

James fenimore cooper

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Connor Roche Research Paper JAMES FENIMORE COOPER James Fenimore Cooper was an important literary figure of the 1800s, best known for his novels. He is perhaps most noted for his greatest work of literature: *The Last of the Mohicans: A Narrative of 1757*, a tale that chronicles the journey of several English people and a few Native Americans during the French and Indian War, also known as the Seven Days War. Cooper's work on this novel and others such as *The Prairie* reflects his different approach regarding certain commonly held ideas of the time.

This was especially true concerning the present-day views most people had about Native Americans. However, Cooper's work also reflected his compliance with the most popular fine arts movement of his time:

Romanticism. To completely grasp the scope of Cooper's writing, some background on Cooper's life, and the social customs and ideas of his time are necessary. Cooper was born on September 15, 1789 to Elizabeth Fenimore and William Cooper, the founder of the city of Cooperstown, NY.

After expulsion from Yale College, Cooper pursued a career as a sailor on a merchant ship, traveling as far as the Strait of Gibraltar. Following this was a brief stint in the United States Navy, followed by farming. During his expeditions at sea, James Cooper seriously considered becoming a writer. In fact, most of his stories tell tales of sailors and sea trips, inspired by his own days on the water (Literature Network). At the time of Cooper's writing, Native Americans were often held in contempt, mistreated, and oppressed.

This had been a common aspect of society since the days of Columbus' first expeditions to the Americas (Cassutto). The Native Americans were regarded

with prejudice, hatred, and most of all fear, as is present when experiencing any unknown thing. Often times, brutal massacres were carried out, killing hundreds of innocent Native Americans. Cooper attempted to change such ideas through the relationships established between characters in his books, as is best shown by *The Last of the Mohicans*.

This book was actually the second (and best known) in a series of five “*Leatherstocking Tales*” In this story, the two of the main characters are a white man named Natty Bumppo and a Native American named Uncas, who is the titular “*Last of the Mohicans*”. These two men, though they were from completely different backgrounds, form a very close bond, and show that interracial cooperation is extremely plausible, and actually useful.

Furthermore, Natty Bumppo goes as far as adopting a Native American name, Hawkeye, to show that he truly could blend in with the Native Americans and act peacefully with them.

The actual story takes place during the French and Indian War, about 30 years before Cooper was born. Though the war is named after two groups, the actual struggle was part of a huge conflict between several nations, including Austria, England, France, Great Britain, Prussia, and Sweden. In the American colonies, the war resulted from excessive pressure from the British for additional resource collection and production. This resulted in higher taxes, more strenuous work, etc. During the war in the colonies, the Native Americans (Indians) faced the French, who, allied with the British, extended the war for seven years.

Considering the effects that the events of the time period would have had on the people, the works of James Fenimore Cooper could even be considered revolutionary. Despite the heavy racism of the time, Cooper stressed the importance and possibility of interracial cooperation, and even seemed to promote it. In other words, he was not afraid to change the stereotype and provide an alternate view of Native Americans. However, as with all situations, James Fenimore Cooper also provides a negative, more foreboding side to the relationship between different cultures.

Specifically, he seems to promote friendship and brotherhood, but strongly warns against interracial romance. This seems to be a common theme of his contemporaries, who also strongly agreed that interracial romance was to be strictly off-limits. Though not stated directly by Cooper, the fates of several of the characters in *The Last of the Mohicans* shows that Cooper believed that interracial love would lead to tragedy. This is implicitly stated through the unfortunate deaths of two of the main characters.

In the story, Uncas, the aforementioned Mohican, and Cora Munro, an English general's daughter, begin a budding romance that leads to their eventual demise. Cora is kidnapped by the villain of the story, a Native American of the Huron tribe named Magua. During rescue attempts, both Cora and Uncas are inevitably killed. The death of these two characters seems to suggest that interracial romance will lead only to failure and is highly dangerous. On a very basic level, it is the essential differences between the cultures that cause a split that leads to the failure of the romance.

In this case, the brutal nature of the Native Americans causes the death of both the sheltered English girl, and even the tough, hardened Native American man. At this point, it is clear that James Fenimore Cooper did not adhere to the racial conventions of his time. Despite some warning of the dangers of cultural mixing, in his literature, he stood by his own beliefs of interracial interaction. However, James Cooper did follow others in his era with the type of literature he wrote. His work was reflective of the Romantic style of writing and at the time of his novels' creations, the Romantic Era was in full-swing in America.

The Romantic era was a movement in the fields of art, literature, and intellectualism that originated in Europe in the late 1700s. The movement placed a heavy emphasis on emotions such as fear, horror, and awe rather than reason. Also, there is a superiority of mystery over clarity, and importance given to the individual, rather than the standards of society. This could be easily expressed through art, but through literature, the conveyance of such emotions was a very new experience. Certain effects of the movement were clearly reflected in Cooper's literature.

For example, along with the Romantic movement came the inspiration of political change, and also, in stark contrast, descriptions of heavily romanticized (hence the name of the period) situations and settings, such as " a mock-medieval castle perched dramatically above a craggy ravine" (History World). Elements such as these are clearly evident in Cooper's work, especially the emphasis on setting. Using rich descriptive language, Cooper gives details of all the areas that his characters venture through. At times,

the extensiveness of his description is so rich that a reader may feel as though he or she is actually experiencing the setting.

This was very common in Romantic literature, and can be seen in the following passage from *The Last of the Mohicans*: “ The mountain on which they stood, elevated, perhaps a thousand feet in the air, was a high cone that rose a little in of advance of that range which stretches for miles along the western shores of the lake, until meeting its sister piles, beyond the water, it ran off toward the Canadas, in confused and broken masses of rock thinly sprinkled with evergreens. ” (*The Last of the Mohicans*, James Fenimore Cooper, 177)

Aside from the Romantic descriptions of locations and characters, Cooper's work also showed a great amount of diversion from previously held ideals, as mentioned above in his explorations of interracial friendships and interaction. This seems to carry an underlying feeling of political activism, which was another of the attributes of the Romantic Movement. The activism lies in the implication that racial boundaries should be reexamined and reevaluated. Though Cooper does not say outright that his novel should spark a revolution, his work does imply that there is a desperate need for change in society.

Furthermore, some aspects of the novel could be seen as an anti-war statement made by Cooper. This was a shared sentiment among many of his contemporaries, and carried on even through the Vietnam War in the late 1900s. However, this sentiment could be seen by analyzing the novel from a Romantic Movement point of view. Returning to the idea of descriptive

nature, Cooper often gives descriptions not only of the beauty of the land, but also of its inherent danger. In the story, nature provides almost as much of a struggle for the main characters as the war does for the soldiers.

In a sense, it seems as if Cooper was trying to say that nature was the real enemy, not other humans. The anti-war sentiment could not only be interpreted metaphorically through the text, it was also sometimes stated explicitly. In the following passage, James Cooper's disgust for war and fighting is evident, as he describes the battle as an extremely gruesome occurrence: " More than two thousand raging savages broke out from the forest at signal and threw themselves across the fatal plain with instinctive alacrity.

We shall not dwell upon the revolting horrors that succeeded. Death was everywhere in his most terrific and disgusting aspects ... The flow of blood might be likened to the outbursting of a torrent... and as the natives became...maddened by the fight, many among them...drank freely...hellishly of the crimson tide. "(Mohicans, Cooper 222) As was made clear by this passage, Cooper clearly resented the war and the horrors it brought with it.

In Conclusion, the works of James Fenimore Cooper gave a clear representation of the ideals and movements of his time.

His writing was reflective of the new intellectual, artistic, and literary Romantic Movement, shown by its beautifully descriptive passages and also by its deviation from what was previously accepted as normalcy.

Furthermore, his works deviated from not only his predecessors, but also his contemporaries, as he implicitly supported the furthering of positive

interracial interaction and cooperation. Coopers work was a great addition to his era, and greatly helped reflect the changing times and culture of the 19th century.