



THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS

James Fenimore Cooper

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES
BY STEPHEN RAILTON

GEORGE STADE
CONSULTING EDITORIAL DIRECTOR



BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS
NEW YORK



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FROM THE PAGES OF THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS

Few men exhibit greater diversity, or, if we may so express it, greater antithesis of character, than the native warrior of North America. In war, he is daring, boastful, cunning, ruthless, self-denying, and self-devoted; in peace, just, generous, hospitable, revengeful, superstitious, modest, and commonly chaste. (page xxvii)

It was a feature peculiar to the colonial wars of North America, that the toils and dangers of the wilderness were to be encountered before the adverse hosts could meet. (page 3)

The eye of the hunter, or scout, whichever he might be, was small, quick, keen, and restless, roving while he spoke, on every side of him, as if in quest of game, or distrusting the sudden approach of some lurking enemy. (page 22)

“An Indian is a mortal to be felt afore he is seen.” (page 45)

A dark hand and glancing knife appeared before him; the Indian released his hold, as the blood flowed freely from around the severed tendons of the wrist; and while Duncan was drawn backward by the saving arm of Uncas, his charmed eyes were still riveted on the fierce and disappointed countenance of his foe, who fell sullenly and disappointed down the irrecoverable precipice. (page 68)

“The memory of an Indian is longer than the arm of the pale-faces; his mercy shorter than their justice!” (page 108)

“Natur’ is sadly abused by man, when he once gets the mastery.” (page 122)

“Revenge is an Indian feeling.” (page 187)

“Grass is a treacherous carpet for a flying party to tread on, but wood and stone take no print from a moccasin.” (page 207)

“Reason and calculation are often outdone by accident.” (page 264)

“It is true, my young men did not go out on the war-path; they had dreams for not doing so. But they love and venerate the great white chief.” (page 300)

“The pale-faces are masters of the earth, and the time of the redmen has not yet come again. My day has been too long. In the morning I saw the sons of Unamis happy and strong; and yet, before the night has come, have I lived to see the last warrior of the wise race of the Mohicans.” (pages 363—364)



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JAMES FENIMORE COOPER

James Fenimore Cooper was born September 15, 1789, in Burlington, New Jersey, to William Cooper and Elizabeth Fenimore Cooper. In 1790 the family moved to the frontier country of upstate New York, where William had established a village he called Cooperstown. Although cushioned by wealth and William's position as a judge, the Coopers found pioneer life to be rugged, and only seven of the thirteen Cooper children survived their early years. Profoundly affected by the challenges of frontier living, James would repeatedly draw on his childhood experience in *The Pioneers* and many of his other novels.

Cooper was educated by private tutors at Yale, where he enrolled in 1803; he was expelled in 1805 after setting off an explosion that blew off another student's dormitory door. As a midshipman in the U.S. Navy, he served at an isolated post on Lake Ontario and in a relatively leisurely assignment in New York City, where he met his future wife, Susan Augusta DeLancey, daughter of a wealthy family. In 1811 he resigned his commission to marry her.

According to family lore, Cooper fell into writing on a dare: One evening he threw down a novel in disgust, saying he could write a better book himself; when Susan challenged him and reminded him that he could barely stand to write a letter, Cooper wrote his first novel, *Precaution*, published in 1820. Encouraged by favorable reviews, Cooper wrote other books in quick succession and was soon regarded as a major voice in America's emerging literary tradition. He eventually published thirty-two novels and was the first American to make a living as a professional novelist. Natty Bumppo, who appears in *Last of the Mohicans* and the four other *Leatherstocking Tales* that Cooper published between 1823 and 1841, became one of America's favorite fictional heroes. Cooper and his family lived in Europe for seven years but returned to America in 1833. Eventually settling in Cooperstown, Cooper remained on the American literary scene as a prolific writer of political tracts, naval histories, and works of fiction. He died in Cooperstown on September 14, 1851.

THE WORLD OF JAMES FENIMORE COOPER AND THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS

- 1789 The twelfth of thirteen children, James Cooper is born on September 15 to Judge William Cooper and Elizabeth Fenimore Cooper in Burlington, New Jersey. George Washington is inaugurated president of the United States.
- 1790 The Coopers move to the frontier country of upstate New York, where William had founded Cooperstown a few years earlier. In his later novels, James will repeatedly draw on the rigors of his early frontier experiences.
- 1803 James Fenimore Cooper enters Yale.
- 1805 He is expelled from Yale for blowing off a fellow student's door with gunpowder.
- 1806 Cooper works as a sailor on the *Stirling*, a merchant vessel. His travels take him to Spain and England.
- 1808 Cooper joins the Navy, making Atlantic passages and serving at an isolated post on Lake Ontario.
- 1811 Cooper marries Susan Augusta De Lancey, the daughter of a wealthy family in Westchester County, New York. The couple, plagued by financial troubles for the next several years, moves to various towns in New York State before buying a country home near Scarsdale, where they settle with their seven children.
- 1812 The United States declares war on Great Britain.
- 1814 British troops set fire to Washington, D.C. Francis Scott Key writes "The Star-Spangled Banner."
- 1819 Washington Irving's tale "Rip Van Winkle" appears.
- 1820 After accepting a challenge from his wife to write a book, Cooper pens *Precaution*, a novel of manners. The Missouri Compromise draws the line between free states and slave states.
- 1821 *The Spy*, a historical romance set during the American Revolution, is published, establishing Cooper as a major literary figure.
- 1823 Cooper publishes *The Pioneers*, the first of the five Leatherstocking Tales,

which are set in the 1700s, both before and after the American Revolution, and tell the life of hunter, trapper, and scout Natty

Bumppo, known as Leatherstocking; the books follow Natty through various periods of his life, but not in chronological order.

- 1826 *The Last of the Mohicans*, the second Leatherstocking Tale, is published; Natty aligns himself with Uncas, the Indian of the title, and works as a scout in the British army. The Cooper family moves to Europe, and resides in Paris, Switzerland, Belgium, and England for the next seven years.
- 1827 *The Prairie*, the third novel in the Leatherstocking series, is published; Natty Bumppo dies among the Indians west of the Mississippi, where he has been driven by the advancing line of pioneers.
- 1829 Cooper publishes *Notions of the Americans*, a reflection on his native land and one of six books he writes while living abroad.
- 1833 Cooper returns to the United States.
- 1834 Cooper writes *A Letter to His Countrymen*, in which he criticizes American provincialism and announces his retirement from writing fiction. He publishes *Sketches of Switzerland*, one of his many travel narratives.
- 1837 In response to hostile treatment in the Whig press, Cooper instigates a series of libel suits, in which he remains entangled for years to come.
- 1838 Feeling financial strain, Cooper resumes fiction writing with *Home as Found and Homeward Bound*, which combine adventure with reflections on American society. On the so-called Trail of Tears, thousands of Cherokee Indians die during their removal from ancestral lands in Georgia.
- 1839 Cooper publishes *The History of the Navy of the United States of America*. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" is published.
- 1840 *The Pathfinder*, the fourth Leatherstocking book, appears; it takes place in 1760 during the French and Indian War.
- 1841 Cooper publishes *The Deerslayer*, the last of the Leatherstocking Tales; it describes Natty Bumppo's youth, when Natty and his friend live with the Delaware Indians and fight the Hurons.
- 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, written by Douglass, appears.
- 1846 Cooper publishes *Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers*.

1850 Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is published.

1851 James Fenimore Cooper dies in Cooperstown on September 14, 1851.

INTRODUCTION

We must not fall for the fiction Cooper uses to organize the story he tells in *The Last of the Mohicans*. There has never been a “last” Mohican. The tribe Cooper refers to by that name survives to this day, on a small reservation in Wisconsin. According to Cooper’s version of the Mohicans’ story, the death of Uncas in the middle of the eighteenth century is the last act in the tragedy of a once-mighty nation. There are a number of tragic elements in the real history of the people who, when they learned to write English, referred to themselves as the Muhheakunnuk or Moheakunnuk, but the story they have written with their actions is that of a people who, while remaining true to key elements of their heritage, made great efforts to adapt to and earn a place in the new world that descended on them with the arrival of the traders and settlers from Europe.

As Patrick Frazier recounts that story in *The Mohicans of Stockbridge*, the tribe accepted Christianity about two decades before the events Cooper dramatizes in the novel; two decades after the supposed death of the last Mohican, they fought on the American side during the Revolutionary War. When the tribe relocated from Massachusetts to the vicinity of New York’s Oneida Lake in the mid-1780s, just a few years before the infant James Cooper was carried to Cooperstown on the banks of nearby Lake Otsego, they took with them a letter from George Washington attesting that the Muhheakunnuks “have fought and bled by our side ... as our friends and brothers ... [and] as friends and subjects to the United States of America.” No efforts could stop the tide of white pioneers from diminishing their population and driving them farther west, but like nearly all the original Native American tribes, they survive despite the centuries of cultural loss, economic dispossession, white aggression, discrimination, and neglect.

That true story, however, is one the United States is still reluctant to tell, and repressed almost completely throughout the nineteenth century as the pioneers moved westward across the continent. On the other hand, Americans loved the story Cooper tells in *Mohicans*. Published in 1826, it was Cooper’s sixth novel; he was already America’s most successful novelist, a position he held through most of his career, and among the thirty-two novels he wound up writing before his death in 1851 were a number of best-sellers. *The Last of the Mohicans* was first among them all: his most popular book, and one of the most widely read American novels ever. Like most of Cooper’s novels, especially those he wrote in the first half of his career, it derives from the model of the historical romance that Walter Scott established in *Waverley* (1814). The subtitle of Cooper’s novel—*A Narrative of 1757*—echoes *Waverley*’s subtitle, *‘Tis Sixty Years Since*, and in his preface to the book’s first edition Cooper warns mere novel readers that by “narrative” he means historical fact, not imaginative fancy. But the project of *The Last of the Mohicans* is myth making, not history writing, and the myth it makes served contemporary readers precisely by replacing history as the nation was enacting it with a story about the fate of the Indians that both moved and reassured the whites who were in fact (but not in Cooper’s fiction) the agents of that

fate.

As Cooper tells the story, the first person to label Uncas “the last of the Mohicans” is actually his own father. Chingachgook himself is still a vigorous warrior, and the narrative repeatedly refers to Uncas as “young” and “youthful”—that such a father would be anticipating the death of such a son rather than looking forward to his eventual marriage and children seems to violate the truths of the human heart, but as Cooper tells the story, even Uncas accepts his ominous title. In fact, he enters the narrative exactly at the moment in chapter III when Chingachgook tells Hawkeye that when Uncas dies the whole tribe will be extinct, “for my boy is the last of the Mohicans.” “Uncas is here!” is the next line, as “a youthful warrior” steps out of the woods to join the conversation. “Here,” this introduction to him implies, “but not for long”—Uncas will figure throughout the novel as a character with an expiration date. As a rescuer of the story’s two white heroines and as the lost prince of the Delaware nation, Uncas is regarded by both the narrator and the white characters with considerable admiration. His head may be naked except for its “scalping tuft,” but the narrative calls it “noble.” Alice looks upon him as a heathen, “a being partially benighted in the vale of ignorance,” but she also associates his “graceful,” “dignified,” “pure,” and “proud” form with classical ideals, “some precious relic of the Grecian chisel.” Cora goes further: “Who that looks at this creature of nature, remembers the shade of his skin!” To her, that’s a rhetorical question, but her companions’ “short and embarrassed silence” in reply keeps the line between races firmly in place. Combined with the epithet “the last,” that racial boundary lets readers know that all the sympathetic admiration they bestow on Uncas is extended provisionally. Within those limits, the narrative allows Uncas to grow increasingly heroic. After the first rescue scene, for example, while his father scalps the Mingoes they’ve slain, Uncas hurries with Duncan, the white officer and gentleman, to the side of the two white maidens. Duncan is not ashamed to cry at the sight of their deliverance. Uncas doesn’t go that far, but his eyes nonetheless “beam with a sympathy that elevated him far above the intelligence and advanced him probably centuries before the practices of his nation.”

While that sentence doubtless sounds patronizing, if not racist, to most twenty-first century readers, Cooper’s books display more respect and admiration for Indian characters like Uncas than was the norm in his culture. Indeed, his depiction of Uncas as so noble a savage came under attack from a number of critics. A novel like Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Nick of the Woods* (1837), also a best-seller, was written expressly to contest Cooper’s “poetical illusions” and “beautiful unrealities” by describing instead what Bird in his preface calls “real Indians,” who are unrelievedly “ignorant, violent, debased, brutal.” Mark Twain made the same argument in *Roughing It* (1872), and began a sequel to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) that takes Huck and Tom into the Indian Territory so he can debunk Cooper’s romances by exposing the boys to a series of atrocities committed by treacherous Indians. In 1851, shortly before Cooper’s death, the Chippewa chief and activist George Copway publicly thanked the novelist for having created Uncas as a “hero” who “possesses all the noble traits of an exalted character,” an Indian whom Native Americans could read about with pride. Yet although Cooper advances Uncas centuries ahead of his tribesmen, he is careful never to suggest that the last Mohican could progress to the point where he belongs inside

American civilization. He lifts Uncas high enough to make his passing tragic—but readers mourn for him at the end, as they admire him throughout, from within the safety of a world out of which he has already disappeared.

In its final chapter, the novel relieves white American readers from the burden of imagining a political and social future for the nation that includes Native Americans by linking Uncas's death to the doom of his entire race. There are two massacres in the book. Neither involves whites killing Indians. The first half climaxes with the account of the slaughter of defenseless white men, women, and children at Fort William Henry by the Indians allied with the French. At the end of the second half we hear “the shrieks and cries of hundreds of women and children” when Delaware Indians loyal to Uncas destroy “the whole community” of a neighboring Iroquois tribe in a failed attempt to rescue Cora. But perhaps the most chilling scene in the novel is the one that follows this battle: the depiction of these Delawares at the funeral ceremony they hold for Uncas and Cora. In a series of descriptions the narrator suggests that these Indians are already dead, more a cemetery than a living tribe: Their grief “seemed to have turned each dark and motionless figure to stone,” and “even the inanimate Uncas appeared a being of life, compared with the humbled and submissive throng by whom he was surrounded.” In the novel's final paragraph, Tamenund, the aged patriarch of this people, explains what they are submitting to: the will of God, or as he puts it, “the anger of the Manitto.” “The pale-faces are masters of the earth,” he adds, and it is time for the Indians to “go.” The story Cooper tells about Uncas, then, opens with the epitaph that Chingachgook prematurely hangs on his son and ends with Tamenund's valedictory consent to the disappearance of his race, putting a frame around the erasure of the Indians that keeps it entirely in the past, where the only responsibility white readers have is to shed a tear for a tragedy they had nothing to do with. Of course, in 1826 most of the worst crimes against the Native American population—President Jackson's “Indian Removal” policy and the Trails of Tears, for example, or the western “Indian Wars” of the last third of the nineteenth century—were still to come. A “narrative of 1829,” as John McWilliams reminds us in his book-length study of Cooper's novel, would include Jackson's use of the myth Cooper created to justify the removal legislation that, in 1838, allowed his successor, Martin Van Buren, to use 7,000 federal soldiers to force 15,000 nonconsenting Cherokee to “go,” to leave the land guaranteed them by treaty and undertake the thousand-mile march across the Mississippi on which more than 4,000 of them died. Reading the novel and mourning the noble but providentially doomed “last Mohi can” allowed contemporary Americans to affirm their compassion while ignoring the real victims of their national policies. That is the self-serving fiction we must not read uncritically.

Having said that, however, it is equally crucial to note that the novel itself is not simply an endorsement of white American history. *Mohicans* is the second of Cooper's so-called Leatherstocking Tales, the five novels that he published between 1823 and 1841 featuring Natty Bumppo (called Hawkeye most of the time in this novel, and also referred to as Leather stocking throughout the five novels). The novels were not written in chronological order: Natty is an old man in the first of them, *The Pioneers*, and is youngest in the fifth, *The Deerslayer*, which is set a dozen years before the events of *Mohicans*. And Natty's role is not the same in all the novels: In the last two,

Cooper tries to involve him more directly in the romance plot by depicting him as in love and beloved. But Natty remains profoundly single, a liminal figure whose relationship to both white and Indian cultures is saturated with ambivalence. For example, at the end of this novel every other surviving white character retreats “far into the settlements of the ‘pale-faces,’ ” goes back from the wilderness to civilization and the rules of the society that the colonists are building in the new world. But Natty, who has lived most of his life among the Delaware, chooses to remain in the woods with Chingachgook. Yet as readers of the novel have many opportunities to note, Natty does not identify himself with the Indians either: His insistent (and, for many readers, annoying) refrain about being “a man without a cross” does not mean he isn’t a Christian, but rather that, as he puts it in his first scene in the novel, “I am genuine white”; that is, both of his parents were white. In his actions as a “warrior,” Natty most commonly serves the interests of the other white characters in the Tales, and reviewers and readers from the start have perceived him as the American equivalent of an epic hero. But in fact he repeatedly rejects the values and aspirations of white society. As a series focused on this alienated hero, the Leatherstocking Tales are written from a perspective both inside and outside official history, and simultaneously affirm and challenge the American quest to settle and civilize the continent.

Hawkeye and Chingachgook are already deep in a discussion about the morality of that project when we first meet them in chapter III. As Natty says there, “every story has its two sides,” and he listens open-mindedly while Chingachgook protests the destruction of his people at the hands of superior force. Two chapters later, Natty himself rebukes Duncan as a representative of the race that has “driven [the] tribes from the sea-shore.” Cooper inherited the theme of civilizing the wilderness not just from his American society but also from his father, Judge William Cooper, the founder of Cooperstown, who claimed to have been responsible for settling more acres of American forest than any other man of his time. Given this relationship, it is not surprising that Cooper’s feelings and ideas about this theme are so conflicted. The unresolved tensions inside the Tales about the moral costs and individual consequences of building an imitation of European civilization on the ruins of both the Native American culture and the natural environment give the series much of its power. Set in the world of Cooper’s own childhood in Cooperstown, *The Pioneers* probably takes the most subversive stance toward the nation’s (and his father’s) official faith in progress. In that novel Chingachgook, though old and enfeebled by drink, is angrier about the extermination of his culture, and Leatherstocking is often prophetically eloquent in the judgments he pronounces against the “wicked and wasteful ways” of white society. *The Last of the Mohicans*, on the other hand, puts considerably less pressure on America’s ideological status quo. While most of *The Pioneers* is set inside the raw forms of a new settlement, from which point of view the natural life embodied by the Indians and by Natty can be romanticized, nearly all of *Mohicans* takes place in the depths of a wilderness where terror seems to lurk behind almost every tree and bush; the worlds of nature and the Indians are aligned with the dangerous forces of Gothic fiction rather than the restorative virtues of Wordsworthian Romanticism.

Cooper’s decision in this second Leatherstocking Tale to pair Chingachgook and the

Delaware/Mohicans with another group of Indians, Magua and the Mingoes/Iroquois, similarly tilts the novel's ideological balance toward society. If the Mohicans can be aligned with the Romantic trope of the Noble Savage, Magua derives from a combination of the archetypal Gothic villain, Milton's Satan, and the New England Puritans' association of Indians with the powers of evil in the howling wilderness. But here, too, the novel is complex: Even Magua's story has its other side. In the scene in chapter XI in which Magua informs Cora that he will spare her sister, Alice, if she will put herself at his mercy by becoming his wife, he makes a case for being seen as the real victim. Like the Indian nation Chingachgook describes for Natty in chapter III, Magua says he was once a good and happy man, until the coming of the whites, with their "fire-water" and other evils and injustices, turned him into a scarred exile with a righteous grievance. "Who made [Magua] a villain?" he asks. That is a question with enormous subversive potential, but Cooper's narrative doesn't give it much chance to resonate. Magua is so single-mindedly and ruthlessly determined to destroy the happiness of these two young women who have never harmed him, his eyes burn so steadily with his thirst for vengeance, that as the narrator says near the end, "it would not have been difficult to have fancied the dusky savage the Prince of Darkness, brooding on his own fancied wrongs, and plotting evil."

It is significant that Cooper labels Magua a "dusky savage" and sees this term as a synonym for satanic. The white characters, including Hawk eye, and the narrator himself repeatedly describe the Mingoes in terms like these that deny them their humanity: "beasts of prey," "hellhounds," "devils," "fiend," "monster." For much of the novel the Mingoes whoop far more often than they speak, and when they scream it sounds, the narrator says, "as if the demons of hell had possessed themselves of the air." Most of their actions trace out a pattern of racially incendiary moments: They gorge themselves on raw food and even drink human blood "freely, exultingly, hellishly" ; more than once we witness the dark hand of a Mingo stroking the blond hair of a white woman as a prelude to scalping her, while during the first atrocity at William Henry a "savage" wantonly kills a white "infant," then tomahawks the mother. The rescue mission in the novel's second half actually takes the narrative into a Mingo village, which allows Cooper to give his white readers a chance to look closely at Native American culture on its own ground. But although Cooper read primary sources to research his Indian novels, especially the accounts of John Heckewelder, a Moravian missionary who had both a Christian and a proto-anthropological respect for the customs of the tribes he lived among, the novel's Mingo village is built out of white prejudice and exists only in the imagination of Cooper and his culture. Even Mingo women and children are "hags" and "dark spectres," and the first time we are shown the whole village gathered together, the scene looks like this:

The place ... resembled some unhallowed and supernatural arena, in which malicious demons had assembled to act their bloody and lawless rites. The forms in the background looked like unearthly beings, gliding before the eye and cleaving the air with frantic and unmeaning gestures; while the savage passions of such as passed the flames were rendered fearfully distinct by the gleams that shot athwart their inflamed visages (p. 245).

If it's "not difficult" to see Magua as Satan, it's impossible not to recognize this Indian village as hell on earth.

The five chapters that the novel spends inside the Mingo encampment (chapters XXIII-XXVII) are paired with two (chapters XXVIII and XXIX) that take us into the neighboring Delaware village. In a sense, this is even where the narrative leaves us in its last chapter, with Natty and Chingachgook at the Delaware funeral for Uncas and Cora. In his account of the Delawares and their social behavior, Cooper relies much more on Heckewelder, on both his facts and his spirit of cross-cultural respect. But while the Delaware community is shown to be dignified, just, ordered, devout, and willing to revere and serve white womanhood (which the novel consistently defines as the epitome of civilized grace), the members cannot transcend their historical fate. In the novel's opening paragraphs the narrator talks about the futility of the French and Indian War, in which two European powers fought for "the possession of a country that neither was destined to retain." At the end the fighting is between Mingoes and Delawares. The Mingo village is entirely destroyed, but in the first paragraph of the last chapter it is the Delawares who are described as "a nation of mourners," and it is their own inevitable extinction as well as Uncas that they mourn for. England and France, Delawares and Mingoes all lose—but, of course, out of these losses Cooper's United States of (white) America is being born. While some citizens of that new country protested loudly against Cooper's sympathetic portrait of the Delawares, his decision in this novel to provide two antithetical types of "Indians" proved very popular with the mass of his readers. Because the tribe that adopts Hawkeye is so noble, white readers can grieve over their passing. Because the rest of the Indians, however, are so monstrous, they must be destroyed to make the continent safe for civilization, and while (in the novel at least) the work of their destruction is not done by white hands, white readers need have no compunctions about rejoicing at their extermination. History is made up of losses as well as gains, the novel says; the end of the Indians is an occasion for sorrow and celebration but not at all for guilt.

Thus, even as a fantasy, Cooper's fiction arises from the brute facts of American history, although the colonial setting disguises the way the novel is a response to America's own empire-building: the imperialist subjugation of the native population that became known, within a generation after the novel was published, as "Manifest Destiny." Almost half of Cooper's thirty-two novels are, in one way or another, about the process of civilizing the wilderness. Most of these are still well worth reading, for in their troubled dramatizations of one of our culture's constitutive acts they hold up a mirror to our own deeply mixed feelings about the stories we tell about that process as well as the ones we continue to repress. As the "wildest" of Cooper's dramas of the wilderness, however, *The Last of the Mohicans* projects a psychological as well as sociohistorical fantasy onto its dark woods and its "dusky savages." In this respect it has a lot in common with *The Heart of Darkness* (1902), the novel about European powers in the African jungle that Joseph Conrad published at the start of the twentieth century. Conrad wrote very admiringly about Cooper's sea fictions but may not even have recognized the relationship between his novel and this one. *Heart of Darkness* is often cited as one of the originating texts of Modernism, while *Mohicans* seems, to many readers at least, most "historical" in its own aesthetic: its prose style, its fussy

and intrusive omniscient narrator, its reliance on literary conventions like “villain” or “light” and “dark” heroines. Thematically, however, Cooper’s novel verges on the same question that suggests “the horror” at the center of Conrad’s: whether “civilized” and “savage” are really not racial or ethnic or historical antonyms, but instead two interchangeable labels for all human beings. The darkness at the heart of Conrad’s “Africa” symbolically represents the deepest truth about human nature. Similarly, the “savage wilderness” into which Cooper’s novel plunges us can be interpreted as the realm of our dark passions.

The plot of *Mohicans* looks compulsively straightforward. Like most American novels in the 1820s, it was published in two volumes. In each volume the heroines are kidnapped, leading to a pair of rescue missions and ending with a pair of massacres. At the center the novel intersects history in its three-chapter account of the 1757 siege and surrender of Fort William Henry, but most of the story occurs in the archetypal, timeless world of villains who abduct heroines and heroes who rescue them. By casting Indians as the abductors, the novel aligns itself with the country’s first best-selling books: the “captivity narratives” written in the seventeenth century by Puritans like Mary Rowlandson and John Williams. The emphasis of these stories, however, is on captivity as a trial of faith in the wilderness. Through both its volumes and across hundreds of miles of woods, Cooper’s story keeps the focus on the threat to Cora and Alice’s virginity: Will they be restored to their father “spotless and angel like, as I lost them,” as he anxiously asks at one point, or will they suffer “a fate worse than death,” the euphemism by which rape is referred to by more than one character? This plot is launched at the very end of chapter II, when from behind the bushes appears an Indian’s face, “as fiercely wild as unbridled passions could make it,” watching “the light and graceful forms of the females” riding through the forest with a “gleam of exultation” in his eyes. Cooper keeps this apparent threat hanging over the heroines’ maidenheads so compellingly that the only major complaint reviewers made was that the novel was unbearably suspenseful, too painfully exciting to read. In their anxiety about the fate of the women, however, Cooper’s readers seem to have missed the moment when Hawkeye turns this story back on them. As the heroes begin their second rescue mission near the start of the second volume, Hawkeye tells Duncan that the threat of rape is all in his white imagination: “I know your thoughts, and shame be it to our color, that you have reason for them; but he who thinks that even a Mingo would ill-treat a woman, unless it be to tomahawk her, knows nothing of Indian natur” (p. 221).

In this amazing revelation, the novel exposes the ideological act of projection that projects “unbridled passions” onto dark savages and suggests that if, like Duncan, readers have been thinking about sex, they should probably revise their reading of both the story and themselves. From this vantage point we can see that the story really begins at the very end of chapter I, and not with the lustful gaze of a savage looking at white women, but with the “indescribable look” Cora bestows on a savage. This event is staged very suggestively, at the very moment the white characters leave Fort Edward’s protecting walls to enter the wilderness. Until this moment, a veil has covered Cora’s face, but just as the nearly naked Magua runs past her to take the lead of the party, “her veil was allowed to open its folds, and betrayed an indescribable look

of pity, admiration and horror, as her dark eye followed the easy motions of the savage." *The Last of the Mohicans* dramatizes what the conventional decorum of Cooper's culture repressed as "indescribable." Out of Cora's ambiguous gaze across racial lines, her attraction to and repulsion from the movements of Magua's body, erupts the novel's fantasy of angelic virginity and demonic desire. And as Hawkeye tells Duncan, as a fantasy it betrays more about our thoughts, who we are outside the walls or behind the veil of civilization, than about Indian nature.

Unlike Conrad, Cooper does not require his readers to acknowledge this insight. In fact, as in his treatment of the theme of "Indian removal," his dramatization of desire is framed in a way that allows white readers to keep their distance no matter how deeply it takes them into its jungle. When Cora's veil opens, it reveals that "her complexion was not brown," but "charged with the color of the rich blood, that seemed ready to burst its bounds." Her blush we can immediately attribute to her gaze at Magua, but readers don't learn why the narrator uses the strange locution "not brown" to describe her until the middle of the novel, when her father tells Duncan that not only do Cora and Alice come from different mothers, but also that Cora's mother had progenitors who came from Africa, that she was "descended, remotely, from that unfortunate class who are enslaved." Thus "not brown" means "partly black," so that Cooper's fantasy includes all three of the races that inhabited his America. Cora is one of Cooper's greatest female characters: brave, resourceful, generous, high-minded, and passionate. Alice is a much more typical Cooper "female": so white, so chaste, so helpless that she is not much more than an icon of innocence. But while it is impossible not to admire Cora, her father's revelation of her heritage has two major implications. Like Cora's "indescribable look" at Magua's body, his marriage to Cora's unnamed mother reminds us that desire can transgress all the lines, burst all the bounds, that Cooper's culture believed should confine it. But at the same time it allows white readers to identify Cora's sexuality with her "blackness" rather than their own humanity. Seen this way, she is not only a dark heroine, but that stereotypical figure American fiction kept coming back to throughout the nineteenth century: the tragic mulatta, as much an "Other" as the dark savages, and like them doomed, despite all her strengths, by her race.

The novel's wilderness, like the greenwood in Shakespeare or folklore, is a place of transformation. In the last section, particularly, the narrative recounts a dizzying number of metamorphoses: People turn into beavers and vice versa, Hawkeye and Uncas turn into bears, an Indian turns into David Gamut who later turns into Uncas, even Duncan paints his face like a Mingo. But the novel refuses to endorse the possibility of racial change through intermarriage, and at the end the racial boundaries are enforced with a vengeance. Duncan carefully removes his paint before being reunited with Alice, who has never given anyone's body a look with the least hint of ambiguity in it, and this untainted white couple is allowed to survive and marry and through their racially unmixed offspring inherit the future. All the characters who have gazed across racial lines—Cora at Magua, Magua at Cora, Uncas at Cora—come together at the novel's climax, but only to die.

That scene has the feel of both a ritual sacrifice and a perversely intimate dance of death. One of Magua's Mingo henchmen "sheathe[s] his knife in the bosom of Cora."