

Beyond the Stereotypes: Racial Progressivism in Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*

For anyone reading *The Last of the Mohicans* the apparent stereotypes and cultural divide in the prose may seem to be a contemporary theme for the time in which the novel was written, offering stereotypical and derogatory statements regarding those of other race. Upon more stringent inspection, however, the stereotypical statements in the novel are directly offset by the progressive ideas about racial and cultural tolerance and equality set forth by the author. Cooper does not use the stereotypes in the novel to further the racial barriers supported by so many of his contemporaries, but rather he builds upon them to promote the idea that individuals of different racial and cultural upbringing can be allies as well as equals. As Edgerton comments in his article, "A Breed Apart," there is a "secret theme" in *The Last of the Mohicans* and it addresses the "relations between men of different races in the New World" (4). These relations between men break down the racial and cultural barriers previously mentioned, with the primary example in the novel being that of the scout, Hawk-eye. This character embodies the progressive ideas of the author, breaking down the classical ideas of race in three different ways. In commenting on his racial background and friendship with the Indians, the idea of a common religious deity, and the criticism of his fellow whites, Hawk-eye acts as the mouthpiece for Cooper's radical social ideas.

"A man without a cross" (Cooper 72). What may be initially assumed to be a racial slur by Hawk-eye, can later be identified as so much more. In proclaiming this the scout is not pushing a white supremacy statement, but rather emphasizing that one with a pure white background can become an ally and a brother to those of a different race. Evidence can be found in his first appearance, in discussion with Chingachgook over the differing stories told

to them by their ancestors, when instead of continuing to argue about it, Hawk-eye decides they should let God sort it out and friends not argue the trivial matter (Cooper 36). This is an important statement because this is the first of many times that Hawk-eye will refer to the Indians as his friends, and in doing so pushing Cooper's idealism of an amiable relationship between those of different race and culture. Later in the novel Hawk-eye shows the extent of this friendship with the Indians when he proclaims his willingness to die for Uncas when fighting, exclaiming "they shall see how a man without a cross can die" (Cooper 300), once again making it clear that he is a pureblood white man, yet still willing to die for his red brothers.

The ultimate embodiment of Cooper's desire to show the ability of an unyielding alliance to form between those so different occurs after the death of Uncas, when we see Chingachgook and Hawk-eye mourning over the grave of the young warrior. Hawk-eye, the closest companion to the elder Indian for over twenty years, corrects Chingachgook upon hearing his claim to be the last of his kind and alone in the world, telling him that while his son may be gone, he is not alone (Cooper 394), embracing him not as a mere acquaintance but as one who has a deep respect and understanding of his 'brother' opposite him. While Cooper may have been able to do more to "mix" the races and breakdown racial barriers in the novel according to today's readers, just this idea of a close personal friendship with those of another race would have been progressive in this era for as Friefeld explains in his article, there were many miscegenation laws in place in the nineteenth century to prevent the mixing of racial groups, due to the widespread belief of inequality in those of color.

The woodsman Hawk-eye, in all his wisdom, does much more to break apart the common racial and cultural stereotypes than simply befriending a few Indians, seeking to explain and pass an understanding of a common belief in a single higher being and a shared idea of a final "paradise." The reader is first confronted with this idea when Hawk-eye speaks to Duncan in the ruins of William Henry, asking if he believes the idea of heaven the white man and the redskin entertain is one and the same, and then going on to share his opinion that he believes this 'paradise' is a place for those who have passed to find a lasting happiness and therefore the ideas of the Indians and those of the white man seem to be

much in the same way of thinking (Cooper 218). This idea is further enforced when David Gamut comments that the Huron tribe is “the profanest of the idolatrous,” to which Hawk-eye responds, “therin you belie the nature of an Indian. Even the Mingo adores but the true and living God!” (Cooper 256). This exchange, in which Hawk-eye argues the shared belief of a single god, holds serious weight in the idea of cultural similarity, for if anyone should know the Indian culture and be able to explain it to the unfamiliar white man it would be him. In one final example of the common religious beliefs of the white man and the red skin, Hawk-eye proclaims when promising to exact his revenge if Uncas is killed, “there is a single Ruler of us all, whatever may be the colour of the skin” (Cooper 301). Leaving no interpretation to chance, Cooper uses this proclamation by Hawk-eye to lay any doubts to rest that there is but one single God whom both the white man and the red man worship and hold in equal grandeur.

As David Gamut is of a Calvinist background it is easier to see why he, and many other Protestant believers view the native American peoples in such a way, for as the Calvinist teachings would have described to its followers, the native peoples were not of the kind to be pre-destined for salvation and were therefore meant to go to hell (Munzer 2005). This would have also led them to believe it was their duty to claim the natives land for their Christian God, for they were told that all of the earth belonged to God and they were meant to bring all the world under his lordship (Van Dijk 2009). Much as David Gamut is reasoned by his beliefs, Hawk-eye can be justified in his belief in a single, if not generic, idea of a final resting place, for as Ojibwa (2014) goes to comment in her article, many native American cultures believe in the idea of the soul going to a final resting place, often where they meet their family members and ancestors. As Hawk-eye tries to reason, it does seem there are at the very least many similar ideas between the Christian view of heaven and the native idea of afterlife, involving a journey of the soul or spirit to meet up with those previously lost, suggesting there may indeed be a common final resting place for all.

The best way to disprove the superiority assumed by one race or culture is by showing the faults of that group much as Hawk-eye does. Through his refusal to accept the actions of whites as any more righteous than other and denounce many of their ways, the

scout sets up an equal playing field for the self-reflection of one's cultural values. The willingness by Hawk-eye to denounce the white man as he does in that first scene with Chingachgook, saying there are many ways of the white man of which he can not approve (Cooper 37), gives the reader his/her first taste of cultural realism, being forced to accept the fact that perhaps the white man has not always been right in their actions and is at no more a moral high ground than any other race or culture. The separation from white culture exhibited by Hawk-eye as he rarely visits any settlements and is more content to stay in the woods with the Indians shows a further resentment of the white man and perpetuates the idea that the way of the whites is not the only right path to success. As Hawk-eye comments throughout the novel, the white man cannot compare to the Indian in their abilities in the woods and often he even offers his own lack of ability compared to his companions as a show of their dominance.

One last criticism by Hawk-eye of his race is offered when Munro asks him to tell the Indians at the funeral that one day they will be joined in heaven under their single Being without race or discrimination and Hawk-eye retorts in short that the Indians would believe this a lie (Cooper 391), for they do not believe the whites would ever respect them as equals. This comment by Hawk-eye garners many interpretations but, one may hold that the Indians trust the white man to respect them and view them equals as much as the white men of the time trusted the natives, remarking on the inability of one culture to prove themselves more morally sound than another. Cooper's investment in Hawk-eye as "liberal" frontiersman, goes much deeper than just that of an author creating a dynamic and appealing character. The voice of Hawk-eye may have indeed been that directly of Cooper's own, for as James Wallace writes in Cooper's biography, Cooper did not get along with the people of New England around the time of his writing this novel for various reasons, and felt rather alienated from them, suggesting he would have had no qualms with expressing his distaste for the actions of them and their ancestors in the setting of the novel. Furthermore, as mentioned by Peck in his essay, Cooper disagreed with the Indian removal policies brought about by Jacksonian democracy and may have further spurred him to give Hawk-eye the voice of distaste and quiet accusation for the greed of white men.

In Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* he did not choose to perpetuate the racism and inequality that was prevalent in his time, but rather promoted a greatly progressive idea that whites and those of other colors and beliefs could be equals and even brothers, contending the oppressive convictions held by those of his own race. While he may have not completely broken the racial boundaries and still gleaned a few ethnocentric ideas regarding natives as suggested by Mills (1986), Cooper was able to introduce the vastly foreign concept of tolerance and equality to fellow whites of his time. The characterization of Hawk-eye, his friendship and brotherhood with the Indians, and the radically different social beliefs and creed he adhered to, used by Cooper to compete with the perpetuating ideas of inequality that once and continue to plague this country, embraced progressivism that would have been found alarming and radical in his era. The risks and effort Cooper committed to, to begin this social enlightenment, should serve as a solid foundation and be expanded on today, as social turmoil and inequalities still hamper the progression of the nation and prevent a new age of prosperity.

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