

The role of family in wieland and the last of the mohicans



The Roles of Family in *Wieland* and *The Last of the Mohicans*” There is nothing heavier than compassion. Not even one’s own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes.” Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* To be a master of the art of fiction is to be a master of the art of manipulation. I am referring not only to the manipulation of the mind of the reader, but also to the manipulation of characters, setting, plot, and perhaps most important, the manipulation of language. In order to successfully engage his or her audience, an author must establish an air of familiarity. When a reader is confronted with characters, situations, or places that they understand on a personal level, the purpose of the author’s words becomes increasingly more evident. One of the most effective manifestations of this idea of “ familiarity” between the novelist and the reader is the element of family. First, it must be stated that the two novels addressed in this essay are remarkably dissimilar. Though both novels are set in the mid-to-late 18th-century Northeastern United States, they differ drastically in style and form. Charles Brockden Brown is often described as the grandfather of American Gothic literature, and is credited with influencing the likes of Mary Shelley and Truman Capote. The works of James Fenimore Cooper, however (and specifically the five installments of his “ *Leatherstocking Tales*”), are widely thought of as the foundations for later “ frontier novels” and modern-day Western films. Though radically different in almost every other way, both authors utilize the effects of family in a similar fashion. In the opening of *Wieland*, we receive a brief summary of the life and death of the father of Theodore and Clara Wieland (the novel’s narrator).

While it may seem that this summary might serve as a tool to better the <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-family-in-wieland-and-the-last-of-the-mohicans/>

reader's understanding of the Wielands, it in fact reveals very little about our characters. What is revealed in the summary, however, is a deep sense of isolation in the lives of Clara and Theodore Wieland resulting from the early loss of their parents. It soon becomes evident that the isolation experienced by the orphans gave birth to an ignorance that would plague their thinking for the rest of their lives. This is especially evident in the language used by Clara as she describes the years following the death of her parents: The years that succeeded were tranquil and happy. Our lives were molested by few of those cares that are incident to childhood. By accident more than design, the indulgence and yielding temper of our aunt was mingled with resolution and steadfastness. She seldom deviated into either extreme of rigor or lenity. Our social pleasures were subject to no unreasonable restraints. We were instructed in most branches of useful knowledge, and were saved from the corruption and tyranny of colleges and boarding schools. (22)The second biological family that we are introduced to in Wieland is the Pleyels, Catharine and Henry. The family dynamic of the novel is made all the more intricate by the fact that Theodore Wieland weds Catharine Pleyel. This detail combines both of these families into a small, isolated group of friends. Interestingly, with the introduction of Henry Pleyel on page 27, Clara begins referring to their group as a "society". One would hardly consider a group of four individuals a society, yet Clara, ignorant of the depth of friendships in the outside world, considers "society" to be an apt title for the relationship between them. It is with the appearance of Carwin, or rather the appearance of Carwin's voice, that Clara's "society" begins to fall apart. When Theodore swears that his wife's voice resonates where she is not present, the four friends begin to lose trust in each other.

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Soon, Theodore begins to slowly but visibly lose his mind in a fashion that mirrors the prophetic fate of his father. Soon, Catharine is found dead and the friends are torn further apart. All of these events cause extreme emotions to arise in the heart of the reader. This point recalls both the opening quote of this paper, and the aforementioned idea of “familiarity” in literature. If it were not for the extreme detail with which the characters are profiled, the identification of these characters as members of families, and the fact that the characters are painted in such a way that affects the reader to view them as “someone”, there would be little or no emotion created by the circumstances surrounding the characters’ fates. In other words, once the reader acknowledges a character as someone who is loved, someone with emotions, or someone who is a member of a family, the plight of said character evokes feelings that are comparable to the sentiment that would arise if the same fate was beset upon a living person. This effect, which I will call “compassionate catharsis”, occurs multiple times in *The Last of the Mohicans*, even though the structure of family differs wildly from that of *Wieland*. This statement should not be deemed contradictory to my previous assertion that both Brown and Cooper utilize the effects of family in similar ways. We have seen that in *Wieland*, there are two biological families that create a small, isolated community. The irony of these two families is that they seem to have very little idea of what family really means. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, however, the two main families (the Munros and the Mohicans) are extremely close-knit. Not only do they know the meaning of the word “family”, but they also go to great lengths to keep their families intact.

Regardless of the differences in the structure and idea of family from novel to novel, the same compassionate catharsis is achieved when a member of a

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family meets their doom. However, I believe that the numerous occurrences of compassionate catharsis in *The Last of the Mohicans* are intensified by the tremendous love that the characters show for each other throughout the novel. The most powerful example of compassionate catharsis comes in the 32nd chapter of *The Last of the Mohicans*, with the murder of Cora Munro. When Uncas jumps down from the trees to rescue his lover, he frightens her captor (one of Magua's men) and causes him to plunge his knife into Cora's chest. Magua then stabs Uncas in the back; Uncas, however, recovers from the attack and succeeds in avenging Cora's death just before he is stabbed three more times by the blade of Magua, who is then killed by Hawkeye. The following day, Cora and Uncas are buried side-by-side in a scene that remains one of the most beautiful ever put to paper. In these two novels, the family serves as an emotional tie between reader and character. How these feelings manifest themselves depends on the psyche of the reader, but there is one thing that we can be sure of: a great novel holds remarkable power over humanity, allowing humans to feel emotions that transcend the reality of their present situation.