1971 on the pages of American Quarterly in the article "The Women of Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales" American literary scholar Nina Baym (1971)

compares women characters from Cooper's best-known series of novels the *Leatherstocking Tales*. The researcher attempts to introduce a classification of Cooper's female characters, which she does by dividing them in two groups such as marriageable and unmarried, still admitting that "to organize Cooper's woman according to types, or stereotypes, is more confusing than clarifying" (p. 699). In 1981 in the journal "Studies in the Novel" the article named "Towards Daisy Miller: Cooper's Idea of the American Girl" by Susan Hopkins (1981) comes out, in which the author convincingly proves the fact that the national image of American lady was created not by the generation of realist writers, but by the romantic writer J.F. Cooper in his novels "Afloat and Ashore", "Miles Wallingford" and the Effingham diology.

In contemporary American literary criticism, there are multiple articles devoted to the study of female images of the writer. For instance, Chuck Zeitvogel's thesis "Gender Power and Social Class: The Role of Women in James Fenimore Cooper's "The Pathfinder", "Homeward Bound", "Home as Found", and "The Ways of the Hour" (2004) compares the images of the four young American women from the above-mentioned novel and concludes that Cooper, being a proponent of a patriarchal society, endows his female images with limited power. Moreover, the scholar names Eve from the Effingham diology the "ideal lady" – the opinion the author of the present paper totally agrees to. Another relevant example is the article "A Brave New World: Wilderness Dreams and Female Empowerment from Vineland to the Pacific" by a contemporary American researcher Signe O. Wegener (2018) who analyses the characteristics of a number of female images by Cooper and hypothesizes that an American young female is "a very different type of woman than the one expected in the "old world" (p. 62).

Subsequently, American critics' contribution to the analysis of Cooper's female images is substantial, though their characters have been analyzed independent of the setting of the story. The present paper does not attempt to classify female images in Cooper's artistic work but rather highlight the specificity of their natural existence in a particular setting, namely, aboard of a ship.

## **Methodology**

The research applies biographical method to trace the connection between the author's life circumstances and the characters he creates. To draw a conclusion about the images of young American ladies created by Cooper, the methods of discourse analysis have been employed, particularly narrative analysis and critical analysis. The method of comparative analysis has been utilized to define the commonalities and differences in the corresponding images of young American females in Cooper's novels under study.

## Discussion

For Cooper, father-daughter relationship is truly special. The images of young ladies were depicted with great love in Cooper's novels, presumably their prototypes were the author's daughters. For instance, in the Effingham dilogy which is considered autobiographical, the prototype of Eve's father is James Fenimore Cooper himself, and therefore the author describes the heroine with such love as if describing one of own daughters. The author eloquently calls this heroine of the novel "Homeward Bound" Eve. This name was also initially chosen by the writer for the heroine of the novel "Pathfinder, or the Inland Sea", but then it was changed to Mabel. Presumably for the author it was more important in this novel to call his best-known character Natty Bumppo 'Adam before the Fall' than to name Eve the girl who refused the love of the angelic protagonist.

This article attempts to combine the study of women's images with the theme of the sea novel. Interestingly, as soon as Cooper describes a ship in his novels, surely there is a lady aboard. The organic existence of the main female character aboard the ship is distinctly traceable in "Homeward Bound", "Pathfinder, or the Inland Sea", "Afloat and Ashore, or the Chase" and "The Red Rover". So, in the four aforementioned novels, one of the central characters is an American girl, 18-20 years old, either belonging to an upper-class society, or being a daughter of a military man, often accompanied by a maid, a governess and a father, in the novel "Afloat and Ashore, or the Chase", she travels with her elder brother, in the other – three girls travel with their fathers. Heroines-travelers in Cooper's novels are brave, patriotic, good-looking and sure to fall in love with one of the central characters of the work – often a so-called Cooper's New Adam – a young American male who realizes this ideal in accordance with the characteristics given to him by Benjamin Franklin, namely, chosenness, providence, usefulness, industriousness, etc.

It is worth mentioning that the period described by Cooper in his books coincides with the time when the transatlantic travel hit the peak. The narrative of "The Red Rover" together with "The Pathfinder, or the Inland Sea" is set around 1759, while the action of "Afloat and Ashore, or the Chase" takes place in 1797. The latest period is described in "Homeward Bound" focusing on 1815. Still throughout the period between 1750 and 1810, in accordance with "Navigating Mobility: Gender, Class and Space at Sea" by Sarah Crabtree (2014) "men and woman traveled in almost equal numbers" (p. 92). In contemporary to Cooper reality, there was often the case that women followed their husbands to the ship because of need. At the same time, in Cooper's novels, not wives follow their husbands: but daughters join their fathers. And mainly, not because the fathers are on military service, but because the family travels together. The reason why girls take voyages with their fathers solely lies in the fact that they are deprived of their mother from an early age. One-parent family is described in numerous novels by Cooper, including all four novels under study.

The ladies' images Cooper creates share several common features which, to a certain extent, contradict the generally known superstition that a woman on a ship brings bad luck. In other words, as it termed in "Legends a Superstitions of the Sea and of Sailors in All Lands and in All Times" by the lieutenant of U.S. Navy

Fletcher S. Basset (1892) “women were thought unlucky at sea” (p. 102). The study by D. Cordingly (2001) “Seafaring Women: Adventures of Pirate Queens, Female Stowaways, and Sailors’ Wives” considers the idea “that women have powers over the sea that are denied to men” (p. 155), but still focuses on the superstitions that prompted the origin of the perception of women aboard as carriers of bad fortune saying that it is challenging to find any factual basis for this idea. Overall, literature corpus on the issue of this superstition primarily elaborates on three different reasons explaining why women on a ship were a taboo.

The first version justifies the ban by objectively harsh living conditions on the ship not at all suitable for women. According to “Encyclopedia of Naval History” by A. Bruce and W. Cogar (1998) Both, Royal Navy and the US Navy of the XIX century faced the problem of recruiting persons to serve on boards due the adverse vessel environment. Along with the long absences from home, the list of boardship discentives includes “poor living conditions, the risk of illness” (p. 305). The author states that the shipboard conditions started improving much later in history, not earlier than the middle of the XXth century.

The second version is based on possible disagreements that a woman on a ship could bring into a cohesive male team. In the collection of folk tales and superstitions “Black Cats and April Fools. Origins of Old Wives’ Tales and Superstitions in Our Daily Lives” by H. Oliver (2006), the one of the negative attitude to the presence of females aboard is proposed to be “originated from the social tensions and problems that might arise among the crew of bachelor men if a woman was on board.”

The third version states that a ship has a soul, and it is certainly of female gender, and in case there is a woman on board, the ship can become jealous and not obey the captain in a critical situation. Similarly, in Chapter III of the study “Boats and Boatsmen” T.C. Lethbridge (1952) mentions that ships were protected by a goddess of female gender whose jealousy to the presence of another woman in her shrine might be provoked.

Three described above reasons of negative perception of women on ships will be considered below with regard to James Fenimore Cooper’s texts. The hypothesis is that the writer tends to disregard two out of the three mentioned causes by creating female characters who feel safe and comfortable aboard, contribute to peaceful environment of a ship’s microcosm, but still is a specific way compete with the ships they travel on in gaining the most of attention from the ship’s master.

J.F. Cooper does not emphasize the difficult life on the ship, and every non-military ship described in his works, accommodates women. The latter being not just inconsiderable passengers, but carefully described protagonists of the plot.

The theory that it would be physically difficult for women as weaker creatures to survive on board of a ship is refuted in Cooper’s novels: contemporary to Cooper American women feel great on water. This can be illustrated by the episode from the novel “Pathfinder, or the Inland Sea” written in 1840 by J.F. Cooper (2008), narrating about the 1750s, where it is noted that the young American woman Mabel does not suffer from seasickness at all and behaves, as the other passengers liked to say, like a “real sailor.”

Moreover, the girls on the ship have a positive attitude towards their sea voyages, they are able to admire not only the landscapes, but also the ships: “She

seems very beautiful to me, uncle... "I daresay you can find faults in his appearance, and in the way she is managed; but to my ignorance, both are perfect." In this romantic manner a young traveler describes the ship she travels on.

Even in the moment of a mortal danger on the ship, a young woman named Gertrude, a passenger ship from the novel "The Red Rover" by Cooper (2004) makes a remark about the ship: "She is certainly beautiful!" Furthermore, the writer shows that the American women are inclined to experience happiness on board of the ship. In "Afloat and Ashore" by J.F.Cooper (2005) the heroine remarks: "Fortunately, everything else was soothing to my sister's spirits; and, so long as she could sit on the deck, holding Lucy's hand, and enjoy the changing landscape, with her brother within call, it was not possible she would be altogether without happiness." The calming effect of being aboard is given mostly to the fact that a person locates in the middle of nature, and this idea of natural world producing a positive and even a divine effect on the heroes of the narratives is typical of all Cooper's writings.

Akin to this description presented above is the episode from the novel "Homeward Bound": by J.F. Cooper (2011) it can be noted that the appearance young American Eve, who is afloat at the time, is harmonious with her inner state: "Indeed, so long did Eve, in the buoyancy of her young spirits, and her keen perception of the ludicrous, indulge herself, that fair hair fell about her rosy cheeks, and her bright eyes fairly danced with delight." The portrait of the girl is taken aboard of the ship and this location seems to be having a positive impact on her mood reflecting in the ways she looks.

The corpus of citations analyzed above convincingly demonstrates that the first assumption about the severe aboard conditions threatening to women's well-being can be debunked judging by numerous Cooper's female characters who feel comfortable and happy when afloat.

Speaking of prejudice that a woman can provoke a conflict among the crew of the ship is also not justified in Cooper's novels. It was believed that for the crew, as for the captain there should be only one "woman" in the voyage — the ship.

The vessels in the novels of Cooper directly represent the highest value for the captains and are traditionally referred to as 'she'. There are even two types of attitude to ships based on their being considered of female gender: the one that guards the sailors, the image of "the all-powerful mother who nurtures and offers womb-like protection", and the other that stands for a metaphorical romantic partner for sailors. In Cooper's (2011) novel "Homeward Bound" captain Truck of the ship "Montauk" from the novel under study explains to the crew: "Sticks, gentlemen, are to a ship what limbs are to a man. Without them she rolls and tumbles about as winds, currents, and seas will; while with them she walks, and dances, and jumps Jim Crow; ay, almost talks. The standing rigging are the bones and gristle; the running gear the veins in which her life circulates; and the blocks the joints.

-And which is the heart? Asked sir George.

-Her heart is her master. With a sufficient commander no stout ship is ever lost, so long as she has a foot of water beneath her false keel, or a rope yarn left to turn to

account.” The fact that arouses is that the commander of the vessel considers the heart of the ship its captain, that is, himself and they together make a happy couple.

Still on the pages of the same novels we spot how organically the young lady aboard exists within the male crew. Exemplifying is the episode a sailor’s funeral attributed by signing some prayers which the girl joined in. “Most of the gentlemen joined in the responses, and the silvery voice of Eve sounded sweet and holy amid the breathings of the ocean.” – The captain’s response to this prayer is described by the author as: “Captain Truck had never before been so deeply impressed with any religious ceremony.” This depiction of a chorus is a metaphorical one as it symbolizes the organic way of Eve’s integration in the ship’s crew.

This way the author describes a story contradicting the stereotype about the separation of the crew of sailors as a result of the woman’s presence on the sloop. Ladies on board do not bring any confusion to the crew of the ship, and only contribute to rallying the men’s team: they discipline, mobilize sailors and, one might say, guarantee the success of the undertaking. Due to women aboard, everything is done correctly, harmoniously and accurately — so that the valuable “cargo” would not suffer and arrive at the destination point safely and timely. However, ladies travelling by ship are not just precious goods to be delivered, as from the text of the novel it can be seen that the females’ opinion is repeatedly requested and taken into account by males. Of interest is an episode from the novel “The Red Rover” by J.F. Cooper (2004), in which the captain of the vessel Wilder sincerely names the lady present on the ship, subsequently the protagonist’s governess, a skilled sailor: “Have you a disposition to look at the night? So skillful and so stout a sailor courageous sailor, should not seek her birth, without passing an opinion on the weather.” After the observations and remarks made by the lady about the present state of the ship, the captain, having listened to her advice, gives the order to remove one of the ship’s gears. This confidence of the captain toward the female passenger is unusual and proves the special position of the ladies on Cooper’s ships.

In each of the four novels by Cooper mentioned above, it is observed that the women on the ships have a special kind relationship with the captain. In the novel “The Pathfinder, or the Inland Sea” there are two captains, one of whom is the uncle of a young American lady Mabel placed aboard, and the second one is her beloved. In the novel “The Red Rover” Captain Wilder is also the beloved of the young American woman Gertrude. The story of “Afloat and Ashore, or the Chase” depicts the captain as the brother of one of the heroines and the lover of the other. In the maritime novel “Homeward Bound”, Captain Truck has a deep sympathy for young Eve travelling on his ship and their relationship can be called friendly. As a proof of the exceptional attitude of Captain Truck to Eve the following episode from the novel “Homeward Bound” by Cooper (2011) can be cited: “...he felt a touch upon his arm. It was the little hand of Eve, between whom and the old seaman there existed a good deal of trifling, blended with the most entire good will.” The closeness of the captain to the girl also proves the fact that he is the first to address her as the ship is approaching her homeland. As soon as the land becomes visible from the board, the captain exclaims: “Here we are, my dear young lady, he cried, within five leagues of Sandy Hook, which lies hereaway, under our lee bow;

as pretty a position as heart could wish." The captain was extremely happy to deliver the girl home safe and sound.

Having considered the plots of the discussed novels it becomes clear that women on ships created on the pages of Cooper's novels do not distort the atmosphere in the crew in any way, and at the same time receive special attention from the vessels' captains, becoming almost the member of the crew.

Regarding the third prejudice that the ship has a female soul capable of jealousy, the following peculiarity can be noticed: if the ship with a woman aboard is called by a male name in Cooper's novel, it makes a successful trip. Ships with male names seem not to create any rivalry with the women they carry, them being the captains' partners. It happens in the novels "The Pathfinder, or the Inland Sea", "Afloat and Ashore, or the Chase", "Homeward Bound" with the ships "The Scud", "The Wallingford of Clawbonny", "Montauk", respectively.

On the contrary, in the case from the novel "The Red Rover" by J.F. Cooper (2004) in which the ship named "The Royal Caroline", it sinks and on the threshold of this event, the author highlights that the captain of the ship divides his attention between the women on board and the ship: "the only immediate effect of the measure, was, to draw the whole of his attention, which had before been so much divided between his passengers and the ship, to the care of the latter." The protagonists of the story successfully continued their trip on the ship that picked them up with the male name "The Dolphin".

Thus, it can be said that there is every likelihood that Cooper preserved the idea of existing rivalry between the woman on board and the feminine spirit of the vessel, which, in Cooper's novels, is reflected in the names of the ships.

All mentioned above convincingly proves that ladies on board are an important and unique part of Cooper's heritage. The intention of Cooper to place his female characters in the middle of the ocean seems to be an attempt to create an image of an ideal American girl. From the novels' context it becomes crystal clear that time spent aboard produces a certain impact on the lives of the ladies described. The most illustrative example is the novel "Homeward Bound" where the ship represents a microcosm in which the protagonist Eve feels harmoniously, while being at the physically located between Europe and America: she is on her way to home after receiving her education in the Old World. Interestingly, the novel was written on Cooper's return to his homeland after a seven-year tour around Europe he made accompanied by his family, which makes it possible to refer the novel to the set of autobiographic ones. Afloat the protagonist leads lively conversations about the differences, similarities and relationships between England and America. They are in various aspects, such as nature, architecture, features of society. These discussions do not only serve the author to outline the contrasts and commonalities between the Old and the New World, but to display the positive influence which the European rich heritage could have on a female representative of the young American culture. Obviously, a voyage plays a special part in Cooper's female images' lives: through their travel they grow up and become young women and real ladies. At the very end of the novel on arrival home we see an idealized image of a girl dressed in a black elegant dress. The author emphasizes her femininity and elegance; however, it is noted that the dress on Eve was French and only a French assistant could so



professionally lace his corset. This description gives a certain completeness — Eve is a true American, but Europe has left its mark on her image, and now she is also a true lady. According to Cooper (2004): “provincialism which has got to be so general in America.” The crux of the matter is that young American women of the first half of the 19th century were a little provincial without a raid of European manners and exquisite dresses. A travel to Europe becomes a way to eradicate this provincialism. It was typical of Cooper himself to place not provinciality, but rather female simplicity, not the sophistication of tastes in the category of advantages, rather than disadvantages. The author admires the taste and style of the young Eve in the novel “Home as Found”: precisely this harmonious combination of American and European. Suchwise, the Cooper’s ship is a so-called bridge between the mother and the daughter countries and the way along this bridge — a travel on this ship — is the way that shapes an ideal American lady.

## Conclusions

Thus, the prevailing opinion that a woman on a ship brings unhappiness is not relevant for the marine writer Fenimore Cooper. The images created by the author demonstrate that the ladies’ presence on the ship was not something unusual. The severe conditions of afloat life do not confuse young American females from the novels. Instead of creating problems for the crew, women on ships give sailors vitality and motivation. Furthermore, the females do not interfere with the male worlds of the ships they travel on, oppositely, a special connection has been revealed between the female protagonists and the captains of the vessels. Traditionally, ships were called female names, in order to make a happy couple with a captain, but in Cooper’s novels, only the ships with male names are able to survive, and the ones with female names sink, thus, the competition between a lady aboard and the ship she travels on is true for the writer. Another specificity is the role of the travel for young American women described by Cooper. By taking a trip to Europe young ladies obtain completeness and perfection. The existence of these images gives us the right to conclude the unique role the images of the young females placed by the writer aboard play, they are the carriers of that precious heritage of the Old-World culture which deserves to be borrowed by the New-World dwellers.

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