Letters from an American Farmer

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF J. HECTOR ST. JOHN DE CRÈVECOEUR

Crèvecoeur, a French immigrant, arrived in New York at age 24 in 1759. Growing up, he had received a Jesuit education at the College du Mont, but by adulthood, he had embraced deism and rejected his Catholic theological education. He also developed a deep love of English culture as a young man. In 1755, he traveled across the Atlantic to join the French army in Canada's St. Lawrence Valley, where he served as a mapmaker and was promoted to lieutenant when the French and Indian War broke out. However, in 1759, he left the army and set out for New York, changing his name to J. Hector St. John along the way. He became an American citizen in 1765 and spent years traveling throughout the colonies as a surveyor and explorer. In 1769 he married Mehetable Tippet, and that same year, he purchased a farm in Orange County, New York, calling it Pine Hill. There he spent several happy years raising three children, developing his farm, reading, and beginning to write. But when the American Revolution broke out, since his sympathies lay with England, life became more complicated. In 1778, he was imprisoned and his papers were confiscated, and he never fully recovered his health and prosperity. Eventually, he made his way back to France, getting his *Letters* published in England on the way. After spending some years in French intellectual circles, in 1783 he wound up back in New York as a consular appointee of King Louis XVI. He found out that Pine Hill had been burned in an Indian raid and his wife was dead; he reunited with his children in Boston. Improbably, it turned out that the Bostonian who'd rescued his children had been rescued by Crèvecoeur in turn when shipwrecked on the French coast years earlier. Crèvecoeur's subsequent diplomatic career was quite successful, but he missed the countryside and ultimately retired in obscurity in France.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The *Letters*' most prominent backdrop is the American Revolution. Fought between 1775 and 1883, it was concurrent with Crèvecoeur's writing. No doubt intentionally, the book is vague about specific events in the war and even Crèvecoeur's views, though in the last letter, James expresses a tortured ambivalence about the war, loving America but feeling loyal to Britain. Although the character of James is a Pennsylvania farmer, the fear of violence on the frontier accords with the author, Crèvecoeur's, location in upstate New York: he mentions raids that started at Lake Champlain and extended down the frontier. Not only was the Lake Champlain valley hotly contested between the British army and the American colonies, but the Hudson River's strategic importance meant that one-third of the war's battles were fought in New York State; it's unsurprising, then, that the tone of the final letter shifts so starkly to near despair. In his final letter, James also expresses his fear that if his family lives in an Indian village, his children will be so attracted to their new lifestyle that they won't want to return to a white European way of life. Besides reflecting Crèvecoeur's own fears after an Indian raid destroyed his farm, James's perspective was a common one on the early frontier, as it wasn't unheard of for young children who assimilated into Indian cultures, whether through captivity or other circumstances, to decline to return to their families and communities of birth.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Letters from an American Farmer is regarded as a foundational work in the American literary tradition. A counterpoint to Crèvecoeur's reservations about the American war for independence, Thomas Paine's 1776 political pamphlet *Common Sense* presents his case for revolution. Despite Crèvecoeur's opposition to slavery, his character James offers a fairly limited critique of the practice; Olaudah Equiano's autobiography *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) thus offers an important voice that's lacking in the *Letters*. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, also published around the same time as the *Letters*, likewise contains reflections on the American ideal of the self-made man and emerging American identity. Such reflections were picked up in a later generation from the outsider's perspective of Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (1835–1840).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Letters from an American Farmer
- **When Written:** 1770s–1780s
- **Where Written:** Orange County, New York
- **When Published:** 1782
- **Literary Period:** Early American
- **Genre:** Novel, Epistolary Novel, Travel Narrative
- **Setting:** The American colonies in the 1770s and 1780s
- **Antagonist:** Oppressive government; war
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Letters to Europe. In the 50 years after its publication, *Letters from an American Farmer* enjoyed its greatest popularity in

Europe, not in America. It went through multiple editions in England, Ireland, Germany, France, and the Netherlands. Its relative lack of popularity in America likely had to do with its author's strong sympathies with England.

New England Namesake. The town of St. Johnsbury, Vermont, is said to have been named after author J. Hector St. John.

PLOT SUMMARY

French immigrant J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur writes a series of letters in the fictional persona of James, a Pennsylvania farmer during the Revolutionary War period. James addresses his letters to a friend named F.B., a European who recently visited him in America. In the first letter, James, who has little formal schooling, demurs from writing the letters F.B. has requested, insisting that he isn't educated enough to write informative, engaging letters. But his minister friend encourages him to try anyway, arguing that a cultured Englishman like F.B. would learn much from James's account of what makes Americans' lives so happy. Finally, James agrees, though he urges F.B. not to think his efforts presumptuous; he's knows he's just a farmer, after all.

In Letter II, James writes of the joys of being an American farmer. He inherited his farm from his father. He believes that there's no lifestyle in the world that affords as much freedom as that of a farmer; he's not beholden to a landlord or a demanding government, and the land supplies everything that he, his wife, and his children need. Being a landowner is the basis of James's rights, freedom, and power as a citizen. It also gives him plenty of opportunity to observe and reflect on both wild and domestic animals that live on his land. He has a special fondness for hardworking **bees** and loves to track them into the woods to gather honey from their hives. Though it might not seem like much to a well-traveled European, James thinks his life is rich and satisfying, and he desires no other kind of happiness for his children.

In Letter III, James explores the nature of American identity. Lacking aristocracy and established religion, America is very different from Europe. Except for town-dwellers, most Americans farm, and there isn't a stark disparity between rich and poor. Also, many Americans descend from a blend of European nationalities, emigrants who rose from humble origins. In Europe, their ancestors had nothing except family ties; in America, by contrast, they have land, the ability to earn their own food, and the privileges of citizenship. America has diverse landscapes—the seacoast, the mid-Atlantic farm country, and the western frontier—which shape the people who live there. (James does think that frontiersmen tend to be "barbarous" and not as enterprising as seafarers or farmers.) America's religious mixture is also novel in its diversity; James says that Americans are too busy farming to be overzealous about their adherence to denominations, and they readily intermarry with Christians of differing beliefs. But the most important thing about Americans is their willingness to work hard to establish a life for themselves and their children. While not every emigrant will become wealthy, the hardworking can expect modest success and a comfortable life. James tells the story of Andrew, an emigrant from the Scottish Hebrides, to illustrate how an emigrant's success is not necessarily something remarkable, but the result of simple virtue and determination.

Next, James devotes Letters IV through VIII to describing a more specific part of America: namely, the island of Nantucket and its people's customs. He chooses Nantucket because it's a rocky, barren environment, yet its inhabitants have nevertheless made a prosperous life for themselves. There was nothing special about Nantucket's pioneers, he says, except that they worked hard, and their government didn't interfere with their lives. Instead of trying to farm the island's sandy, swampy land, Nantucket's settlers planned to become fishermen. Because the soil is so poor, they were motivated to become excellent seafarers and to gradually develop a better and better whaling industry, whose practices James discusses in detail. Chasing and harpooning whales on the open ocean is a very dangerous business, which both Nantucket's white and native fishermen have mastered; out of it they've built a booming industry in whale oil. While not everyone in the whaling business gets rich, most people manage to live a modestly comfortable life, as long as they persevere and work hard. To this day, most islanders live simple, industrious lives and scorn luxury. James believes the example of Nantucket conveys the "one diffusive scene of happiness" that prevails across America.

In Letter IX, James moves to a description of Charleston, South Carolina, which James esteems less highly than Pennsylvania or Nantucket. He is especially critical of wealthy planters' obliviousness to the sufferings of their enslaved people. While he acknowledges that some northerners practice slavery, too, he claims that they generally treat their enslaved people more humanely than southerners do. As an illustration, James tells the story of visiting a Carolina plantation and discovering an enslaved man dying in a cage in the woods; the man had been trapped there in retaliation for killing an overseer on the plantation. As much as he claims to be horrified by this barbarous act and to reject the planter's self-defense for his actions, James doesn't claim to have done anything to help the enslaved man at the time.

The following Letter X contains James's further reflections on wildlife, particularly hummingbirds and snakes he's seen around his farm. He recalls an especially vivid memory of watching two snakes chase and wrestle each another in his field until one of the snakes drowned the other; he found the sight of their coiled bodies strangely beautiful.

In a departure from the rest of the book, Letter XI is written not by James's character, but in the persona of a Russian traveler and friend of James's named Iwan. Iwan is visiting America because he believes it's the country of the future. James sends Iwan to visit his friend John Bertram, a celebrated botanist. Iwan is fascinated by Bertram's meticulously tended fields and husbandry methods, explaining that in Russia, much land is farmed by serfs who are sold like property and who lack the freedom to improve and enjoy the land like American farmers do.

The final Letter XII, "Distresses of a Frontier Man," differs sharply in tone from most of the others. The Revolution has broken out, and James fears that British and American fighting along the frontier threatens his home and family. As a peace-loving man who feels loyalty to both England and America, he also dreads aligning himself with one side or the other—it seems that no matter what he chooses, he will be condemned for it, so he might as well protect his family before all else. After pouring 20 years of labor into his farm, he decides that his family must flee to a remote Indian village where the chief has promised him land and protection. He is familiar with native customs and finds Indians to be more peaceful and hospitable than most Europeans, so he isn't afraid of living among them. However, he is determined to teach his sons farming so that Indian culture doesn't make them too "wild," and he won't let his daughter marry an Indian man. He closes his letter with a prayer to God to protect his family and America as a whole, and an appeal to F.B. to sympathize with his sufferings.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

James – James is the fictional "author" of *Letters from an American Farmer*. He is a Pennsylvanian in the late 1700s who inherited his farm from his father and has little formal education, but has come to cherish the simple life of the American farmer as the happiest in the world. In the letters he writes to his friend Mr. F.B., he describes what he thinks makes Americans' lives so uniquely happy. In particular, he believes that the freedom to own and farm one's own land and make one's own living, without intervention from a meddling government, contributes greatly to American happiness, making farmers especially productive, virtuous citizens. James is a loving family man and often mentions the joy and motivation that his wife and children bring to his life. Even more than that, James loves to write about his observations and reflections on nature and wildlife, such as **bees**, hummingbirds, and snakes. James apparently traveled widely before getting married and writes of his impressions of places like Nantucket and Charleston, South Carolina. Some of James's attitudes reflect a relatively advanced outlook for his time, while also betraying a certain apathy and self-justification. On several occasions, he writes with deep feeling against cruel treatment of enslaved people and even hopes for the eradication of the practice of slavery in America, but at the same time, he continues to justify being a slaveholder himself. In a similar way, he expresses respect and sympathy for Indian neighbors and even plans to take refuge among them when Revolutionary fighting breaks out, yet he maintains that European and Indian people ideally live separately and do not mingle too much. At the end of the *Letters*, as war shatters his hitherto peaceful life, James doubts whether his farm—and indeed America as a whole—will survive the Revolution's upheaval.

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur – Crèvecoeur is the author of *Letters from an American Farmer*. He writes most of the *Letters* from the perspective of a character named James (with the exception of one letter written by Iwan). The historical Crèvecoeur was born and educated in France, served in the French army in Canada, and emigrated to America in 1759, becoming an American citizen in 1765 and establishing a farm in upstate New York. Though the *Letters* reflect Crèvecoeur's extensive travels, Crèvecoeur himself mainly shows up in the book's opening Advertisements, where he comments on his antislavery views and his regret over the conflict between England and the American colonies.

Mr. F.B. – F.B. is James's friend, recent guest, and the recipient of his letters. Though F.B. doesn't appear directly in the book, James portrays him as an educated Englishman who's much more cultured, well-read, and widely traveled than James himself. After visiting James in America, F.B. apparently requested that James write him letters in England, which form the premise for the book.

James's Wife – James's wife doesn't play a direct role in the *Letters*, but James often mentions her (though he never names her directly) when writing about life on his farm. James expresses deep affection for his wife, consults her before making decisions, and claims, with tongue in cheek, that she is always right. He portrays her as having a mind and opinions of her own, like when she initially tries to dissuade him from spending time writing to F.B. for fear that he'll gain a reputation as the "scribbling farmer." He also credits his wife for motivating him to become a successful farmer and feels joy when she and their children keep him company while he works. He also praises his wife's hard work and skill, especially at weaving, brewing, and home remedies.

Andrew the Hebridean – Andrew the Hebridean is a friend of James's who emigrated from the remote island of Barra, Scotland, in 1774. James gives Andrew's story as an illustration of how a virtuous, hardworking man of humble origins can do well for himself in America. James met Andrew and his family while visiting a friend in Philadelphia and offered to lodge the newcomers until they got on their feet. Over the course of a few years, with the help of James and other neighbors, Andrew

becomes a proficient farmer and saves enough money to buy and develop his own small farm.

Iwan – Iwan is a Russian gentleman and friend of James's and the author of Letter XI. On James's encouragement, Iwan visits botanist John Bertram to learn about American farming practices. Iwan is struck by the freedom American farmers enjoy and predicts that America will surpass Europe in prosperity. He tells Bertram how Russia's progress is hindered by poverty and particularly by the inhumane practice of serfdom.

John Bertram – John Bertram is a friend of James's, a Pennsylvania farmer, Quaker, and celebrated botanist whom Iwan visits in Letter XI. Bertram has little formal education but became a self-taught botanist after he began noticing beautiful plants on his farm. His knowledge and specimen collection have even gained him a reputation in Europe.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Minister Friend – The minister is James's friend who appears in the first of the *Letters*. Besides preaching and pastoring his congregation, the minister is also a farmer. He encourages James to write to Mr. F.B. about American life even though James isn't an experienced writer or as educated as his correspondent.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FREEDOM AND GOVERNMENT

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur writes *Letters from an American Farmer* mostly in the voice of James, a fictional Pennsylvanian in the 1770s. Repeatedly in the letters, James asserts that America offers more freedom than anywhere else on Earth, and that the life of the American farmer exhibits that freedom in a unique way. (It's important to note that James speaks for the European, property-owning majority and not for enslaved people or the very poor.) The freedom of the farmer's life, James proposes, is made possible by the American colonies' minimal government. In Letter II, James attributes much of his happiness to the fact that he owes "nothing but a peppercorn to my country," letting him focus on his family and neighbors instead of a distant government. Farmed land is the foundation of American "rights; [...] our freedom, our power as citizens," he adds. Essentially, James insists that because farmers work for themselves and their families instead of to enrich a feudal lord, they are motivated to succeed, they have a stake in their community's and country's success, and they are much happier than people in other countries who own little or nothing and lack a voice. Because Americans have the opportunity to become citizens and have a say in their own government, countless downtrodden Europeans risk their lives to settle in America.

At the same time, James doesn't believe in unbridled freedom. He claims that people who live on America's frontiers, because they're so distant from seats of government, tend to be too idle and conflict-driven. And because they hunt to survive instead of becoming disciplined farmers, they suffer from weaker character. This suggests that there's such a thing as too much freedom, and that virtue is necessary to maintain freedom in the long run. It's also worth noting that, at the end of the *Letters*, James is in doubt about the ultimate fate of the American experiment. Ironically, James fears that when American colonists assert their freedom by fighting their British rulers, his cherished freedom is threatened, and he considers joining an Indian community to maintain some semblance of that freedom. He believes that anything more than a mild, hands-off government—whether British or American—will impede the freedoms, success, and happiness of ordinary citizens. The *Letters*' overall impression, though, is that such a government is hard to maintain, and thus freedom is a fragile balance.

FARMING, LAND, AND LOVE OF NATURE

In one sense, land has a very practical purpose in *Letters from an American Farmer*. It's the basis for "the true and the only philosophy of an American farmer"—that is, owning and cultivating land gives someone standing and a voice in the world. This status contrasts starkly with the oppression of serfs in Russia, which Crèvecoeur describes in the voice of Iwan, a Russian traveler, in Letter XI. Because serfs are bought and sold along with their land, Iwan explains, they can take no joy in the land they work and, unlike resourceful American farmers, aren't invested in creatively making it better. The American ideal, then, is a mutually beneficial relationship between free farmers and their land.

But owning land doesn't mean that Crèvecoeur views it only as a means to an end. James's special relationship with his own land affords him the leisure to study and enjoy it—a form of "contemplation" that, he implies, is unique to the American farmer. Such contemplation is the subject of many of James's reflections, especially in Letter II, where he admires the industriousness of the **bees** he tracks down to harvest honey, the humorous behaviors of greedy cows and songbirds, and the ingenious nests of hornets. He even spends most of Letter X describing the strange beauty of two snakes wrestling to the death. Though James maintains the superiority of human reason and sometimes kills prey or pests, he also asserts that

animals deserve humane treatment. Though it isn't argued outright, the *Letters*' overall impression is that land and nature should be lovingly stewarded, not exploited, and that any American farmer would come to this conclusion by the nature of his daily work on the land.

EMIGRATION, HARD WORK, AND SUCCESS

For Crèvecoeur, as conveyed through James, America is unique in the world of his day. Because America is such a new country, novelties can be found there that can't be found elsewhere in the world. One of James's favorite points is the colonies' curious blend of nationalities—people emigrate to America from many different European countries, so the average American has a "strange mixture of blood." What these diverse people have in common, according to James, is a determination to seize opportunity and improve their lives in a new land. A century before he wrote in the late 1700s, America was mostly a wilderness, but now it is filled with farms, villages, and cities. Because of emigrants' virtuous hard work and industry, James suggests, America has become an incredible success story. James doesn't claim that everyone can become rich in America. Rather, he proposes that Americans have avenues to try to succeed that were closed to them in Europe; and even if they don't become wealthy, most people who work hard should be able to achieve a stable, comfortable life.

James argues that Americans work hard because they work for themselves. They don't have to labor for a nobleman or prince under an oppressive feudal system. Because Americans are landowners instead of tenants, they have the chance to become productive and self-sufficient in a way they could never be in Europe. As they become landowners, they also gain self-respect, their ambition grows, and they work even harder for themselves and their children. James offers the story of Andrew the Hebridean to illustrate how emigrants hailing from humble origins can become successful, not through any remarkable means, but simply by setting goals, working hard, and integrating into a community. Unimpeded by greedy landlords or oppressive laws, Andrew is able to start a farm and support his family within a few years of landing at Philadelphia. James also spends several letters describing the colonization of Nantucket in detail to show how even a barren, sandy island can yield success through emigrants' ingenuity and effort. Through his choice of examples, Crèvecoeur argues that America is truly a land of opportunity for those willing to be industrious.

RELIGION IN AMERICA

Crèvecoeur was a deist (a philosophy that emphasized human reason and observation of nature and downplayed divine revelation), and that perspective is clear in James's remarks on religion throughout the *Letters*. In particular, James sees religious indifference as characteristic of Americans. He explains that when emigrants arrive in America, they're often fervent members of a specific Christian denomination, but that the more they intermingle with neighbors from different sects, the less religiously distinctive they become. While newcomers might try to settle near others of like beliefs, most don't succeed in staying isolated from other groups—and anyway, farming is such a demanding life that most people don't have time to proselytize or persecute others who believe differently. Many continue to attend church, but the more denominational identities weaken, the less they are passed down through subsequent generations. In fact, when James faces the possibility that his family will escape the war by living among the Indians, he takes comfort in the fact that they don't *need* a specific church or set of doctrines in order to worship—they just need to believe that God is "the Father of all men" no matter what he is called. This attitude takes James's admiration for religious indifference to a surprising extreme.

Readers should notice that the author's deist outlook shapes his opinions about who is a good or bad Christian, and even which details he chooses to emphasize in his religious survey of the American colonies. It wouldn't be hard to find examples of colonial Americans who *weren't* religiously indifferent, and plenty of Christians valued their distinctive teachings much more highly than Crèvecoeur would think appropriate or choose to highlight. Still, the *Letters*' overwhelming view is that when religious identities and theologies weaken and fade in the American melting pot, the country benefits in the long run.

COLONIZATION, ATROCITY, AND APATHY

The *Letters*' attitude toward oppressed and colonized peoples is complex. James takes the existence of slavery in America somewhat for granted. That is, he calls slavery a great evil that should be eradicated eventually, yet in the meantime, he finds it acceptable to enslave people himself, as long as he treats them humanely. In his Letter IX on Charleston, South Carolina, James laments that colonial planters have become wealthy due to the labor of enslaved people, while remaining numb to the sufferings of those very people. As an example, he tells a horrible story of a Carolina planter who left an enslaved man in a cage to die because the man had killed his overseer. James describes the dying man's sufferings in affecting detail, and he refuses to even relate the plantation owner's words in his own defense. And yet, he apparently doesn't do anything to dissuade the slave owner or help the tortured man himself.

James also doesn't shy away from acknowledging that many native people suffered violence or were defrauded of their lands when they first came into contact with colonists. Even

when those encounters were friendly, like when Quakers settled on the island of Nantucket, huge numbers of Native Americans succumbed to new scourges like smallpox or alcoholism; therefore they face growing obscurity and probable extinction. Still, James generally presents a favorable view of Native Americans. In the book's final letter, James even plans to flee the American Revolution by taking refuge with his family in an Indian village, trusting that the villagers will be more hospitable and peaceful than most Europeans. Yet his attitude is complicated; on one hand, he holds an admiring, even romanticized view of Native American life (it's perfectly apolitical and peaceful), but on the other hand, he dreads his young children becoming fully "Indian" in their habits and would never allow his daughter to marry a non-European. In both his attitudes about the evil of slavery and oppression of Native Americans, then, James acknowledges atrocities while not showing much willingness to confront them, and often betraying his own racist beliefs in the process.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BEES

Bees symbolize the qualities James loves most about life as an American farmer, especially contemplation of nature, hard work, and cooperation. Out of his wide-ranging reflections on nature, James expresses a special respect and admiration for bees. On one level, bees reflect the special relationship that a farmer can enjoy with his land. That is, because James is able to spend so much time observing and contemplating his natural surroundings, he has the opportunity to notice and appreciate small, easily overlooked creatures like bees. In his second letter, James describes in detail the process by which he patiently tracks bees into the woods in order to collect their honey, suggesting that farming instills this patience and discipline in James, and that bees' noble traits make them worth the painstaking effort—a more delicate yet more rewarding effort than hunting for deer or bear.

His fondness for bees is such that, in other letters, James occasionally uses bees as a literary device to convey his admiration for human traits like loyalty and industry. He describes Quakers as being "like bees" because their community-mindedness leads them to emigrate as groups, "in regular and connected swarms." He elsewhere describes Quakers as a "fruitful hive" whose hard work enables them to thrive no matter where they live.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America* published in 1981.

Letter 1 Quotes

Here we have in some measure regained the ancient dignity of our species: our laws are simple and just; we are a race of cultivators; our cultivation is unrestrained; and therefore everything is prosperous and flourishing. For my part, I had rather admire the ample barn of one of our opulent farmers, who himself felled the first tree in his plantation and was the first founder of his settlement, than study the dimensions of the temple of Ceres.

Related Characters: Minister Friend (speaker), James

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

James spends almost the whole introductory letter dialoguing with his friend, a minister who lives nearby, about whether it is appropriate for him, a mere farmer, to write letters to his better-educated, more widely-traveled friend F.B. The minister friend encourages James to do so, arguing that even though America is a new country, it contains plenty of fascinating subjects for even a cultured correspondent.

One of the minister friend's main points is that American life recaptures the dignity of humanity's ancient past. By doing this, he taps into philosophical ideas that were popular in the 18th century, namely Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idea that human beings' original, primitive state was more desirable than their current state, which has been corrupted by society. This claim also lets him contrast America's "simple" laws and lifestyle based on "cultivation" (farming) with life in Europe, which is more advanced and therefore more corrupt, less connected to the land, and less free.

To cap this part of his argument, the minister adds that he would rather study an American farm built from scratch than tour Rome's ancient ruins (of which the temple of Ceres was one). This is a radical statement because it suggests that touring culturally advanced Italy, as an English intellectual might do, reveals less about human history than observing how people live when they are free to make their

living from nature. In other words, if an educated man like James's friend F.B. really wants to understand what life is about, he should come to America where things are simple, not stick to Europe, where things are more sophisticated, yet more degraded. By tracing the minister's argument, James also implies that a simple farmer has insight worth sharing with the world, and thus makes a case for continuing to read and benefit from his letters.

❝ Were I in Europe, I should be tired with perpetually seeing espaliers, plashed hedges, and trees dwarfed into pygmies. Do let Mr. F. B. see on paper a few American wild-cherry trees, such as Nature forms them here in all her unconfined vigour, in all the amplitude of their extended limbs and spreading ramifications—let him see that we are possessed with strong vegetative embryos.

Related Characters: Minister Friend (speaker), James, Mr. F.B.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, James's minister friend continues to persuade him that he should write letters to his cultured European friend F.B., even though James is just an American farmer. He uses horticultural imagery to strengthen his argument, contrasting carefully cultivated gardens with wild growth.

An espalier is a tree or plant that's trained on a trellis to grow in a desired pattern or shape; "plashing" is a method of interweaving branches to create fences or borders. Like "dwarfing" trees into pygmy sizes, these methods constrain plants in order to achieve a certain aesthetic effect. Many European gardens, especially on wealthy estates or in areas frequented by tourists, would contain cultivated features like these. James's friend compares fancy gardens to heavily stylized, sophisticated writing. By contrast, James's writing will be like a wild-cherry tree, with "extended limbs and spreading ramifications"—a rather backhanded compliment implying that James rambles (something readers might find to be an arguable case!). But the minister's point is that F.B. might get tired of reading sophisticated letters, and that once he gets used to the "unconfined vigour" of James's more rustic style, he might even like it. At the very least, F.B. will see that America has "strong vegetative embryos"—potential, in other words.

Letter 2 Quotes

❝ […] where is that station which can confer a more substantial system of felicity than that of an American farmer possessing freedom of action, freedom of thoughts, ruled by a mode of government which requires but little from us? I owe nothing but a peppercorn to my country, a small tribute to my king, with loyalty and due respect; I know no other landlord than the lord of all land, to whom I owe the most sincere gratitude.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Near the beginning of his second letter, James explains why he believes Americans—and American farmers in particular—have the happiest, and freest, lifestyle in the world. For James, farming isn't just a question of land ownership. While owning land gives someone status, it more importantly grants someone the freedom and means to provide for themselves and their family, without relying on—or owing—anyone else, such as a landlord. (Indeed, James only answers to "the lord of all land," meaning God.)

The lack of an intrusive, demanding government is a big part of freedom for James. He owes "nothing but a peppercorn" to his king and government, referring to the tiny berry of the pepper plant. It's an interesting metaphor, because many Americans ultimately felt that they owed *more* than a "peppercorn" to their rulers, or else the American Revolution wouldn't have gotten off the ground. But either way, freedom from heavy government burdens was widely viewed as a prerequisite for a prosperous, happy life—one worth fighting for, because it's so rarely found anywhere else in the world.

❝ This formerly rude soil has been converted by my father into a pleasant farm, and in return, it has established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens, our importance as inhabitants of such a district. These images, I must confess, I always behold with pleasure and extend them as far as my imagination can reach; for this is what may be called the true and the only philosophy of an American farmer.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

James is describing what he sees as the foundation of the American farmer's happiness. That foundation isn't just owning land, but rather a kind of exchange that landowning makes possible. A farmer transforms "formerly rude" (undeveloped) land into productive farmland. While that farmland gives the farmer the means by which to feed and support his family, it also does more—it "establish[es]" the farmer's "rights," "rank," and "freedom." Because a farmer provides for himself and is not beholden to a landlord, he is free to live life as he chooses and therefore free to contribute to his community and his country as he chooses, too. His freedom and his standing in his community, or rank, are closely connected.

Calling it "the true and the only philosophy of the American farmer," James sums up what he regards as the simplest and happiest way of life. A philosophy of life that's based on being a landowner obviously excludes many people. But it's important to recall James's audience—an English friend, who's essentially a stand-in for all Europeans curious about American life. James's primary focus isn't Americans who will never be able to afford land themselves (or are themselves mistreated as if they're property), but the freedom of an American landowner compared to a European peasant, who probably doesn't own the land he works on and certainly has less freedom to do what he wishes with it, or to choose his own destiny.

> It is my bees, however, which afford me the most pleasing and extensive themes; let me look at them when I will, their government, their industry, their quarrels, their passions, always present me with something new[.]

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

James has been discussing how his life as a farmer gives him plenty of opportunities to observe nature, especially animals, around his property. He delights in nature's mysteries and enjoys comparing animals' behaviors to humans'. He has a special delight in bees.

James likes to watch bees in the hive on his farm and even has an elaborate method for tracking bees in the woods so he can harvest fresh honey. Here, though, it's especially notable how James personifies the insects. Not only does he imagine them being hardworking and having a sophisticated social structure, but he also attributes traits like quarrelsomeness and passion to them. While he means these things figuratively and doesn't think bees have feelings and opinions as humans understand them, it's telling what James admires about the bees. The bees' sense of community, their willingness to work hard and stick to their beliefs, are traits that James also admires about Americans. In fact, he admiringly refers to bees and hives a few times throughout his letters, suggesting to readers that Americans' industry and stubborn determination, even when these things seem to do little more than create noise and confusion, are unique and commendable.

Finally, while bees might seem like a strange subject to include in a letter about what makes American life so great, they serve not just as a symbol of Americans, but as a reminder of James's love of nature and the farming life that lets him indulge that love.

Letter 3 Quotes

> Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, [...] no great manufactures employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury. The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe. Some few towns excepted, we are all tillers of the earth, from Nova Scotia to West Florida.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

In Letter III, James considers an English newcomer's possible impressions of America. While an Englishman would see plenty that's familiar because of the two countries' shared cultural heritage, he would also be struck by major differences—like America's relatively equitable social structure. Though the American colonies certainly had wealthy families, were still formally under the British monarchy, and some colonies had an established church,

they also lacked a centuries-old aristocracy and the heavy dominance of a single church. Because it was so young, America simply hadn't had time to develop such things, and philosophies influenced by the Enlightenment helped guard against them, too.

As readers would expect, James also praises most Americans' shared status as "tillers of the earth." However, it's notable that there *are* vast power and status imbalances in America at this time. There might not be peasants, but there are enslaved people—and those people probably are, at least on the more affluent farms, the real "tillers of the earth."

It's also interesting how much James's concept of American prosperity depends on a farming-based society. Within a century of his writing, there *would* be "manufactures employing thousands," and the industrialization of America certainly would contribute to a bigger gap between rich and poor by that time. But James's remarks provide a kind of snapshot of American self-conception at a very early stage in its growth.

> The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. This is an American.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout this letter, James has been trying to explain what distinguishes an American from a citizen of any other country. Some of the difference is as simple as the fact that Americans hail from many different countries of origin and then intermarry, creating a more diverse society than one finds in Europe. But much more of the difference consists in the way Americans think. Here, James develops the idea that the rewards of hard work create a very different mindset in Americans. In Europe, people cannot always find enough work to survive; when they do, they often become dependent for life on a landlord or other employer, they may not be able to climb out of poverty, and their work is "useless" in the sense that they seldom get to enjoy the fruits of their labor. By contrast, Americans—especially farmers—work for themselves, and their toil directly feeds and supports them and their families. To James, this very different relationship with work is a key part of what makes an American. That's because being able to support oneself from the land is a relatively novel form of freedom, especially compared to serfdom or peasant farming in Europe, and it allows Americans to have a greater voice in their government than citizens of more socially immobile countries do.

> Their children will therefore grow up less zealous and more indifferent in matters of religion than their parents. The foolish vanity or, rather, the fury of making proselytes is unknown here; they have no time, the seasons call for all their attention, and thus in a few years this mixed neighbourhood will exhibit a strange religious medley that will be neither pure Catholicism nor pure Calvinism.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

In this section of Letter III, James has been discussing America's unique religious diversity. Just before this quote, he explains that unlike in most of Europe, people of different religious views tend to become neighbors in America and even intermarry.

James contends that because of America's religious mixture, religion becomes more watered down as the generations go on, and fervent adherence to a specific sect or denomination begins to fade. So, for instance, a Scottish Presbyterian emigrant might not have the luxury of settling in a like-minded community, and as a result, his children might even marry Anglicans or Baptists. Then, *their* offspring might not have a strong denominational identity at all. Another factor in this process is that American life is demanding and time-consuming—a farming family simply won't have time to devote to their religious beliefs, much less seek to spread those beliefs ("making proselytes"), as they might have had in Europe.

Author Crèvecoeur was a deist, meaning that he believed in a concept of God, but he elevated nature and human reason over traditional religion. So, from his perspective, religious decline is a hopeful prospect, not something to regret. His perspective colors his view of the religious

landscape—while it's true that denominational adherence weakened in America, distinctive communities and beliefs didn't disappear, and religion (mainly Protestant Christianity) remained a significant factor in American life for centuries to come.

History of Andrew, the Hebridean Quotes

The powerful lord, the wealthy merchant, on seeing the superb mansion finished, never can feel half the joy and real happiness which was felt and enjoyed on that day by this honest Hebridean, though this new dwelling, erected in the midst of the woods, was nothing more than a square inclosure, composed of twenty-four large, clumsy logs, let in at the ends. When the work was finished, the company made the woods resound with the noise of their three cheers and the honest wishes they formed for Andrew's prosperity. He could say nothing, but with thankful tears he shook hands with them all.

Related Characters: James (speaker), Andrew the Hebridean

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

James follows Letter III with an appendix telling the story of a successful emigrant, whom he calls Andrew the Hebridean. This quote sums up what James considers to be an emigrant success story—a modest home of one's own, built with the help of a supportive community.

Earlier, James explains that Andrew the Hebridean arrived in America from Scotland with very little to his name. Over the course of a few years, Andrew learned farming and survival skills from James and other Pennsylvania farmers, began earning a living by working for one of them, and eventually saved up enough money to lease land of his own. Now, he's finally ready to build his own house. At each step of the way, Andrew has found help from welcoming Americans, and his hard work, in turn, has won his neighbors' respect. So, when neighbors show up to help Andrew build his simple log house, it's a celebration of Andrew's whole venture in coming to America. Because of his neighbors' earnest goodwill and getting to see the tangible fruits of his own labor, Andrew's happiness is even greater, James suggests, than it would be if Andrew were a rich landlord. James uses Andrew's story to show European readers what's possible in America and to suggest that even if American success looks different from what Europeans are used to, it might be even more satisfying and rewarding.

Letter 4 Quotes

Yet I have a spot in my view, where none of these occupations are performed, which will, I hope, reward us for the trouble of inspection; but though it is barren in its soil, insignificant in its extent, inconvenient in its situation, deprived of materials for building, it seems to have been inhabited merely to prove what mankind can do when happily governed!

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

In his previous letters, James has focused broadly on farming as an important basis of American happiness and freedom. In Letters IV–VIII, he shifts to discussing a place where farming, and indeed most other common industries, aren't practiced at all—the island of Nantucket, off the coast of Massachusetts.

This is a surprising shift for a few reasons. James is proud of being a farmer and evidently believes it's the best way for an American to make his living. Yet, by introducing readers to a place where farming isn't sustainable—in fact, a place that's so barren, small, and remote that it's hard to accomplish much of anything there—James is able to emphasize some of his favorite American virtues, like hard work, stubborn determination, and ingenuity. The subject also allows him to return to another favorite point—that a "happily governed" land, or one that receives minimal oversight and interference from its government, is a place where motivated people can flourish. Finally, by devoting a few of his letters to Nantucket, James can offer his European audience a kind of travelogue, proving that there's fascinating variety in America even if it's not a type his readers would normally consider to be worth their time.

Letter 6 Quotes

They have all, from the highest to the lowest, a singular keenness of judgement, unassisted by any academical light; they all possess a large share of good sense, improved upon the experience of their fathers; and this is the surest and best guide to lead us through the path of life, because it approaches nearest to the infallibility of instinct. Shining talents and university knowledge would be entirely useless here, nay, would be dangerous; it would pervert their plain judgement, it would lead them out of that useful path which is so well adapted to their situation; it would make them more adventurous, more presumptuous, much less cautious, and therefore less successful.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

In this letter, James has been discussing the personal qualities that enable Nantucket residents and their communities to thrive. Here, he particularly focuses on common sense, arguing that too much formal education would displace people's natural wisdom.

James's description of Nantucket people is clearly generalized and idealistic; it's unlikely that *everyone* on the island has "a singular keenness of judgment." But his point is that, on this isolated island, it's what people in general have to rely on, in addition to the wisdom passed down to them from older generations. Note the phrase "infallibility of instinct," which hints at Crèvecoeur's deist philosophy—he had a lofty view of pure human reason, even suggesting that instinct, if it's uncorrupted, will not err. Indeed, it isn't anti-intellectualism that leads him (through James) to downplay the value of a university education, but his belief in unaided reason to guide people on a "useful path." If university studies led people to deviate from the practices that have worked for past generations, their whole lifestyle could be undermined. So, as usual for Crèvecoeur, hard work and an enterprising attitude are more important for American success than the qualities, like a prestigious education, that might seem indispensable to his European readers.

After all, is it not better to be possessed of a single whale-boat or a few sheep pastures, to live free and independent under the mildest government, in a healthy climate, in a land of charity and benevolence, than to be wretched as so many are in Europe, possessing nothing but their industry; tossed from one rough wave to another; engaged either in the most servile labours for the smallest pittance or fettered with the links of the most irksome dependence, even without the hopes of rising?

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

James has been pointing out the fact that not everyone who's engaged in Nantucket's fishing industry ends up becoming wealthy. However, he argues that even if a fisherman or, for that matter, any other American makes only a modest living, they are still far better off than if they were living in Europe.

This quote is clearly meant to appeal to readers' emotions. For one thing, note that this quote is a single very long sentence. The emotional phrases build on each other, using poignant adjectives like "wretched" and "irksome," and figurative expressions like "tossed from one rough wave to another" and "fettered with [chains]" to convey just how volatile and constrained life in Europe can be. In contrast, life in America is free, mild, healthy, and marked by "charity and benevolence." Though James is contrasting Europe and America unrealistically, as if they are two opposing extremes, his sentimental diction and insistent sentence structure have one purpose: to drive the reader to answer his rhetorical question with "yes." This is entirely consistent with his argument that it's better to be poor and independent where there's hope of advancement than to be poor and dependent with no hope of upward mobility.

Letter 7 Quotes

[F]ortunately you will find at Nantucket neither idle drones, voluptuous devotees, ranting enthusiasts, nor sour demagogues. I wish I had it in my power to send the most persecuting bigot I could find [...] to the whale fisheries; in less than three or four years you would find him a much more tractable man and therefore a better Christian.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

In this part of Letter VII, James has been describing Nantucket's religious customs, which consist of simple, moderate Quaker and Presbyterian services. As he has done in previous letters, James attributes this low-key religious practice partly to the fact that fishermen, like farmers, lead such demanding lives that they don't have much leisure for religion, or for trying to convert others to their religion.

What's interesting about this quote, though, is what it reveals about Crèvecoeur's anti-religious bias. As a deist, Crèvecoeur held a fairly low opinion of organized religion, and his word choice, through James, leaves little doubt about that: James characterizes many religious practitioners as "idle," "voluptuous," "ranting," "sour"—words describing people who are a drain or menace to society in various ways. While he doesn't claim that all religious people fit these descriptions, the sharpness of his tone might lead readers to wonder if his opinion on the matter is trustworthy. It's also notable that he assumes he knows what would make a "better Christian" despite not being one himself. In any case, James's main point is that life on Nantucket tempers the strength of religious feeling, and that he sees this as a very positive thing for individuals and society.

Letter 8 Quotes

❝ Idleness is the most heinous sin that can be committed in Nantucket: an idle man would soon be pointed out as an object of compassion, for idleness is considered as another word for want and hunger. This principle is so thoroughly well understood and is become so universal, so prevailing a prejudice, that, literally speaking, they are never idle.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

James is discussing some of the "peculiar," or unique, characteristics of Nantucket's people. One of them is attitudes regarding work and idleness. He explains that being idle, or not working, is just about the worst thing a person can be accused of here. As his earlier descriptions of Nantucket's barren soil and dangerous fishing trade made clear, mere survival demands all of people's time, ingenuity, and strength. So, if someone simply refuses to work, that person would go hungry very quickly. That's why it's almost unthinkable that someone would *choose* to be idle on Nantucket and why it's simply assumed that an unemployed or sluggish person on the island needs their neighbors' sympathy and help. This is a good example of the communal implications of hard work in James's America. Especially in a difficult environment like Nantucket, people generally don't work hard in order to distinguish themselves or get rich. They do it in order to provide a stable, self-sufficient life for themselves and their families, and their success or failure impacts their neighbors' and community's success or failure, too.

❝ Who can see the storms of wind, blowing sometimes with an impetuosity sufficiently strong even to move the earth, without feeling himself affected beyond the sphere of common ideas? Can this wind which but a few days ago refreshed our American fields and cooled us in the shade be the same element which now and then so powerfully convulses the waters of the sea, dismasts vessels, causes so many shipwrecks and such extensive desolations? How diminutive does a man appear to himself when filled with these thoughts, and standing as I did on the verge of the ocean!

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, James describes falling into contemplation while going to visit a family that lived on the Nantucket beach. His thoughts provide a vivid illustration of James's ability to find beauty and meaning throughout nature.

James marvels that the ocean-borne windstorms can move someone "beyond the sphere of common ideas," or everyday thoughts. It's not just because of the wind's awesome power, but because the wind travels across vast swathes of America—perhaps moving across the very farms and fields of Pennsylvania before creating storms and mayhem off Nantucket's coasts. For James, then, the wind is a reminder that human beings are at the mercy of nature to some degree, no matter where they live or what their lifestyle. By remarking that these thoughts make him feel "diminutive,"

or insignificant, James taps into the Romanticism of the late 18th century, which was fascinated with nature's wildness and its impact on the human spirit.

Letter 9 Quotes

❝ The chosen race eat, drink, and live happy, while the unfortunate one grubs up the ground, raises indigo, or husks the rice, exposed to a sun full as scorching as their native one, without the support of good food, without the cordials of any cheering liquor. This great contrast has often afforded me subjects of the most afflicting meditations.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

In Letter IX, James makes his first and only venture into the American South, describing aspects of life in Charleston, South Carolina. For the most part, his portrayal isn't a flattering one, as he devotes much of the letter to criticizing the disparity between rich and poor in this wealthy city.

In particular, James draws attention to the shocking disparity between Charleston's rich class of planters (crops like cotton, rice, and indigo thrived here), and the Black enslaved people who made those wealthy lifestyles possible. James finds this disparity all the more shocking because the rich planters appear so oblivious to the enslaved people's plight. His reference to the "chosen race" may not reflect a belief in the literal superiority of white people, but a way of saying that by all appearances, the rich white planters are born into a life of ease, while their enslaved people suffer under merciless conditions all their lives. They are forced to go without basic necessities while their owners indulge in excess. By describing this contrast in vivid terms, James sets up the critique of slavery he will make in the rest of the letter.

❝ We have slaves likewise in our northern provinces; I hope the time draws near when they will be all emancipated, but how different their lot, how different their situation, in every possible respect! They enjoy as much liberty as their masters; they are as well clad and as well fed; in health and sickness, they are tenderly taken care of; they live under the same roof and are, truly speaking, a part of our families.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, James compares the situation of enslaved people in America's southern colonies to that of enslaved people living in the north. The comparison reveals a lot about James's overall perspective on slavery.

Essentially, James views northern and southern slavery as two different institutions, and he regards the northern version as being much less atrocious than the southern one. Strikingly, though he's quick to acknowledge slavery's continued existence in the North, he quickly moves past it by expressing the "hope" that it won't last for much longer. He fails to express a sense of urgency about the fact that people continue to suffer under that institution, even making the dubious claim that northern enslaved people enjoy "as much liberty" as those who own them and are basically part of their masters' families. While some people living under northern slavery were more integrated into households than those living in the South, the fact remained that they only enjoyed things like good food, adequate clothes, and healthcare because their masters chose to grant them. It's hard to tell whether Crèvecoeur, in writing James's perspective this way, actually views him as hypocritical in his relative support for northern slavery and is subtly critiquing that conventional view, or if he actually held such a view himself.

❝ Oppressed with the reflections which this shocking spectacle afforded me, I mustered strength enough to walk away and soon reached the house at which I intended to dine. There I heard that the reason for this slave's being thus punished was on account of his having killed the overseer of the plantation. They told me that the laws of self-preservation rendered such executions necessary, and supported the doctrine of slavery with the arguments generally made use of to justify the practice, with the repetition of which I shall not trouble you at present. Adieu.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178–179

Explanation and Analysis

These are the closing sentences of James's letter about slavery in South Carolina. He has just recounted the story of walking through the woods on his way to dine with a planter and discovering an enslaved man in a cage, left there to die slowly in retaliation for killing an overseer.

There is a lot going on in James's framing of this painful story. On one hand, the image of the dying man is obviously meant to upset readers and prick their consciences, moving them to denounce the brutality inherent to the institution of slavery. And by refusing to even tell readers what the plantation owners said in defense of their horrible actions, he gives the message that their arguments aren't worth listening to. Yet, at the same time, one can't ignore the fact that even though James was horrified by what he saw, he went on to dine with the planters as if everything was normal. Also, even though he hints that he rejects everything the planters had to say, it's less clear that he tried to dissuade them in any way or to help the man they'd left to die—points that the normally verbose James probably wouldn't omit. So, again, it's hard to tell what Crèvecoeur's aim is with this passage—whether it should be read at face value as a denunciation of southern slavery, or whether it's a critique of northern self-righteousness and apathy in the face of enslaved people's suffering. Either way, that such apathy existed is clear.

Letter 10 Quotes

❝ When it feeds, it appears as if immovable, though continually on the wing; and sometimes, from what motives I know not, it will tear and lacerate flowers into a hundred pieces, for, strange to tell, they are the most irascible of the feathered tribe. Where do passions find room in so diminutive a body? They often fight with the fury of lions until one of the combatants falls a sacrifice and dies. When fatigued, it has often perched within a few feet of me, and on such favourable opportunities I have surveyed it with the most minute attention.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

In this letter, James returns to a favorite subject—contemplating nature around his farm. Hummingbirds are an especially good subject for a letter from an American farmer, because hummingbird species only exist in the Americas and the Caribbean, meaning that European readers were unlikely to know much about them. This quote is a good example of James's curious and whimsical attitude toward nature. He knows that hummingbirds don't have human traits like irascibility, and that their territorial fights aren't actually motivated by "passions"—but these anthropomorphisms capture James's wonder at the mysteries of nature, as the hummingbird exhibits strangely recognizable behaviors while also being a totally unique species.

Though he doesn't say so outright, James is also modeling what he sees as a privilege of the farmer's life—getting to contemplate the natural world with which he shares his property. A peasant in Europe probably wouldn't get to enjoy the luxury of observing anything "with the most minute attention" because they'd just be working to survive. What's more, James's reflections show readers that being a farmer isn't just a matter of physical labor—farmers get to cultivate the life of the mind, not just the earth.

Letter 11 Quotes

❝ Then I began to botanize all over my farm; in a little time I became acquainted with every vegetable that grew in my neighbourhood and next ventured into Maryland, living among the Friends; in proportion as I thought myself more learned, I proceeded farther, and by a steady application of several years, I have acquired a pretty general knowledge of every plant and tree to be found in our continent.

Related Characters: John Bertram (speaker), Iwan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

Letter XI is unique in the book because it's not written from James's perspective, but from the perspective of James's friend Iwan, who is visiting America from Russia. Iwan pays a visit to America's first famous botanist, John Bertram (an actual historical figure, though elsewhere known as John Bartram).

Bertram is explaining to Iwan how he became a botanist. He did not learn his trade by attending a university or studying under a renowned European botanist like Linnaeus. Rather, he got started when he began to notice beautiful wildflowers around his own farm. After acquainting himself with some scientific basics, he then began to study plants all around his farm, his local area, and gradually around the

whole country. Bertram's biography is a great example of an American who contributes to the world beyond America's shores, and to do so, he literally doesn't have to leave his backyard. Crèvecoeur pointedly uses Bertram's example to show European readers that America has something to offer *their* culture, not just vice versa.

"I am glad to see that thee hast so much compassion; are there any slaves in thy country?" "Yes, unfortunately, but they are more properly civil than domestic slaves; they are attached to the soil on which they live; it is the remains of ancient barbarous customs established in the days of the greatest ignorance and savageness of manners and preserved notwithstanding the repeated tears of humanity, the loud calls of policy, and the commands of religion. The pride of great men, with the avarice of landholders, make them look on this class as necessary tools of husbandry, as if freemen could not cultivate the ground."

Related Characters: Iwan, John Bertram (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

This is a conversation between Iwan and John Bertram about the Russian practice of serfdom. Iwan has just finished telling Bertram that he can't stand to see American slaves mistreated, and here, he goes on to explain that serfdom isn't identical to slavery as it's practiced in America, but it is plainly analogous. Serfs are bought and sold along with the land on which they live and work, a practice dating back centuries and now considered to be indispensable to Russian life.

Crèvecoeur held strong antislavery views, so this quote should be read not merely as a critique of Russian serfdom, but as an indirect attack on American attitudes about slavery. Through Iwan's denunciation of serfdom, the author denounces slavery as "barbarous," savage, inhumane, and irreligious. He also argues that it's just pride and greed that keep such a system going—once a class of oppressed human beings becomes regarded as "necessary tools of husbandry," their oppressors fail to imagine that their work could be accomplished in any other way. Read this way, the passage may actually critique America more scathingly than it does Russia.

Letter 12 Quotes

I am conscious that I was happy before this unfortunate revolution. I feel that I am no longer so; therefore I regret the change. This is the only mode of reasoning adapted to persons in my situation. If I attach myself to the mother country, which is 3,000 miles from me, I become what is called an enemy to my own region; if I follow the rest of my countrymen, I become opposed to our ancient masters: both extremes appear equally dangerous to a person of so little weight and consequence as I am, whose energy and example are of no avail.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 203-204

Explanation and Analysis

Letter XII, the last of the book, is a jarring departure from the subjects and tone of the earlier letters. James has spent most of the letters praising America and commending its strengths to European readers; but now, in the midst of the Revolution, he expresses nothing but dread and regret about his situation.

James's sharp change in attitude has much to do with the unsustainable tension he feels between his American identity and his British heritage. Now that England and the American colonies are at war, James can no longer feel at home in America. If he sides with the "mother country," he'll be considered a traitor to the neighbors whom he's always cared about and tried to support; but if he sides with the American revolutionaries, he'll be regarded as a rebel by Britain, a possibility he finds intolerable. He also suggests that as an ordinary farmer of little consequence in society, neither of these "extremes" offers him much benefit. Presumably, he'd just like to continue farming and maintaining his way of life, but instead, he feels pushed to adopt an identity—traitor or rebel—that has nothing to do with his loyalty to his family, his land, and his neighbors. Though obviously plenty of American colonists didn't feel as conflicted as this, James's attitude offers a glimpse of the difficult position that some ordinary people felt caught in as the wider world erupted into war.

The innocent class are always the victims of the few [...] It is for the sake of the great leaders on both sides that so much blood must be spilt; that of the people is counted as nothing. Great events are not achieved for us, though it is by us that they are principally accomplished, by the arms, the sweat, the lives of the people.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

Having established his point that many Americans feel caught between extremes that don't represent their perspective, James develops the idea that ordinary people suffer unfairly when global events disrupt their lives.

By "the innocent class," James refers to ordinary citizens like himself, while the "few" are those in positions of power who can actually affect big events, like waging war. It's an interesting perspective, because James declines to look at the Revolutionary War primarily as a conflict between British and American, but instead insists that it's fundamentally a conflict between "great leaders" and "the people." Great leaders mainly fight for their own benefit, presumably to impose their own will on the world and maintain their powerful status in the process; they don't fight for the people. Inevitably, though, "the people"—their "arms [...] lives, [and] sweat"—*do* fight for the great leaders, because they have no choice, and the great cannot achieve their goals without the efforts of the small. James sees this state of things as a basic injustice, no matter the merits of one side or the other.

> Must I then, in order to be called a faithful subject, coolly and philosophically say it is necessary for the good of Britain that my children's brains should be dashed against the walls of the house in which they were reared; that my wife should be stabbed and scalped before my face; that I should be either murthered or captivated; or that for greater expedition we should all be locked up and burnt to ashes as the family of the B—n was?

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote James continues his passionate critique of the Revolution and the pressures it places on him and other ordinary citizens. To persuade his reader, he uses pathos, or the appeal to emotion. This rhetorical technique is clear in the stark and horrifying imagery he employs—children being dashed against walls, his wife brutally killed before his eyes, and himself being murdered or taken captive. With such imagery, James presumably refers to raids by British-sympathizing parties of Native Americans taking advantage of the exposed frontier. It wasn't just a hypothetical prospect to writer Crèvecoeur—his beloved farm was indeed "burnt to ashes," resulting in his wife's death.

Even though James describes events that did happen on the frontier, it's also true that he uses pathos to depict the deadliest possible scenario in order to convince readers that the Revolution was a bad thing. Most readers probably would agree with James that he *shouldn't* have to coolly accept such possibilities in order to be considered a faithful subject; but a reader could agree with James and still support the Revolution, too. More than he denounces the war itself, James protests a wartime mindset that tries to force people into one partisan camp or the other, no matter what horrors people might be suffering on the ground.

> You may therefore, by means of anticipation, behold me under the wigwam; I am so well acquainted with the principal manners of these people that I entertain not the least apprehension from them. I rely more securely on their strong hospitality than on the witnessed compacts of many Europeans.

Related Characters: James (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

After explaining his family's distress in affecting detail, James moves on to telling F.B. what his contingency plan is—to escape the violence on the frontier by moving his family to a remote Indian village. In other words, if James cannot continue to enjoy his cherished freedoms as an American farmer, he will salvage what freedoms he can by letting go of his American identity, at least for the duration of the war.

Given how much James has written about his love for his farm and the joys of being an American farmer, this is an unsettling conclusion and demonstrates to readers how dire he felt the wartime situation to be. After reading the first few letters, readers would not have expected James to eventually write that he could be found "under the wigwam." His plan also highlights James's ambivalent views of his indigenous neighbors. On one hand, he feels comfortable

enough with them that he's not afraid to live among them, and he has witnessed firsthand that they possess more hospitable virtues than some Europeans—an opinion no doubt hardened by the wartime atrocities James has witnessed. Yet, at the same time, James assumes that the villagers will be happy to welcome his family and won't feel their coming as an intrusion in its own right. And his assessment of Indian life, as being in every way simpler and more peaceful than his current life, suggests that he still regards Indian life in a reductionistic way, not considering that life in the Indian village has its own deep history, politics, and conflicts like any other human community.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ADVERTISEMENTS

To the First Edition, 1782. This collection of letters was written by the American farmer whose name is on them (J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur). He wrote them to satisfy a friend's curiosity and published them to satisfy England's appetite for news of America. Their authenticity is easy to determine from their plain style and novice inaccuracies.

The first section of the book contains the publisher's "advertisements," which serve as forewords for the book as a whole. Although the tone of this first advertisement might sound defensive or exaggeratedly humble, it fits with the style of the time—the author explains why he wrote this book and argues that its weaknesses actually help establish his honesty and trustworthiness as an author. He also suggests that English people are especially curious about their country's former colony. The book did, in fact, have its first and greatest success in Europe.

St. John has personally witnessed the events that have "deformed the face of America." He didn't want England and the colonies to separate, and indeed, that event has driven him out of the comfortable situation described in his early letters. The conflict is drawing to a close, and hopefully the two countries will reconcile.

In the late 1770s, St. John de Crèvecoeur was jailed in British-occupied New York City on the suspicion of being an American spy, while ironically, his sympathies lay more with England than with the revolution. After that, he never fully rebuilt the comfortable life he'd led before. These events no doubt shape St. John's overall negative attitude about the war that "deformed the face of America."

To the Second Edition, 1783. Since the first edition was published, St. John has accepted a job in New York, so it is unlikely he will have time to compile a second volume of letters anytime soon.

Though the book enjoyed publishing success in Europe and presumably created demand for a sequel, St. John had taken up diplomatic work by this time and never did write a follow-up volume.

To the Abbé Raynal, F.R.S. St. John, a humble American farmer, presumes to address the Abbé from the other side of the Atlantic. He wishes his letters were worthy of that honor. A few years ago, he read Abbé Raynal's book on political history and was moved by its plea for the humanity of enslaved African people, and its view of America as a refuge for the distressed. The Abbé's ideas inspired him to write, and he now begs the Abbé to receive these letters as a tribute. After all, even though he's an American and only a farmer with no title, shouldn't he be allowed to join in the intellectual brotherhood of which the Abbé is part? This dedication is signed by J. Hector St. John of Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

This section of the 1783 Advertisement dedicates the edition to the Abbé Raynal, an 18th-century French intellectual whose popular book History of the East and West Indies *strongly condemned slavery. This book is quite likely the historical volume Crèvecoeur mentions that moved him so profoundly and inspired him to begin writing himself. Again, he emphasizes the point that he's not educated and titled like the Abbé, a formulaic statement of humility that paradoxically lets him claim standing in the literary world.*

LETTER 1

Just because James received Mr. F.B. with hospitality when he visited America, why would Mr. F.B. expect James to be able to write him good letters? For five weeks, his guest F.B. taught James all about European countries, especially France, which James knew little about—including geography, farming, art, and trade. So the gratitude should be on James's side. The letters Mr. F.B wants in return require talent that James doesn't possess. He might be able to describe American farming, manners, and customs based on his own observations, but he isn't very educated or knowledgeable beyond that.

Within the letters, Crèvecoeur writes in the voice of a fictional Pennsylvania farmer named James. In this first letter, James explains his reason for writing: his European friend F.B. visited recently and asked James to write to him. Much as Crèvecoeur did in the Advertisements, James insists that he's not smart or skilled enough to fulfill this request. Like before, the self-deprecating tone shouldn't be taken at face value; by arguing that he's not worthy of the honor of writing to F.B., James actually establishes himself as a trustworthy narrator.

James's father left him a few books, but how much could James have learned from Scottish theology, the *Navigation of Sir Francis Drake*, and the *History of Queen Elizabeth*? He occasionally chats with a local minister, but that man, too, is busy with farming and sermon preparation. His wife, whom James always consults before he does anything, laughs at the whole idea. She asks if James isn't ashamed to write to a man who has studied at Cambridge and who has traveled extensively in both Europe and the colonies. She thinks F.B. must be joking, but after both she and the minister friend study the letter carefully, they agree that James's correspondent is in earnest.

James continues to lay it on thick regarding how uneducated he is and therefore unfit to write. He even introduces other characters, his friend and his wife, both to support his claims and to show that he doesn't have a wide social circle; the farming minister is presumably his most cultured acquaintance. James's wife never develops into a very rounded character, but James portrays her as quite willing to speak her mind. In doing so, she actually sounds rather mean, but she should also be read as worrying about James's broader reputation, especially in a context where social hierarchies were more pronounced.

James finally resolves to write, but he wonders how to gather and organize everything he knows. His friend, F.B., has pointed out that writing is just "talking on paper," so his minister friend suggests that James simply write down what he'd say if F.B. were actually here. Even if James's letters aren't elegant, his friend points out, "they will smell of the woods and be a little wild," and F.B. will surely learn something from them. After all, everyone loves "exotics"—that's why so many people love to visit Italy to look at old ruins. The minister thinks, however, it would make more sense if people visited America instead, where there are so many "humble rudiments and embryos of societies" appearing everywhere.

James's minister friend suggests that even if James can't write like a cultured European would, his own American context gives him a special advantage: it's "exotic," so it will appeal to F.B. in a unique way. On one hand, the word "exotic" seems to be connected to England's imperial outlook—the American colonies are "exotic" because they're remote and populated by strange, "wild" people. On the other hand, "exotic" also seems to mean simply "out of the ordinary," like Italy's ancient ruins. In that sense, the minister friend thinks America has more to offer than Europe.

James asks his friend to go on. The minister suggests that an "enlightened Englishman" would learn the most from an account of what makes Americans' lives happy, how they expand their settlements, and convert the wilderness into farmable land and civilized communities. In Italy, the traveler mostly encounters ancient history. America, in contrast, is "modern, peaceful, and benign." No wars have been fought here, and there's no oppressive feudalism. Nature supplies ample food to endless newcomers. All of this is far more interesting and entertaining than "the musty ruins of Rome." Here, the traveler can imagine the promising future instead of the dreary past.

Now that James's friend has established that it's worth James's effort to write letters, he offers further comments that begin to shape the rest of the book. The nature of American life, including the unique features that James believes make American life especially happy, will be the main focus of the 12 letters. The minister friend further suggests that, contrary to what many "cultured" people might assume, something new is potentially more interesting and enlightening than something old. It's also noteworthy that he claims America has been free from war—a strange and hard-to-interpret claim, since even if this letter is set before the Revolution got underway, Americans were certainly familiar with the French and Indian War (1754–1763).

Here in America, the minister goes on, a visitor can witness the "ancient dignity" of the human species. The laws here are simple and just, and people are focused on cultivation, so the country as a whole flourishes. An English observer would find America's harmony and hospitality inviting. The minister further muses that so far, Americans have focused their energy on agriculture; it will be the job of future generations to mine for riches beneath the earth.

James's minister friend continues to name themes that James will expound upon in later letters. In particular, he implies that the simplicity of America's laws allows people to live more freely than they do elsewhere, and that a culture focused on farming leads to widespread flourishing. With his emphasis on "ancient [human] dignity," he also implies that Americans live in a more "primitive" way than more developed European societies do, and that this is a more desirable state—a view that would fit with the Enlightenment philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was popular at the time.

James is impressed by the minister's eloquence. The minister assures James that his letters will get better and better with practice, and anyway, their novelty in coming from "the edge of the great wilderness" will hold great appeal. He adds that James wants one of his children to become a clergyman, so perhaps Mr. F.B. can help with that someday—"it is good for American farmers to have friends even in England." James simply has to write down his normal way of speaking.

James's friend continues to encourage him that his position as a spokesman for the "wilderness" makes up for his lack of education and culture. And, anyway, his friendship with the more sophisticated F.B. is worth preserving—after all, in the wilderness, overseas connections might prove beneficial someday.

James says that the minister has persuaded him. He will write as best he can and let Mr. F.B. separate the good from the bad. After all, it's a question of being hospitable, just like when F.B. visited America. His wife dislikes this comparison, though, since she thinks they did the best they could with poor materials, forcing the poor man to live on fruit-pies. James, she argues, needs to know what materials he has on hand, "and then whether thee canst dish them up." James responds that, for once, his wife is wrong; he can't know what he's capable of until he tries. The minister encourages James that he only became good at preaching through practice, so James should simply get started.

There's definitely a comic edge to this passage, with James's wife not buying his comparison between letter-writing and hospitality and doubting whether he can "dish up" what he promises. Again, this prolonged discussion between James, his wife, and his friend shouldn't be taken entirely at face value; letter-writing between people of differing social standing probably wouldn't have been this big a deal in real life. But since this is one of the earliest American literary works, Crèvecoeur is likely taking care to establish James's credibility as a uniquely American voice.

James finally agrees, though he says he will read his letters aloud to his wife and the minister before he sends them. The minister further encourages James that he will probably be a more interesting writer as an American farmer than he would be if he were a Cambridge scholar. To Mr. F.B., James will seem like an exotic American plant. In Europe, most plants are meticulously cultivated. The minister encourages James to let F.B. see "a few American wild-cherry trees" in all their natural splendor. He points out that even a farmer thinks, and he ought to share his thoughts on paper. The minister himself has composed many good sermons while ploughing his land. Farmers have the privilege of silence and contemplation in a way that other workers don't. James should persevere with the same focused and determined attitude he would take to ploughing.

The minister friend continues to assure James that being a backwoods American doesn't mean he can't write good letters to an educated European. He uses horticultural language to support his claim. Compared to Europe's carefully planned and tended gardens, James is more like an unruly tree that thrives in the wilderness—a comparison that presses home the image of the uncultured American, while importantly avoiding casting Americans as backwards. The minister adds that living close to one's land does not preclude having a lively intellectual life. In fact, it can even be an advantage—another theme James will pick up later.

James's wife remains skeptical. If it ever got out that James were writing letters to a great man in England, she argues, people would gossip about his ambitions to become an author and the effect that dream would have on his family. She urges James to consider the potential impact on his time and reputation. He would be accused of both "idleness and vain notions," of wanting to become a politician, and of "telling the king's men abundance of things." She would rather blend in with their country neighbors, the way they do now. Englishmen have leisure to write letters, but writing doesn't help farmers survive. So James should keep his writing as secret as possible. Otherwise, he'll become known as the "scribbling farmer." It's much better to be known as a well-fed and comfortable family.

Compared to the minister, James's wife offers a very different perspective. Regardless of whether a farmer can *write, she argues, writing doesn't befit a farmer. There's the matter of reputation—people would think he's wasting his time, has ambitions to seek public office, or perhaps is even a spy (as Crèvecoeur was accused of being). Any of these things would suggest to people that James doesn't put his family first. Plus, there are class implications—farmers need to make a living, unlike English country gentlemen, and writing doesn't contribute to that.*

James recounts this conversation so that his correspondent can't accuse him of presumption. Now Mr. F.B. can see James's motives and misgivings. There's nothing left for him to do but write. F.B. must tell him what subjects to write about, keeping in mind that he is only a simple farmer. If he had wanted the perspective of a politician, a naturalist, or a man of taste, then he could have asked them. But since he's sought out "a cultivator of the earth" and "simple citizen" instead, he must accept James's letters as they come.

James doesn't address his wife's objections directly, suggesting that when he's made up his mind, he's unlikely to let her perspective sway him. He is, however, concerned that F.B.—and a European audience more generally—not take him the wrong way. Now that he's acknowledged he's not on their level, he's free to talk about whatever simple subjects he chooses (though he claims F.B. will supply him with those, too). With this lengthy apology out of the way, James can finally write his letters in earnest.

LETTER 2

Mr. F.B. is the first "enlightened European" James has ever known, so he is eager to continue their correspondence. Based on what F.B. has told him, James has observed that European and American customs differ. He can see that every society is a mix of good and evil. He is thankful to be an American farmer instead of "a Russian boor or an Hungarian peasant." Knowing the miserable condition of such people has made James even more grateful for his own situation.

After the hemming and hawing of the first letter, James switches to a much more confident tone in this one, suggesting that his previous hesitations were mostly performative. Even though James sets up the letter by observing that no country is perfect, he is quick to assert that Americans, especially farmers, are much happier than their foreign counterparts, anticipating the argument to come.

Yet, when James was younger, he considered selling his farm, as he found the work tedious. But when he thought about going through life without his farm, he couldn't imagine where he'd fit in the world. He decided to try to be happy where his father was before him. It's true that his father couldn't give him a good education, but he left behind his farming experience and no debt. And once James got married, he was perfectly content with his situation, since his wife made everything cheerful. He was able to return to farm work with renewed motivation, knowing he wasn't just laboring for himself. Sometimes his wife would come and sit under a nearby tree with her knitting, praising his skill, and James would wish he'd married sooner.

James describes farming not so much as a job, but as a way of life. It's also notable that despite his earlier doubts, James apparently considers it more rewarding to continue with a way of life that was passed down to him than to strike out on his own, unique path. This suggests that as much as he values freedom, he doesn't regard freedom as an unfettered right to do everything his own way, without thinking of anyone else. Community and obligation are built into his understanding of freedom, as shown by the fact that his wife's dependence isn't a burden on his freedom, but an asset to it.

Where, James wonders, is a system of living that affords more freedom of action and thought than that of the American farmer—and under the rule of a government that asks for little from its people? James owes "nothing but a peppercorn to my country" and his king; his landlord is "the lord of all land." He owns 371 acres, an orchard, and a nice house and barn, all of which his father built from scratch. He has plenty of pork, beef, wethers (male sheep), and fowls. His enslaved workers are faithful and healthy. Thanks to his father's efforts, life is good for James, and he is grateful.

James sees the farmer's life as the peak expression of American freedom. Key to that freedom is a government that doesn't lay heavy demands on citizens. Instead of being indebted to a landlord, he's only indebted to "the lord of all land," or God. One important detail, though, is that James assumes that his freedom grants him the right to enslave people. His glancing reference to those enslaved workers is wedged, jarringly, between a description of his property and livestock and his gratitude for the good life he's been given. The clash between his nonchalant attitude about slavery and his reverence for "freedom" is worth noting throughout the letters.

When James's first son was born, everything changed. He stopped daydreaming so much and wandering beyond the boundaries of his farm. Still, he finds plenty to reflect upon as he goes about his work. He figures that's why F.B. used to call him "the farmer of feelings." He knows his feelings must be much less sophisticated than those of an educated, well-read European; still, he'll do the best he can to describe them.

As subsequent letters will make clear, James has traveled widely throughout the American colonies; however, becoming responsible for a son focused his energies closer to home. Yet for James, the hard work of farming isn't detached from sentiment. In fact, the emotions and observations associated with farming, even if they're not sophisticated like a European's, are a key part of what it means to be an American farmer.

James can't describe the love, gratitude, and pride he feels when he sees his wife working around the house or nursing their child by the fire; it often moves him to tears and inspires him to be a good husband and father. When he plays with his baby son, he longs to know what the boy's future holds. He always leaves home reluctantly and returns home with joy.

For James, a life of freedom and hard work is both sustained and rewarded by a blissful home life. Providing for his wife and anticipating a similar life for his descendants makes his labors feel worthwhile. Presumably, if he were just a tenant who didn't own his own land, he couldn't enjoy such pleasures to the same degree.

Whenever James returns home, he thinks of his "precious soil" and wonders where American farmers would be without it—the supplier of their food, clothes, and even drink. It's no wonder that Europeans risk the ocean crossing to become landowners themselves. This soil, transformed into a farm, has become the foundation of "our rights [...] our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens." He calls this "the true and the only philosophy of an American farmer."

James calls the soil "precious" because it sustains the farmer's entire way of life. Furthermore, being a farmer gives him standing and a stake in his community. Of course, this raises the question of what standing non-landowners had (which is to say, not much). But James is comparing this "true [...] philosophy" to the diminished position of a serf or tenant in old world Europe.

James urges Mr. F.B. not to laugh at "an artless countryman" trying to describe his feelings. Sometimes when he ploughs, he takes his little boy along, and the boy chatters happily. This makes James think of how his father took him ploughing when he was a child, and how he hopes his own son can someday do the same.

As he's done earlier, James demurs that he's not very sophisticated. But his friend F.B. probably won't literally laugh at him, and James knows that. In fact, he's indirectly inviting readers to admire his sensitive feelings as he introduces his child to the joys of a farmer's life.

When James walks home in the evenings, he is amazed by all the different insects he sees in the light of the setting sun; he never noticed such details when he was younger. He never sees an egg on his table without thinking of how it might have become a hen or rooster. The changes of the seasons, and the wisdom of the animals that live on his land, fill him with wonder. He believes all creatures deserve respect. He regrets that "king-birds" destroy industrious **bees**, yet those same birds keep crows from destroying his fields. James describes a time when he watched a swarm of bees attack a king-bird, then as soon as they dispersed, the bird turned around and gobbled up many of the bees. James killed the bird and took 171 bees out of its mouth, 54 of which revived and flew back to their hive.

This is the first of a number of passages where James almost turns poetic in his reflections on his land. His bigger point here is that because he spends so much time working on his land, he's able to notice details like insects and shifts in daylight or seasons. Even his relationship to his food—like recognizing the potential of an egg—is different than it would have been if he weren't a farmer. From paying attention to his land, James is able to notice the contributions of even seemingly destructive pests, like the Eastern kingbird he describes here. It's also the first time he brings up his special fondness for bees, which become a kind of symbol of hard work and community.

James also loves to feed the quails that flock to his farm during the barren winter. He thinks it's barbaric to catch and kill harmless birds during the winter. He also loves closely observing the temperaments and behavior of his cows during that time of year; they are like humans in their greed and attempts to steal one another's food.

Though he doesn't directly say so here, James's humane attitude toward animals, both wild and domestic, seems to derive from his closeness to nature and his land. He seems to feel a special protectiveness even toward wild animals that find food and shelter on his farm.

When James travels home in his sledge on cold nights, he has many other reflections, like wondering about the nature of frost, and where the heat has gone, and how the millions of summer insects could have so perfectly hidden themselves. Yet he keeps returning to the subject of **bees**—their fascinating "government, their industry, their quarrels, their passions." He loves to rest near his bee-house and observe their movements. When they seem inclined to go to the woods, he never tries to impede them, knowing they'll be back next fall.

James portrays himself as having a curious and even somewhat whimsical outlook on nature, suggesting that for him, nature isn't something to be exploited, but to be thoughtfully used and enjoyed. His anthropomorphic language about bees is also telling, in that it echoes some of his language about Americans. Like Americans, bees are self-governing and hardworking and have strong wills—traits James considers worth emulating.

When James finishes up his sowing for the season, he heads out into the woods, not to hunt for deer or bear like his neighbors do, but to catch **bees**. Once he finds a good spot, he builds a fire, on which he places some wax. On a nearby stone, he puts some drops of honey and a little vermilion (a reddish pigment), then waits. Soon, bees are attracted by the smell of burnt wax and begin to feast on the honey. In the process, bits of vermilion stick to their bodies to help identify them. As the bees fly off, James sets his compass to figure out their course, and he looks at his watch to see how long it takes them to fly back. Once he's figured out the bees' direction and approximate distance, he finds and marks the tree where they live. In this way he sometimes finds up to 11 swarms in a single autumn and collects huge quantities of honey. The extra honey allows his wife to brew delicious mead. If the bee-trees he finds are located on somebody else's land, the owner is always entitled to half the honey.

Though James portrays his experiences as if they're fairly typical of farmers in general, his reflectiveness about nature seems to lead him down some unusual paths, as suggested here. Notably, he doesn't just enjoy finding wild honey; he also relishes the process of attracting and finding the bees, suggesting that ingenuity, not just hard work, is an important part of an American farmer's life. He also has at least a modicum of respect for other farmers' land, showing that even though he prizes freedom, it's not freedom without any limits or respect for others' (at least other landowners') rights.

Twice a year James catches pigeons with a net. Though they are plentiful and cheap, he thinks they are a delicacy. He notes that every farmer keeps a tame pigeon in a cage to help lure and catch wild ones whenever the flocks happen to fly over. In spring, he loves listening to the songbirds and wakes when they do, just before dawn. He also observes the "astonishing art" of their nests and their devotion to mates and offspring. In general, he finds that though animals lack reason, their instincts often provide a corrective to human follies.

In colonial America, pigeons were a common dish, providing an inexpensive source of protein. Whether they provide food for humans or just delight with their song and delicate nests, birds are a favorite source of reflection for James. His life as a farmer has helped him cultivate a special respect for them and other wildlife.

Spring offers such "ravishing scenes" that James soaks up every moment he can. If he kept on talking about them, he might become tedious to his reader. But, he promises, everything he writes is true. He recalls one day when he observed a small bird while sitting and smoking his pipe. In his piazza there were three nests, belonging respectively to a swallow, a phoebe, and a wren, all very tame. The wren, living in a box James had built for that purpose, appeared dissatisfied with its home, so it successfully drove the swallow out of its nest and moved all of the swallow's nesting materials to its own box. It then appeared to flutter its wings with satisfaction. Where, James wonders, could a creature lacking reason learn to act this way? Meanwhile, the offended swallow sat there unresisting, though within a few days, it had repaired its nest, and James moved the wren's box elsewhere so this wouldn't happen again.

James continues to portray the farmer's life as affording him a special relationship with his land and the wildlife that call it home. In fact, he even delights in providing shelter for certain animals, carefully observing their behaviors, and protecting them when others threaten them. Though he stops short of anthropomorphizing animals, he can't help finding humor and wonder in the human-like behavior of creatures like the triumphant wren. Implicitly, someone who doesn't own and farm their own land lacks the leisure to contemplate and enjoy nature as James does.

In James's parlor, he has "a curious republic of industrious hornets" in a nest hung from the ceiling. A hole in a windowpane allows the hornets to fly in and out for food. Because they're treated kindly, the hornets have become harmless, and they keep the fly population down. They build their intricate nests out of a cottony material they get from oakwood. The whole family is used to the hornets' buzzing by now.

James's choice of words is intriguing here—a "republic of industrious hornets." The imagery subtly likens the hornets to hardworking, democratic American citizens, suggesting that his benign view of nature is filtered through his optimistic perspective on American potential.

Many wasps also live on the farm, building muddy nests on the roof. To survive the winter, they bury themselves inside the nests' oblong cells. When it becomes warm again, they perforate the cells to get outside. Yellow wasps are much scarier: they build underground nests in the meadows and, when mowers accidentally pass over their holes, burst out of the ground in fury. The only way to escape them is to lie down and cover one's head with hay. But even when James has been forced to burn hornets' nests, he always somewhat regrets destroying these ingenious dwellings.

James admires the wasps' resourcefulness and survival instinct which, again, seem to remind him of the traits he admires most about Americans. Nevertheless, his view of wildlife isn't always romantic, and he acknowledges the need to defend oneself against harmful pests—though, even then, he does so with reluctance and respect.

If James kept going on this subject, he might never stop. He also acknowledges that a well-traveled, well-read person might not find all this very interesting; but to him, lacking time for more learned pursuits, they provide rich sources of contemplation. At home, of course, he finds other subjects for reflection as he watches his children grow and tries to develop tools to simplify his wife's labors around the house. He thanks God for all he has and envies no one. The only happiness he desires is to teach his children to become "good, substantial, independent American farmers"—the best position a man could want, as long as American civil government continues to bless it.

Like earlier, James portrays himself as uneducated and insular compared to his correspondent. Again, though, his humble tone shouldn't be taken at face value; he's indirectly arguing that America actually is *well worth a cultured traveler's time. More than that, from James's point of view, America offers the happiest home possible—a place where families can be self-sufficient and, free from government interference, enjoy what they have.*

LETTER 3

James wishes he could know the thoughts and feelings of an Englishman newly arrived in America. He imagines such a man must feel a sense of national pride. After all, English industry and ingenuity are on display here. A century ago, America was "wild, woody, and uncultivated," but now it is filled with houses, farms, villages, and cities.

In the last letter, James focused on the joys of his own life as an American farmer. In this letter, he considers a newcomer's likely impressions of the young country. An English visitor should find much that's familiar, like farms and settlements. Notably, James takes for granted that the transformation of the wilderness into settlement is a positive form of progress—a perspective that indigenous Americans wouldn't necessarily share.

America is also very different from Europe. Unlike in Europe, there aren't wealthy lords, aristocrats, kings, or established churches. There isn't such a vast gulf between rich and poor. "From Nova Scotia to West Florida," everyone farms the land, with the exception of some town-dwellers. The country is huge, and people communicate by means of roads and rivers, "united by the silken bands of mild government" and living under equitable laws. People are hardworking because they work for themselves.

Though a European visitor would find some things about America recognizable, the two places are also fundamentally different. James links America's more egalitarian atmosphere to its farming-based economy. He also connects it to a "mild" government that generally leaves people to themselves. Presumably, then, if either of these conditions changed, America would become a less equitable place, and a less happy one.

In the countryside, there aren't castles and mansions dominating over dismal peasant homes, but fairly uniform standards of living for everyone. Even a humble log cabin is dry and comfortable. In towns, the loftiest position is that of lawyer or merchant; in rural settlements, there are only farmers. On Sundays, one sees respectable congregations of tidy farmers' families. Ministers are of the same humble class as their flocks. Nobody must serve princes. America is "the most perfect society now existing in the world."

While it wouldn't be difficult to find exceptions to James's statements here—certainly there were poorer people in America who didn't live in comfortable homes, and indentured servants, not to mention enslaved people, who had little choice about serving others in order to survive—James's point is that America, as a young country, is free from the class stratification deeply embedded in European society. In his view, this is what makes America the "most perfect" place to live.

America's freedom will endure for a long time. North America isn't yet fully occupied, and we don't even know how far it extends, as Europeans have only explored half of it.

James takes a notably optimistic view of American expansion here. He takes for granted that there won't be any serious impediments to America claiming all the land it wants in North America (quite an assumption, given he admits that Europeans haven't even mapped the entire continent yet!), and that it will be good if it happens—disregarding the fact that those lands are already occupied.

An English visitor would be curious about Americans' origins. James notes Americans comprise a mix of "English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes." The group of people known as Americans has arisen from this "promiscuous breed." James especially admires the relatively unmixed Englishmen of the Eastern part of the colonies. They have accomplished much with "ungrateful" soil within a short period of time.

A key feature of America's uniqueness is that people emigrate there from many different countries. While certainly people emigrated between European countries at this time, the sheer variety of nationalities found in America would indeed be novel for an English tourist. James uses "promiscuous" in the sense of a diverse mix, not in a pejorative sense.

James says that in "this great American asylum," Europe's poor people have gathered for various reasons. Many of these people, he claims, were poor, oppressed vagrants who had no real native country. In America, under better laws and a better social system, such Europeans have "become men," flourishing as much as they once withered. Here, they can be actual citizens. The laws, and their own hard work, bring about this transformation. American laws protect and reward newcomers, hardworking emigrants can buy land, and being landowning "freemen" brings every benefit a man could want.

James characterizes America as a safe harbor for oppressed peoples. Not only that, but life in America allows people to flourish to a degree they couldn't in Europe. This is because, in James's view, people's hard work counts for more in America than it does in Europe, allowing them to develop a stake in their communities and gain the privileges that come with it. Of course, not everyone who comes to America gets to be or benefit from a "freeman"—a point James doesn't pursue here.

American laws come from American government, which itself derives "from the original genius and strong desire of the people" and was ratified by the crown. By way of contrast, James mentions Nova Scotia, where the crown itself has greater power; this, combined with the mosquitoes, has resulted in a much more thinly populated province.

Laws are friendly to hardworking Americans because those laws originate with Americans themselves, who understand their best interests better than a king thousands of miles away. James argues that too much royal power has a stagnating effect on people. He might name mosquitoes pointedly here, hinting that an intrusive government is like a nuisance insect!

James argues that a poor European emigrant can't be very attached to a country where he had nothing except for some linguistic and familial ties. America, on the other hand, gives him "land, bread, protection, and consequence." So to answer the question, "What is an American?" James answers that it's someone who likely has a "strange mixture of blood," has left behind old ways and prejudices, and has adopted new ways under a new government and by virtue of his new rank.

Crèvecoeur's positive experiences as an American emigrant certainly color the perspective he expresses through James; undoubtedly, plenty of emigrants, no matter how much they might gain in America in terms of security and standing, still found language and family ties a very strong link to their former country. However, his point stands that America drew many emigrants so strongly that they readily adopted new ties, opinions, and ways of life in their new land.

In America, all such people are "melted into a new race of men" who will one day change the world. Americans are "the western pilgrims" who will "finish the great circle" by carrying European culture and achievements with them as they go. Because of the opportunities available to them here, Americans should love their new land much more than their old land. Instead of begging and starving, American children are now "fat and frolicsome" and eagerly help their fathers in the fields. Religion is voluntary, not imposed by rulers. In light of all this, "the American is a new man," with new principles, ideas, and opinions guiding him.

In his optimism about American potential, James voices a troubling perspective about (as he sees it) the supremacy of European culture and its destined global reach. He doesn't acknowledge any potential harm the "western pilgrims" could cause as they colonize further. However, his main point here is that, by virtue of their emigrant experience, Americans are very different from their European counterparts; their freedoms are not just novel but revolutionary in the history of the world.

"British America" lies along a coast 1,500 miles long and about 200 miles wide. James wants to describe its society, or at least that found in the "middle provinces." It may be different from what one would find in Europe, but it boasts its own variety, from coastal dwellers to forest-dwellers and everyone in between. People are like the soil, or society, in which they grow.

James shifts from sweeping praise of America's virtues to describing aspects of the land and its people in greater detail. He particularly focuses on ways that people's environment shapes them—an unsurprising emphasis, given his romantic view of the relationship between a farmer and his land in previous letters.

People who live near the sea are much like it. They are "bold and enterprising" and avoid confinement in their work and society. They like to use the sea to transport goods, and they innovate labor-saving techniques.

James's generalizations about people who live in different environments tend to be whimsical, but they do offer insight into the kinds of innovation that were blossoming across the colonies at this time. Fishing and seafaring are of special interest to James, and he'll discuss them further in Letters IV-VIII.

On the other hand, those who live in the middle settlements enjoy cultivating the land (farming). Being "independent freeholders" creates a unique class of people that aren't known in Europe. Freemen develop wisdom early in life, they're stubborn, and can be litigious. They follow politics and think for themselves in religious matters, if they're religious at all. James identifies with these "middle" folk.

Given James's love of the farming life, it's not surprising that he favors the people of the agricultural middle colonies and thinks their characteristics—like stubbornness and freethinking—are some of the traits that best exemplify America. He still acknowledges their faults, like a tendency toward lawsuits (probably springing from their attachment to their land).

Finally, men who live near the forested frontier, being distant from the centers of government, are rather left to themselves. People are driven to such places, James suggests, by things like misfortune, greed, or the need to start fresh. Areas like this tend to be characterized by conflict, drunkenness, and idleness, and there isn't sufficient government or community to rein the people in. James suggests that anyone who wants to understand America's "feeble beginnings and barbarous rudiments" should visit the frontier. Gradually, over decades, more hardworking people move westward to improve and civilize these areas begun by less able pioneers.

James has praised Americans' virtues so much that his attitude about people on the frontier (just beyond the Appalachian Mountains at this point) is a bit jarring. It's worth remembering that James does value government and settled communities as desirable things. So, in that light, he tends to view pioneers as outcasts—people who choose to live beyond the bounds of recognized society and presumably lack the virtues that make society strong.

In addition, each province has its own unique character, shaped by its government, climate, and other special circumstances. Within a few generations, then, a European emigrant becomes not simply an American, but a Pennsylvanian, Virginian, or other "provincial." Across the colonies, in fact, people differ so widely that they really only have language and religion more or less in common.

America isn't just divided by regions but by distinct colonies (what James calls provinces). Americans tended to have a strong sense of colonial identity, not just a broader American identity—especially if families settled down in a given colony for multiple generations.

James suggests that Mr. F.B. might also be interested to know how the different Christian denominations give way to religious indifference in America. If members of a religious group settle down in close proximity to each other, they establish a church and worship undisturbed. It's the same if a new sect emerges in Europe, emigrates, and makes converts in America; as long as they're good neighbors, nobody minds how they pray. But as members of different groups intermingle, they gradually become less zealous. Much as Americans tend to forget about their former identification as "Englishman," or "European," they also tend to forget their fervent adherence to a particular sect in Europe.

Crèvecoeur was a deist, meaning he didn't adhere to a mainstream Christian denomination or set of beliefs. So, his outlook on Christianity (as presented through James) is detached in one sense, but perhaps also downplays the strength of religious belief in America. James's basic argument here holds true—denominational identities weakened fairly rapidly as people settled in more religiously diverse communities and intermarried more than they typically did in Europe. Still, weakened adherence to a given church (like Lutheran or Presbyterian) isn't necessarily the same thing as a decline in religious faith.

James knows F.B. might find this hard to understand, so he offers an example. Imagine traveling and coming upon a Catholic household; they worship as they've been taught and bother nobody. Then, a little farther down the road, you meet a German Lutheran who also worships according to his conscience and lives peaceably, getting along with his neighbors and not persecuting anybody.

To help his reader understand the phenomenon of religious diversity in America, James takes an imaginary tour of an American community. In this (idealized) community, people are free to worship according to their consciences, yet they generally keep their religious beliefs to themselves, which allows them to live quietly side by side with people whose ancestors may have persecuted their ancestors generations before.

Next door, you find a fiery "seceder," but since he doesn't live near others of his beliefs, he mostly focuses on tending his farm. Next to him lives a Dutchman who adheres to the Synod of Dort. From the looks of his tidy farm and handsome horses, you will deduce that he's more concerned about this world than the next, and after all, his views about the latter are only God's business. Because farm labor is so demanding, no one has time to worry about making converts, so before long, the neighborhood will have become "a strange religious medley."

The "seceders" were Scottish Presbyterians who had broken away from the mainstream Church of Scotland in the mid-1700s. The Synod of Dort was a 17th-century church council whose teachings were definitive for the Dutch Reformed tradition. James views this "strange religious medley"—Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Dutch Reformed—as a positive step toward religious tolerance. He also implies that if it weren't for the time-consuming demands of farming, there would be more religious conflict—another advantage of the farming life, from his perspective!

Over time, even within a generation, people become more religiously indifferent in this atmosphere; their children begin to intermarry, and they pass down their beliefs in a piecemeal fashion. Though some will continue to worship in a nearby church, others don't bother. This religious mixture is one of the strangest things about America, and it's hard to say how it will turn out. But James says that persecution, pride, and conflict are the main characteristics of religion, and those things simply don't have a chance to gain a footing in America.

Again, Crèvecoeur's deist biases are visible here—he disfavors organized religion, primarily because he sees it as a source of personal and societal conflict more than a good in its own right. So, to him, it's a good thing that, because of America's diversity, religious adherence is becoming watered down. Despite these biases, the historical details hold true to an extent—though America did continue to be a strongly religious country, adherence to specific denominations (and social divisions based on such adherence) became less of a big deal.

James returns to his discussion of frontier settlers. He thinks that living near the woods has a profound effect on such people. They are surrounded by wild animals that seek to destroy their crops and livestock, and this "wildness" turns frontiersmen primarily into hunters rather than farmers. This lifestyle makes them "ferocious, gloomy," and disinclined to socialize with neighbors. Getting their sustenance from the woods instead of by cultivating the land gives these people a "lawless" character that, James says, is worse than the character of Indians. They tend to become lazy, and their children are poorly educated.

After digressing to talk about religion, James returns to his unflattering description of frontiersmen. Whereas James thinks farming has a healthy effect on one's character, he clearly believes that a hunting-based lifestyle in the wilderness distorts people's character. This is because frontiersmen aren't subject to the same discipline as farmers and aren't as connected to a local community. The fact that James thinks they are "worse" than Native Americans reveals his ambivalent, often racist attitudes toward indigenous Americans—attitudes that will become clearer in subsequent letters.

James holds that such settlers lack the knowledge they need in order to really prosper. They've gone from repression in Europe to too *much* freedom in the American woods. Since they lack Sunday services to attend, they don't have any incentive to dress neatly or maintain decent manners. Those who've "generated altogether into the hunting state" are, according to James, the worst of Americans. If they spent more time tilling the ground, even their rough manners would be softened, and they'd be too busy to get into trouble. But a hunting lifestyle leaves too much time for idleness, which leads to vice; and the lifestyle leaves one susceptible to poverty, which leads weak characters to commit crimes. James remarks that it's backwoods settlers who really need conversion, not Indians.

This passage provides nuance to James's view of freedom. He doesn't advocate for an unfettered, anything-goes freedom that's not accountable to anyone else. Frontier settlers, in fact, are an example of excessive *freedom, in his opinion. He thinks frontier conditions lead to a more primitive, uncouth, and unproductive lifestyle. The intensity of his prejudice is striking, but it underscores how much James prizes hard work as an American trait—he doesn't believe frontiersmen work hard enough, therefore they're bad Americans. When he speaks of conversion, James, who's not very religious in a conventional sense, refers more to "civilizing" people than to changing their religion.*

While not all frontier settlers are this contemptible, James concedes, many are, especially those of the Virginia and Carolina frontiers, which are the most distant from government. It's no wonder that Indians have such a terrible impression of Europeans, given the drunken, greedy ones they most often have to deal with. These frontiersmen are too often deceptive and violent. This explains massacres like the one that took place in Virginia in 1774.

James refers to Lord Dunmore's War, a conflict between American Indians (especially Seneca-Cayuga and Shawnee) and white settlers over disputed territories in what was then Virginia territory and what's now western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio; he may be thinking especially of an occasion in May 1774, when a group of British colonists vengefully killed a group of Seneca, setting off months of bloody fighting.

In Europe, there are simply lords and tenants. In contrast, America is settled by freeholders who own and farm their land, who participate in their own government, and make their own laws. Because colonists are so fruitful, James suggests, they should be considered very useful subjects to their countries of origin. Those who would remain poor and idle in Europe can become productive and self-sufficient in America.

Though James clearly ranks some Americans more highly than others, he thinks Americans in general are more promising and productive than most of their European counterparts. Since the letters are aimed at a European audience, he is apparently trying to persuade his readers that they shouldn't look down on American colonists, but should regard them as assets to their countries of origin instead.

It's no wonder that America is so fascinating to Europeans. There's enough variety here to please everyone, and bits of European language, manners, and place-names can be found everywhere you look. Americans and their towns are hospitable and charming. Europeans who can find no avenue for their talents in their countries of origin can find success in America. It's not that everyone will become rich, but anyone of moderate ambition can do well enough to live comfortably.

James continues to highlight what he regards as some of America's most interesting and inviting characteristics. He clearly wants more Europeans to emigrate to America, encouraging readers that America won't seem too foreign to them and that their prospects might be much better in America than in Europe. While not every emigrant will become incredibly successful, James holds that America offers wider opportunities than Europe does.

As soon as poor Europeans arrive in America, they immediately benefit from plentiful food and ample opportunity. If a man is willing to work hard, he will soon find himself treated with greater respect than he has known before. Such treatment grants him self-respect and growing love for his new country. Within a few years, he probably owns a little land of his own. Before long, he becomes a naturalized citizen, whereas in his old country, he counted for nothing. Now he dreams bigger dreams for his children. Not every emigrant will succeed in this way, but the honest and hardworking can.

James argues that though establishing oneself in America takes a little time, an emigrant with the right attitude will begin to benefit almost right away. And those benefits aren't just individual, but communal—as an emigrant builds a home and becomes embedded in his new society, the society grows and benefits, too. This situation also sets up future generations for greater success.

German emigrants tend to do very well in America because they're quick learners and hard workers, and they own America's finest mills. Scots and Irish emigrants aren't quite as successful, despite their frugality, because their wives can't work as hard as German women. The Irish, especially, drink and fight too much and aren't as skilled at farming.

James's varying attitudes about European emigrants show that he has plenty of biases to go around. Those biases especially show up in the area of productivity—he ranks Germans, Scots, and Irish according to their capacity to work hard, which he regards as the key to success in America.

The Scots tend to fare better at farming. James wants to close this letter by writing about "an honest Scotch Hebridean" who arrived in America in 1774. When James paid him a visit to see how his settlement was coming along, the Hebridean rejoiced in his family's full bellies and fat livestock; he blessed the King and William Penn. The Scotsman explained that a New England neighbor had taught him how to split chestnut logs for shingles, and another will help him build a barn. James offered to teach him how to locate **bees**. He points out to F.B. that even England was once mostly woodland and that its people "were once painted like our neighbors." In the future, America will progress and flourish much as England has.

Here, James introduces a character he will use as an example of emigrant success. The Hebridean exemplifies a hardworking, loyal newcomer who has established a better life for himself and his family in America. His neighbors' generosity and help also exemplify good-natured American cooperation. When he refers to "painted [...] neighbors," James might be thinking of early Anglo-Saxon or even Celtic residents of the British Isles. His point is that Britain, too, has developed from relatively "primitive" beginnings, so surely America can look forward to similar progress.

James wonders what aspects of Scots' background makes them generally so much more religious, honest, and hardworking than other people. From what he's heard about Scotland, the Hebrides sound like they're more fit for felons than the American colonies are. Britain has actually rewarded criminals by sending them here, and now, living under better conditions, those men have become upstanding citizens. Britain should send its good people to America and condemn its bad people to "the hell of Great Britain," the Scottish Hebrides. A hardworking man, no matter how poor, can improve himself in America.

With his disparaging remarks about the Hebrides (a group of remote islands off Scotland's west coast), James again offers opinions that don't seem well-founded, to put it mildly—especially considering he admits his impression is based on hearsay rather than firsthand knowledge! However, it mostly shows James's eagerness to make America seem like the best possible land for an emigrant wanting to improve their life.

HISTORY OF ANDREW, THE HEBRIDEAN

James will leave it up to historians to record America's political history and the stories of its founding; he is interested in less weighty stories. So he presents here the story of a simple Scottish man, even though there's nothing amazing about it. He simply wants to show how a poor man moved "from oppression to freedom," not by remarkable means, but simply through emigration and virtue.

In this brief appendix to Letter III, James provides a specific example of the kind of emigrant success story he championed earlier. He shares this story precisely because, in his view, there's nothing unusual about it—in other words, European readers should consider emulating this Scottish emigrant because they can easily achieve the same level of success.


Thinking about emigrants in general reminds James of his own grandfather, which prompts him to praise William Penn, "thou best of legislators," whose laws gave men dignity and set an example for other colonists. Returning to his story, in 1770, James purchased some lands intended for one of his sons and went to make sure they'd been properly surveyed. While in the woods, he encountered a group of Indians who'd just killed a bear. He had some peach brandy, so they all shook hands and settled around a fire to share a feast.

James's letter-writing tends to ramble, but he generally chooses his details purposefully. Quaker Englishman William Penn, the founder of the colony of Pennsylvania (1681), was known for his religious tolerance and for amicable relationships with the land's Lenape or Delaware people. His choice to describe a friendly feast with local Native hunters might be intended to suggest that James follows in Penn's tolerant footsteps.


James then had to travel to Philadelphia to have the land deeds properly recorded. Though this was a journey of over 200 miles, James didn't mind, because he had so many friends along the way. On the third night, he stayed with Mr.--- (friend B.), whom Mr. F.B. has met before. He thinks B.'s family is the finest he knows. While complimenting B.'s wife's wonderful hospitality, James learns that her grandmother was the first female child born after the arrival of William Penn, so she was named Philadelphia, and B.'s wife is named the same. After this friendly visit, James travels on to the city.

In this section, James hints at a few things that European readers might find intriguing or attractive about American life. First, America is a massive land, but it's possible for settlers to maintain networks of meaningful friendships across the miles. Second, despite its youth, America already passes down a distinctive heritage—illustrated by James's friend's wife, "Philadelphia." The city's name means "brotherly love," and the fact that the name has been passed down for generations in this woman's family suggests that William Penn's benevolent Quaker values are still thriving.

While there, James hears that a vessel filled with Scottish emigrants has arrived. James goes with his friend Mr. C. to watch the newcomers disembark. Most of them are pale and thin but appear vigorous. The people of the city give them lodging and provisions; Mr. C. brings one emigrant, with his wife and teenaged son, back to his house. The man feasts his eyes on everything and remarks that it's nicer than Glasgow or Greenock, Scotland. He comes from the island of Barra.

Implicitly, the arrival of an emigrant ship was enough of a novelty at this time to draw a crowd. Notably, Philadelphians going out of their way to welcome newcomers isn't portrayed as unusual—supporting James's claim that America is a great place for emigrants. Barra is one of the most remote islands of Scotland's Outer Hebrides.

James asks him questions about Barra, and the man, Andrew, describes the island's barren soil and how everybody but the laird (landlord) was poor, which is why he's come to America. He has brought nothing with him but a letter of introduction from his minister and a little bit of money. James explains that Andrew will have to prove himself in America. He promises to teach Andrew how to handle an axe and to set up him, his wife, and their son with work and lodging for the time being. Andrew weeps with gratitude.

Andrew describes a situation where a tenant like himself would be very limited in his ability to improve his lot in life—a situation so poor that he's willing to risk the move to America despite having very little to his name. Though James emphasizes each emigrant's need to prove themselves in America, he also shows that this expectation doesn't mean denying anyone a helping hand.

James asks Andrew lots of questions about life in the Hebrides. Andrew explains that everyone survives by means of subsistence farming, and that just barely. While they weren't oppressed by their rulers, they simply couldn't grow enough food to survive. James admires Andrew's simple religion and morals, but figures they will transform on American soil, since "we are machines fashioned by every circumstance around us."

Andrew and emigrants like him might not be escaping situations of crushing oppression, but they had to be content living on very little—a situation that could only be changed by moving to a land of greater opportunity. James emphasizes his frequently-made point that people are shaped by their environment, and that includes people's deepest values. He takes it for granted that becoming an American means leaving old convictions behind, especially when they don't fit one's new context.

At James's farm, Andrew proves to be teachable, soon becomes proficient, and eventually begins earning a living on another farm. After a year at Mr. P.R.'s farm, Andrew tells James that he wants to buy his own land, and James agrees to help him a little later in the spring.

By tracing Andrew's progress in America, James suggests that the average emigrant can emulate Andrew's hard work and achieve similar success. The standard path to success includes learning from settled Americans until, after a year or two, one is ready to become a landowner oneself.

A few days later, Andrew is sitting and reading the Bible in his employer's house when nine Indians arrive. Not knowing the Indians are Mr. P.R.'s friends, Andrew thinks they're a group of lawless robbers and runs for his Scottish broadsword. The visitors are unimpressed by the sword and refuse to leave, eventually frightening Andrew with a war whoop. They laugh uproariously at him. Eventually, Andrew finds Mr. P.R., who calms him down and explains that the Indians are welcome in his house, just as he is welcome in their wigwams. P.R. explains the situation to his friends in their language, and they shake hands with Andrew and smoke peaceably with him.

This humorous story gives an interesting perspective on relationships between colonists and Native people in the Revolutionary period. As James tells it, it wasn't too unusual for a farmer to have a friendly and mutually hospitable relationship with Indian neighbors. The fact that Andrew is frightened of the visitors is played for humorous effect, suggesting that fear of Native Americans is a common but naïve weakness that newcomers must eventually overcome, since they live side by side with indigenous neighbors and ideally cooperate with one another.

Soon after, James goes to visit his friend Mr. A.V., praises Andrew's virtues, and persuades Mr. A.V. to lease Andrew 100 acres to start his own farm. As a condition of the lease, Andrew must also make certain improvements to the land, like planting trees and clearing a swamp. Mr. A.V. also reassures Andrew that no king's or minister's men can come to take the land away from him. Andrew is astonished and overwhelmed by all this.

James's actions on Andrew's behalf demonstrate that an emigrant's hard work wasn't simply a matter of rugged individualism, but of integration into one's new community. Andrew proves his mettle to a sympathetic farmer who, in turn, speaks favorably of him to a potential lender. As lessee, Andrew must also do work benefiting the landowner. Yet this is a far more mutually beneficial agreement than Andrew's former situation in Scotland, since it's based on a contract instead of a king's assumed privileges.

So, now, Andrew is a freeholder, a voter, a resident, and a citizen of Pennsylvania. James gives him some supplies to start out with, and Andrew rents a room in a neighboring settler's house. He begins by clearing a swamp, and soon his hard work earns admiration from his neighbors. Within two months, he is proficient at ploughing his land. When it's time for him to build a house, James invites the whole neighborhood to a "frolic," to which about 40 people show up. The people sing and tell stories as they work. While all this goes on, Andrew, overjoyed, goes from person to person, offering drinks. No rich man could have been happier with his mansion than Andrew was with his humble log dwelling. Everyone cheers for him and wishes him well, and a week later, he moves in.

By listing the new privileges Andrew enjoys in America, James impresses his reader with just how drastically Andrew's situation has improved within a few short years. He also emphasizes that this improvement has much to do with Andrew's own efforts to gain new skills and the respect of his neighbors. As a tangible sign of his success, Andrew gets plenty of willing help when it's time to establish his own dwelling in the community. James suggests that this kind of success—because it's earned, and embedded in a community of equal peers—is more satisfying than the affluence of a self-made millionaire.

Before long, Andrew begins raising animals and crops, fulfilling civic duties, and helping neighbors in his turn. Nowadays, he enjoys independence and ease, no longer having to worry about debts or rents. He is an example of "the happy effects" of "sobriety and industry, when united with good land and freedom."

As Andrew gains greater economic stability, he also develops the capacity to contribute to his community. For James, Andrew's hard work and eagerness to seize what his new land has to offer make him the epitome of an American farmer.

LETTER 4

The best compliment one could pay to a ruler is that the ruler is primarily concerned about people's happiness and about reforming abuses. But, judging from the sheer numbers of emigrants who continue to arrive in America from Europe, the work of reform must be extremely difficult. It seems like America is "providentially intended" to receive the world's oppressed peoples.

In this letter, James shifts his focus somewhat from his own experiences as a farmer to a detailed look at a very different part of America. He begins by reflecting that many Europeans seem to live in exploitative situations that are unlikely to improve, and that America appears to be designed as a safe harbor for such people.

James observes that it's easy to read about America's geography, history, and politics, but books can't convey the spirit of the American people and the way they've built happy, prosperous lives for themselves. After all, few of those books' writers have actually lived or traveled extensively in America. And since James himself is not equipped to lead his reader through the whole of America, instead he will focus on a specific part. He chooses a rather unlikely spot—one that's small and barren, yet filled with industrious and happy inhabitants. He finds this place especially remarkable because its people have produced so much in such an unpromising environment. That place is the island of Nantucket.

James argues that reading travel books isn't an adequate way to understand America. In fact, even he can't convey everything his readers should know about America. But by focusing on a very specific part of the country instead of offering broad observations, he can capture some of the characteristics he treasures most about America—namely, the spirit of determination and hard work that have enabled Americans to become prosperous and happy.

James doesn't want to explore Nantucket's whole history, but to consider how its people started with nothing and arrived at such prosperity. Unlike other settlements, it did not have a violent beginning, and there was nothing special about its first settlers, except that they lived under a humane and undemanding government.

James intends to focus on what has allowed the people of Nantucket to become successful. Similar to his study of Andrew the Hebridean, James's study of Nantucket's settlers emphasizes ordinariness, not uniqueness. And, as ever, James points to freedom from excessive government as a key factor for success.

Nantucket is sandy, boasts only about 23,000 acres, lacks stones, timber, or meadows, and yet it has a thriving town, a busy seaport, plenty of livestock, and even some wealthy citizens. Why did people leave behind a fruitful continent (Europe) in order to settle in a place so lacking in natural advantages? They didn't receive any special privileges or royal charters to help them get started. Their success, rather, owes everything to their freedom, hard work, and perseverance. It's an example of what happens when humanity is allowed to work unimpeded and then to enjoy the fruits of their own labor in peace.

James's point here is that Nantucket isn't an obvious place for emigrants seeking a better life to settle and thrive. It's small, its soil isn't very good, and it lacks many natural resources. There's no other explanation for its people's success than their own determination and industry. And, as James seldom fails to point out, that success wasn't hindered by an oppressive government demanding an exorbitant share of its people's earnings.

Nantucket is located about 80 miles from Boston. Its only town is called Sherborn, which contains about 530 plain-looking houses. It contains Quaker and Presbyterian houses of worship, a marketplace, and a courthouse; the island's ground is uneven, and there are plenty of swamps, peat bogs, and ponds. When James first landed on Nantucket, he was immediately struck by the foul-smelling whale oil because of the storehouses near the wharfs. However, the massive wharfs and hundreds of sailing vessels immediately give an impression of prosperity, too.

James describes what he witnessed during his visit to Nantucket. Its damp environment and unsavory smells don't seem very promising, and yet Nantucket's people are clearly thriving socially and commercially. By noting those features that seem less desirable, James builds some suspense for readers wondering how the island reached its present prosperity.

Sherborn doesn't have many gardens or fertile fields because the land is so sandy; however, by fertilizing the soil with cow manure, people have been able to raise limited crops, and by a similar method, they go to great pains to maintain an enclosed meadow near the harbor.

Nantucket clearly isn't an ideal place for farming, so in that respect, it's an unlikely subject for farmer James. Yet because of his own love of agriculture, James takes special note of islanders' ingenuity in developing a small amount of fertile land.

Nantucket was patented in 1671 by a group of 27 proprietors from New York, but the land was so poor that they didn't bother dividing it among themselves and instead established a harbor, with an eye toward becoming fishermen. They claimed small lots in the town and agreed to hold the rest of the land in common, where each man could graze an allotted number of sheep; in areas where grass could be grown, they could raise comparable numbers of cows and horses.

James's history is a little bit off, as European settlement of Nantucket began more than a decade earlier than this; however, the earliest settlers' inclination toward fishing rather than farming is accurate, and it set the direction for the island's later development.

A naturalist wouldn't find Nantucket very interesting, as it mostly contains various scrubby grasses and salt- and freshwater ponds filled with fish. The people of Nantucket love to fish. The western part of the island has a harbor called Mardiket; three creeks containing bitter-tasting eels flow into it. The eastern part of the island has a nice patch of relatively even ground with decent soil, known as the common plantation; each man is responsible for maintaining his own subdivision within it. Five hundred cows graze there daily, herded by the town shepherd. Most of Nantucket's people aren't farmers, however; they're fishermen who only keep a little livestock.

James gives some further geographical features of Nantucket. Sometimes his choice of detail (like the bitter eels) relies more or less on what he personally finds interesting. But the overall emphasis shows that Nantucket is indeed inhospitable for farming, even though it can sustain enough livestock to keep the community fed. To survive here, Nantucket's settlers needed to find prosperity through other means.

James discusses some of Nantucket's other notable landmarks and structures, among them Sandy Point. Not much grows on this arm of land, but it's a prime spot for catching porpoise or sharks. There's also an island west of Nantucket called Tuckernut, where cattle are driven to graze in spring. Nantucket's summer climate is pleasantly mild because of the sea breezes, but in winter, the island is buffeted by the northwest wind, although the snow isn't as deep as it is on the mainland.

James continues with his geographical description of Nantucket and nearby islands. Just as James has focused elsewhere on the shaping influence of, say, farmland or forest on the people who live there, so the island's remoteness, limited resources, and sometimes harsh climate shape the people who live on Nantucket.

South of Nantucket lie shoals, dangerous to mariners but providing a natural barrier for the island. From the shoals come most of the fish that Nantucket's people eat. The same was true for the island's "aborigines," whose descendants now live in houses by Miacomet pond, in the southern part of the island. James calls them industrious, "harmless," and expert seafarers. They settled on Nantucket to escape warfare on the mainland.

Nantucket's indigenous people were called the Wampanoag. By the time this book was written, most of the Wampanoag living on Nantucket had died out from disease. The warfare James alludes to is likely King Philip's War, a late-17th-century conflict between white colonists, mainland Wampanoag, and other indigenous groups that allied themselves with one side or the other.

Before discussing the lifestyle of Nantucket's current population further, James thinks it's important to give more of the history of the island's native people—especially since these people "are hastening towards a total annihilation." Unlike in many provinces, James says, the native people weren't victims of fraud or violence; actually, Nantucket's Quakers treated them as brothers. Before that, they probably came from the Massachusetts coast, since they speak "Nattic." In any case, the island's original inhabitants divided into eastern and western groups that were prone to perpetual feuding, to the point that they risked mutual extermination if they didn't find a solution. So they divided the island into western and eastern halves and both groups agreed to stick to their respective half.

James is fairly aware of the native people among whom he lives, so it's not surprising that he devotes space in his letter to giving the history of Nantucket's indigenous residents. He registers that this particular group is sadly dying out, and that quite often, Native Americans have fallen victim to unscrupulous colonists. Still, James's awareness of these facts doesn't extend to questioning whether white colonization of Nantucket is a good thing its native people or not. "Nattic" may refer to "Natick," a branch of the Algonquian language.

But worse was to come. When Europeans arrived on Nantucket, they brought smallpox, killing large numbers of the native people. Many others succumbed to alcohol abuse. They seem to be doomed to disappear as a people. Those who survive are devout Christians and live a peaceful life focused on seafaring. James lists dozens of Indian tribes that once filled New England and the Cape Cod peninsula, and famous chiefs—all of these tribes and lineages have died off, often through war with the Europeans, or have faded into obscurity.

Here, James specifically acknowledges some of the atrocities that befell native peoples in colonial America, including exposure to previously unknown diseases and alcohol, or through violence between colonists and indigenous people. Again, though James regards these events as regrettable, he also notably regards them as if they're fated—not as something that could or should have been avoided.

James returns from this digression to discuss the law in Nantucket. He says that coercive measures are seldom required, and that the government has no flashy dignitaries or showy pageantry. People mind their own business and live at peace with their neighbors. How is this possible? James says the answer is that idleness and poverty, which are the causes of many crimes, are unknown in Nantucket. People are very busy making a living, and they know that they'll either succeed or be helped by a neighbor if they fail, so ill-gotten gain doesn't appeal to them. The island's poor soil demands hard labor, so there just isn't a lot of spare time to get into trouble.

James returns to a favorite theme—his preference for simple, unobtrusive forms of government. According to him, low-profile government allows people to live as they please and thus to thrive. Poverty, a factor in much crime, scarcely exists on Nantucket, not just because people work hard, but because they're prepared to look out for one another and help those who are struggling. Like other environments, Nantucket shapes the kind of industrious, self-sustaining people who tend to thrive here; though James doesn't say so directly, people who can't succeed on Nantucket presumably get weeded out in one way or another.

Luxurious customs couldn't flourish here and would ruin everything. As things stand, people on Nantucket live in remarkable equality. Even though their differing success at sea and in farming leads to some disparities in fortune, all continue to live a "simple, useful, and unadorned" lifestyle, and differences don't lead to jealousy that might otherwise provoke crime. The wide sea surrounding Nantucket offers the same opportunities to everyone.

James seems to regard Nantucket as America in microcosm, in the sense that people are focused on hard work, contentment with what they have, and avoiding the kinds of class divisions common in European societies. Much as Pennsylvania's farmland offers scope for success to the determined farmer, the Atlantic offers equivalent opportunities to those willing to make their living on the sea.

LETTER 5

The best way to understand how a group of people thinks and lives, James writes, is to look at how they educate their children. In Nantucket, most households have a calm, moderate, affectionate atmosphere, and children learn by example to prefer simplicity and reject ostentation as "sinful." They are also influenced by their parents to be prudent, frugal, and always usefully occupied.

James's reflections on his own life have often included his hopes for his children's future, so it makes sense that he would look at Nantucket child-rearing practices to help him understand the place as a whole. Here, of course, his description sounds somewhat idealized—it's doubtful if any children are always *prudent or usefully occupied!—but it still shows what the people of Nantucket value.*

If a family has wealth, the children are taught to save and to spend in moderation; if they're not wealthy, they're taught how to work. At church, they are taught the central tenets of Christianity. Like all Christian groups, the Quakers have their distinctions, such as their emphasis on nonviolence, meekness, and sobriety. At school, children study reading and writing until the age of 12; then, boys generally become cooper's apprentices, since that is the island's second most common trade. Later, at 14, they are sent to sea and gain hands-on experience in every aspect of running a ship.

Whether a family is relatively affluent or not, childhood on Nantucket is geared toward preparing for a productive adulthood. Because of Nantucket's unique situation, young boys don't get too many career options; like James taking on the farm he's inherited, young men here are expected to pursue the paths laid out for them, doing their part to build up the community. Even the Quaker values they're taught, like submission to authority and avoiding drunkenness, could be read as reinforcing broader social expectations.

Earlier in the island's history, as the whaling trade was getting established, the southern part of the island was divided into four parts. A company of six fishermen was assigned to each part. One fisherman would watch for spouting whales, and as soon as he spotted one, the six men would pile into their narrow whale-boat and pursue their prey. With time and success, they were able to purchase larger boats and sail farther from shore, even venturing to Cape Breton, Newfoundland, and points farther north. Nowadays, their confidence is so great that they talk of exploring the South Sea. Nantucket has become North America's primary source of whale oil and related products.

James outlines the development of Nantucket's whaling trade not because he's an expert on the industry (or expects his readers to be interested in the minute details), but to show how hard work, cooperation, and ingenuity—not to mention daring—have brought Nantucket to dominate this trade. The industry's explosion illustrates Nantucket's overall remarkable growth from humble origins to prosperous community.

Commerce ("the simple art of a reciprocal supply of wants") in general is understood and highly valued on Nantucket. Whaling vessels conduct transport and trade between Nantucket and England and the West Indian Islands, and people are always on the lookout for secondary money-making schemes. They know the cheapest way to get lumber from Maine, tar from North Carolina, and other products from up and down the colonies, exchanging cod-fish and West Indian produce for these items. In turn, they have been able to build better ships and fisheries.

James suggests here that no industry, and by extension no single community, can thrive in isolation. Communities up and down the Eastern seaboard, and even across the ocean, exchange goods with Nantucket whalers, to everyone's mutual benefit (ideally, anyway). Ironically, then, Nantucket's very isolation compels its people to venture out into the world in order to build prosperity.

James repeats the point that if it weren't for the poverty of Nantucket's soil, the people here probably wouldn't be so enterprising. For comparison, the people of the Vineyard, the neighboring island, are just as hardworking and just as well situated for fishing, but since they enjoy fertile soil there, they aren't as famous for their seafaring. Since James visited this island on his way back to the mainland, he'll write a brief description of it, too.

James reiterates that because Nantucket isn't suitable for farming, its settlers were forced to rise to the challenge and provide for themselves in more adventurous ways. The people of Martha's Vineyard could be just as successful in the fishing industry, but since they can afford not to be, they aren't. It's another example of the natural environment shaping human enterprise.

LETTER 6

Martha's Vineyard is 20 miles long and between seven and eight miles wide. It's nine miles from the mainland and, with Elizabeth Island, comprises Dukes County, Massachusetts. The Vineyard is divided into the townships of Edgar, Chilmark, and Tisbury. Its population is about 4,000 people, 300 of them Indians. The Vineyard's Indian residents live at Chappaquiddick and were converted to Christianity by a family of early settlers called the Mahews. The first Mahew settler gave his daughter a section of land with abundant vines; it was called "Martha's Vineyard" in her honor, and the name soon extended to the whole island.

James's historical account is broadly on point. Thomas Mayhew settled on the island in 1682 and befriended a local Wampanoag family, who converted to Christianity and later refrained from fighting in King Philip's War. One of the sons of this family became one of Harvard's first Native American graduates. Though Martha's Vineyard Wampanoags were known for practicing a blend of traditional and Christian, New England-influenced ways, they also suffered some of the same hardships as their counterparts on Nantucket, like devastating disease and being forced into limited, less fertile parts of the island.

The descendants of the ancient indigenous people still live here and protectively maintain their ancestral lands. James observes that New Englanders are exceptional for their honesty in fulfilling treaties they've made with the Indians. He regards the Indians here as "wholly European" in their sobriety, hard work, and religious devotion. They often work as fishermen on Nantucket and are as skilled at seafaring as their white neighbors.

James's remark about New Englanders' honesty is certainly too sweeping, and though the Mayhew family treated their Indian neighbors better than most, that's not necessarily saying much. In fact, James's approval of the Martha's Vineyard Indians' "European" assimilation is more telling—he praises them insofar as he likes and agrees with their customs.

Martha's Vineyard's white residents are divided into farmers and fishermen. No matter where you go, "from Nova Scotia to the Mississippi," you will find seamen who hail from Nantucket and the Vineyard. But what most Vineyard men want most is to marry and have families, so they're often obliged to move elsewhere in search of adequate land.

Martha's Vineyard is more suitable for farming than Nantucket, but given the island's small size, it can only sustain so many families. Though it's not as renowned as Nantucket for its fishing industry, it's home to a disproportionate number of American seafarers.

The Vineyard's whale-fishing brigs are about 150 tons, manned by 13 fishermen so that they can row out in two whale-boats of six men each (one man remaining aboard the brig). That way, one of these boats can be occupied in harpooning a whale, while the other boat stands ready to rescue the men on the other boat if needed. Rather than receiving wages, each crewmember draws a share in partnership with the vessel's proprietor, ensuring that each man is equally invested in the ship's success. Whalemen never exceed 40 years of age, since the work requires agility and vigor. This is understandable when you consider the size of a whale, the relative smallness of a ship, and the dangers of the ocean—these challenges demand the greatest of human strength.

As he did in the previous letter, James devotes a lengthy section to describing how Vineyard fishermen chase and kill whales. While James's account shouldn't be read as if it's a whaling manual—he is just a curious onlooker, after all, and might not get every detail correct—he does effectively convey the risk and danger involved in whaling. In turn, this suggests that many people who live on islands like Nantucket and the Vineyard are willing to assume great risk in order to survive and provide for themselves and their families. Needless to say, it's quite different from a farmer's life, but it contains something of the same pioneering determination.

When a whaling crew enters whale territory, a man climbs up to the mast. When he spots a whale, he cries "*Awaite Pawana*" ("here is a whale"), and the whaling boats are quickly launched. Nattic expressions are commonly used on board, since Nantucket settlers understand them, too. While one boat waits at a slight distance, the harpooner on the other boat prepares to strike. When he is about 15 feet away from the whale, the harpooner throws his weapon.

Continuing with his description of a whaling voyage, James reaches the climactic moment—spotting a whale. It's interesting that an Indian expression is used to announce a sighting—it suggests that at this time, a fair degree of friendship, or at least cooperation, existed between white and Native islanders. (Again, "Nattic" may refer to the Natick dialect of Algonquian.)

Anything can happen next: the whale might destroy the boat with one angry stroke of her tail, or the boat might be forced to give chase while the injured beast swims to the point of exhaustion. Since the harpoon is attached to the boat, the boat is sometimes pulled along at great speed, and the harpooner might finally be forced to sever the harpoon's cord to spare the men's lives. If and when the fishermen do succeed in lethally wounding the whale, they tow their catch alongside the boat.

Catching a whale is a harrowing and even life-threatening process, for the fishermen and obviously for the targeted whale. Any given pursuit might mean death for the whalers, again suggesting that these men are willing to take on the greatest risk in order to succeed—indeed, that the islands attract settlers who aren't just willing to work hard, but don't believe they have much to lose.

The next step is to cut open every part of the whale's body that yields oil. They boil the contents and fill the ship's hold with the barrels. Whales often yield tremendous quantities of oil; the River St. Lawrence whale, which is 3,000 pounds, can produce 180 barrels of oil. Once the whale has been killed, fishermen also have to worry about sharks and thrashers (a 30-foot whale species, which are quite fierce). Both these predators will often follow the whale boat, hoping for a share of the prey. James concludes by listing the various types of whales found in the vicinity of Nantucket, some of which crews have never successfully killed, and sharing some statistics that show how much the whaling industry has boomed within a few years.

Once the whale is caught, the work doesn't stop; the whale must be processed into a sellable form. Before the 20th century, whale oil (obtained from the whale's blubber) was often used for fueling lamps and lubricating machines. New England's whaling industry peaked in the mid-1800s, so at the time Crèvecoeur wrote, it was still relatively young, though as its rapid advancement suggests, it was already well on its way to becoming a lucrative, global business.

James suggests that people who spend two-thirds of their time at sea must have very different conduct and customs from those who farm. Forced to live austerely, breathe salt air, and face frequent danger, such people naturally seek out pleasure when they return to land. Yet James maintains that he doesn't see Nantucket men indulging themselves as wildly as Europeans do. He believes this is because Nantucket men marry young and are mainly happy to go home to their families. Besides, they don't go to sea because they don't have anything better to do, but because they want to learn a good living.

Always interested in the natural environment's impact on the people who live and work there, James figures that whalers naturally need to blow off steam when they return to the comparative safety of the island. Still, rather than seeking adventure for its own sake, whalers are primarily trying to support themselves and their families—a point James finds important to make. Like farmers, fishermen hope to enjoy stable, self-sufficient lives.

By the time James had stayed in Martha's Vineyard for a whole month, he had gotten to know the heads of the major families and was impressed by their simple manners, though he found them a bit "primitive" due to their isolation. The people pursue their occupations with great diligence, but without the "servility of labour" that James has heard about in Europe. Though there are visible class differences in the community, people don't seem arrogant or prideful. The houses are simple and comfortable, and the people are hospitable. People lack for nothing; in fact, it seems like they could be living in fertile Virginia, not on "a barren sandbank."

It's interesting that James finds the people of Martha's Vineyard impressive even though they're "primitive," whereas he finds people living on America's western frontier to be simply backward. His reasoning is unclear, but he seems to find the islanders more civilized in their habits than the ungovernable westerners. For one thing, they work hard and take pride in their work, unlike frontiersmen who rely on occasional hunting for survival, and unlike downtrodden Europeans who don't have much opportunity to enjoy what they do. In fact, their diligence allows them to overcome the natural limitations of island living.

James entertains himself by questioning both men and women about their various types of industry. He's impressed by their excellent judgment, even though they're not highly educated. Instead, they build on their natural good sense and their forebears' experience. In fact, university education would be more likely to lead people astray here because it wouldn't be useful and would pervert people's instincts. Not everyone here becomes rich, but even owning a single whale-boat or some sheep and living in freedom is better than working for nothing and being oppressed by the government in Europe.

James makes some interesting observations on education here. He doesn't view formal education as being inherently valuable in every case. Rather, he thinks that common sense, passed-down family wisdom, and well-developed instincts can serve people better than what they might learn in college—and formal learning might even stifle those more natural and inherited ways. This view fits with James's egalitarian instincts, as does his prizing of individual freedom over class status.

Many of the tradespeople on Martha's Vineyard are Presbyterians, while the wealthier people tend to be members of the Society of Friends, but even the Quakers started out as "simple whalemen." And to this day, it's believed that even the sons of the wealthy should serve as apprentices on boats, to harden them and introduce them to their future career.

The Society of Friends, or Quakers, valued equality in their worship services and daily interactions. This value seems to have influenced their attitudes about hard work, too—just because a young man was well off didn't mean he wasn't expected to do his part to contribute to his community.

LETTER 7

Men on Nantucket generally get married as early as they can; finances aren't regarded as a big factor. Fathers don't give dowries along with their daughters. A wife's "fortune" is considered to be her thrift and her skill at running a household, much as a husband's prospects in trade are his. After a few years of hard work, this is generally sufficient to support children. Children grow up hearing of adventures on the sea and gaining knowledge about it, even from short trips across to the mainland. People who grow up on the island have a distinctive agile gait their whole lives.

In this letter, James returns to Nantucket from Martha's Vineyard, with a focus on the colonists' social customs. With the lack of emphasis on things like marriage dowries, it appears that marriages on Nantucket have less to do with securing one's class status than with living a respectable, productive life and maintaining a family. Also, people's love of their natural environment comes across not just in their interests or vocational choices, but in their very posture.

Emigration comes naturally to seagoing people, and this is true of Nantucket's people, too. Sometimes they emigrate "like **bees**, in regular and connected swarms." In particular, the Quakers often travel to visit other Quaker congregations throughout America. Their travels also keep them well informed about conditions throughout the country, which helps them make purchasing decisions, like when a group of them bought a large piece of land in Orange, North Carolina. There wasn't room for them to live on Nantucket any longer, but because of the seafaring skills they'd developed, they were in a good position to emigrate. This new settlement, called New Garden, is beautiful, with plentiful hills, streams, and rich Carolina soil.

Given James's love of bees, it's not surprising that he resorts to bees as a symbol for Nantucket Quakers' tendency to emigrate in big, mutually-supporting groups. Though James has previously portrayed islanders as being rather isolated, Quakers seem to be a partial exception, with more cosmopolitan, enterprising ways. Though this section is a digression from James's overall focus, it fits with his admiration for people who are willing to take the initiative to begin a new life for themselves.

Other groups of Friends, or Quakers, have settled on the Kennebec River in Sagadahock, Massachusetts, where they engage in various timber-related trades. As wonderful as New Garden is, James thinks the Kennebec settlement is better, because it demands hardy workers, whereas the Carolinas tend to produce a luxuriant, idle lifestyle. James will always value rougher country more than country that promotes "greater opulence and voluptuous ease."

Sagadahock, Massachusetts, is in what's now Maine. In this passage, James again highlights his belief that, rather than a person making what they can of their environment, the natural environment tends to influence a person's character. Sunny southern weather apparently weakens character, whereas the rigors of the northern woods have the opposite effect.

The "fruitful hive" of Quakers thrives in any setting. Still, perhaps it seems strange that after doing well for himself, a rich Quaker wouldn't prefer to seek an easier life on the mainland. But Nantucket feels like home, and people here do not want to give up their habits and customs, not to mention their friendships. Plus, they love simplicity and despise affluence.

James again employs his favorite metaphor, comparing the Quaker community to a humming beehive of activity. As much as some Quakers might enjoy trying their fortunes in other colonies, though, many are content to stick to the Nantucket community they know and love.

It's also true that plenty of Nantucket people die poor, or at least without having accumulated the riches their hard work seemed to have promised. James thinks this has to do with the expense of food, much of which must be procured from the mainland. Even hay for the horses must be gotten this way. Even a frugal family therefore spends a lot just to supply their basic needs.

James makes it clear that not everyone who works hard enjoys great material success as a result. Factors like supplying a household's basic necessities can limit the amount of wealth even an industrious family can accumulate.

Nantucket only has two churches and one clergyman, a Presbyterian. The Quakers do not have ordained clergy, believing that any member may expound upon the Scriptures during their meetings and that outward sacraments are unnecessary. The two groups live harmoniously together and do not condemn each another's beliefs. They are usually too busy with daily affairs to be too vehement about spiritual ones. James wishes he could send "the most persecuting bigot [he] could find" to the whale fishers; a few years there would make him a milder and better Christian.

James's deist outlook comes through in this section. In previous letters, he has praised religious groups for keeping their beliefs to themselves and not being too enthusiastic about seeking converts. In his view, Nantucket Christians are especially admirable in this regard—their daily lives are too demanding for devout religion. James is sure that if a "bigoted" religious person spent time here, hard work would eventually moderate that person's beliefs. Again, to someone who believes in human reason instead of religion, that's just as it should be.

There are only two physicians on the island. While this might not seem like many, they simply aren't needed—people generally do not drink or eat to excess, and they have strong constitutions due to regular exercise. So far the town has suffered no epidemics, and they often practice Indian healing methods for ordinary diseases. But thanks to the climate, pure air, and overall virtue and moderation of the people, Nantucket is a remarkably healthy place.

Nantucket people's character extends beyond their hard work and religious toleration to their physical health. While moderate and active habits play a big role, the physical environment also promotes residents' wellbeing. Since James thinks people's environment has a huge influence on them, this isn't a surprising view.


James knows of a single lawyer who has settled on Nantucket, but most of his wealth comes from his heiress wife and not from his practice. James is surprised that more lawyers haven't settled here, since usually "they are plants that will grow in any soil that is cultivated by the hands of others," gaining from their fellows' misfortunes. America's founding fathers did such a good job of extinguishing many evils that it's a shame they didn't do the same with lawyers.

Here and in other letters, James reserves some of his sharpest sarcasm for lawyers. He never explains exactly how he arrived at this level of distaste, but he regards them as unethical people who enrich themselves at others' expense. Since he values individual hard work so highly, it's not too surprising that he would question the ethics of making one's living this way.

There are no military establishments or even governors on Nantucket, only a light civil code. A resident can live his whole life without ever needing to appeal to the law. It nevertheless serves to protect individuals, levying mild taxes.

As usual, James advocates for the least intrusive form of government possible, believing that government should exist to defend people in cases of injustice, but should otherwise leave people alone to conduct their affairs as they wish.

Like the law, worship is very simple on the island. Elders are the Quaker congregation's only teachers, and they do most of the work of instruction, visiting, and comforting. The Presbyterians have a pastor to teach them, and the simplicity of their worship is second only to the Quakers'. Members of both denominations live and work together without any rancor.

James depicts simplicity as being the overarching tone of people's lives, and that pattern even extends to religion. These denominations' preference for simplicity in rites and hierarchies fits with the American ethos of freedom, equality, and neighborly goodwill that James revisits throughout the letters.

James believes there are no enslaved people living on Nantucket, at least among the Quakers. While slavery continues to be practiced all around them, Quakers alone "[lament] that shocking insult offered to humanity."

The Society of Friends (Quakers) maintained a strong anti-slavery stance from the group's founding in the 1600s, and Quakers were often involved in helping people who were formerly enslaved.


If James had the time and ability, he would show Mr. F.B. how "one diffusive scene of happiness" prevails from America's seashores to its wilderness. This happiness is only disrupted by individual folly, litigiousness, and natural disaster. He hopes that the people of Nantucket will enjoy such peace and happiness for ages to come.

Obviously, it's not realistic to say that everyone *in America is happy, but James wants F.B. to see that, in places as different as Nantucket and the Pennsylvania countryside, extensive freedom allows people to live as best they can. James's list of obstacles to happiness is interesting—besides foolishness and litigiousness (quickness to sue), he doesn't seem to have a clear category for simple cruelty and oppression, which surely made many people unhappy.*

LETTER 8

The manners of Quakers, or Friends, are based on their famed simplicity. They dress and speak plainly, to the extent that if a native tried to speak more sophisticatedly, he'd be regarded as a "fop." If a Quaker were to be seen wearing an especially nice coat on any day but "First Day" (Sunday), he would be mocked and regarded as a spendthrift. When one family imported a set of single-horse chairs, there was a great deal of gossip.

In this letter, James digs further into social behaviors on Nantucket, presumably to show Mr. F.B. a variety of expressions of American happiness. Simplicity was a major Quaker virtue because of the desire to promote humility and equality. James makes the interesting observation, however, that simplicity could become a self-righteous goal in its own right, and it wouldn't necessarily stop people from judging others and spreading rumors about them.

In Nantucket, idleness is considered the worst sin. But an idle person is pitied rather than scolded, since idleness is regarded as synonymous with hunger. Even while visiting with friends or sailing to a fishing ground, people often carve, whittle, or find some other use for their hands.

Since James prizes hard work as a key to happiness and success, it makes sense that he admires Nantucket's Quakers so much. For them, choosing to be idle makes no sense because it goes against a person's best interest, and the community pitches in for a person who doesn't work hard, assuming that such a person is unable *to provide for themselves.*

Because their husbands are at sea for so long, women must often provide for their families in the men's absence, and they are generally quite good at this. They also spend a lot of time visiting friends while their husbands are away, but only after cleaning the house. Single young adults spend time talking about whaling voyages and travels abroad instead of playing cards or singing. Singing, dancing, and excess drinking are unheard of, so they make do with conversation and laughter. It's no wonder they tend to marry early.

The combination of the seafaring lifestyle with Quaker restraint from pastimes like cards and dancing makes Nantucket's social scene rather unusual. But James emphasizes that this doesn't mean people on Nantucket have no fun; they have plenty of opportunities to be sociable and neighborly. These occasions help knit society together.

After marriage, however, Nantucket's young people become more serious. The men go to sea and the women quickly learn to govern their homes, though this doesn't mean the women are ungovernable. Men understand that they owe much of their success to their wives: the richest fisherman might have been supported by his wife's sewing and school-teaching when he was first starting out. Over time, a wife might build on this foundation by forming crucial business connections for her husband, even in England.

Because the fishing trade takes men away from their homes for long periods of time, Nantucket's women assume more household responsibilities that might have traditionally fallen to men. Though James seems to want to assure his readers that these women aren't trying to usurp men's places at home and in society, he generally seems admiring of the business ventures wives undertake to support their households.

Besides managing their husband's business, Nantucket wives undertake their own industry by spinning wool and flax, making plain clothing for each member of the family. There's another custom that James finds much more surprising: Nantucket's women take a dose of opium every morning. James finds it hard to understand that such an otherwise healthy, hardworking society would indulge in such a habit, but no society is perfect.

James probably refers to laudanum, a tincture of alcohol and opium that colonial Americans, lacking many medical options, often used to treat everyday ailments. Though many people would have seen opium use as a harmless home remedy, James is forward-thinking in his recognition of opium's addictive properties.

Most people on Nantucket are descendants of the 27 original settlers, with others, of English descent, having moved over from the Massachusetts mainland. This means that everyone on the island is somehow distantly related; everyone calls each other "uncle," "aunt," or "cousin." Anyone who stays on Nantucket for more than a few days is expected to adopt this custom, too, as a sign of friendship.

The custom of giving each other kinship-based nicknames suggests that Nantucket settlers saw themselves as engaging in a shared family effort to survive against difficult odds. People's willingness to support struggling neighbors and welcome newcomers bears this out.

James thinks that certain trees could have thrived on Nantucket, but people are so absorbed in fishing that they haven't put much effort into agriculture. Recreations don't thrive here, either. Instead of spending their wealth on luxuries, people prefer to put money back into their businesses, into hospitality, food, and wine. People enjoy walking and talking together, rough sports like stone-heaving, or riding a horse if they have one. Once, when James had the pleasure of taking a young Quaker lady on a date, he had never seen such good humor mixed with modesty before. He doubts that a European could entertain himself so well without resorting to cards and dancing.

James's impression of Nantucket's people is that they know what they like and aren't concerned about conforming to outside expectations—whether about what to plant on their island or how to spend their free time. He is especially struck by people's ability to find pleasure in simple things like company and the outdoors, hinting that when people don't have high-society hobbies at their disposal, they generally learn to be content with plainer pursuits, allowing their authentic character to shine through.

James describes taking a ride from Sherborn to the easternmost part of the island. He'd been directed to a particular fishermen's shelter on the shore; it had been built on the ruins of an early settler's hut. A single family lived in this remote spot. James was enchanted by the roar and motion of the sea and instantly fell into pleasant reflections. He ponders how anyone can behold the ocean without being moved by its immense power, beauty, and danger.

Just as James can lose himself in observations and reflections around his Pennsylvania farm, he has no trouble finding similar food for thought in the drama of the ocean, suggesting that living close to the beauty of nature—no matter the specific habitat—has a healthy influence on human souls.

He enjoyed meeting the family's many healthy, hardy children, some of whom were already brave enough to wade into the sea, the others making little wooden boats. The family subsisted on fish and dumplings, and their clothes were hand-woven by the mother and daughters. The people of Nantucket own few books, usually only the Bible and some schoolbooks in English and Nattic. Occasionally he sees volumes by Hudibras and Josephus and is surprised how much mere fishermen can enjoy them.

As James portrays them, Nantucket's people live simply, needing little and sticking close to their natural environment and local culture. Interestingly, books in Natick are commonplace—in fact, the historical record shows that America's first published Bible was an Algonquian translation. Hudibras *was a satirical poem published by Samuel Butler in the late 1600s, and Josephus was an ancient Jewish historian. This variety of reading material suggests that even though they are isolated and have limited formal education, Nantucket's people are interested in the world beyond their shores.*

Travelers newly returned from Italy would doubt that such a remote, unremarkable place as Nantucket could be worth visiting. But, as he's never been to Europe, James contents himself with his native country. America might not boast ancient wonders, but its woods contain beauty that surpasses art. Americans aren't oppressed by government or religion, and generally, only the idle are truly poor. And, unlike in Europe, there's no reason to remain unemployed in America, where there is boundless opportunity.

Recall that an earlier letter argued that even though America lacks Europe's boasted cultural artifacts, it contains its own variety of valuable treasures. Now that he's spent so much time describing the people and customs of Nantucket, James returns to that subject here, suggesting that America isn't just beautiful, but offers unique opportunities for flourishing to those who are willing to seek them out.

LETTER 9

James writes that Charles Town is the Lima of the northern hemisphere. Like Lima, it is the capital of its hemisphere's richest province (South Carolina). Charles Town is situated at the confluence of two navigable rivers, so its wharfs are busy with trade. The wealthiest planters in the region flock here. Because the city sits on a narrow neck of land, it can't expand, and houses are therefore costly. The hot climate makes it particularly dangerous to overindulge in pleasures like eating, but many, especially the men, are content to do so anyway, living "a short and a merry life."

Charleston, South Carolina, was founded in the late 1600s and was the South's biggest, richest city by Crèvecoeur's time, as well as one of the American colonies' most bustling ports. Its thriving cotton and rice trades drew heavily on the labor of enslaved people. Though James will go on to criticize slavery, his distaste for slavery seems perhaps more connected to his disdain for idle, indulgent lifestyles (which wealthy planters exemplified) than to his concern for the rights and dignity of enslaved people.

There are three main classes of people in Charles Town: lawyers, planters, and merchants. Lawyers rule this society, because no one's land title or will is valid apart from their say-so. James observes that the nature of American laws and love of freedom tends to make Americans litigious. He supposes that in a century's time, the law profession will become as powerful in America as the Church is in Peru or Mexico.

This isn't the first time that James has written disapprovingly of lawyers and the law profession. Interestingly, he consistently draws a connection between the blessings of freedom and Americans' tendency to sue over their cherished property rights, suggesting that as important as freedom is, its impact on people's character isn't always positive. Americans like to sue so much that James predicts that lawyers will essentially become America's priestly class in the future—that property-owning fills the place in American culture that religion does in other cultures.

Though Charles Town is full of happiness and festivity, it is also full of misery—the misery of its enslaved people, to which the wealthy have become numb and oblivious. Yet it's because of enslaved labor that the wealthy have become rich. The contrast between the carefree lives of the rich and the suffering of the enslaved has often disturbed James. Africans are ripped away from their families, sold like cattle, and forced by threat of violence to work for strangers.

James quickly points out the glaring disparity between the privileges of Charleston's wealthy and the abject oppression of its enslaved people. The ease of rich people's lives is all the more shocking to him because it wouldn't be possible if not for the cruelly exploited labor of the enslaved—yet the rich continue to live as if they're unaware of that fact, or don't care.

If an enslaved man is allowed to become a father, his misery is only increased, as he regrets the extra burdens thereby placed upon his wife. Instead of getting to indulge in the natural joys of parenthood, they are forced to become hardened to their children's suffering. This is how Carolina's planters get rich, and James cannot imagine living in peace if he participated in such a system.

Throughout the letters, James shows interest in various expressions of family life, and his observations about enslaved families are especially poignant—unlike him, getting to enjoy watching his children's growth and future prospects, enslaved parents have more heartache than joy to look forward to.

James acknowledges that the northern colonies have enslaved people, too, and while he hopes for their emancipation, he believes that their situation is much better than that of southern enslaved people: he claims they are well clothed and fed, cared for in sickness, and generally live as part of their masters' families. Many are taught reading, writing, and religion and are permitted to marry and have a semblance of a family life.

James effectively views northern and southern slavery as two different institutions, with the northern form being regrettable but, on the whole, much more benign than the southern form. While the lives of enslaved people in the North often did look different in various respects, James glides over the fact that these people are still enslaved, and they only enjoy life's basic necessities if and when their owners choose to grant them.

James asserts that, contrary to what some have claimed, the hearts of Black people are just as noble and sensitive as those of white people. Yet the circumstances they're forced into don't allow them to cultivate their inner lives. It's no wonder, then, he says, that many are resentful and focused on revenge.

While James tries to sound open-minded here by pointing out that the hearts of Black and white people don't fundamentally differ (and compared to plenty of contemporary writers, he was), it's not clear that James has any personal relationships with Black people. Indeed, his assertions that they harbor vengeful and resentful attitudes, or otherwise lack developed inner lives, are just uninformed, racist assumptions.

A few years ago, a new clergyman arrived in Charles Town and preached that his congregants should not be so severe toward their enslaved people, and that Christianity teaches them to be compassionate. James says one of the congregants objected that church members don't want to be told how to treat their enslaved people. The clergyman stopped.

In European and American slaveholding societies, some Christian preaching ultimately proved to be a significant factor in changing minds about slavery, but this anecdote makes it clear that even conscientious clergymen could be intimidated by the powerful who stood to lose if slavery was abolished.

James says it's true that many societies have practiced slavery throughout history; but history is filled with terrible crimes, to the degree that human beings seem to have a perverse love of bloodshed. Humans love to talk about virtue when they're at leisure, but in active life, they cast aside any virtues that get in the way of their desires.

It's a bit hard to follow James's line of thought in this passage, especially since it's a departure from his typical writing style. Basically, he is saying that although there's historical precedent for the practice of slavery, that's not an argument in its defense, since human beings have done all kinds of horrible, wretched things throughout history. Ultimately, humans seem to be inclined to do whatever gets them what they want, no matter how much they philosophize about virtue in the abstract.

James remarks that the world seems more like a place of punishment than reward, and that those punishments seem to disproportionately fall on the innocent. And every region of the world seems to have its share of unique vices, leaving few truly desirable places. Even otherwise pleasant regions are cursed with slavery, despotism, and superstition. Most of the world prefers tyranny to liberty, and nations commit bloodshed against one another.

This passage is interesting in light of Crèvecoeur's deist outlook, which tends to take an optimistic view of human nature. Here, through James, he pessimistically reflects that much of the world is subject to various forms of oppression and warfare. Note that this is how James follows up his remarks on slavery.

Given this survey of human nature, James wonders why we assume that nature intends us to be happy. If the reader wonders why James sounds so melancholy, the following account will explain his mood. While in South Carolina, he was invited to dine with a planter one day. To get there, he took a pleasant path through the woods. As he walked, he was suddenly startled by a noise and saw a cage suspended from a tree. Inside the cage was a Black enslaved man who'd been left there to die. His body was covered with wounds, and birds and insects had repeatedly attacked him, leaving him blind.

The reason for James's dark musings becomes clear. It's not clear whether the story of the caged, tortured man has a basis in Crèvecoeur's own life or if it's entirely fictional, but either way, the author obviously intends for this story to horrify readers and dispose them to hate and denounce slavery. Though the man's full story isn't yet known, he has evidently been brutalized. The horror of his situation contrasts jarringly with the natural beauty James had been admiring till now.

The man heard James's approach and begged for water. Horrified, James complied. The man thanked him but wished James could poison him to put him out of his misery; he had been trapped there for two days. Later, at the planter's home, James learned that the man was being punished for killing his overseer. The planter's household defended this barbaric act on the grounds of "self-preservation" and offered the usual pro-slavery arguments, but James will not bother his reader with these.

The trapped man's full story confirms that he is being tormented by the plantation owner. The shocking story is obviously meant to stick in the reader's memory and bother their conscience regarding the ongoing practice of slavery at the time, but it raises less obvious questions, too. From what James relates, it's clear that he thinks the slaveowner's arguments are wrong and even morally reprehensible; yet it isn't clear that James tries to change his mind, much less intervenes to help the suffering enslaved man. So, it's curious that the strongly antislavery Crèvecoeur frames this section as he does—it's possible that he is subtly critiquing the overall apathy and hypocrisy of northern slaveowners like his character James, but it's also possible that Crèvecoeur himself has a blind spot here.

LETTER 10

Mr. F.B. has insisted that James tell him something about snakes. The southern colonies have a more interesting variety of species; where James lives, there are only two poisonous snakes. The most dangerous snake is the copperhead, which lurks in rocks near water. There is no antidote for its poison. James knows of one man in the area who was bitten by a copperhead; the man swelled horribly, appeared crazed, and hissed at everyone. He died within two hours. In contrast, rattlesnakes are shy, their bites aren't immediately deadly, and most families have antidotes on hand. He once saw a tame rattlesnake whose fangs had been removed; it came to its owners when called and enjoyed being scratched.

In this letter, James returns to more mundane and familiar themes—namely, reflecting on the beauties of nature. His remarks on this subject should always be taken with a grain of salt. For example, while it's true that antivenoms weren't broadly available at this time, making any venomous snakebite a riskier prospect, copperhead bites aren't as commonly deadly as described here and certainly don't make victims hiss. It's also rather farfetched to imagine that a rattlesnake, which is quite dangerous, could be tamed to the degree that it would act like a dog or cat!

However, James also recalls a terrible accident involving a rattlesnake, told to him by the widow and mother of the victims. A Dutch farmer, along with his enslaved people, went to mow a field. He accidentally stepped on a snake, which bit him; one of the other men quickly killed the snake with a scythe before it could strike again. That night, however, the farmer woke up sick, began to swell, and died before a doctor could arrive. Nobody asked many questions about the incident. A few days later, however, the farmer's son put on his late father's boots and went to work in the same meadow. That night, he woke up with the same symptoms and died the next morning. Unable to figure out the cause of these two deaths, the doctor announced they'd been "bewitched." The farmer's widow sold the farm and moved away soon after.

This story is another good example of James's questionable expertise on the natural world. As this story unfolds, it will seem more and more implausible (not least the part about the doctor giving up and declaring the family "bewitched," which, even in the late 1700s, is a bit hard to believe), so Crèvecoeur may be taking some creative license. Perhaps the best takeaway is that, despite James's sometimes sentimental love of nature, he also recognizes its dangerous and unpredictable elements—especially on the remote, undeveloped frontier.

Not long after, however, a neighbor, who'd bought the late farmer's boots, put them on and soon suffered snakebite. His wife sent for a better doctor, who arrived in time to save the victim's life. Then the doctor examined the boots and found that the initial rattlesnake's fangs had gotten embedded in the leather. There was enough poison left in the fangs that the father, son, and neighbor were each scratched and poisoned by the fangs when they pulled the boots off.

Regardless of the truth behind a story like this, it illustrates that nature is so powerful and unpredictable that, as James claims when he describes the fate of a series of boot-wearers, animals can kill humans even after the animals are dead.

James shares another wildlife anecdote. In the lowlands on his farm he has dug a ditch, and over the ditch he built a bridge. On each side of the bridge is a small arbor of hemp grains and vines. Hummingbirds are drawn to the vine-blossoms, and James loves to watch them. Like **bees**, hummingbirds "subsist by suction." They fly so rapidly that their wings are a blur. They are beautifully colored: blue, gold, and red. The hummingbird's long beak is like a needle, allowing it to drink nectar deep inside flowers. They appear to hover in mid-air while they drink. Strangely, hummingbirds "are the most irascible of the feathered tribe" and will fight other hummingbirds to the death.

Here, James returns to his more typical mode of describing wildlife, with a tone of wonder and even whimsy. Because he has spent so much time developing his land, he has had time and opportunity to watch tiny, swift animals like hummingbirds. If he didn't have that leisure, he probably wouldn't be able to closely observe and contemplate nature as he describes here. As he did with bees in an earlier letter, he anthropomorphizes hummingbirds, in this case attributing a cranky personality to the species.

One day, James was sitting in his arbor when he noticed a rustling noise. He climbed one of his large hemp-stalks to investigate and saw two long snakes chasing each other through the field. The aggressor was a six-foot-long black snake, and its prey was a water snake of about the same length. When they met, their bodies twisted together, and they tried to tear each other with their teeth. The fight was strangely beautiful to watch. The black snake coiled its neck around the water snake to keep it from escaping, while the water snake anchored itself with a stalk of hemp and kept fighting. Eventually, the pair crashed into the watery ditch, where the black snake forced its enemy underwater until it stopped struggling. Then it crawled ashore and disappeared.

James concludes this letter with another dramatic story about snakes. Again, getting to watch two snakes writhing together in a vicious fight to the death isn't something most people will ever witness, and most people probably wouldn't regard the sight as beautiful. But by living so close to his land, James has had many such opportunities, and he has developed an ability to find graceful and compelling what others might only find frightening. The snake battle also reminds readers that animals, like humans, live in their own societies marked by struggle and death as well as beauty.

LETTER 11

No European traveler can help being delighted by the happiness he sees in the American colonies. "The wisdom of Lycurgus and Solon" couldn't give a Pennsylvanian so much prosperity, and William Penn should be honored above many of England's kings. To prove that he isn't exaggerating, the author of this letter, a Russian gentleman named Iwan, recounts a visit to botanist John Bertram.

In this letter, Crèvecoeur returns to his earlier theme of American uniqueness and happiness. Lycurgus and Solon were ancient Greek reformers and lawgivers, so by saying that settler William Penn bestows greater benefits on society than they did, the author implies that America's freedoms are a huge advance for the world as a whole. This letter is a departure in that Crèvecoeur writes in the voice of a European visitor to America, Iwan, instead of in James's.


Mr. Bertram lives in a modest house with a tower in the middle. Iwan finds the botanist working in one of his meadows. During a simple dinner without ceremony, Bertram asks his guest what he, a Russian, is doing in America. The Russian replies that he regards America as "the seed of future nations," and, like Russia, it is making many new discoveries. Perhaps the two countries have other things in common.

John Bertram, or Bartram (1699–1777), was a real historical figure, an American-born Quaker who established the country's first botanical garden near Philadelphia. In the 1770s, Russia was ruled by "enlightened despot" Catherine the Great, as the Russian empire experienced territorial expansion as well as advancements in the arts and sciences. It's interesting that Crèvecoeur writes this letter from the perspective of a fictional Russian, suggesting that he thought Russia might have been on a similar path to America at the time.


Iwan questions Mr. Bertram about the work he is doing. Bertram explains that the Schuylkill River created a lot of uselessly swampy land, but now he and some other landowners share the expense of improving thousands of acres into meadows. The resulting land is so rich that within a few years, it pays for itself.

As portrayed here, Bertram is a model American farmer, in that like James, he enjoys a close relationship with his land and constantly looks for ways to improve it rather than exploit it.


After dinner, Iwan hears distant music and goes upstairs to find wind blowing through the strings of an Eolian harp, which he's never seen before. Retiring into Mr. Bertram's study, Iwan is surprised to see a coat of arms in a gilt frame. Bertram explains that it's a memento of his French father and not the sort of display that Quakers typically favor. The pair then passes the hours until sunset admiring Bertram's botanical collection. Iwan enjoys himself so much that he asks to stay, and Bertram warmly welcomes him to do so. He takes Iwan on a tour of his drained meadows, his fields, flocks, and orchards. Iwan is impressed by Bertram's methods of irrigating and fertilizing his once-barren lands.

An Aeolian harp is basically a wind chime. The various mementos and curiosities in Bertram's study give an impression of an inquisitive man who respects his past, yet is deeply rooted in his present surroundings—a very American character, in other words. Iwan's reaction to Bertram's lovingly developed lands deepens that impression. By portraying the historical Bartram as a character in his book, Crèvecoeur shows that such farmers weren't just figments of his imagination like James, but people who really existed and played a notable role in America's growth.

When Bertram asks about husbandry in Russia, Iwan explains that few Russian farmers own their land, so they cannot undertake such extensive schemes as Bertram does here in Pennsylvania. In America, by contrast, farmers hold their lands from the "Master of Nature." Iwan predicts that, thanks to its freedoms, America will prosper far beyond Europe within a few years. Bertram agrees with him but warns against presumption, since all societies seem susceptible to tyranny. Iwan replies that it's "poverty […] that makes slaves."

This passage makes the same strong connection that James made in his letters earlier, between land ownership and good stewardship of one's land. Most of the people who work the land in Russia, Iwan explains, lack the freedom or personal stake in the land to deeply invest in its development. It's also interesting that Iwan regards poverty as something that enslaves. Though he doesn't elaborate here, presumably he believes that poverty limits people's ability to determine their future.

Mr. Bertram encourages Iwan to read a letter he received from Queen Ulrica of Sweden. Iwan is not surprised that a Swedish queen, who "walk[s] in the gardens of Linnaeus," would write to America's prime botanist. He asks Bertram how he became a botanist, and Bertram explains that he received little education growing up, only the inheritance of his father's farm.

Carolus Linnaeus was an 18th-century Swedish naturalist who came up with systems for classifying and naming plant species. By linking Bertram—with his farming background and minimal education—to a famous European botanist and monarch, Crèvecoeur suggests that humble American farmers could hold their own in bigger cultural and scientific conversations.

One day, while taking a rest from ploughing, Bertram sat under a tree and began examining a daisy, thinking it a shame that he had inadvertently destroyed so many beautiful plants over the years. He couldn't stop thinking about it, so a few days later he visited a Philadelphia bookseller and came home with botany books and a Latin grammar. A neighboring schoolteacher tutored him in enough Latin to study Linnaeus. Bertram began to botanize around his farm, and within a few years, he had gained a general knowledge of America's plants and trees. He enjoys more leisure nowadays and thus spends more time on botany, sending specimens to Europe upon request.

Bertram's account of how he became a self-made, first-class botanist is striking because it is so rooted in Bertram's upbringing as an American farmer. Self-taught, he became America's premier botanist while hardly leaving the farm on which he'd been raised—suggesting that, though Americans can and should learn from European expertise, they do not have to become any less American in order to make a mark on the wider world. In this way, Bertram is like Crèvecoeur's James.

Iwan spends several happy days on Bertram's farm and is struck by the ease and mildness in all the relationships in the household, even between Bertram and his enslaved people. He questions Bertram about this, and Bertram explains that the influence of Quaker writings has encouraged him to set aside prejudice and look upon Black people differently. He now pays them and provides them with room, board, and education. As long as they behave as "moral men," he allows them to eat at his table.

The book is somewhat unclear about the status of the Black members of Bertram's household. Iwan refers to them as if they're enslaved, though it seems that Bertram has actually freed them from bondage and now technically employs them. Yet there is still a racist undertone in Bertram's implication that as long as they adhere to the white household members' standards of behavior, they will be treated as full members of the family—it implies that if they don't *meet those standards, Bertram might regard them as inferior or even subhuman.*

Bertram criticizes other Christians who rule their enslaved people through fear, without teaching them any religious principles. Slavery is anti-Christian, he argues, and after granting his enslaved people freedom, they chose to remain attached to his family. Iwan is impressed and wishes that other Christian denominations would follow Bertram's example. He claims he can't bear to visit the southern colonies because people treat their enslaved laborers so cruelly there. He also explains that Russia doesn't have slaves, exactly, but they do have serfs who are attached to the land on which they live, a barbarous custom.

Though Bertram holds troubling attitudes about Black people themselves, not seeming to regard them as inherently equal to white people, his unambiguous denunciation of the institution of slavery was markedly progressive for the time. Iwan echoes James in claiming to find the American South much more racist than the North. Russian serfs could not be sold individually like enslaved people, but they could be sold along with the land to which they were "attached" and treated as the landowner chose—sometimes savagely. Russian serfdom wasn't abolished until 1861.

Iwan's happy visit with Bertram is punctuated by the Sunday service at the Quaker meeting in Chester, Pennsylvania. The meeting-house is square, plain, and furnished only with benches and a warm stove. Everyone sits silently for half an hour with heads bowed. After that, a woman stands up and says that the spirit has moved her to speak. She gives a moral discourse for about 45 minutes, and Iwan is impressed by her good sense and lack of ostentation. Not long after, the congregation departs. Iwan is deeply impressed by the simplicity of the Friends' doctrine and peaceful manner of life and death.

Worship services of the Society of Friends, or Quakers, lack ordained clergy or formal structure, instead focusing on silent meditation. Any member is welcome to exhort the rest of the congregation when they believe the Holy Spirit has moved them to do so. Since Crèvecoeur was a deist—rejecting most aspects of traditional religion—it's not too surprising that, through Iwan's character, he praises an expression of Christianity that lacks official dogma and clerical authority.

After that, Iwan is hosted by various local farmers and enjoys the hospitality so much that he ultimately spends two months there. If it weren't for James's encouragement, he would never have made such delightful acquaintances in Pennsylvania.

The connection between James's and Iwan's characters isn't made clear, but this letter's takeaway might simply be that James wants his European friend F.B. to see that Iwan, a fellow European, finds much to admire about America, both philosophically and in lifestyle.

LETTER 12

James must leave his house and abandon his farm. But where can he go? The polar regions would match his "melancholy" mood. But no matter where he goes, he cannot forget the terrible things he's witnessed, so he can never be happy. For that matter, he doesn't believe that the current generation will ever be happy again. The word "misery" has taken on new meaning for him. When he considers all the human miseries with which he's now connected, he feels as if he'll lose his reason.

This final letter opens with a sudden shift in James's mood. Recall how rapturously James described his land and his life as a farmer in the first few letters; now, he sounds hopeless, as though he's experienced something traumatic. It's worth noting that Crèvecoeur had a rough time during the Revolutionary War as a sympathizer with England, so that experience saturates this letter.

James broadly describes his settlement. To the west is a chain of mountains, to the east a thinly inhabited area. Neighbors live at a considerable distance from one another. "Our dreadful enemy" can emerge from the western mountains at any time, and it now seems that they intend to destroy the whole frontier, starting from Lake Champlain. These raids usually happen in the middle of the night, though farmers fear them as they go to their fields in midday. The slightest noise frightens a family as they sit down to a meal, and their sleep is disrupted by imagined fears. James passes suspenseful hours at the door, ready to die, while his family hides in the cellar. He begs Mr. F.B. to sympathize with him.

It's not really obvious who James regards as the "enemy" here. Crèvecoeur, an American citizen writing for a largely European audience, probably wrote ambiguously on purpose, so as not to alienate his audience or get himself into hotter water than he already had (imprisoned at one point as an alleged spy for the British). But the enemy's identity doesn't matter much: James's point is that the war encroaches terrifyingly on the lives of civilian frontiersmen and their families.

James laments that people go so easily from loving to hating once another. As a peace-lover, he doesn't know what to do. He respects America's "ancient connexion" with England, yet he fears innovations that his own countrymen now embrace. He regrets "this unfortunate revolution." If he expresses loyalty to "the mother country," he is regarded as a traitor; yet, if he sides with his countrymen, he opposes "our ancient masters." He is troubled by both extremes.

Throughout the letters, James has celebrated the neighborly kindness and support that most Americans enjoy with each other; now that the colonies are at war, however, political loyalties pit neighbors against neighbors. This puts someone like James, who genuinely loves aspects of both sides, in a very difficult position.

James doesn't know much about the dispute that sparked the revolution. Both sides have written a lot about it, but who is wise enough to judge between the different accounts? No matter what, the innocent always suffer at the hands of a few, shedding blood for the sake of "great leaders."

James's outlook on the revolution is remarkably frank—he acknowledges that partisan accounts aren't objective and that the average American struggles to discern what's true. What's more, he suspects that the conflict doesn't benefit the average American much, instead causing people to suffer for no clear purpose.

James is not a learned man, and he can only follow his sentiment and feeling. How can he do that when "Reason" has been replaced by bloodshed? He does not want to renounce the principles he was raised to believe and the nation (Britain) he has always respected. Yet he grew up in America, and how can he fight against it? The idea is horrible to him.

Earlier in the letters, James described himself as uneducated in order to suggest that even an American farmer has something to say. Here, he returns to that tactic in order to suggest that the average American is unfairly torn between two extremes—pressured to denounce either their homeland or their British heritage.

James sees how much suffering the aggressors have caused. Families have been ruined, children have been orphaned, and much blood has been shed. But he wonders what a man like him can really do about it, when there's so much hostility on both sides of the conflict. Even if a man tries to act according to his principles, he will likely be punished for it, while those who act according to self-preservation won't be blamed as harshly. Since nobody cares what happens to the people of the frontier, then, it seems best to act in self-interest.

Again, it's not entirely clear who James regards as the aggressors, but it's a fair guess that he's referring to those who are actively waging war, whether on the British or American side. He observes that fighting to protect oneself is understood and respected, whereas holding the "wrong" views about the war isn't. But he feels that nobody is fighting for the ordinary Americans of the frontier, so he doesn't have the luxury of fighting for principle and must defend his family above all.

The disinterested man who's not in danger has the luxury of declaring who's right and wrong in this conflict. But if such a man came and lived with James's family for a month, and had to spend sleepless nights protecting his wife and children with his musket, then "the man will […] get the better of the citizen." Abstract political opinions will vanish in the face of real suffering.

Previously, James argued that Americans are happy because, in part, they are free to live according to their beliefs. So it's interesting—and powerful—that now, he presents principles as collapsing in favor of simple survival. Being an American citizen is more complicated in war, then, than in peacetime.

Indeed, if even the king were to endure what the frontiersmen endure, he would quickly be reduced to the position of a fearful father. Then his royal policies would also be influenced by "Nature, that great parent." In light of this, does it make sense that James, to be considered a faithful subject, must impartially say that his family should suffer for the good of Britain?

James suggests that natural instincts, like a parent's desire to protect their children, are more powerful than any political beliefs. In other words, even royal prerogative wouldn't hold up next to human suffering. It's senseless, then, to ask ordinary people to sacrifice for principle.

James passionately asks if Mr. F.B. understands how bad his family's situation is. If they stay here, they will ultimately die; if they decide to leave, there's nowhere to go—everyone's houses are filled with refugees. If they defend themselves, they'll be regarded as rebels; yet shouldn't passivity be regarded as rebellion against Nature? Even animals defend themselves when threatened. Why, then, should reason stifle human instinct?

Through James, Crèvecoeur makes a heartfelt appeal to readers to sympathize with the plight of ordinary Americans—much as he previously appealed to them to recognize American blessings. In light of the author's family's own suffering during the war, he asks distant readers to understand that when people are in danger, they simply do what they have to do to survive and protect their loved ones.

When James reflects on all this, he quickly grows bitter and concludes that life is meaningless. He is only distracted from such thoughts when he remembers his wife and children. Because of them, self-preservation is the only thing that makes sense. He wishes he could ensure their wellbeing without harming anyone else. If necessary, he would "revert into a state […] nearer to that of nature" and forget about allegiance to a country.

James is referred to elsewhere as the "farmer of feelings" because he describes such strong emotions for his family and farm; the feelings are just as evident here, if not more so, when he's faced with abandoning his beloved land for his family's sake. Even his loyalty to America is negotiable when their lives are at stake.


James isn't trained for anything besides farming his land, and he's never wanted anything except to live quietly with his family and teach his children to provide for themselves in their turn. But now, after almost 20 years of labor, his family must abandon everything—a poor reward for virtue. The only alternative he sees is to flee to a distant Indian village, where they will subsist on very little, learn to hunt, and speak a different language. His only hesitation is that, often, young children who live among Indians refuse to leave their adoptive culture behind when they are older. Indian life must be superior to European in some respects, or it wouldn't be attractive to so many people. So, James is determined to join the village or die trying.

James's love for the simplicity and self-sufficiency of farming life has been evident throughout the letters. Being a farmer was inextricable from being an American; it's what allowed him to live freely and pass the same lifestyle down to his children. So, if the war forces him to give up being a farmer, he must essentially give up being an American, too—at least in his lifestyle. This is clear from his radical solution of starting over in an Indian village—a place where he can't remain a farmer or expect that his children will do so one day.

James assumes that this is his final letter and that, if he flees, he won't be able to repossess his property after the war. But F.B. shouldn't mistake him for a stoic—he feels keen regret at the prospect of abandoning the house and lands he built with his own hands, and heartache at the thought that his children might suffer. At the same time, he trusts that the Indians will be kind; only vengeance motivates them to violence, unlike Europeans, who will shed blood "for sixpence per day." He has communicated with a tribal chief who has promised that there will be plenty of land and food for them; however, James is afraid to share this news with his wife, in case she refuses to follow him there.

It's uncertain precisely when each letter was written, so readers can only guess how the letters align with Crèvecoeur's biography; however, James's fear of losing his land forever matches Crevecoeur's experience of losing his farm, Pine Hill, in the course of the war. Meanwhile, James holds an optimistic view of life in the Indian village. Especially with evidence of bloodshed all around him (including that committed by mercenaries, which he alludes to with "sixpence per day"), he believes that Indians are morally superior to Europeans, at least where violence is concerned.

James knows that F.B. isn't familiar with the geography, but he can reach the village by traveling overland for 23 miles and by water the rest of the way. He plans to sell most of their belongings to his father-in-law and to free the people he's enslaved, encouraging them to go and make their own livings. He will also write a letter to an acquaintance making it clear that he isn't leaving "to join the incendiaries on our frontiers."

The trip to the village is a fairly significant journey, speaking to James's deep familiarity with the surrounding country. It's also notable that it's only under extreme duress that James is willing to take the step of freeing his enslaved people, hinting at the hypocrisy beneath his past moral indignation over slavery. James is more concerned about protecting his reputation by proving he's not a revolutionary.

James is so familiar with Indian lifestyles and hospitality (which is greater than many Europeans') that he's not worried about living among them. After arriving in the village, he will build his own wigwam on the land the village allots to him. He also hopes that he and his family will be "adopted" into the village soon after their arrival and receive new names. He only worries that his youngest children will be so susceptible to the "charm of an Indian education" that they will reject their family's customs. To keep them from becoming completely "wild," therefore, James will teach them to farm.

Throughout the letters, James has shown respect and even admiration for aspects of Native American life. His willingness to be assimilated into the Indian village further illustrates this open-mindedness; yet, at the same time, his tolerance has limits. He regards Indian life as fundamentally "wild" or uncivilized, the opposite of the farming life he has championed throughout; so, he must make an intentional effort to ensure his children become farmers, not Indians.

James can keep himself busy with hunting, but without wool and flax, what will his wife do? He figures she will have to learn to cook Indian dishes of corn and squash, to smoke meat, and to adopt her neighbors' customs. He nevertheless hopes that his wife and daughters won't adopt native paint and hairstyles. His wife is experienced in giving inoculations, so James hopes her skill will win esteem for her in the village.

James recognizes that farming life doesn't transfer perfectly to Indian village life and is willing for his family to learn new ways. Again, though, he doesn't want his family to completely assimilate into such a different culture. Inoculations were relatively new and still controversial at this time, so James's and his wife's familiarity with the practice (probably for smallpox) is striking, a subtle marker that they're not ignorant of the wider world.

As for the family's religious beliefs, they won't change much, because their practices are already so simple. James will regularly read and explain a section of the decalogue (the Ten Commandments), just as he's always done.

This passage is a nod to Crèvecoeur's deism—limiting religious instruction to the Ten Commandments indicates that James isn't too concerned about a larger structure of distinctively Christian beliefs.

Six acres of land will be plenty for James to grow the family's crops; he will share produce with the Indians and try to encourage them to do more farming instead of relying on hunting so much. He also hopes to influence the villagers to handle "those pests of the continent," the Indian-traders, with greater savvy. As much as he respects Indians, though, he doesn't want his daughter to marry one of them, since he sees intermarriage as "disagreeable […] to Nature's intentions."

Even after he's lost his farm, James expects farming to hold an important role in his life and will even continue to commend that life as a superior one. This passage is a good illustration of James's conflicted attitude about his indigenous neighbors. He denounces the underhanded ways of many white people who make a living by trading unfairly with Indians, yet at the same time, he resists the idea of interracial marriage as unnatural.

Despite the great change in his family's lifestyle, James thinks it is worth it for the peace they will once again enjoy. He is confident his plan can succeed. Though he still fears "Indian education," he figures it is not more dangerous than "the education of the times," and he trusts that hard work will prevent its excesses. He will keep a careful account of his sons' labors so that, when peace returns, he can give them the property they've earned by their work. Otherwise, they might not be motivated enough. He will encourage them to hunt and fish well enough to keep up with their Indian friends, but not to count this a great accomplishment.

Again, preserving his family's wellbeing is more important to James than remaining in American society, if the latter means exposing his family to violence. Foreign (and, in his mind, inferior) cultural influences are worth the risk. Still, it's clear that James's ultimate hope is for his children, at least, to have the chance to someday return to the farming life he's dreamed of for them.

James's children may not be educated in American schools, but they will learn sobriety and modesty from the Indian villagers. They will no longer have to put up with constant worry and fear. They might not be able to learn a profession, but they will learn how to support themselves on the land. If they aren't raised in a specific church, at least James will have taught them "that primary worship which is the foundation of all others." After all, in his opinion, God doesn't reside in a particular church or community, and it's most important to know God as "the Father of all men" who just wants us to make each another happy.

James reiterates some of the trade-offs of giving up farming and raising his family in an Indian village. Though living in the village inevitably means giving up some of the hallmarks of a "civilized" American life—like formal schooling, learning a trade, and attending church— James's children can still learn to be hardworking, ethical people who live off the land. Crèvecoeur's deism is evident once again, as James commends a fairly generic faith in which God, a benevolent father, expects people to be kind to each other but not necessarily to adhere to human institutions or religious structures.

James grants that his dreams of this possible future might be brighter than reality. Nevertheless, he hopes that their isolation will serve to draw the family closer together; and he would rather his children learn to thrive in the woods than have to become soldiers. In the village, they will be free from politics. And James will be able to contemplate Nature to his heart's content.

James puts the best spin that he can on the devastating possibility of fleeing his farm. Arguably, it's a romantic spin, as James pictures village life as totally apolitical, giving him even more leisure to wander in nature and reflect. This suggests that James has a pretty reductive idea of what Native American life is like.


James prays that if the Supreme Being cares about the events in individual people's lives, He will bless his family's life and give James the strength to guide his wife and children through the coming trials. He also prays for peace in America and that the fruits of Americans' labors won't be lost.

Even though James has spent much of this letter seeking to distance himself from America, knowing he might soon give it up, he clearly still treasures his American identity and hopes that the best of American life might somehow outlast the present conflict.



James tells F.B. that the frankness of his letters must be convincing evidence of their true friendship. He's sure that F.B. sympathizes and mourns with him in this oppression. James's own sufferings look small when he considers what has befallen America as a whole.

The letters conclude on a somber note, as James does not seem to hold out much hope that America will survive the war with Britain, at least not in the form he's known and loved. While the American Revolution turned out much differently than James expects, the pessimistic tone matches Crèvecoeur's difficult fortunes, as he never did fully regain the happiness he enjoyed as an American farmer before the war.

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