

An analysis of conflict  
in Cooper's Last of the Mohicans

A Senior Studies Report

Submitted to the Faculty  
Of Saint Meinrad College of Liberal Arts  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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May, 1993  
Saint Meinrad College  
St. Meinrad, Indiana

"Man without a Cross"

*The Last of the Mohicans* is perhaps Cooper's most popular volume within the Leather-Stocking saga and this saga is probably his altogether most successful work. It is definitely the most violent and bloody work written by Cooper. The tales are a biography of a white man, Natty Bumppo, from his early life with the Delaware Indians to his death in his early eighties. This saga is Cooper's idea of the conquering of the wilderness, or the making of the Americas, the men and women who either established civilization or died by trying. This biography of Natty is fulfilled in *The Pioneers*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Prairie*, *The Pathfinder*, and *the Deerslayer*. In this saga, Cooper uses Natty Bumppo as a representation of "America as it ought to be" (Motley, 2). Natty represents a noble man. Unlike the French, English, and even the Indians, Natty portrays a free man, "a man without a cross." He respects all people, and he evenly lives and keeps company with people of different races, namely Indians. To Natty everyone is equal in nature. It is the laws of man that weigh one down and create the crosses we carry. This is the way Cooper believes we should all be,

that is, accepting of others for who they are, namely, human beings.

In this story, Cooper brings us many of the controversial issues of the time. Issues such as the white man coming to the New World and taking away land from the Indians, the mingling together of different races, the murdering of innocent women and children, and even, to some degree, religion. Also, I believe that Cooper is very interested in the following question: "does nature belong to man or does man belong to nature?" In this story, wilderness, that is, nature, plays a large role in trying to understand Natty Bumppo, a man who is one with nature. Natty, for Cooper, is the one true person that links the story to his own personal beliefs, or should I say, wishes.

Cooper loves the tomahawking continent of America, and as D.H. Lawrence would say, Cooper even imagines himself to be Natty Bumppo (Wilson, 952). Can you even begin to imagine it? Here is Cooper sitting in front of a large, brown hard-oak desk wearing a nice blue city suit with ruffles and a pair of brown buckled shoes. And then there is Natty wearing his dark brown weather-stained buckskin outfit, carrying a rifle, and has a full beard. The two men just don't seem to fit together, but they do. Natty is Cooper's ticket

to be the man of nature, that is, to have no cross. The idea of being free is very pleasing to the eyes of Cooper. You might even want to call Cooper a revolutionary, in the small sense of the word. *The Last of the Mohicans* allows Cooper to say what he feels and thinks, and to be who and what he wants to be. For example, "Cooper's most impressive presentation of the question of race from the redskin point of view is put, oddly enough, into the mouth of Magua, the villain of the story (as if to suggest that his evil-doing is partially due to, and perhaps justified by, race hatred)" (Porte, 19).

The Spirit that made men coloured them differently...  
 Some he made with faces paler than the ermine of the forest: and these he ordered to be traders; dogs to their women, and wolves to their slaves. He gave this people the nature of the pigeon: wings that never tire: young, more plentiful than the leaves on the trees, and appetites to devour the earth. He gave them tongues like the false call of the wild-cat; hearts like rabbits; the cunning of a hog... With his tongue, (the white man) stops the ears of the Indians; his heart teaches him to pay warriors to fight his battles; his cunning tells him how to get together the goods of the earth; and his arms inclose the land from the shores of the salt-water to the islands of the great lake. His gluttony makes him sick. God gave him enough, and yet he wants all. Such are the pale-faces(300-1).

It seems that Magua truly understands the ways of the white man. However, "since these are for Cooper secret truths almost too terrible to be uttered, they are entrusted to the care of the darkest and most

feared savage of all Cooper's savages, an Indian whose slyness and irrational malice should suffice officially to call into question anything that he says" (Porte, 19). *The Last of the Mohicans* is Cooper's way of bringing his real thoughts out through fiction. And Natty, personifying Cooper, is the realness of Cooper, that is, who Cooper wants to be.

In *The Last of the Mohicans*, Natty, who has earned the name, Hawkeye, through his sharpshooting skills, and Chingachgook are reintroduced fourteen years after we first see them in the Glens Falls and Lake George region. Uncas, the son of Chingachgook, is the "last of his people." "For my boy is the last of the Mohicans" (33). However, this brings up an interesting point. If Natty portrays the star character in the saga, why would Cooper title this novel *The Last of the Mohicans*? "Although the Indian is still the central figure, as the title indicates, it is noticeable that white actors are beginning to occupy more of the stage, as if emblematic of what was happening in the larger drama of colonial expansion" (Walker, 54). The white characters are the representation of the French, Dutch, and English people coming into the New World. These people are taking away land from the Indians by whatever means necessary,

that includes killing and stealing from the Indians.

Cooper exploits with a particular ability the broad setting for the story's narrow adventures. The lonely fights of a handful of characters are made to seem a part of the French and Indian War, and the entire struggle for the land of the Continent by shifting the scenes from the wilderness to the armies at Fort William Henry, and to the village of the ancient Delaware chief, Tamenund. In terms of the action, that is, fighting and such, the function of changing the scenes is to furnish an opportunity for the continuation of the chase between Magua and Hawkeye and the Mohicans. During the confusion of the horrible massacre at Fort William Henry, Magua again captures the daughters of Colonel Munro and must be pursued once again. Magua heads to the Delaware camp to seek reward and honor. Tamenund allows Magua only to take Cora which gives rise to one last chase.

This chase is symbolic in Cooper's tale because it shows the continuous struggle for Hawkeye and his companions to take back what was originally theirs. This is closely related to the Indians' struggles to take back their land which the white man took from them. Not only is the situation similar, but the final end is basically

the same. That is, the only thing they are able to retrieve is death itself, they being Uncas and Cora on one side of the spectrum and the American Indian on the other side. However, all of this chasing after Cora and Alice Munro seems to build itself quite a paradox in one of Cooper's characters.

Natty Bumppo, better known as Hawkeye, is a man without a cross. What exactly does Cooper mean by this? I believe that living without a cross can actually mean two different things. To be without a cross epitomizes the easy life. That is, nothing should weigh him down by giving him a burden or a duty to act out. There should be no worries, no struggles, nothing that makes life difficult in any way. However, every thing Hawkeye and his friends do in the story prove to be heroic acts that include complete danger, that is, life threatening to them, but they continue to jump straight into the danger (literally "jump").

The Hurons stood aghast at this sudden visitation of death on one of their band. But, as they regarded the fatal accuracy of an aim, which had dared to immolate an enemy, at so much hazard to a friend, the name of *la Longue Carabine* burst simultaneously from every lip, and was succeeded by a wild and a sort of plaintive howl. The cry was answered by a loud shout from a little thicket, where the incautious party had piled their arms; and, at the next moment, Hawk-eye, too eager to load the rifle he had regained, was seen advancing upon

them, brandishing the clubbed weapon, and cutting the air with wide and powerful sweeps. Bold and rapid as was the progress of the scout, it was exceeded by that of a light and vigorous form, which bounding past him, leaped, with incredible activity and daring, into the very centre of the Hurons, where it stood, whirling a tomahawk, and flourishing a glittering knife with fearful menaces, in front of Cora(11).

Here we see one instance of the bravery shown by Hawkeye, Uncas, and Chingachgook where they risk their own lives to save the two sisters, Cora and Alice. Yet, even if the decision by Hawkeye and the Indians were not to save the girls, the burden of the decision itself gives a cross to them. Therefore, Hawkeye is a man with a cross.

However, if we want to look at a possibly deeper understanding of a man without a cross, we could say Hawkeye, like the Indians, is a man without one particular religion, and in this sense, a man without a cross. His religion shows itself through life within nature and all that it entails. Nature contains everything a person needs to survive. However, its beauty is misinterpreted by man. Within nature both heaven and hell can be found. That is, within beauty there is also evil.

"Tis open before your eyes," returned the scout; "and he who owns it is not a niggard of its use. I have heard it said, that there are men who read in books, to convince

themselves there is a God! I know not but man may so deform his works in the settlements, as to leave that which is so clear in the wilderness, a matter of doubt among traders and priests. If any such there be, and he will follow me from sun to sun, through the windings of the forest, he shall see enough to teach him that he is a fool, and that the greatest of his folly lies in striving to rise to the level of one he can never equal, be it in goodness, or be it in power" (117).

Therefore, within nature we must fight and live for our own sakes, without expecting too much from God. Survival calls for individual success and strength. Doing good deeds comes from our choice, Hawkeye's choice. He is man without a cross. Hawkeye is a man living within the wilderness. I believe that Crèvecoeur's *Letter from an American Farmer* says it best: "Without temples, without priests, without kings, and without laws, they are in many instances superior to us; ('they' are the Indians) and the proofs of what I advance are that they live without care, sleep without inquietude, take life as it comes, bearing all its asperities with unparalleled patience, and die without any kind of apprehension for what they have done, or for what they expect to meet hereafter. What system of philosophy can give us so many necessary qualifications for happiness" (Walker, 45)? "Take life as it comes" says it all, there is no cross to bare for Hawkeye.

At this particular moment Hawkeye brings something else into mind. Natty is given three names; he is Hawkeye, La Longue Carabine, as well as Natty Bumppo. My question to Cooper, is what was he trying to pull off, if anything. I believe that Natty realizes that he is only a man and this is proven when he tells us that he has no cross. However, everyone else sees him as being something more than a man, almost as a god. Natty has the name Hawkeye which relates itself to that of a hawk who sees everything, and the ability to see all is a godly trait. The name La Longue Carabine represents a spirit name given to Natty by his enemies. They are never actually able see him but only hear tell of his heroic actions and adventures, therefore, he inherits this "spirit" name, La Longue Carabine. And his last name is Natty, the manly name, the name which he never goes by in the entire book of *The Last of the Mohicans*. I believe Cooper intended Hawkeye to be a God-like character in this tale. I also believe that others, that is, characters in the story, definitely saw him as that, with the exception of Hawkeye himself. Allowing Hawkeye to resemble that of a godlike character is Cooper's optimistic approach of hope for America. Like Warren Motley said, Hawkeye is Cooper's representation of "America

as it should be." Cooper wants to follow the example of Natty, that is, to be free and noble, or better yet, a man without a cross. "He (God) knows no difference in his children, whether the colour of the skin be red, or black, or white" (234).

Cooper's wilderness is perhaps the most famous part of *The Last of the Mohicans*. It is also the biggest conflict within the story, that is, nature versus man. However, some might argue that the biggest conflict is man versus man for nature, or land, but it is the man, or better yet, the white man who is fighting with nature. The Indians are seen in the story as being one with nature, that is, they blend right in with the wilderness, being part of the wilderness. The white man, however, with his fancy colored uniform and his brilliant marching step finds himself acting and, I would even imagine, looking like a clown to the Indians. These men have no understanding of what nature is. Nature's beauty supersedes the imagination of understanding it as a whole. That is, to look at nature we see beauty, but inside of the beauty exist many dangers and trials. The wilderness chooses its own plan of action, nobody ever knows what to expect. Wayne Franklin's essay *The Wilderness of Words* tells us "it is a wilderness, we quickly learn, whose 'toils

and dangers' pose almost as grave a threat for those characters as do the bloody enemies who await them there, a world where 'impervious...forests' painfully delay - though they cannot eliminate, such is the devotion to violence in this book - the fearful meeting of the opposing hosts" (Romero, 388).

Along both ranges of hills, which bounded the opposite sides of the lake and valley, clouds of light vapour were rising in spiral wreaths from the uninhabited woods, looking like the smokes of hidden cottages, or rolled lazily down the declivities, to mingle with the fogs of the lower land. A single, solitary, snow-white cloud, floated above the valley, and marked the spot, beneath which lay the silent pool of the "bloody pond" (140).

Here nature is explained with a certain beauty hiding the evil. That is, it shows how nature can show us a deception, something like what Emerson would say how we hide our true selves behind our clothes because truth is sometimes harsher than a lie. The peacefulness hides the death found in the quiet lake. In fact, the peacefulness can be death personified within itself throughout the entire story. Where there is quiet there is death lurking.

"The best expression of the chaotically gathered world and of the nature and significance of action taking place within it is Hawkeye's description of Glenn's Falls" (Butler, 122).

...look at the perversity of the water! It falls by no rule

at all; sometimes it leaps, sometimes it tumbles; there, it skips; here, it shoots; in one place 'tis white as snow, and in another 'tis green as grass; hereabouts, it pitches into deep hollows, that rumble and quake the 'arth; and thereaway, it ripples and sings like a brook, fashioning whirlpools and gullies in the old stone, as if 'twas no harder than trodden clay. The whole design of the river seems disconcerted. First it runs smoothly, as if meaning to go down the descent as things were ordered; then it angles about and faces the shores; nor are there places wanting, where it looks backward, as if unwilling to leave the wilderness, to mingle with the salt!...After the water has been suffered to have its will for a time, like a headstrong man, it is gathered together by the hand that made it, and a few rods below you may see it all, flowing on steadily towards the sea, as was foreordained from the first foundation of the 'arth (55)!

This description of Glenn's Falls shows us the water's conflict of sounds, colors, movements that represent the conflicts of race and policy of Cooper's bloody world, our world. However, the perversity of the water also gives a glimpse of hope because one thing is for certain. Just like the water continues to move on with its struggles and turns, so does life, that is, us. It is also very interesting that Cooper uses Natty to give this description of Glenn's Falls. This description, like in many of Shakespeare's play, acts as a play within a play, actually, a theme within a theme. That is, just like the water struggles, so must we. I think Cooper has hit upon something by using his wilderness, or nature. Cooper realizes that neither

nature or man belong to each other, but in contrary, are one in each other. Therefore, man fighting against nature shows us a conflict in itself, that is, a contradiction in terms.

In Cooper's wilderness of heaven and hell, natural law is the commandment that nature gives, or in all reality, what man gives to nature. That is, what natural law may actually be, differs for each people/race. What an Indian may believe natural law to be may not be the same for what the white man believes. Cooper, therefore, allows different ideas about natural law to exist. He offers a moral choice of decision for natural law within the story. Should Hawkeye, Uncas, Duncan, and Chingachgook stay to defend the helpless women when death is almost imminent? Or should they escape by using the raging waters in hope of rescuing the women later?

"Chingachgook is willing and eager to go, since it is perfectly sound within the Indian value system (as Cooper defines it) for a valuable warrior to save himself by abandoning the undervalued females...Heyward, (or Duncan) cannot leave the women, even though that is the practical course" (Slotkin, 19). In short, it is more or less a gentlemanly thing for a white man to do. However, the moral conflict only effects Hawkeye and Uncas. Hawkeye is a white

man who wants to stay but the better instinct of the wild savage, Indian, tells him to go. Meanwhile, Uncas who should have the instinct of his father, finds himself wanting to stay because of his attraction to Cora Munro, who herself has some "Negro" blood in her. I believe that Cooper uses her being mixed as a scapegoat for having intermarriages. This brings up a interesting situation. Hawkeye, who has white man's blood, lives by the Indian ways, whereas Uncas who has Indian' blood almost chooses the white man's way but doesn't. Cooper makes this love in Uncas to be a character awakening that allows him to be more advanced than most Indians. However, this advancement proves to be the final downfall of Uncas. His struggle with Magua for Cora becomes his death. Uncas' death in his effort to save Cora shows an illogical step for the death of an Indian, moreover, the extinction of a race. The death of Uncas allows us to see a prophecy of the extinction of Indians resulting is some degree from the hands of the white man. More importantly, however, even though Cooper allows different beliefs in natural law, we can clearly see how the differences of belief mingle together between the two different races. This proves the point that man is one with nature from Cooper's point of view.

It is clear that Cooper's Indian history is a deliberate and rather elaborate fabrication of "myth" for fictional purposes. Its effect is to unite the fragment of Indian history into a story of origin, rise to grandeur, intermarriage, decline, and fall which symbolize the rise and fall of contemporary history. Cooper's Indians are a metaphorical example of the pattern of our own civilization, reinforcing the suggestion that in the Indian we see the primitive person of our own character and fate. In their character as racial "grandfathers", Cooper's Mohicans resemble the various master races cited by historians as the "linguistic, cultural, and genetic forefathers of the ruling classes or dominant nations of Europe."(17)

It is the Indian culture that Cooper falls in love with. They are a people who are one with nature. They are a free people. They are men without crosses. Cooper, who is trapped in the makings of government and law, sees *The Last of the Mohicans* as his freedom. The life through which Natty lives is the real truth of Cooper, that is, the want to be a free man, and it is only through Natty Bumppo that Cooper can become "a man without a cross."

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