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The Feeling of Powerlessness against Fate and the Illusion of Miscegenation in James Fenimore Cooper's Novel "The Last of Mohicans"

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Abstract

The Last of the Mohicans, was widely considered Cooper's best work, was an implausible story narrated in a fashion that could seem overwrought to modern readers. Cooper's work remained important for its portrait of frontier life and its exploration of the traumatic encounters between races and cultures poised on opposite sides of a shrinking frontier. Written in 1826, The Last of the Mohicans took place in 1757 during the French and Indian War, when France and England battled for control of the American and Canadian colonies. During this war, the French often allied themselves with Native American tribes in order to gain an advantage over the English, with unpredictable and often tragic results. Descriptions of certain incidents, such as the massacre of the English soldiers by Huron Indians, embellish accounts of real historical events. Additionally, certain characters in the novel, General Montcalm in particular, were based on real individuals. Creating historically inspired stories was common in nineteenth-century adventure tales. The Mohicans were the possessors of the country first occupied by the Europeans in this portion of the continent. They were, consequently, the first dispossessed; and the seemingly inevitable fate of all these people, who disappeared before the advances, or it might be termed the inroads, of civilization, as the verdure of their native forests fell before the nipping frosts, was represented as having already befallen them. There was sufficient historical truth in the picture to justify the use that had been made of it.

Key Words: Allies, encounters, devoted, ruthless, cunning, diversity, modest.

Introduction: It was believed that the scene of this tale, and most of the information necessary to understand its allusions, were rendered sufficiently obvious to the reader in the text itself, or in the accompanying notes. Few men exhibited greater diversity, or, if we may so express it, greater antithesis of character, than the native warriors of North America. In war, the Mohican was daring, boastful, cunning, ruthless, self-denying, and self-devoted; in peace, just, generous, hospitable, revengeful, superstitious, modest, and commonly chaste. These were qualities, it was true, which did not distinguish all alike; but they were so far the

predominating traits of these remarkable people had to be characteristic. It was generally believed that the Aborigines of the American continent had an Asiatic origin. There were many physical as well as moral facts which corroborated this opinion, and some few that would seem to weigh against it.

The color of the Indian, the writer believed, was peculiar to himself, and while his cheek-bones had a very striking indication of a Tartar origin, his eyes did not. Climate might have had great influence on the former, but it was difficult to see how it could have produced the substantial difference which existed in the latter. The imagery of the Indian, both in his poetry and in his oratory, was oriental; chastened, and perhaps improved, by the limited range of his practical knowledge. He drew his metaphors from the clouds, the seasons, the birds, the beasts, and the vegetable world. In this, perhaps, he did no more than any other energetic and imaginative race would do, being compelled to set bounds to fancy by experience; but the North American Indian clothes, a dress which was different from that of the African, and was oriental in it. His language had the richness and sententious fullness of the Chinese. He would express a phrase in a word, and he would qualify the meaning of an entire sentence by a syllable; he would even convey different significations by the simplest inflections of the voice.

Philologists had said that there were two or three languages, properly speaking, among all the numerous tribes which formerly occupied the country that now comprised the United States. They ascribed the known difficulty when people had to understand another to corruption and dialect. The writer remembered that he had to be present at an interview between two chiefs of the Great Prairies west of the Mississippi, and an interpreter was also present who spoke both their languages. The warriors appeared to be on the friendliest terms, and seemingly conversed much together; yet, according to the account of the interpreter, each were absolutely ignorant of what the other had said. They were of hostile tribes, brought together by the influence of the American government; and it was worthy of remark, that a common policy led them both to adopt the same subject. They mutually exhorted each other to be of use in the event of the chances of war throwing either of the parties into the hands of their enemies. Whatever may be the truth, as respected the root and the genius of the Indian tongues, it was quite certain they were now as distinct in their words as to possess most of the disadvantages of strange languages; hence much of the embarrassment had arisen in learning their histories, and most of the uncertainty which existed in their traditions. Like nations of higher pretensions, the American Indian gave a very different account of his own tribe or race from what was given by other people. He was much addicted to overestimated his own perfections, and undervalued his rival or his enemy; a trait which might possibly be thought corroborative of the Mosaic account of the creation.

The whites had assisted greatly in rendering the traditions of the Aborigines more obscure by their own manner of corrupting names. Thus, the term used in the title of this book had undergone the changes of Mahicanni, Mohicans, and Mohegans; the latter being the word commonly used by the whites. When it was remembered that the Dutch, the

English, and the French, all gave appellations to the tribes that dwelt within the country was the scene of this story, and that the Indians not only gave different names to their enemies, but frequently to them, the cause of the confusion would be understood.

In the book, Lenni-Lenape, Lenope, Delawares, Wapanachki, and Mohicans, all meant the same people, or tribes of the same stock. The Mengwe, the Maquas, the Mingoes, and the Iroquois, though not all strictly the same, were identified frequently by the speakers, being politically confederated and opposed to those just named. Mingo was a term of peculiar reproach, as were Mengwe and Maqua in a lesser degree.

In fact, the country which was the scene of the following tale had undergone as little change, since the historical events alluded to had place, as almost any other district of equal extent within the whole limits of the United States. There were well-attended watering-places at and near the spring where Hawkeye halted to drink, and roads traversed the forests where he and his friends were compelled to journey without even a path. Glen's had a large village; and while William Henry, and even a fortress of later date, was only to be traced as ruins, there was another village on the shores of the Horican.. The whole of that wilderness, in which the latter incidents of the legend occurred, was nearly a wilderness still, though the red man had entirely deserted this part of the state. Of all the tribes named in these pages, there existed only a few half-civilized beings of the Oneidas, on the reservations of their people in New York. The rest had disappeared, either from the regions in which their fathers dwelt, or altogether from the earth.

Hawkeye called the Lac du Saint Sacrement, the "Horican." As we believed this to be an appropriation of the name that had its origin with ourselves, the time had arrived, perhaps, when the fact could be frankly admitted. Looking over an ancient map, it was ascertained that a tribe of Indians, called "Les Horicans" by the French, existed in the neighborhood of this beautiful sheet of water. The name had appeared to find favor, and all things considered, it might possibly be quite as well to let it stand, instead of going back to the House of Hanover for the appellation of our finest sheet of water. We believed our conscience by the confession, at all events leaving it to exercise its authority as it might seem fit.

Literature Review: It was the late 1750s, and the French and Indian War gripped the wild forest frontier of western New York. The French army attacked Fort William Henry, a British outpost commanded by Colonel Munro. Munro’s daughters Alice and Cora had set out from Fort Edward to visit their father, escorted through the dangerous forest by Major Duncan Heyward and guided by an Indian named Magua. Soon they were joined by David Gamut, a singing master and a religious follower of Calvinism. Travelling cautiously, the group encountered the white scout Natty Bumppo, who went by the name Hawkeye, and his two Indian companions, Chingachgook and Uncas, Chingachgook’s son, the only surviving member of the once great Mohican tribe. Hawkeye said that Magua, a Huron, had betrayed the group by leading them in the wrong direction. The Mohicans attempted to capture the traitorous Huron, but he had escaped.

Hawkeye and the Mohicans led the group to safety in a cave near a waterfall, but Huron ally of Magua attack early the next morning. Hawkeye and the Mohicans escape down the river, but Huron captured Alice, Cora, Heyward, and Gamut. Magua celebrated the kidnapping. When Heyward tried to convert Magua to the English side, the Huron revealed that he seeks revenge on Munro for past humiliation and proposed to free Alice if Cora would marry him. Cora had romantic feelings for Uncas, however, and angrily refused Magua. Suddenly Hawkeye and the Mohicans burst onto the scene, rescuing the captives and killing every Huron except for Magua, who escaped. After a harrowing journey impeded by Indian attacks, the group reaches Fort William Henry, the English stronghold. They sneaked through the French army besieged the fort, and, once inside, Cora and Alice reunite with their father.

A few days later, the English forces called for a truce. Munro learnt that he would receive no reinforcements for the fort and would have to surrender. He revealed to Heyward that Cora's mother was part "Negro," which explains her dark complexion and raven hair. Munro accused Heyward of racism because he preferred to marry blonde Alice over dark Cora, but Heyward denied the charge. During the withdrawal of the English troops from Fort William Henry, the Indian allies of the French preyed upon the vulnerable retreating soldiers. In the chaos of slaughter, Magua manages to recapture Cora, Alice, and Gamut and escaped with them into the forest.

Three days later, Heyward, Hawkeye, Munro, and the Mohicans discover Magua's trail and began to pursue the villain. Gamut reappeared and explained that Magua had separated his captives, confining Alice to a Huron camp and sending Cora to a Delaware camp. Using deception and a variety of disguises, the group managed to rescue Alice from the Hurons, at which point Heyward confessed his romantic interest in her. At the Delaware village, Magua convinced the tribe that Hawkeye and his companions were their racist enemies. Uncas revealed his exalted heritage to the Delaware sage Tamenund and then demanded the release of all his friends but Cora, who he admitted belonged to Magua. Magua departed with Cora. A chase and a battle ensued. Magua and his Hurons suffered painful defeat, but a rogue Huron killed Cora. Uncas began to attack the Huron who killed Cora, but Magua stabbed Uncas in the back. Magua tried to leap across a great divide, but he falls short and clings to a shrub to avoid tumbling off and dying. Hawkeye shot him, and Magua at last plummeted to his death.

Cora and Uncas receive proper burials the next morning amid ritual chants performed by the Delawares. Chingachgook mourned the loss of his son, while Tamenund sorrowfully declared that he had lived to see the last warrior of the noble race of the Mohicans.

Themes: Themes were the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Interracial Love and Friendship: The Last of the Mohicans *was a book about race and the difficulty of overcoming racial divides. Cooper suggested that interracial mingling was both desirable and dangerous. Cooper lauded the genuine and long time friendship between*

Hawkeye, a white man, and Chingachgook, a Mohican Indian. Hawkeye and Chingachgook's shared communion with nature transcended race enabled them to team up against Huron enemies and saved white military leaders like Heyward. On the other hand, though, Cooper showed his conviction that interracial romances were doomed and undesirable. The interracial love of Uncas and Cora ended in tragedy, and the forced interracial relationship between Cora and Magua was portrayed as unnatural. Through Cora, Cooper suggested that interracial desire could be inherited; Cora desired Indian men because her mother was partly black.

Escape, Pursuit, and Rescue: The structure of the story's action was that of escape, pursuit, and rescue, in which Hawkeye, Uncas, and Chingachgook, and sometimes Heyward, engaged in a back and forth with Magua, alternately rescuing and losing Cora and Alice. These complex sequences of escape, pursuit, and rescue serve several purposes in the novel. First, they were necessary components of the "frontier adventure novel," of which Last of the Mohicans were perhaps the primary example. Second, they underscored the difficulties of life in the American colonies in their history. Many societies, native and European, converged on a relatively small space in the middle of the eighteenth century, hoping to control its vast resources. The dangers of Hawkeye, Heyward, and the rest of the group were dangers many in this region had faced—though perhaps not in such dramatic and sustained fashion. Third, this structure of escape and rescue allowed for a great deal of emotional impact when certain characters were not saved—namely, Uncas and Cora, the representatives of "native" and "European" society. By having endangered most of the lives detailed in the novel, the Author highlighted the continued skill of Hawkeye, the luck of Heyward, and, ultimately, the misfortune suffered by the young Mohican warrior and by Munro's courageous daughter.

Loyalty and Treachery: The Last of the Mohicans was a meditation on the nature of loyalty—what it meant to be loyal or disloyal and the consequences of loyalty and treachery was played out in battle. On one side Hawkeye, Uncas, and Chingachgook—men and warriors who were loyal to their own, whoever that group was said to be. Although the latter three did not start out the novel in defense of Heyward, Cora, Alice, David, and Munro, they went on, as the story progressed, to serve them even to the point of death. Heyward's morality occasionally differed slightly both from the natives' and from Heyward's, but all these characters acted on principles of trust and honesty that were unbroken throughout the novel. Magua, on the other hand, would stop at nothing to further his own interests. He left the tribe of his birth for a time, pretended to be a scout sympathetic to the British, then turned back to the Mingos and their allies, in the aid of the French. His common aim, simply, was to gain as much power and influence as possible, and to "acquire" Cora as his wife, partially as an act of vengeance against her father, Colonel Munro, whom Magua believed had mistreated him.

There was, too, the larger scale of alliances and broken promises that governed the conflict between the British and the French for control of the region. As the massacre of Fort William Henry was described, it was passively permitted by Montcalm, who, in

Fennimore Cooper's telling, went on to be slained in a later battle of the French and Indian War, and who died a "hero." But Fennimore Cooper believed, largely, that the French are of changeable opinions, and that the British, from which American rebels came (including Washington), were more stalwart, upright, and loyal. Hawkeye, in this sense, remained a central figure of the novel. Although he was not, perhaps, its hero—that position was reserved for Uncas—he was its most notable, most boisterous personage, and he was a man whose confidence was hard-won. But when Hawkeye committed to a cause—that of the Mohicans, or of Heyward's band—he did so for life, and he listed the Mingos as his lifelong enemies. This immutable daring -did seem much prized by Fennimore Cooper, and was celebrated throughout the novel as exemplifying the best of "frontier" morality.

Historical information: *The Last of the Mohicans* was set in the mid-eighteenth century, when the pioneer frontier man was eking out a living in fledging America. At that time the English had colonized America. The English at that time were also at loggerheads with France and involved in warfare with France in America. The French and Indian War provided a backdrop to The Last of the Mohicans. The fall of Fort William Henry and subsequent massacre of civilians took place in 1757. At this time, Native American tribes had been subdued and pushed back. However there were still many independent Indians and tensions between Europeans and Indians ran high. There existed a confederation among the Indian tribes, which occupied the northwestern part of the colony of New York, which was first known as the Five Nations. At a later date it became the Six Nations. The original confederation consisted of the Mohawks, the Oneidas, the Senecas, the Cayugas and the Onandagoes. The Sixth tribe was the Juscaroras.

Setting: The last of the Mohicans setting was in the American frontier with its physical background of wild and virgin nature, its human cross-purposes and conflicts. It was a place of primeval forests, mountains, caves, and waterfalls; a place of great beauty and of constant potential threat from its terrain and its native Indians; a place where a man, if he chose, could be a Deist. But the time was that of the American pre-revolution (1757), when white men were exploring and ruthlessly pushing westward. Thus man, though in general and inextricable part of nature, became a blot on what nature would be without him on its landscape, for man felt he must possess — must own — nature physically whether he did so spiritually or not. Human nature exerted itself at this time and in this place generated the setting, the American frontier in New York State.

Human nature, of course, is not all bad. Though most people in the story seem to be caught up, either directly or indirectly, in conflict for being held or having gained land, there was Gamut, who was ineptly concerned with religious values, and there was especially Hawkeye, who possessed the landscape spiritually and who despoilt its produce (plant, animal, or man) only to defend or feed himself. This was clearly indicated by the recurrent theme of finality which gathered like darkness at the end with the Indians being slowly dispossessed of land, sustenance, and existence. The white invaders were already winning. The setting, then, was not merely that of time and place (though these are historical, convincing, and necessary to the novel's basic reality about life) but was also one

of atmosphere, that aura which encompassed, permeated, and unified — and somehow at the same time came from—all the living elements of a story. In this case, it was the atmosphere of conquest and dispossession. So the Mohicans originally lived in an area that covered a lot of what is now New England—parts of Massachusetts and Connecticut were Mohican land. By the time *The Last of the Mohicans* took place, during the French and Indian War, Mohican land was relegated to a small area in upstate New York. The setting in this story; opened with a mention of the scene and historical moment in which the characters found them. It was about American history at a crucial junction. It was about history being made.

Third Person's Point of view: This point of view was pretty rare—in *The Last of the Mohicans* we were just given the actions of the plot, as outlined by an unnamed narrator. Perhaps because this point of view was so difficult to maintain, the narrator did occasionally slip and we entered into one of the character's heads. For example, we got pretty deep inside Montcalm's head on the eve of the British retreat: the narrator showed Montcalm having an "Am I *sure* about this?" type of moment. This break in the narration also provided a bit of comic relief, as when the narrator detailed Heyward's derpity-derpy-durr thought processes while looking at the beaver dam. Overall, though, the point of view was consistently Third Person throughout. We were typically given only descriptions of the action without knowing what went on in the character's head. Although the narration was described as Third Person, it was not actually objective in the strictest sense of the word.

Fatalism in the Last of the Mohicans: Hawkeye's vision of relativity and his idea of place were tainted with a touch of fatalism. Any race or any culture and tribe had a right to exist, right to survive and right to assert its dignity. Hawkeye wanted to maintain an atmosphere of reconciliation and harmony on the scene of frontier by virtue of his vision and virtue of relativity. Anybody could achieve progress only if they passed through the trouble of conflict and chaos. But Hawkeye said everything had its own place in existence. It should not try to assert control over another. This view was upheld by Hawkeye. This view sounded fatalistic. To possess success one had to play the game of power, politics and violence. Hawkeye's vision of relativity disallows violence and transgression, without which continuity of progress simply stopped.

Hawkeye had the fatalistic vision of relativity and the other fatalistic elements in his vision were the concept of miscegenation. Hawkeye proposed miscegenation as a way of solving interracial conflict on the frontier life. When two different persons from two different races and culture enter into wedding tie, one learned to love, respect and admire gift of another. In this way people accepted the existence of the gifts of another. As a result, the frontier conflict got reduced. But in the novel *The Last of the Mohicans* a young Mohican belonging to Indian tribe developed a romantic affinity in partly European woman Cora whose mother was a Negro. This interest of Uncas in Cora led to the tragic death of Uncas and Cora. Both of them died a violent death. Thus, there sounds the acute sense of the failure of miscegenation. Uncas and Cora were unable to get sufficient time to consummate their love and marry. Instead the start of miscegenetic relation between Uncas

and Cora led to the fatalistic death of both of them. Only Alice and Heyward's romance ended in success. The only pertinent reason was that the vision of miscegenation cherished by Hawkeye was fatalistically doomed to failure. There was another fatalistic element in expectation of Munro. Munro expected Heyward to forward marriage proposal to Cora. But contrary to Munro's expectation Heyward was romantically drawn closer to Alice which was fatally bound to be so.

Civilization had been spreading on the frontier. Hawkeye was, asking the Indian tribe to accept the existence of civilized ethos and spirit. Similarly Hawkeye was asking the civilized European to say yes to the existence of tribalism. But nobody was ready to act the way Hawkeye expected them, to work which was weak enough to tackle the fatalistic situation of the frontier. Certain touch of fatalism could be noticed in David Gamut. David Gamut represented the fatalistic cast of the Christian mind. The Christian mind was habituated to render good for evil. The Christian mind was lazy to tackle the evil.

Reader response criticism: The quality of events in *The Last of the Mohicans* was as indigenous as Hawkeye's cap of skins and his buckskin leggings, which made the scout known the world over as Leather-Stocking. The love between Heyward and Alice, sentimental though it was, could not have progressed in its precise way except on the American frontier and amid the events peculiar to the frontier condition. The author was fusing an established literary tradition with something of his own as a member of a new, green, and hitherto non-literary nation. In the fusing, that which was new became primary, as could be seen in the conclusion of the novel where the perfunctory pairing off and disposing of sentimental lovers was almost lost from sight in such overriding concerns as the dignity, ritual, and tragic passing of the Indians. The bringing together of the foreign and the native was sometimes an uneasy amalgam, but the good reader would be careful not to take the author too much to task. The alchemy of innovation often meant that some fool's gold would crop up with the real metal, and it would be as unfair to criticize Author's writing like a modern American novelist.

For one thing, the Author never meant to be writing realism. In the 1850 preface to the collected Leather-Stocking novels, he quite sensibly answered his critics thus: It was the privilege of all writers of fiction, more particularly when their works aspired to the elevation of romances, to present the *beau-ideal* of their characters to the reader. This it was which constituted poetry, and to suppose that the red-man was to be represented only in the squalid misery or in the degraded moral state that certainly more or less belonged to his condition, was, we apprehend, took a very narrow view of an author's privilege. Such criticism would have deprived the world of even Homer. The term *beau-ideal* is a key one. The Author was true to the spirit of the American frontier, but he was writing romance as distinguished from realism and naturalism. For his characters, even those rounded and relatively three-dimensional ones like Hawkeye and Magua, he abstracted in order to make them recognizable and representative.

My thoughts: Contrary to the impression one might have gained, I did not always find Cooper's novel intriguing. The first one hundred pages in particular were slow and, to quote Abigail, dull as sand. The author allowed no check on his verbosity, and subjected his reader to long historical discussions and descriptions. Though he took his time getting around to it, Cooper definitely knew how to layer the tension and intrigue. One of this book's most controversial facets was the way in which it portrayed the Indians of colonial New York. *The Last of the Mohicans* presented a view of the Native American savage both old and new in nature. The author showed him in his most violent element, scalping enemies and friends alike with cold-hearted indifference, and then gave the man an artificial sort of holiness above that of the "pale-faces" because he was better acquainted with the ways of nature. The characters themselves were rather ambiguous on this subject, especially Hawkeye, who both commended and convicted the "red man" for his ways. Such an image fell short of the modern opinion, which depicted the Indian as an innocent and forsaken creature who was forced from his land by the domineering white man. While it certainly sounded heartbreaking and tragic, history's records did not agree with this faulty depiction. Cooper displayed his Native Americans as capable of both shocking brutality and heart-rending sacrifice, painting an image conjured less by fantasy and more by reality. A good portion of the book was drenched in the violence and gore produced by the natives, but it did not keep the author from dropping obscure references to an Indian's supposedly superior knowledge and understanding. These opposing views were not easily reconciled with one another, and the worldview they presented was ambivalent at best.

The Last of the Mohicans remained the quintessential example of a historical romance. Despite the slow beginning, it soon drew the reader in with its depictions of daring escapes, bloody massacres, valiant sacrifices, fearless heroes, lovely heroines, and every other element that classified a page-turner. Even Cooper's prose, tedious at times though it may be, lent a sort of arresting beauty to the feral wilderness he described. The male characters were gallant and fearless, repeatedly setting aside their own lives for the security of Cora and Alice. In the same vein, the two sisters acted in a manner both modest and feminine, and entirely appropriate in nature. Both demure and strong-willed, Cora remained the voice of reason throughout the story, and her pure, wholehearted faith in God stood in sharp contrast with the shaky, practically nonexistent dogma of Hawkeye.

Besides the graphic violence native to its subject matter, the author also presented a vague image of morality between the spiritual clash of Yahweh, the One True God, and the Indians' Great Spirit. Hawkeye claimed that the two are one and the same, and while they shared a few similarities, such a view was obviously false. David Gamut, a devout Protestant and master of psalmody, was made to look quite ridiculous in his seeming lack of knowledge of all matters concerning warfare and wood-dwelling.

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