

**THE MAIN THEMES IN J.F. COOPER'S NOVEL "THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS"**

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**ANNOTATION**

Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* is seen as not only romanticistic, but as actively anti sentimental. In nineteenth – century sentimental theory, sight was one of the primary conduits to the emotions. When one beheld the sight of suffering, the theory went; one could not help but develop pity for the object of that suffering. Cooper wrote the novel as an explicit rejection of sentimental positions staked out by Lydia Maria Child in *Hobomok*: "He is resisting or rejecting the fantasy of women's novels that women's elevated place in white society is a function of a spiritual power by which male physical force can be countered, contained, and even disarmed denies that women have influenced world or national events and uses the romanticizing of American Indians in women's novels as evidence of their unfitness for the cultural power to which they were apparently aspiring".

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**INTRODUCTION**

Lora Romero resists seeing adventure narratives and cautioning against a too – easy distinction between micro and macro – powers, between home and frontier. But even so, she still argues that that the novel reads against sentimentalism's emphasis on education and its celebration of women's moral power; "The threat that woman's invisible power poses to the male subject produces the need for semi space to elude her miasmatic influence and hence makes imperative the macro – political controls effecting Indians removal from contiguous territories. In other words Cooper's discovery of the discipline deployed against his white man legitimates the technologies of punishment deployed against his red men". Cooper, she argues, finally blames women and sentimental fiction for the deaths of Indians and for the policies of their removal. The theory of sight and sympathy helps to explain some of the more peculiar narrative moments of looking, mistaken identity, and visual confusion in Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. Cooper uses the visual to control for which the reader feels sympathy and human connection. For instance, in probably the oddest visual moments in the novel, Duncan Heyward mistakes a beaver colony for an Indian village. Cooper uses this scene to make some comments on the industriousness of beavers and the comparative laziness of Indians. But if we consider Hume's theory of sympathy through resemblance, we can understand that this is one way to distance readers from the native peoples: they are less like us white readers than beavers are. Cooper's

descriptions also frequently serve to enforce or create a distance between the reader and the Indians characters: for instance, in the first chapter of the book, we watch the white characters' reactions when they first see Magua, and Cooper structures this "first contact" so that Magua's resemblance to the white people his very humanity, is minimized. We see Magua in the context of David Gamut's looking at horses, commenting on one of them by saying, "This beast, I rather conclude, friends, is not of home raising, but is from foreign lands". When he turns, he discovers that he has been addressing Magua, and, as Cooper tells us, sees something even more extraordinary, if not less animalistic, on which to gaze: "he turned to the silent figure to whom he had unwittingly addressed himself, and found a new and more powerful subject of admiration in the object that encountered his gaze". We are told that this "silent figure" has a "sullen fierceness mingled with the quiet of the savage, that was likely to arrest the attention of much more experienced eyes, than those which now scanned him, in unconcealed amazement The colors of the war paint had blended in dark confusion about his fierce countenance, and rendered his swarthy lineaments still more savage and repulsive. His eye, alone, which glistened like a fiery star amid lowering clouds, was to be seen in its native state of wildness". When Alice and Cora finally see this fierce, wild, native, savage appearance, Cooper focuses our attention on their retain to the sight: a "short exclamation" comes from Alice, and Cora, though she makes no sound, allows her veil to "open its folds, and an indescribable look of pity, admiration and horror, as her dark eye followed the easy motions of the savage". At the start of chapter two, the characters discuss Magua purely as a sight, not as a human: Cora shudders in terror and asserts, "I like him not". Though they convince themselves that they should not distrust him just because "his manners are not our manners, and ... his skin is dark", that is, of course, what the narrative finally teaches.

I will not belabor the repeated descriptions of Indians that Cooper provides to assure us that the difference between reader and Indian go deeper than manners and skin color. The descriptions of and references to most American Indians characters repeatedly emphasized their unlikeness to the white characters and their resemblance to animal or demonic forces: they are like "beasts of pray", "red devils", with "horrid visages". Magua even assumes the name of an animal "le Renard". The descriptions repeatedly call on visual difference to signify larger moral differences; differences in dress, in hairstyle, and in "paint" therefore, signal differences that run very deep indeed.

In contrast, Cooper's descriptions of Indian characters are quite different when he intends sympathy for them. Just as he describes Magua in the context of Cora's and Alice's gaze on him, so too does he describe Uncas as the object of that female gaze.

At a little distance in advance stood Uncas, his whole person thrown power hilly into view. The travelers anxiously regarded the upright, flexible figure of young Mohican, graceful and unrestrained in the attitudes and movements of nature. Though his person was more than usually screened by a green and fringed hunting shirt, like that of the white man, there was no concealment to his dark glancing, fearless eye, alike terrible and calm; the bold outline of his high, haughty features, pure in their nature red; or to the dignified elevation of his receding forehead, together with all the finest proportions of a noble head, bared to the generous scalping tuft. It was the first opportunity possessed by Duncan and his companions to view the marked lineaments of either of their Indian attendants, and each individual of the party felt relieved

from a birthed of doubt, as the proud and determined, though wild, expression of the features of the young warrior forced itself on their notice. The ingenuous Alice gazed at his free air and proud carriage, as she would have looked upon some precious relic of the Grecian chisel— Heyward, openly expressed his admiration at such an unblemished specimen of the noblest proportions of man.

As we can see, Uncas's form is viewed quite differently from Magua's: even though Uncas is red and wild, he is nonetheless proud, determined, noble, a work of Grecian art. And unlike Magua, he is clothed like a white man, wearing a green shirt that "screens" much of his body, making him a fitter subject for female gazing. Heyward and the women know from the way that he is dressed, that they can trust him.

In the late – eighteenth and early – nineteenth centuries, sight was understood as crucial to sympathy. Philosophers debated at length whether blind people could be fully human, with fully developed emotions; since they could not see suffering, the argument went, they couldn't develop human sympathy. Similarly, Cooper uses the representation of visual acuity – the ability to discern disguises – to emphasize differences between his readers and Indians. Indians, according to Cooper, do not see very well, and may therefore not develop truly human pity for others. White characters are frequently fooled by disguises, but they usually see through them quickly, emphasizing the resemblance between the reader and the Anglo characters. But since Indians frequently make fairly serious visual errors – mistaken Heyward for a juggler and clown, taking Natty's bear disguise for the real thing, and taking the lanky and malformed David Gamut for the athletically perfect Uncas they must not be as fully "human" as Anglos. Not only do Anglo characters rarely make these mistakes of viewing, but we must also remember that Natty's Indian name is "Hawkeye", emphasizing his superior ability to see. So from yet another angle, they are not like us white readers – they almost certainly cannot have human sympathies.

Indians kill up close with knives. When Cora is killed, we see her murder as if from close by, and understand that the Indian who kills her is untroubled by such close killing. When Magua looks away from her toward Uncas, "one of assistants, profiting by the chance, sheathed his own knife in the bosom of Cora". Magua's reaction to this death emphasizes his animalism, his willingness to kill even his close associates without sympathy: "The Huron sprang like a tiger on his offending and already retreating countryman, but the falling from of Uncas separated the unnatural combatants. Diverted from his object by this interruption, and maddened by the murder he had just witnessed, Magua buried his weapon in the back of the prostrate Delaware, uttering an unearthly shout, as he committed the dastardly deed". Cooper draws on several visual and sentimental tropes: Magua's tiger – likeness, his willingness to engage in unnatural" fighting with his own "countryman" and his lack of sympathy for a downed combatant. Further, Cooper stresses that Magua's reaction to seeing Cora's murder is not sympathy or pity, but madness. When this first blow doesn't kill Uncas, Magua turns to the now "unresisting Delaware" and "passé his knife into his bosom three several times". In contrast to Magua's reaction to the sight of violence, Duncan Heyward, when he sees Magua's murder Uncas, yells "Mercy! Mercy! Huron ... give mercy and thou shaft receive it!" This difference in reaction emphasizes that Magua not only does not look us, but that when he looks, he doesn't sympathize.



It is the late 1750s, and the French and Indian war grips the wild forest frontier of western New York. The French army is attacking Fort William Henry, a British outpost commanded by Colonel Munro. Munro's daughter Alice and Cora 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 are joined by Davit Gamut, a singing master and religious follower of Calvinism. Traveling cautiously, the group encounters the white scout Natty Bumppo, who goes by the name Hawkeye, and his two Indian companions, Chingachgook and Uncas, Chingachgook's son, the only surviving members of the once great Mohican tribe. Hawkeye says that Magua, a Huron, has betrayed the group by leading them in the wrong direction. The Mohicans attempt to capture the traitorous Huron, but he escapes.

Hawkeye and the Mohicans lead the group to safety in a cave near a waterfall, but Huron allies of Magua attack early the next morning. Hawkeye and the Mohican escape down the river, but Huron capture Alice, Cora, Heyward, and Gamut. Magua celebrates the kidnapping. When Heyward try to convert Magua to the English side, the Huron reveals that he seeks revenge on Munro for past humiliation and proposes to free Alice if Cora will marry him. Cora has romantic feeling to Uncas, however, and angrily refuses Magua. Suddenly Hawkeye and the Mohicans burst onto the scene, rescuing the captives and killing every Huron but Magua, who escapes. After a harrowing journey impeded by Indian attacks, the group reaches Fort William Henry, the English stronghold. They sneak through the French army besieging the fort, and, once inside, Cora and Alice reunite with their father.

Uncas, too, is used as a foil for multiple characters. Most obviously, he stands in contrast with Magua. Where Uncas is handsome, strong, and unmarked, Magua is savage – looking, devious, and bears the scars and marks of battles and his own foolishness. Uncas lives in the wilderness, with his father and Hawkeye. Magua has been cast out from his people, and serves first the English and then the French army and later returns to his tribe. Though both are to be chiefs of their respective nations. Uncas does not have a nation to rule, and Magua's has cast him out. In the simplest terms, Cooper has set Uncas up as the ideal, noble Indian, and made Magua the crafty, vicious savage. Uncas and Major Heyward are used as opposites, both feeling roles as potential suitors for the Munro sisters.

Uncas is silent, classically beautiful, as the girl's remark, and makes his love for Cora known through his action, including his eventual death. He also acts as a contrast with Major Heyward, who loves Alice. Heyward, handsome as well but not classically so, is a talkative man of words and little action, who neither fights for nor gives his life for Alice. He becomes a part of her rescue by following the party, following the instructions of Hawkeye, and by simply being in the right place at the right time.

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