

Deconstructing an American Myth: Hollywood and *The Last of the Mohicans*

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Since its initial two-volume publication on 6 February 1826 by the Philadelphia publishing house of Carey and Lea, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans; A Narrative of 1757* has probably generated more attention from Hollywood filmmakers than virtually any other American novel. From its first adaptations in 1909 as a D. W. Griffith one-reeler and in 1911 as two different one-reelers by the Powers and Thanhouser Film Companies to its latest incarnation in 1992 as a Michael Mann potboiler, more than a dozen interpretations of the novel have appeared in various forms, from silent picture to Mascot serial to animated version to BBC television series to Hollywood epic.¹ Considering the popular reception of the novel in Cooper's day and the mythic story it spins about American frontier heroes, this attention seems deserved. Most Americans, if they have not read the novel (and most have not), have nonetheless read about it or read abridged versions of it, and our own popular culture has embraced it in a number of curious ways. Mark Twain made Cooper and his "offenses" against literary art in the Leather-Stocking tales part of his traveling lecture shows. More recently, the anti-hero of television's *M*A*S*H*, Captain Benjamin Franklin Pierce, we are told, received his sobriquet "Hawk-eye" because the Cooper tale was supposedly the only novel his father had ever read.

That most Americans have never read *The Last of the Mohicans* is not surprising. Until the Fenimore Cooper family agreed to cooperate in the production of a responsibly-edited series of Cooper's fiction and non-fiction in the mid-1960s, *The Last of the Mohicans* (appearing in 1983 as part of that NEH-sponsored, CSE-sealed, SUNY Press-published series) was available for readers only in a plethora of corrupt texts. And while the absence of reliable Cooper texts has been partially responsible for Cooper's less than highly touted reputation as a man of letters, Twain certainly had something to do with this offense against the American literary canon. The fact remains that the novel has been praised more often for what it did not, rather than for what it did. Film versions of the novel illustrate this strange reaction to Cooper's masterpiece and explain the distortion of the text, yet ironically Hollywood filmmakers are probably as responsible for generating interest in Cooper's novel over the years as literary critics or college and university professors. In translating Cooper's work for the screen, they highlight and make popular those elements of *The Last of the Mohicans* that have little to do with

Cooper's original story, but have everything to do with twentieth-century American popular culture and taste. While most of the directors do a sterling job of targeting Cooper's mise en scene, none of their film versions of the novel accurately reproduce Cooper's plot, and few come close to understanding Cooper's theme. Despite these problems, film versions continue to be made because Hollywood sees the novel containing the ingredients of an American film classic, if for all the wrong reasons.

When *The Last of the Mohicans* appeared in 1826, it was hailed by some as an American masterpiece. In the 18 February 1826 issue of the Philadelphia National Gazette, Robert Walsh remarked that

Never since the days of our childhood has Fairy hand sported so with our feelings.... Never has necromancer, or poet, held us so long enchanted. The work, from the beginning to the close, is one tissue of harrowing incidents, beautiful and chaste imagery, and deep pathos, and what adds to the charm, is, though we yield a willing credence to every turn of the narrative, we know that every thing is true. (163)

William Leete Stone's review in the *Commercial Advertiser* of 6 February 1826 concurred with Walsh's praise of Cooper's novel:

"It is American books," says a late English Review, "that are wanted of America; not English books, nor books made in America by Englishmen. We want, in a word, from the people of North America, books, which, whatever may be their faults, are decidedly, if not altogether, *American*." Well, here they have one -- a description of the aboriginal character -- in all its native, wild, and lofty grandeur-powerful, warm, rich, glowing, and animated, from the hand of a master, though they may be unwilling to acknowledge him as such. (238)

Such contemporary reviews of the novel addressed issues that have affected the literary interpretation of *The Last of the Mohicans* in the almost two centuries since its publication, but have had seemingly little impact on the twentieth-century filmmaker's response to the text. Historically praised either for the inclusion of harrowing incidents in his fictions or for the creation of truly American books, Cooper has been generally misinterpreted and misrepresented by filmmakers. Almost all of the film adaptations have concentrated on his plots, always to the novel's detriment, and the result has been chaos with Cooper's text.

[78] With the exception of the 1920 silent version of *The Last of the Mohicans*, directed by Maurice Tourneur and Clarence Brown and starring Wallace Beery as Magua, Barbara Bedford as Cora, Albert Rosco as Uncas, Harry Lorraine as Hawkeye, and Theodore Lerch as Chingachgook, none of the other versions come close to reliably retelling the story. In this 1920 interpretation, the directors concentrated on the relationship between Cora and Uncas, with Hawk-eye reduced to almost a secondary position. It is generally faithful to the novel, although it includes an extremely long section on the Fort William Henry massacre and introduces a villainous British officer who lusts for Cora and betrays the fort to the French. These are minor distortions in the text in comparison to those in later versions.

In 1924, for example, Pathe produced a composite film of *The Leatherstocking Tales* directed by George B. Seitz. With Harry Miller as Leatherstocking and David Dunbar as Chingachgook, the film also features Edna Murphy as Judith Hutter and Lillian Hall as Hetty Hutter (both characters from *The Deerslayer*, not the *Mohicans*), and depicts such historical figures as Montcalm, Braddock, and George Washington. Columbia Pictures produced a similar distortion in 1947 called *The Last of the Redmen*. In addition to making Hawk-eye an Irish scout and Cora Munro a redhead, the film also introduces a new character into the text, Davy Munro, the Munro girls' kid brother, as well as a

standard bromide of the classic western, the circling of the wagon train. Equally western in its mise en scene is Harold Reinl's direction of a 1965 German adaptation called *The Last Tomahawk*. Set in the American West of the 1880s, the action takes place at Ranch Munro and contains such imaginative variations as a chest of government gold, an exploding mountain, and a cavalry charge.

In the 1930s, two film versions of the novel were produced. The first, a Mascot serial directed by Reaves Eason in 1932, is a classic twelve-chapter nail biter that includes almost as many textual distortions of the novel as it has cliffhanger endings. Known chiefly for its casting of Harry Carey as Hawk-eye, the twelfth installment ends with an equally bizarre violation of textual integrity: Chingachgook is killed, Uncas lives, and Hawk-eye tells the young Mohican that he is the last of his race. The second cinematic version filmed in the 1930s is probably the most famous of all the film adaptations, primarily because its script was used as the source for the 1992 Michael Mann blockbuster. Based on a screenplay by Philip Dunne and directed by George B. Seitz, who remade his 1924 silent film in 1936 for United Artists, *The Last of the Mohicans* stars Randolph Scott as Hawk-eye and Binnie Barnes as Alice Munro. Seitz introduced most of the plot changes used in the 1992 film, but the chief plot difference portrays Seitz's Hawk-eye and Alice Munro as the two white star-crossed lovers rather than Mann's Hawk-eye and Cora. In spite of his misrepresentation of Cooper's novel, which has Uncas, the Native American, and Cora, the part-white woman herself the product of miscegenation, as the principals in an interracial romance, Seitz's plot twist was not surprising in 1936, given Hollywood and the Hay's Office's horror of miscegenation.² It would have been distasteful to Cooper, too, not only because of the violation of plot, but also because he attempted in his Leather-Stocking tales to deemphasize the love interest of the European Gothic novel.

When Michael Mann produced his 1992 film, the Hawk-eye and Cora love affair took center stage. In choosing to pair Hawk-eye with the dark-haired Cora and Uncas with the fair-haired Alice, Mann revised Cooper's original story which showed Hawkeye as a "man without a cross" (and without a girlfriend) and Uncas drawn to Cora, a dark-haired mulatto, rather than to the blonde Alice, a coupling representing Cooper's own attitudes toward miscegenation. Of all the many revisions of Cooper's novel that appear in the 1992 version, Mann's decision to turn *The Last of the Mohicans* primarily into a love story and to ignore the essence of the Native-American theme is the strangest and most damaging plot twist of all. It is one thing to borrow scenes from other Leather-Stocking novels (the canoe chase from *The Pathfinder*, for example); to invent scenes (Hawk-eye's shooting of Duncan Heyward to prevent his suffering at the burning stake, Magua's killing of Colonel Munro); or to mismatch lovers (Duncan and Cora rather than Duncan and Alice, Uncas and Alice rather than Uncas and Cora) to sell theater tickets. But to manipulate the story's plot in an attempt to make history more vivid and realistic for the contemporary filmgoer is questionable directing and screenwriting. To focus on the love affair between American literature's most strongly individualistic, anti-authoritarian, and anti-British mythic hero and Cora Munro is to miss the essential theme and flavor of Cooper's classic tale. As James Franklin Beard informs us in his historical introduction to the SUNY edition of the novel, *The Last of the Mohicans* is not finally about such peripheral action as two lovers (particularly white ones), but about the "unremitting, frequently violent, always exasperating contest between the Native Americans and the intruders, white immigrants and settlers of every description" (xxx) and its consequences: the destruction of the last vestiges of a race of Native-Americans.

In the current climate of political correctness, where the rights and heritage of all Americans demand celebration and recognition, it is unusual that none of the filmmakers who have translated *The Last of the Mohicans* for the stage have taken this theme into consideration. Cooper's early nineteenth-century reviewers certainly recognized his strengths and his weaknesses as a writer and social critic. An anonymous pundit wrote in the pages of the July 1826 issue of the *North American Review* that "we do not find that he [Cooper] describes with great effect the secret workings of the passions of [79] the human heart; or that he moves our affections, by any other than mere external agents, and such commonly as are calculated to excite no softer or more sympathetic emotion than

terror or surprise" (153). Charles Sealsfield agreed in his 12 February 1831 *New-York Mirror* essay on the newly published Bentley Standard Novels series of Cooper's novels that "Our author does not excel in painting civilized men and manners; and, least of all, civilized women" (252). Cooper, of course, was not, nor did he intend to be, a novelist of manners. His strength, as another anonymous critic pointed out in his biographical sketch of Cooper in the June 1838 issue of *the Southern Literary Messenger*, was "In painting Indian scenes of still life, or in delineating the warrior and hunter, the battle or the chase, our novelist, as he is the first who seized upon subjects so full of interest for the romance, so is he alone and unrivalled in this branch of his art" (375). An earlier anonymous writer's diagnosis in *The New-York Mirror* concurs: "In this novel the American aborigines are introduced with better effect than in any work of fiction that has ever been written. The gentle Uncas and his valiant sire, the fiend-like Magua, and the venerable patriarch of the Delawares, are perfect masterpieces of their kind.... They are immensely superior to all that Chateaubriand, or any others, have made to delineate the character of the American savage" (39). Cooper's strengths certainly did not lie in his portrait of domestic toilets, and the contemporary reviews showed it; instead reviewers like the critic in the April 1826 issue of the *Literary Gazette* admired his Native-Americans and praised them as "original and interesting" portraits never "so well, so truly, and so vividly drawn as in his pages" (198).

How then has twentieth-century America and Hollywood strayed so far abreast of Cooper's original theme in *The Last of the Mohicans*? What is it about Cooper's story that readers and filmmakers have refused to understand or acknowledge? Does the problem lie in ignoring the source and history of Cooper's tale, or perhaps in falling prey to the bad reputation Cooper as novelist has received in American literature ever since Mark Twain penned his hilarious satire of "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences" and condemned Cooper forever as a second-rate hack? The problem, I would argue, lies somewhere in between. On the one hand, American readers have not stopped laughing long enough over Twain's essay to recognize that it was not serious literary criticism, but primarily a tour de force in the history of American humor. To some degree this has prevented American readers and filmmakers from listening closely enough either to what scholars have been claiming as Cooper's contributions to American literature or to what we have learned about the historical background and composition of the novel.

When Twain wrote his grossly exaggerated lampoon in the July 1895 issue of the *North American Review*, he accused Cooper of literary incompetence by attacking his use of imprecise language, his development of improbable characters, and his creation of impossible plots in the Leather-Stocking novels (in particular, *The Deerslayer*, *The Pathfinder*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*).³ In recent years, as the Writings of James Fenimore Cooper series has worked to produce seventeen textually-reliable editions of his novels, we have learned that Cooper was not the careless slipshod writer Twain portrayed him to be in his essay. While it is true that the editions of his novels were remarkably corrupt because compositors had difficulty reading his script, because he did not read proof against printer's copy, and because numerous resettings had left a heavy toll of corruptions, Cooper did revise, as the textual evidence discovered by the editors of the Cooper series has demonstrated conclusively. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, for example, Cooper in a letter from Paris dated 29 August 1831 to his publishers Colburn and Bentley noted that "There are errors in the Preface of the Mohicans, and in one instance bad grammar -- 'As the verdure of their native forests *fall*.' Verdure is the nominative case of fall, and it should have been *falls*" (*L&J* II: 137). Such authorial revisions were commonplace with Cooper. Furthermore, Twain's charges have also been challenged and disproven by Lance Schachterle and Kent Ljungquist in their rejoinder to Twain appropriately called "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Defenses: Twain and the Text of *The Deerslayer*." In their essay, they attempt to prove that Twain's charges against Cooper's art are both fallacious and inaccurate. Based upon their own work as Cooper editors, they determine that "By carefully manipulating Cooper's texts, willfully misreading, and sometimes fabricating evidence, Twain leaves the reader with the impression that he has polished Cooper off." However, "By looking at Twain's treatment of plot, characterization, and especially diction

in *The Deerslayer*, [they] lay bare Twain's rhetorical strategy and satirical distortions" (402). Despite the overwhelming evidence they present in their essay that Cooper was a careful craftsman, most uninformed American readers continue to laugh at Cooper. Hollywood has unfortunately contributed to this offense against literary history by repeatedly telling the wrong tale of *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Cooper first conceived the idea for his novel in early August 1824. As James Franklin Beard tells the story, *The Last of the Mohicans* was born out of an excursion Cooper took with four young English noblemen (Edward Stanley, Henry Labouchere, Evelyn Denison, and John Wortley) to Glens Falls and Lake George. While there, Cooper was struck by the scenery at the falls and declared, recorded in a footnote in Stanley's journal appended to his description of the Falls, that he had to "place one of his old Indians here" -- "The last of the Mohicans" was the result." Beard notes that "The word Indian or Indians in both accounts is probably significant; for The Leatherstocking Tales had not yet been [80] conceived as a series, and the introduction of Hawk-eye may have been an afterthought" (*Mohicans* xx). If Stanley's note and Beard's interpretation of Cooper's words are correct, then *The Last of the Mohicans* as a novel focusing exclusively on the character of Hawk-eye as its central hero is as much an American literary myth as are the Hollywood films that not only place him at the center of their adventure tale, but also represent him as the principal male lead in a love story.

Of course, Hawk-eye's role in the novel is certainly important and central to the significance of the action, but it is not necessarily as the quintessential American white hero that this centrality functions. Following the massacre at Fort William Henry, Hawk-eye recognizes that the decisions made by his fellow white men (Munro, Heyward, Montcalm) have led to an unmitigated disaster. As he discusses with Chingachgook and Uncas the path they should take to recover the Munro sisters, "he arose to his feet, and shaking off his apathy, he suddenly assumed the manner of an Indian, and adopted all the arts of native eloquence. Elevating an arm, he pointed out the track of the sun, repeating the gesture for every day that was necessary to accomplish their object" (199). This scene is crucial, not only because Hawk-eye shakes off his apathetic mood, but also because he undergoes a metamorphosis and realizes that the "manner of an Indian" is one he must assume to successfully rescue the women. It is in the second half of the novel that Cooper reinforces his decision to select the Native-American (and his ways) as the hero and the subject of his story.

Cooper's interest in Native-Americans and their story appears throughout *The Last of the Mohicans*. He was certainly aware of the significance of statements by Chief Justice John Marshall in 1823 and President James Monroe in 1824 that would be the basis of the official Federal Indian Removal Policy instituted years after the publication of his novel,⁴ as well as the popularity of Indian captivity narratives throughout the colonial period of American history and historical treatments of the massacre of Fort William Henry, all of which he used as inspiration for his narrative of 1757.⁵ Cooper's task, as Beard suggests, "whether or not he formulated it consciously, was to invent an infrastructure to make the outrage dramatically intelligible and humanly meaningful" (*Mohicans* xxxi). *The Last of the Mohicans* was that infrastructure.

Seventeen years after the publication of *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper wrote to Rufus Wilmot Griswold telling him that his book was "an experiment, being quite original as to manner and subject" (*L&J* IV: 343). A year later, in another letter to Griswold, he remarked that his narrative was "an original book... I do not know where to find its model. It succeeded perfectly, forming a totally new class of romance" (*L&J* IV: 461). Noting the book's originality, Cooper implies that *The Last of the Mohicans* was not a novel intended to continue the story of Leather-Stocking saga first addressed in *The Pioneers*, or simply a tale that would address his fascination from youth with Indian culture; instead, as he said in the introduction to the 1831 Bentley Standard Novels edition, "the business of a writer of fiction is to approach, as near as his powers will allow, to poetry" (*Mohicans* 7). Cooper of course intended this to imply that he would de-emphasize realism and, as Beard notes, present "himself as a writer of romance, stressing the tragic element Aristotle identified as endemic in epic

structure" (*Mohicans* xxxii). *The Last of the Mohicans* fits this definition, but it becomes not so much a romance demonstrating Hawk-eye and his woodsmanship, as it develops into a tragic tale of the extinction of a Native-American race and the recognition of man's mortality.

Cooper did not write *The Last of the Mohicans* because he wanted to vilify the Native-American race or to celebrate the manifest destiny of the white man. He examined human nature and did not care much whether he exposed the evils of one race or another. Magua is probably the blackest villain in Cooper's fiction, but Montcalm's inability (or unwillingness) to anticipate and prevent the Fort William Henry massacre does not speak well for Europeans. Similarly, those characters who promote their own education and sophistication as the chief virtues of the civilized world (Montcalm again, Colonel Munro, Duncan Heyward, the Munro sisters) have little or no compassion or understanding of human nature. Even Hawk-eye and the two Mohicans commit their own acts of transgression in the course of the narrative and do not escape blame for the tragedies that befall either race. Cooper was far more interested in exploring larger moral issues in *The Last of the Mohicans*, something that Hollywood has not recognized in its film adaptations of the novel.

To explore these ideas, Cooper did not write a Gothic romance; instead he constructed a plot that borrowed from several popular genres of the period, ones that were certain to address moral issues in 1826 America and to evoke emotional responses from his readers. Certainly the most prominent genre appearing in *The Last of the Mohicans* is the Puritan captivity narrative.⁶ Cooper adopts many of its conventions and invents some new variations so as to transform the captivity genre into his own secular adventure story. By doubling the number of captivities, Cooper also doubles the number of the traditional attack-capture-escape scenes in the novel and makes the center piece of the tale -- the massacre at Fort William Henry -- more atrocious and dehumanizing. Cooper also invents two heroines instead of one, doubling the love interest that he does borrow from the British Gothic romance. He introduces the psalmist David Gamut into the novel for comic relief and to satirize the Calvinist theme of the triumph of the godly over the savage wilderness and [81] the pagans who inhabit it. And by describing Magua and his actions in both Miltonic and Shakespearean terms to broaden his historiographic strategy (his use of literary allusion in the novel is extensive), Cooper borrows and modifies for his own use traditional literary tropes.⁷ But *The Last of the Mohicans* is anything but a traditional novel.

Almost every convention and motif Cooper adopts in his narrative of 1757 helps him address in one way or another the conflict between Native-Americans and European settlers. His use of two captivity narratives not only provides structure for the novel (the first occurs in Chapters 1-17 and describes the journey to Fort William Henry and the events leading up to the massacre; the second in Chapters 18-33 charts the course of Hawk-eye and the Mohicans as they track Magua and the captive Munro sisters), but also provides an important context for the tragic conclusion.⁸ Following the massacre scene in Chapter 17, Cooper describes almost immediately in the very next chapter the change in the season: "The whole landscape, which, seen by a favouring light, and in a genial temperature, had been found so lovely, appeared now like some pictured allegory of life, in which objects were arrayed in their harshest but truest colours, and without the relief of any shadowing" (181). The grass is arid, the mountains are barren, the wind blows unequally; as Cooper paints it in allegorical terms, "it was a scene of wildness and desolation; and it appeared as if all who had profanely entered it, had been stricken, at a blow, by the relentless arm of death" (181-82). The world of the novel has abruptly changed, but so too has the character of the participants also changed. Munro and Heyward, the heroes of the European world of the first half of the novel, seem impotent, while Uncas, "*who moved in front*" (183; italics mine), takes the lead in the chapter following the massacre and discovers the tell-tale signs of Magua and the fleeing party. Magua is transformed from the victim of the European settlement of the colonies to its destroyer, the "Prince of Darkness, brooding on his own fancied wrongs, and plotting evil" (284). It is Uncas and Magua who become the central figures in the second half of the novel; as the last of the Mohicans, Uncas asserts his mythic stature in a battle on

a mountain top with Magua, not only to determine the winner in a struggle between good and evil, but also to decide the destiny of a race.⁹ Uncas's ultimate death not only signifies the end of the Mohicans, but in a larger context, the end of a time in history. In the final paragraph of the novel, Tamenund, the Delaware sage, elegizes that "The pale faces are masters of the earth, and the time of the red-men has not yet come again" (350).

Cooper's decision to concentrate on the end of a race and on the dramatic battle between white and red, rather than on the romantic adventures of a frontiersman in *The Last of the Mohicans*, surfaces everywhere in the novel. Hawk-eye, for all his centrality in the tale, never serves as the romantic lead or as the hero of the story, the role that Hollywood has assigned him in all of their adaptations of Cooper's work. In the first half of the novel, Cooper casts Hawk-eye as a guide to lead Heyward and the Munro sisters to Fort William Henry. In the second half, Cooper uses him again as guide, this time to prepare Uncas to seek his destiny in the land of the Delawares. While he voices many of Cooper's concerns regarding the settlement of America by Europeans throughout the novel, fulfills his role as sharpshooter when the events demand, and serves as the stage manager of much of the plot in the tale, he guides, but never directs the action. Similarly, none of the other white male characters in the novel take the lead in anything other than their own culpability. Duncan Heyward never understands that the methods of white warfare will not work in the wilderness; Colonel Munro's and Montcalm's blindness to the realities of "honor" (whether white or red) brings destruction; David Gamut's belief in the goodness of men is both facetious and ironic. Hollywood has consistently portrayed these impotent Europeans in their true light in all of the film versions of *The Last of the Mohicans*, but scriptwriters and directors continue to misrepresent Hawk-eye and the Native-Americans in the tale.

Even the two heroines in the tale surface on film as the opposite of what Cooper intended them to represent. It is Cora Munro, the dark-haired sister to the fair-haired Alice, that Cooper intends to fall in love with Uncas. By using Cora, the product of two races, not Alice, as the love interest of Uncas (and in an even more aberrant moment, of Magua), Cooper intensifies the tragic consequences of their fatal attraction and heightens the importance of Uncas's responsibilities towards his hereditary responsibilities and customs. While the Hollywood of the 1930s could not have portrayed on celluloid such an interracial relationship, the Hollywood of the 1990s certainly could write into the script such a match. To pair Hawk-eye with either woman or to match Uncas with the fair-haired Alice, as Hollywood filmmakers continue to do, is to misunderstand the very essence of Cooper's theme in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Cooper did not condone interracial relationships; his attitude toward interracial marriage was pragmatic. In his *Notions of the Americans* (1828), he explained that "As there is little reluctance to mingle the white and red blood...I think an amalgamation of the two races would in time occur. Those families of America who are thought to have any of the Indian blood, are rather proud of their descent; and it is a matter of boast among many of the most considerable persons of Virginia, that they are descended from the renowned Pocahontas" (490). For Cooper, neither interracial marriage (the proposed match of Uncas and Cora) nor miscegenation (Colonel Munro and his mixed blood mistress) was a racial judgment, but instead a plot device.¹⁰

[82] As a plot device, the suggestion of interracial marriage or miscegenation raises important issues in the novel on a number of levels. As a product of an "unnatural union" (her mother was "the daughter of a gentleman of those isles, by a lady, whose misfortune it was, if you will...to be descended, remotely, from that unfortunate class, who are so basely enslaved to administer to the wants of a luxurious people!" [159]), Cora herself is tainted. Yet it is Cora who anticipates a marriage with a red man, and it is Cora who is the object of both the lust and protection of Magua. As a tainted woman, however, Cora also is the only character in the novel who represents Christian forgiveness. As Robert Milder reminds us, she "pardons Magua for his obscene proposal to her and his malignant ferocity with a Christ-like 'he knows not what he does,'...and in the trial scene...she is cast in the role of the eloquent advocate for mercy, Shakespeare's Portia" (426-27). Milder concludes that "Cora's history

establishes her as a symbol for the injustice done the Negro," and "she is made to embody both the problem itself and the potential solution to the problem.... As the product and victim of racial injustice Cora represents the sufferings of the Negro in the New World; as the most eloquent and admirable Christian in the book she offers a principle of reconciliation founded upon the equality of souls before God" (427- 28). Everyone loves her: Magua, Uncas, Alice, Colonel Munro, and Duncan Heyward, ironically a southerner himself. It is unusual in another sense that Hollywood has not grasped the significance of Cooper's treatment of Cora and developed her role in their versions of *The Last of the Mohicans* as something more than the love interest of Hawk-eye, who in the novel admires her also, but certainly is not in love with her.

Hollywood has seldom missed an opportunity to tell a story on film about interracial relationships, independent men and women, Native-Americans, and the historical truth behind the real violence that generated American culture. They missed it this time, however. Filmmakers should follow D. H. Lawrence's advice for readers in regard to Cooper, and trust the (text of the) tale, not the (misunderstood reputation of its) teller (2). Although *The Last of the Mohicans* seems a natural choice for the wide screen, at least by those who believe that Fenimore Cooper was a writer of children's frontier adventure stories, it is a tale, however, with a far more profound significance than Hollywood has given it in any of its superficial film interpretations. None of them are accurate representations of Cooper's novel. Hollywood has regrettably conducted its own campaign against historical and textual veracity and committed its own set of literary offenses. In their versions of *The Last of the Mohicans*, filmmakers have rewritten Cooper's plot,¹ miscast and mislabeled his characters, modernized his dialogue, misunderstood his themes, and misrepresented history. As Mark Twain himself would have to confess, "Counting these out, what is left is Art. I think we must all admit that" (12).

Notes

- ¹ I would like to thank Hugh C. MacDougall, of the James Fenimore Cooper Society, Cooperstown, for providing me with a description of the film versions of *The Last of the Mohicans*.
- ² The Motion Picture Production Code was adopted by the Association of Motion Picture producers in February 1930, and by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America the following March. The Code was amended several times over the years and included new sections on crime, costumes, profanity, and cruelty to animals. A complete copy of the code is included in the appendix to Leffs and Simmons's *The Dame in the Kimono* (283-92). In section "II -- Sex," under "Particular Applications," number 6 deals with miscegenation: "Miscegenation (sex relationships between white and black races) is forbidden" (285).
- ³ Twain also wrote a second essay on Cooper edited by Bernard DeVoto under the title "Fenimore Cooper's Further Literary Offences."
- ⁴ Marshall's 1823 decision removed the "right of discovery" as the legal basis for titles to Indian land conveyed in treaties and agreements; Monroe argued that "unless the tribes be civilized they can never be incorporated into our system in any form whatsoever." See Beard's "Historical Introduction," especially pages xxviii-xxix.
- ⁵ For a discussion of Cooper's sources for the Fort William Henry massacre, see French and Philbrick; see also Butler and Philbrick (in his "Sounds of Discords" essay) for a discussion of Cooper's historical process.
- ⁶ Numerous critics have drawn connections between the captivity narrative and *The Last of the Mohicans*, but David Haberly's essay is the best.
- ⁷ William Kelly calls *The Last of the Mohicans* Cooper's most allusive of novels, not only in his use of material for the epigraphs, but also in his extensive use of literary allusions to reveal the character of his players.
- ⁸ See Peck's chapter on *The Last of the Mohicans* and the parallels he draws between the first and second halves of the novel.

9. See Darnell's treatment of Uncas as the hero of the novel in the tradition of the *ubi sunt* formula, as well as John McWilliams's essay and chapter on the novel as an American Indian epic.

10. Leslie Fiedler's treatment of the miscegenation theme in *The Last of the Mohicans* remains the most celebrated.

11. Michael Mann's 1992 version of *The Last of the Mohicans* contains a number of significant plot variations. Cooper's original plot (in italics) is followed by Mann's version: the scout is called Nathaniel Bumppo, the scout is called Nathaniel Po; Natty does not fall in love with any of the women in the novel, Natty falls in love with Cora; Cora is attracted to Uncas, Cora falls in love with Natty; Uncas falls in love with Cora, Uncas falls in love with Alice; Heyward falls in love with Alice, Heyward falls in love with Cora; Heyward lives (and eventually marries Alice), Heyward dies at the burning stake in the Delaware camp (shot by Natty); Colonel Munro lives a disillusioned and broken man, Colonel Munro dies (killed by Magua); two captivities, one captivity; Cora dies (killed by a Huron), Cora lives and travels with Natty and Chingachgook at the end; Alice lives, Alice dies (by jumping over a cliff); Natty shoots and kills Magua, Chingachgook kills Magua; Natty as guide, Natty as hero.

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