

# The Treatment of Nature in “The Last of the Mohicans”

Eric Miller  
eric@millerphx.com  
ENGLISH X135A-012  
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One of the most important and telling characters in James Fenimore Cooper’s pre-revolutionary war adventure novel, “The Last of the Mohicans,” is nature. It is not only the backdrop against which much of the story takes place. It is a key driver of the drama in the story, and the changes wrought on the land are an underlying motivation for the conflict fueling the story. In addition, he uses nature to build the mythological image of how native peoples mastered the wilderness.

Writing after that wilderness had been tamed by the young American country’s westward expansion, Cooper painted the natural environment as a character in the opening line of the novel, “It was a feature peculiar to the colonial wars of North America, that the toils and dangers of the wilderness were to be encountered before the adverse hosts could meet.” (1) The forest is quickly established as not just a backdrop, but as an antagonist in the story that was as dangerous as the various factions fighting in that war.

Before we meet the human characters, the author describes where the conflict occurred, focusing on the lakes and rivers and then the forts. He then describes how the detachment of soldiers dispatched to rescue a besieged fort marched away until “the forest at length appeared to swallow up the living mass which had slowly entered its bosom.” (6) Here, a collection of trees take on the anatomy of a person and swallow the soldiers.

Most of the action in the story takes place in nature, either in the woods, battling a river, on a lake, or in caves. Taking a look at passages where each plays a role in the story shows how Cooper used nature to create drama and tension and move the story forward while creating an attractive canvas on which to paint the story.

One of the best examples that stayed in my mind from when I read this story as a

child is the passage where the travelers leave their horses and take a canoe onto a river. (43-44) Summarizing their journey from the bank to an island where they will hide, they face danger and, "Twenty times they thought the whirling eddies were sweeping them to destruction." That same dangerous river becomes their protector as the shelter in the caves hidden within a waterfall. The vivid descriptions of sight and sound at first create a picture of safety and refuge but then becomes the stage that takes part in the battle that will soon come.

This use of caves was important from a writing perspective because it created a location with limited visibility, a place for characters to hide and move the story forward without being seen by their antagonists, and to create the tension of multiple openings into an otherwise safe space. Not only did they hide in caves at the beginning of their journey, but they also moved in and out of caves to rescue Cora.

The final good example of using nature in the drama was the battle on the lake in Chapter 20. It is a classic "car chase" (maybe one of the first?) with guns a'blazing and near misses as our heroes try to speed away from the bad guys. Before the chase begins, they paddle from island to island, "and when a clearer sheet of water permitted, his keen vision was bent along the bald rocks and impending forests, that frowned upon the narrow strait." (211) Then, when they are fired upon, they race across the surface of the lake looking for shelter. When they escape, they transition from a crowded, narrow portion to a portion where the "lake now began to expand, and their route lay along a wide reach, that was lined, as before, by high and ragged mountains. But the islands were few, and easily avoided." (217). Again, nature plays a role in creating danger, and then when they escape, the part of nature also changes to one of safety.

The transition from wilderness to settled land is also key to how Cooper portrays nature in this story. Early on, he establishes the battle between the European powers and their native allies was were, "England and France last waged for the possession of a country that neither was destined to retain." He shows how the war was about controlling that land.

Cooper establishes that the Mohicans are at an end because Dutch settlers used money and drink and took their land, forcing them into the wild forests. (25) He also

shows the French and English are fighting over control of the strategic portage between Lake Champlain and the headwaters of the Hudson. (2)

Then, in the novel's closing scenes, Chapter 33, everyone is lamenting over the death of both Cora and Uncas. Cora is a dark mulatto, and her blond, pale sister is the one who survives, signifying the transition to European dominance. And, more tellingly, when Uncas dies, so do the Mohicans, and also, so does the time when the tribes along the coast live with nature. The aging and wise chief Tamenund finishes the novel with the words, "Go, children of the Lenape, the anger of the Manitou is not done. Why should Tamenund stay? The pale-faces are masters of the earth, and the time of the redmen has not yet come again. My day has been too long. In the morning I saw the sons of Unamis happy and strong; and yet, before the night has come, have I lived to see the last warrior of the wise race of the Mohicans." The transition from wilderness to settled land has begun.

The final way Cooper portrays nature is by weaving the myth, prevalent at the time and strongly reinforced and established in American mythology by this novel, of the "noble savage" who lived with and mastered the dangerous wilderness. In contrast, Europeans conquer and control the land. He creates this stereotype in several places, especially when Uncas slays a deer with a knife. Hawkeye even says, "These Indians know the nature of the woods, as it might be by instinct!" (27) Uncas then stealthily approaches a deer, shoots it with an arrow, and it falls at his feet so that he might mercifully end its suffering with a single knife stroke.

Tracking, or avoiding leaving tracks, is also used to show this close connection, as do Hawkeye's many references regarding their native companions' ability to see and hear things that white men can't. Although the role of nature in this part of the story is different, it is still important, showing how those who live in the wilderness are somehow purer and more capable.

Although "The Last of The Mohicans" is first and foremost an adventure story with romance, fights, betrayal, suspense, and in the end, great sadness, it is also a story about a version of nature that had disappeared by the time Cooper wrote the novel. By making it a part of his story and using it to drive the conflict behind the actions of the

other characters, he introduced a view of a countryside that would, like the Mohicans, never exist again.

#### Works Cited.

Cooper, James Fenimore. *The Last of the Mohicans*, New York NY, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/27681/pg27681-images.html>