

The last of the mohicans: context for the decline of a noble people



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The Last of the Mohicans is a novel written by James Fenimore Cooper in 1826, set in upper New York wilderness in 1757, the book focuses on the French and Indian War (1754 – 1763). The book follows Alice and Cora Munro, Hawkeye, Chingachgook, Uncas and David Gamut as they attempt to arrive at Fort Willism Henry and the trials they face along the way and after their departure. During this war, both the French and the British used Native American allies in their quest to take control of North America, but the French were more dependent as they were outnumbered in the Northeast frontier areas by the British colonists. The Native Americans potrayed in the text are the Delaware Indians, the Mohicans, the Mohawk, and the Iroquois. The former two groups are painted as good Indians – peaceful, calm, and kind while the latter two are deceitful, bloodthirsty, and vengeful. Though Cooper attempts to paint Native Americans in a more favorable and positive light and show that they are more than just crude savages who enjoy massacring white men and cutting off their scalps, he nevertheless alternatively idealizes and demonizes them.

The Last of the Mohicans is aptly named. It signifies not only the fall of a particular tribe of Native Americans but the fall of all the Indian nations. The arrival of more Europeans on the shores of America served to destroy Native American civilization. The Europeans obviously considered themselves superior to the native people, they were more “ advanced” and educated. In short, they were civilized and the Indians were barbaric, savages. There is more to people than the physical things they have accomplished, their technological progress and the like, one most also consider their values, their ideals and their way of life; unfortunately, the European settlers failed

to do this in the case of the Native Americans. If one abandons the idea that technological progress, population growth, and conquest are the uncontested hallmarks of an advanced civilization, then what is left is the observation of family dynamics, social support, nourishment, prosperity, and community (Belic). Like many other colonists who were exposed to new cultures – the native people were assumed to be weaker, inferior, something “other” and apart from themselves; these people deserved to be subjugated and conquered, to be invaded and taken over.

In the book, two cultures present in upper New York clash – the whites and the native people are in conflict. These two people simply cannot comprehend the other’s ways. Though they make alliances, they do so because of mutual benefit and not because of any deeper understanding or sympathy. Even Hawkeye, who has a chance to live in both worlds cannot merge both cultures. Hawkeye sees a wide chasm between the ways of the Mingo and those of the white man. He believes that whites have a more enlightened set of values, inspired by Christianity but he also respects indian customs, tradition and religion. Cooper expresses the attitude towards Indians at that time period. He abundantly refers to Native American as “savages”. Magua was “goaded incessantly by those revengeful impulses that in a savage seldom slumber” (Chapter XXVII). Cooper clearly thinks that a revengeful nature is part of an Indian’s repertoire along with craftiness and cunningness. However, he often tries to be objective and refers to Indian culture in a more favorable less-prejudiced manner. We can see this in his depiction of the Mohicans as good Indians and in acknowledging the good qualities of the savages.

Race is a subject that is prevalent in the novel and interracial relationships play a huge role in the development of the story. Miscegenation is clearly frowned upon – the British are against mixing with a lowly race. The idea of Magua and Cora marrying is disgusting to all involved. Even Cora is put at a disadvantage because of her black blood – Heyward does not consider her suitable marriage material and she is thought to have inherited racial characteristics/personality traits. It can be inferred that it is because of Cora's dark blood that she is not initially repulsed by Magua like her sister. She looks at him with "pity, admiration and horror, as her dark eye followed the easy motions of the savage." (Chapter I). Cora has a more open-minded attitude towards matters of race. She tells Uncas that no one who looked at him would "remember the shade of his skin" (Chapter VI). Others of that time period did not share this view. Though Uncas loves Cora, Hawkeye scoffs at the idea that they are together in the afterlife. He is aware that her family and society would never acknowledge their relationship. It is interesting to note that mixing of races does not extend to friendship between men as evident in the between Hawkeye, Chingachgook and Uncas.

The Europeans influenced the Native Americans in various ways. For example, Magua was driven from the Hurons because the white man introduced the Indians to firewater(alcohol). Europeans also introduced their diseases. Infectious diseases, to which the Native Americans possessed no immunity from spread quickly throughout the land. People were unable to care for the sick, to bury the dead, to gather food, secure water or to maintain their villages or communities. Squanto, a Pawtuxet man that had been captured by the Europeans settlers escaped and went back to his

village, only to find that there were no survivors. The villagers had died of a plague that had spread the previous year (Adolf 247). The religious settlers assumed that the diseases were a divine sign of God showing that the natives did not deserve their (Stockwell). The Europeans believed that God was clearing the settlements of unchristian Native Americans for themselves. It is estimated that by the eighteenth century, the Native American population had been reduced to about ten percent of what it had been in 1491. The social structure, support systems of the native americans had crumbled; their tribal leaders had died and entire communities had been destroyed. Tribes had to join together to survive. This went on for centuries and broke down the Native Americans' sense of self and individualism (Zinn 3; Loewen 77).

The Native Americans had inhabited the North American continent for thousands of years. They lived in peace and harmony and would not have been able to predict the devastation the expansion and oppression of the European people would have on them. The colonies that had been established early on in the 16th and 17th centuries were tolerated and supported by the Native Americans. In spite of this, the Native Americans were mistreated, kidnapped, abused and marginalized. Many Native Americans decided to change their ways and assimilate to European American culture. Some were successful, others were not - they were not fully accepted by the white people or given equal rights; they could not be considered "white" nor could they go back to their Native American origins (Zinn 5).

The French Indian war marked the beginning of the decline of Native American Culture. The historian Fred Anderson writes: “ In bringing to an end the French empire in North America, the French and Indian War undermined, and ultimately destroyed, the ability of native peoples to resist the expansion of Anglo-American settlement. The war’s violence and brutality, moreover, encouraged whites—particularly those on the frontier—to hate Indians with indiscriminating fury.” The Indians fearing losing their land decided to side with the French, the side that had a disadvantage in the war and was more understanding of Indian ways. The French lost and The Native Americans were pushed more and more westwards. This occurred for decades until 1830, when President Jackson decided to make it official and put “ The Trail of Tears” in motion. President Jackson said his plan to remove the Native Americans to sparsely populated land further west was beneficial to both the natives and the white population but the natives who lost lives, their homeland, habits would not have agreed. Indeed, the Indian removal act completely disregarded the preservation of Native American culture.

The Last of the Mohicans is a book that provides the readers with a window into the French and Indian War. It shows the way several ethnic groups might have interacted with each other and helps us understand the styles and ways of this time period. Cooper has portrayed his views on the Native Americans, their ways and customs and we are able to imagine the tragic decline of a great culture. The Native American culture still exists today but not as it was. Perhaps it will rise again. It is important not to ignore the happenings of history that authors like James Fennimore Cooper have revealed or attempt to rewrite it but to acknowledge the mistakes of the

past. The evidence of the marginalization of a whole “ different” culture exists. Instead of suppressing this evidence, we must embrace it, only then can we begin to learn the lessons of American history and attempt to be more tolerant and understanding of “ other” people.

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