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Paper 1: Cooper

Beautiful desolation. The result of Cooper's epic is beautiful desolation. Beautiful because his language flows like the river—it ebbs and swirls subtly when the story becomes slow and gives character to the setting, "For several miles in this direction, the mountains appeared reluctant to yield their dominion, but within reach of the eye they diverged and finally melted into the level and sandy lands…Along both ranges of hills, which bounded the opposite sides of the lake and valley, clouds of light vapor were rising in spiral wreaths," (156). The beauty comes naturally and brings readers to the very feet of the mountains, figuratively and literally. And at other times, when the action is quick and fierce, his language flows like a troubled river cascading over a precipice and leaves no doubt to the intentions of his characters, "Though not a vaunting and bloodily disposed Goliath, returned David, drawing a sling from beneath his parti-colored and uncouth attire, 'I have not forgotten the example of the Jewish boy. With this ancient instrument of war have I practiced much in my youth…and the skill has not entirely departed from me'," (380). Yet the story is one full of desolation. From the dashing of a baby against the rocks during a surprise attack to the deaths of Uncas and Cora, there is no beauty left at the story's conclusion. And most significantly, the landscape where the roots of the great American realist novel could take hold and flourish is only a land of desolation, a land of missed opportunities.

Despite the beauty and absolution with which Cooper writes, we are left with a sense of ambiguity, a noncommittal approach to the history he is trying to represent. Where opportunities arise to inject moralizing, a subjective view of his history, or at the very least a subtle commentary, Cooper plays it safe and follows the known route instead. At best it could be an oversight or a mere habit; at worst it could be a deliberate attempt to avoid commenting or criticizing the established values of his day. Despite being known as a prolific writer and a "Social critic," (vii) he is unwilling or unable to fully *criticize*. Cooper is stopped from fully creating a true historical novel by the unstoppable power of habitual inertia. The figurative desolation we find at the end of the novel is a last great attempt to infuse the story with a level of realism capable of commenting on the situation he created. But his inability to fully remove himself from the norms and values in which he was entrenched mean *Last of the Mohicans* cannot stand as the quintessential American historical novel that Cooper himself wanted it to be.

We learn that young Cooper was intelligent and advanced. "At the age of thirteen James Fenimore Cooper enrolled in Yale University: he must have been uncommonly precocious…He was the youngest in his class and excelled in the study of Latin," (vi). He was also prolific and almost arrogant: "It seems that it [his time in the Navy and voyage to Europe in 1826] was chance that made him a novelist…One day he laid aside an English novel he was reading with the idle remark that he could write a better one himself." He ended up writing more than 50 works, most of which were novels. His works were diverse, but most importantly for *Last of the Mohicans*, "He was interested in organized society and wrote on the subject of American democracy; both defending and criticizing it," (vii). Were Cooper's intentions in producing *the*

American novel not so obvious, the resulting reliance on tradition and customs highlights the missed opportunity. But since he blatantly stated he was a critic of democracy and wished to explore that, the resulting novel is forced into a harsher light.

Cooper was a student of history—both recent and ancient. His skill and knowledge produced many copycats and imitators later. “These cheap novels, of course, did follow…They certainly do not compare,” (xi). And most importantly we learn that, whereas the imitators were skilless fakes, Coopers were brilliant and “Grounded in history.”

As both a scholar of democracy and Latin, Cooper was well poised to critique the atrocities common to the mid-1750s that stretched into the early 1800s. He was also keenly aware of literary traditions familiar to Latin scholars.

For all his skill, tradition, experiences, and productivity, *Last of the Mohicans* reads far too conservative and presumptuous to truly make a statement. If taken as a historical novel, this work is indeed very historically accurate—he writes from a perspective of chauvinism, bigotry, and Christian bias. Cooper was well educated, well-read, and very invested in both the past and the present. The moment to moment presumptions and apathetic portrayal of race, religion, and gender are at odds with the generalized statement of the story’s conclusion—that those forces and beliefs only wind up leaving death and sadness in their wake, both figuratively and literally.

Initially, I believed that Cooper was presenting his historical novel as a piece set firmly in the time in which it takes place. In other words, it seemed obvious the statements of fact were conscious and represented an awareness of their falsehood. Repeated use of the terms savage,

fairer sex, grace of God, pale-faced dogs, and so on was common for a time when the French, English, indigenous peoples, and soon-to-be Americans were mixing and fighting over what would become the United States. In this readers could learn a lesson simply by observing how harsh the past sounded, feeling the grating effects of such course language. However, the repeated assumptions by both characters and narrator paint a picture of genuine belief, not an objective observer. Characters from all races and stations in life preach the same didactic and xenophobic ideals. From French generals to native leaders, each character is so firmly entrenched in their assumptions as to almost become caricatures or literary Type of their beliefs that there is no commentary on the quality of the beliefs. Instead, it comes across as something Cooper didn't even consider when writing. It flows so freely that it seems more like Cooper taking those ideas for granted and inserting them without thought than a conscious display of characterizing the incorrect ideals of the Colonial Era. "Students of Cooper's works and life have commented on the difficulties he had with egalitarianism," Says A. Guthrie in the introduction to Cooper's story. "Whether Cooper was really bothered by egalitarianism, I don't know…It is a straightforward story, told without references to social order, and happily, without digging into psychology," (xi).

Cooper is very aware of the values of both his time and the period in which the book takes place. But unlike other Historical authors, his work is lacking impetus or force that could allow it to make a statement instead of reading more like a textbook of raw data. Of the historical novel Lukacs says, concerning French history that can easily be applied to American history, "This interpretation [Balzac recognizing the complexity of the French Restoration period] of modern French history as a long path leading to the 'error' of the French Revolution

is, of course, not only a judgement on the social content of this development, but contains within it an entire methodology of approach to history, that is the whole question of whether one regards history as subjective or objective," (Lukacs, 76). He continues with a statement that is more damming for Cooper's methods: "He [Vigny] says of historical facts: 'They always lack a palpable and visible concatenation which could lead unerringly to a moral conclusion." Thus the deficiency of historical facts consists, according to Vigny, in their being unable to provide clear enough backing for the author's moral truths." In other words, a historical novel cannot rely on just facts and history, because facts alone cannot lead to a conclusion. And if one wishes to write a transformative work and express the ideas of democracy, race, religion, and history, as Cooper was interested in so doing, the author must do more than merely place the facts. But that is exactly what Cooper does—he inserts the established dogma of the Colonial Era without subjectivism and more as a deferring "well, this is how it is, I can't change or comment on it" perspective. The objective facts are accurate, but there is little subjectivity.

From the module 2 video lecture comes a quote from Reverend Smith. He states dryly, "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?" His statement articulates the generalized feelings towards America, that they (Americans) had not yet produced anything great. But, as the video lecture continues and we read earlier, Cooper set out specifically to counter that argument and "Change all that."

Cooper, then, was aware of America's lack of great works and knew all too well that mere historical facts are deficient to create a moral conclusion. A moral conclusion was needed to pull America out of obscurity and answer Reverend Smith's question with a resounding *Everyone reads an American book!*

Cooper was a student of history, knew Latin and modern techniques, was precocious, prolific, and determined, and set out specifically to create the American novel that others would read and value. And despite all that, every character, every opinion, every idea, and every opportunity to make that statement falls flat, the victim of established conventions without daring to moralize or, even worse, criticize those conventions. He desires to create The great novel and instead creates a book of history and conventions that can read like a pamphlet or guide on how to behave like a typical 18th-century man or woman.

Where opportunities to create value and moralizing exist, Cooper uses lazy xenophobia. "Magua was born a chief and a warrior among the red Hurons of the lakes; he saw the suns of twenty summers make the snows of twenty winters run off in the streams, before he saw a pale-face; and he was happy!" (111). Magua tosses racial epithets with ease and no thought. But that's okay because Magua *is* racist, right? "Tis not often that books are made, and narratives written, of such a scrimmage as was here fou't atween the Mohicans and the Mohawks…I was then a younker, and went out with the Delawares, because I know'd they were a scandalized and wronged race. Forty days and forty nights did the imps crave our blood around this pile of logs," Hawkeye says on page 138. Now we see a "pale-face" hurling racial slurs and using bigotry without a second thought. But *he* is not racist, or at least, not *as* racist, right? Hawkeye is bound to views common to the day without a thought put towards moralizing his views.

The views of someone like Hawkeye or David, both of whom are at opposite ends of the religious spectrum, could be argued away by their education (or lack thereof), not habit. But there is one single line that shows Cooper *was* acting out of habit and unaware of or unable to

critique the views of the characters. “Forty days and forty nights”. Hawkeye, a man without religion, utters the phrase with ease. Forty days and forty nights is a Biblical phrase used to represent a period of trials and tribulations, as Christ was tempted of the devil forty days and forty nights according to Luke chapter 4, and fasted forty days and forty nights according to Matthew 4. Even the book of Genesis says that it would rain for forty days and forty nights, thus leading to the great flood for which Noah was to build an ark. This is a highly Christianized phrase representing a figurative trial. Cooper uses Hawkeye to talk about the people of the land with relatively thoughtless racism (the imps) which could be explained as a product of Hawkeye’s upbringing and experience. There’s a reason saying someone has a mouth like a sailor is a cliché—it’s because being around sailors inevitably leads one to adopt the foul language of a sailor. And so Hawkeye undoubtedly adopted the tongue of the woods and the natives. Were this all it would at best be an example of Cooper merely stating the historically obvious, the objective facts without subjective moralizing. However, the expression of forty days and forty nights by one who repeatedly admits he is not religious in the slightest, one who spent more time alone or with natives than the common man, could not have picked up such a phrase due to constant exposure. “Doctrine, or no doctrine, said the sturdy woodsman, ‘tis the belief of the knaves, and the curse of an honest man. I can credit that yonder Huron was to fall by my hand…nothing short of being a witness will cause me to think he had met with any reward, or that Chingachgook, there, will be condemned at the final day.” (128). Hawkeye here denounces the religious statements of David. David continues to interject his Christian perspective, after which Hawkeye responds, “Book! Do you take me for a whimpering boy at the apron string of one of your old gals; and this good rifle on my knee for the feather of a

goose's wing, my ox's horn for a bottle of ink, and my leathern pouch for a cross-barred handkercher to carry my dinner? Book! What have such as I…to do with books? I never read but in one." Hawkeye here spends a page denouncing David and the need for religion. His religion is the woods. This again could be Cooper merely approaching Hawkeye from a heathen's perspective. And yet, not many lines later comes the phrase forty days and forty nights.

The highly religious phrase, uttered by an unabashedly atheist man, is an absolute contradiction in terms. Hawkeye *could* have heard the term in his travelings and adopted it, but that is *extremely* unlikely given the frequency with which he admits his religious naivete. So seamlessly does Cooper weave this saying into the book, specifically Hawkeye's dialogue, that this can hardly be taken as anything *but* a habit of Coopers, something he is so deeply familiar with that he hardly knows he is doing it.

The idea of the historical novel, according to Lukacs, is one that steps away from the grandiose of the era before and focuses on the actions of "Everyday life" (52). It isn't the grand heroics of the mass experience that we find the historical and real, but in the everyday lives of the average person. "They [historical authors such as Scott] wished to show that the possibilities for this human upsurge and heroism are widespread among the popular masses, that endless numbers of people live out their lives quietly, without this upsurge, because no opportunity has come their way to evoke such an exertion of powers," (53). Says Lukacs of Scott's writing, "He is a patriot, he is proud of the development of his people. This is vital for the creation of a real historical novel, i.e. one which brings the past close to us and allows us to experience its real and true being. **Without a felt relationship to the present, a portrayal of history is impossible**," (bold added for emphasis).

Unfortunately, Cooper misses this point entirely. He has the opportunity to be proud of his nation and its progress, he can be proud of the lessons learned from the atrocities of the past. Instead, he merely relates them from an objective point of view without offering any form of moralizing—good or bad. Even in his relation to the events, he writes, perhaps unintentionally, from a very Christian-centric, narrow perspective. Everything that happens in the story, all the chances for heroics are undermined by his biases.

This is not all to say that Cooper is without merit, value, or quality as an author and that *Last of the Mohicans* is not fit to be a historical work. The beauty and elegance with which he paints the landscape of America is second to none. If for no other reason than bringing the country alive, Cooper's work justifiably answers Reverend Smith's question by giving readers a gateway into the land. As nothing more than a travel novel, a way of exploring the wilds of America, Cooper's work is of great value. And as an adventure novel and a fictional read, it is not only good but superb. The adventure of the last Mohicans and their various American friends is good enough to stand out as a potential inspiration for great fiction writers such as Tolkein (in that they could have learned much from Cooper's style).

Further, the conclusion to the story offers a real glimpse into the moralizing, subjective, and idealized novel Cooper set out to create. Our heroes and villains are dead. Life has not dramatically changed for the nation or the individuals (other than experiencing loss). Unlike the epics and fantastic tales of the eras that preceded this and led to the development of the historical realist novel, Cooper does not finish with a "and they lived happily ever after". His tale shows that, for all the struggles, issues, and changes in the characters, the world very much goes on. Heroics happen on a small scale, as Lukacs believes, and Cooper shows this expertly in

the subtle changes of the characters, not by sweeping national reform. While there are plenty of missed opportunities for injecting moralizing and judgment into the work, and much of it comes off from a very biased perspective, in the end (literally and figuratively), Cooper does indeed show that history is found in the lives of the individual, and heroics do not require global change.

Works Cited

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