

THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS

When James Fenimore Cooper published *The Last of the Mohicans* in 1826, it became a milestone in American Literature. Although the United States of America had existed for nearly fifty years, American fiction had yet to be defined. Readers in England, the main literary scene, and even in America preferred to read novels written by British authors like Charles Dickens and Jane Austen. They viewed stories set in America as amateurish and backward and American authors as talentless hacks. James Fenimore Cooper set out to prove them wrong.

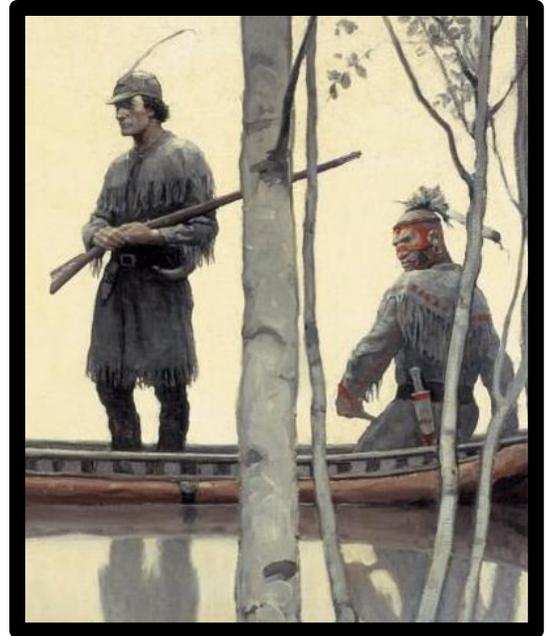
Cooper's writing career began one evening when his wife put down the book she was reading and bet him he could write a better one. Cooper accepted the challenge. Cooper's first published novel was set in England, as most stories were at the time, but from then on he frequently used the United States and its historical past as the setting for his stories. His second novel, *The Spy*, was set during the Revolutionary War and featured George Washington as a character.

Most of Cooper's stories are full of adventure—possibly because he had lived quite an adventurous life himself. After being accepted into Yale College at the young age of 13, Cooper was expelled for playing pranks like locking a donkey in a classroom and blowing up a classmate's dorm room door with gunpowder. College was not for him, he decided, so he took to sea and had many escapades in the U.S. Navy. Using his real-life experiences for inspiration, many of Cooper's novels were sea adventures.

Although he had earned himself a comfortable living from his writing, Cooper would not be famous today if he had not created his most enduring character—Hawkeye. Cooper's third novel, *The Pioneers*, introduced the rugged frontiersman, Natty Bumppo (also called Hawkeye, Pathfinder, Leatherstocking, and many other aliases). In the end Cooper wrote five novels that featured Hawkeye—spanning the character's life. *The Last of the Mohicans*, set during the French and Indian War when Hawkeye was in his 30's, is the most famous of these five. (Hawkeye's name went on to become an inspiration for the Iowa Hawkeyes and the lead character on the television show *M.A.S.H.*)

The character of Hawkeye became a favorite of readers for a variety of reasons. Probably the foremost is the fact that he is an archetype—an independent man's man, who is able to survive off the land. During Cooper's time period, there were real-life outdoorsman heroes like Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone, and he perhaps based Hawkeye on them—although many of their tales were just as fictional as Hawkeye's was. Having completely shunned society, Hawkeye appealed to the American sense of individuality. After all, part of the American spirit has always been a sense of self-reliance—a source of pride in one's own accomplishments. Hawkeye is a complete non-conformist and does not allow anyone else to define who he is. It is a sentiment that is completely American.

Next to Hawkeye, the landscape of America is probably the novel's most important feature. As far back as the earliest explorers, part of coming to America was a willingness to face the forces of nature;



therefore, part of the American spirit is appreciating, respecting, and celebrating nature. From waterfalls to wilderness forts to Indian settlements, the setting of the novel transported readers to another world. In spite of the British expectations that a novel set in America would fail, *The Last of the Mohicans* only increased readers' appetite for more American adventures. It has been called "the first American novel" because of its completely American themes and unprecedented success.

The Last of the Mohicans is also one of the first novels to prominently feature Native Americans. Most readers at the time considered American Indian culture to be so dull and simplistic that it would not make for interesting reading. Cooper proved them wrong by making the Indians both the antagonists and protagonists of his tale. He even gave one of his heroines, Cora, two Indian love interests—Uncas and Magua—in a time when interracial mingling was considered an extreme social taboo.

Touching upon the issue of race, the novel also raised the question—how exactly does a society function when composed of such drastically different groups of people? Hawkeye is the answer to this question, for he acts as the bridge between two vastly different worlds. He is a white man who adopted Indian ways. He weeps at the memory of his white mother, but Chingachgook is his oldest friend, and Uncas is his adopted son. He believes in God, but he finds God's presence in the wilderness instead of in a church. Because he is a hybrid of two worlds, he is able to act as the protector to the Munro sisters and their companions. The message of this is clear: In order for America to grow and flourish, Americans must be willing to adapt in order to survive—to see things from more than one perspective—to grow and change when the situation demands it.

The Last of the Mohicans also mourns the loss of Native American culture. Four years after the novel was published, President Andrew Jackson initiated the Indian Removal Act, forcibly moving thousands of Indians from their tribal lands, an exodus eventually known as the Trail of Tears. In the novel Chingachgook and Uncas, the last of their tribe, are a symbol of the slow fade of the native peoples—deprived of their land and their numbers dwindling. The novel seems to mourn a vanishing way of life.

Hawkeye's way of life is destined to fade away as well. In the novel, although Chingachgook and Uncas are his closest companions, Hawkeye does not seem sentimental about the fate of their tribe. It is simply the way of the world. The world changes, and those who do not change with it must pass away. He knows that his way of life is temporary, too. When there is no more frontier to explore, no more woods to hunt in, he will be obsolete—just like the Native Americans.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How was James Fenimore Cooper an innovative writer?
2. Is part of the American spirit being individualistic and self-reliant? Explain.
3. Is part of the American spirit appreciating, respecting, and celebrating nature? Explain.
4. How does Hawkeye bridge two worlds, and how does this enable him to be a hero?
5. How does Hawkeye serve as an example for Americans—living in a land made up of many different cultures?
6. How are both Hawkeye and the Mohicans doomed?