Title: Overview of "The Last of the Mohicans"

  Novel, 1826

Author(s): Tabitha McIntosh-Byrd

  American novelist ( 1789 - 1851 )

Other Names Used: Cooper, James;

Source: ***Literature Resource Center***. Detroit: Gale. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Work overview, Critical essay

**Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 2010 Gale, Cengage Learning

***The Last of the Mohicans*** is centered on Hawkeye, the figure of the pioneer and pathfinder who provides the link through which wilderness and civilization can be mediated. Throughout Cooper's novel, both Hawkeye and the reader are presented with a series of oppositions based on culture, race, and geography that create seemingly irreconcilable tensions and paradoxes. Indeed, the text itself is driven by an overarching narrative and generic paradox--the uneasy reconciliation of fact with fiction, history with romance.

Cooper's blend of fact and fiction has been extensively analyzed. Set in the third year of the French and Indian War, ***The Last of the Mohicans*** elides the boundaries that separate history and literature in order to create a quasi-mythic narrative of American history within which the New Man can be understood. Hawkeye, the archetypal American, straddles the fiction/fact divide, linking the actual events and persons of the period to the demands of Cooper's genre. Colonel Munro, the Marquis de Montcalm, the Indian nations, and the Fort William Henry massacre all find their basis in fact, though all are significantly altered by their incarnations in a romance.

The traditional narrative model of the romance is a quest, and its traditional textual movement tracks the protagonist as she or he enters unknown territories and worlds that transcend normal existence. This model also serves as the basis of the historical romance, Cooper's chosen genre, which is normally structured by the movement between hostile civilizations, worlds, or stages of cultural development. In so doing, the form allows narrative articulation of cultural self-analysis and awareness. By allowing the "Self" culture to come into conflict with its "Other," the central features of the former are thrown into relief. In the American versions of the genre, this definitional clash of cultures gains intense significance. By endlessly enacting and reenacting the distinctions between New American and Native American cultures, historical romances act as a primary tool of self-definition for a young country that finds itself in need of a stable self-identity. In ***The Last of the Mohicans*** this series of clashes takes place between multiple "Selves" and "Others," and serves several purposes. Hawkeye, as the hero of the romance quest, travels between the Old and New Worlds and is in permanent contrast with both. Moving uneasily between his affiliations with the "natural" Delaware and the "pure-blooded" Europeans, Hawkeye creates a version of American identity that challenges the old order while retaining many of its key myths of lineage and purity.

Cooper's novel is most easily understood through an analysis of these kinds of oppositions. The narrative gains its momentum from the juxtaposition of such opposed elements as French and English, Indian and white, and from more particularized juxtapositions of characters and types. The complexity of the novel's structure is suggested by the density of such contrasts, which not only provide comparisons between the Old and New Worlds, but also refract those worlds in upon themselves, removing the possibility of simplistic assessments. Uncas and Magua, both chiefs without a tribe, stand in contrast to each other and with the contrasted Europeans, provoking a more complex negotiation of cultures than is at first apparent. Where Uncas is handsome, strong, and unmarked, Magua is "a savage" in appearance, painted and scarred by custom, war, and punishment. The level of scarification serves a clear symbolic function. Just as Uncas is a "pure" Indian, untainted by corrupt contact with Europeans, so he is "untouched" in appearance, while Magua's increasing corruption is literally inscribed into his flesh. Uncas in turn mirrors Major Heyward, both of them in love with one of the Munro sisters, but only the former capable of adequately defending them. Moving outwards in the ripple of textual associations, the relationships of Webb/Munro, Munro/de Montcalm, and Heyward/Gamut provide interior commentary-through-comparison on the European worldview.

Following the generic conventions of the romance, Hawkeye's character is created through an assembled chiaroscuro of contrasts with all of these representatives of various cultures. A "woodsman" and "beaver expert," Hawkeye's dangerous wildness is made valorous and valid by what he is *not*: neither a "civilized" nor a "rude" man. Major Heyward, uniformed, chivalrous, and educated in all the arts of war, is literally and figuratively "lost" as soon as he leaves the fort. Where his environment is circumscribed and dangerously finite, Hawkeye's natural medium *is* the environment in its most general sense--the wilderness. David Gamut, the psalmist, epitomizes an ordered and civilized spirituality inflated to a ridiculously hyperbolic level. Physically jarring and unable to assimilate into any of the situations in which the characters find themselves, Gamut becomes representative of the Old World religion against which American culture is defining itself. When he is juxtaposed with Hawkeye, the latter thus takes on a quasi-Jeffersonian naturalism by contrast, one in which harmony with nature and the self is elevated above formal protestation of faith as a signifier of moral virtue.

However, the near paganism of Hawkeye's "natural religion" is carefully distanced from the spirituality of the "Natural men"--the Mohicans. Chingachgook and Uncas, the new American counterparts of Hawkeye's dual cultural alignments, are separated from the hero both by the narrative and the character himself. While Hawkeye's "natural" instincts are in contrast to the formalized uselessness of both Heyward and Gamut, they are also configured as "rational" or "civilized," when juxtaposed with the behavior of his comrades. Where Hawkeye is careful, reserved, and feared as the dead-shot "Longue Carabine," Uncas is rash, killing nominal enemies who offer no threat and rushing headlong into conflict. Significantly, it is neither a European nor a native, but only Hawkeye--the man who is of both and neither cultures at the same time--who is compassionate enough to waste his ammunition in putting a dangling enemy out of his misery. As a "man without a cross" who lives with natives but remains insistently white, Hawkeye is allowed to negotiate all possible worlds by remaining either genetically or geographically detached.

What happens if these series of opposed elements blend instead of finding or creating a removed mediation point, as Hawkeye does? Cooper's "romance" gains much of its thematic momentum from answering this question through the use of "romance"--the metaphoric role of sexual relationships between members of opposed cultures. Significantly, the protagonist is resolutely excluded from this literal "mediation" of cultures, providing a model of "untainted" communication instead. Thus while Hawkeye is, as he insists to a hyperbolic degree, a "man without a cross," many of the other characters are either symbolically or actually "crossbred"--and the results are never shown to be positive. Cora's mother is a woman of West Indian slave origins, and though Colonel Munro takes great pride in his daughter's heritage, it is clear that he expects it to retard her progress through life. Cora's "bursting blood" recalls both the destruction of an earlier culture, as well as the cultural erasure signified by assimilation: just as West African culture has been destroyed, so intermarriage has destroyed the individuality of Cora's racial heritages. The result is not decay but vitality, the excessive life that is uneasily demarcated as both positive and negative within the text. Unlike her blonde and feeble sister, Cora is determined and heroic, but the only textual resolution available to her character is death or further "crossbreeding." Only "savages" fall in love with Cora.

The metaphor of interracial blending is reinforced in the story of Cora's lover. Uncas's love for a European woman leads to his death in the same way that his involvement with white affairs leads to his moral decay. On a broader symbolic level, this pattern can be applied to much of the novel's treatment of culture. Chingachgook identifies the "blending" of European and native cultures through the trade of "firewater" as the primary and devastating force of European colonialism. The Hurons are shown in the process of self-destruction through alliance with de Montcalm's forces, which threaten to destroy both their ways of life and their culture. By Magua's own analysis his character is destroyed by his interaction with whites--both English and French--and the evils of their culture, especially whisky. His sexual obsession with Cora, who symbolizes both colonizer and colonized, compounded with his drinking--Chingachgook's Original Sin of colonialism--leads to his punishment, revenge, and the cycle of treachery that ends in his death. Even Chingachgook, despite his integrity, embraces the dispersal of his culture when he accepts Hawkeye as his "brother." Though Hawkeye is a solitary white man, and a new kind of white man at that, Chingachgook has nonetheless been forced by genocide and cultural self-destruction to leave his own world when he accepts Hawkeye as family. In this new, American idea of family, only Hawkeye has the ability to retransmit his culture to another generation, and their interracial relationship thus signifies death even as it appears to provide narrative hope. As Tamenund says, "I have lived to see the last warrior of the wise race of the Mohicans."

The core paradox of Cooper's historical romance lies in the uneasy ambiguity of its hero's mediation of these opposed cultures. Both Cooper and his protagonists work from the assumption that the modern stages of historical development are inherently better than the "savagery" of prior stages. At the same time, they also view the present as a dangerous challenge to the communal values and hierarchical relationships of the recent past. Both European and native cultures are shown to be violently disrupted throughout ***The Last of the Mohicans***, with established systems of leadership and conduct broken down by alcohol, war, corruption and cultural contamination. Hawkeye, the only man to successfully negotiate these disruptions, is also significantly removed from the social hierarchy that has reformed itself by the novel's closing pages. The "man without a cross" may be the new American archetype, but he is also its Other--a man who dwells in the borderlands that separate Europe and the natives, with no familial or emotional ties to the people who comprise the power elite of either side.

The end of Cooper's historical romance thus intimates both stability and disruption--an uneasy celebration of both the return of hierarchical order and the heroism of the man who remains outside of that hierarchy. It allows identification with a socially mobile outsider and simultaneously promises that real social mobility will be denied him. In exactly the same way, it validates the possibility of a superior native culture even while it is careful to make that culture an irretrievably dying one. If, as many literary theorists have claimed, the historical romance genre acts as a stabilizing force for the demands of social hierarchy, then the main impulse of ***The Last of the Mohicans*** is not the articulation and celebration of "natural," or "wild," self-identity, but instead the exact opposite. Hawkeye is both hero and antihero of his own story in a culture that seeks to distance itself from the Old World, even as it tries to retain the social structure that makes that world possible. As a stalemate of conflicting Anglophobic and Anglophiliac impulses, it provides an extremely ambiguous fictional pathway to later American history.

**Source Citation**

McIntosh-Byrd, Tabitha. "Overview of 'The Last of the Mohicans'." *Literature Resource Center*. Detroit: Gale, 2010. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 20 Oct. 2010.

Document URL  
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CH1420031323&v=2.1&u=ccl\_deanza&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w