

# Analysis of Cooper's Writing Style In *The Last of the Mohicans*

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**Abstract**—The Independence of American established a new state, but political independence did not bring cultural independence. The American literature still could not cast off the yoke of English literature. Although Cooper, was regarded as the pioneer of American national literature, his style remained under the strong influence of English writers. This does not mean that Cooper had no style of himself, he had composed his special features to express his theme---Narration and Description. In this essay, we are trying to take “The Last of the Mohicans” for example to analyze Cooper special writing skills.

**Index Terms**— narration, description, frontier work, Indian

## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important periods in the history of American Literature is the Romantic period, which stretches from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century through the outbreak of the Civil War (Cunliffe, Marcus, 1985). James Fenimore Cooper, was regarded as the pioneer of American national literature during this time, was born in Burlington, New Jersey on September 15, 1789, and died on September 14, 1851(Wu Weiren, 1995). Cooper had published about fifty works in all his life. The most notable is a romance of the American frontier that came to be called “The Leatherstocking Tales”, five in all, they are *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans*(1826), *The Prairie*(1827), *The Path Finder*(1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1847) (Wu Weiren, 1995). They are vivid and fascinating stories about Indian life. The characters are vigorous and the description of primitive forest life is captivation. “The Last of the Mohicans” is the best written of the “Leatherstocking Tales” with its vivid description and exciting plot. The novels describe the life of the hunter, Natty Bumppo, a brave noble scout, who stands as a protest on behalf of simplicity and perfect freedom, against encroaching law and order, who hover between the two world of Indian and White man. This paper takes “The Last of the Mohicans” for example to analyze Cooper special writing skills .In this novel, his vivid scenes, and his fictional pattern of flight, pursuit, capture and escape became dominating conventions in the literature of adventure, and at the same time, Cooper's characteristic was showed to us completely.

### A. Background

The Romantic period is one of the most important periods in the history of American Literature, in this period, we can see a rising American fast burgeoning into a political, economic and cultural independence it had never know before. Democracy and political equality became the idea of the new nation, and a new system was in the making. The spread of industrialism, the sudden influx of immigration, and the “pioneers” pushing the frontier further west---all these produced something of an economic boom and with it, a tremendous sense of optimism and hope among the people (Rubinstein, Annetle T, 1997). The nation bursting into new life cried for literary expression. But the American literature still could not cast off the yoke of English literature (Guo Qunying, 1993). The demand of living left little time to the new born nation to raise their education let alone to establish its own literature. None of great American literature could be written without reference to past English and European literature. Irving, Cooper and some other are regarded as the pioneers of American national literature (Rubinstein, Annetle T, 1997). But their writing style remained under the strong influence of English writers. Although foreign influences were strong, American romanticism exhibited from the very outset distinct features of its own. It was different from English and European counterpart because it originated from an amalgam of factors which were altogether.

### B. Cooper's Life

James Fenimore Cooper, the first important novelist, the first frontier novelist, the first historical romance writer and the first writer of sea adventures, was born in Burlington, New Jersey on September 15, 1789. He is the son of Judge Cooper, a wealthy land agent who founded Cooperstown in central New York. When Cooper was only over one year old, his family moved to Cooperstown. There, he grew up, watching the frontier continually being pushed back and always finding a fascination in the strange darkness of the neighboring wilderness area. Young Cooper was accustomed to the life of the privileged class of the time. He entered Yale College at the age of 15. He was dismissed after two years, and

then he went to sea as an ordinary seaman on the vessel, the *Stirling*, all the time making plans for a career in the navy. When he was 18, he returned to America having seen parts of England and Spain. In 1808, he was given a commission as a midshipman in the US Navy. During his service, exceeding over three and a half years, he sailed on the vessels the *Vesuvius* and the *Wasp*. His experience gave him more knowledge about sea, and made him keenly aware of various social levels of society, which he described in his works. In 1811, after the death of his father, he left the sea to inherit a fortune from his father and married Susan Augusta Delancey. He fathered five daughters and two sons. In 1817, he made his home in Westchester. In 1821, he returned to the American scene with *The Spy*, the first important historical romance of the Revolution, and on its success, he moved to New York to take up his new career as writer. Then he traveled in England and crossed Europe to Switzerland and Italy, went to Germany and France. In 1833, he returned to the US and lived in Cooperstown. From 1836 to 1838, he published five books about his European travels. In 1837, he engaged in an extended argument over a plot of land in Cooperstown called Three Mile Point. Cooper gave the world one of America's most widely admired literary creations—Leatherstocking, a striking representation of frontier freedom and individuality—himself ended his days soured with his world. He, like Leatherstocking, remained an individual. However, the Indian scout, Natty was always able to retreat westward to get away from civilization and the new ideals he considered questionable, whereas Cooper could only retire to Cooperstown and indulge himself in remembering his lawsuits. On September 14, 1851, the America's first important novelist died in Cooperstown (Wu Weiren, 1995).

### C. *Cooper's Frontier Works*

Cooper had published about fifty works in all his life. He eventually wrote 32 novels. The most notable is a romance of the American frontier that came to be called "The Leatherstocking Tales", five in all, they are *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Path Finder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1847) (Wu Weiren, 1995). They are vivid and fascinating stories about Indian life. The characters are vigorous and the description of primitive forest life is captivating. The novels describe the life of the hunter, Natty Bumppo, a brave noble scout, who stands as a protest on behalf of simplicity and perfect freedom, against encroaching law and order, who hover between the two world of Indian and White man. With these and with a vast group of supporting characters, virtuous or villainous, Cooper made the American conscious of his past, and made the European conscious of America (Chang Yaixin, 1996). The unimaginable great American forests did not last long under the American ax, which were both a builder and a destroyer. Cooper captured and preserved the forest for us in his vivid, imaginative landscapes. He captured and preserved, too, the man who roamed and forest. "The Leatherstocking Tales" has been translated into many foreign languages and is as well known in Europe as in America.

## II. ANALYZE COOPER'S CHARACTERISTIC IN "THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS"

### A. *Brief Summary of "The Last of the Mohicans"*

The time is 1757. The place is near Lake George, in New York Colony, during the war between the British and the French. Major Duncan Heyward had been ordered to escort Cora and Alice Munro from Fort William Henry, where Colonel Munro, father of the girls, was commandant. David Gamut, a Connecticut singing-master, was also accompanied with them. A Huron Indian named Magua, who claimed that he knew the short way to their destination, guided them. In fact, he wanted to lead the party to a trap. Luckily, Hawkeye and his two Delaware Indian friends discovered his trick. Magua escaped. Then under the guidance of Hawkeye, Heyward and the sisters got the way to Fort William Henry. On the way to it, Magua and his savages attracted them many times. Heyward tried to convince Magua that he should take the party to Colonel Munro and receive a large reward. But he refused, he wanted Cora to be his wife, his aim was to revenge Colonel Munro because he had punished him for his mistake. With the help of Hawkeye and his friends, the party reached the destination at last.

Several days later, Colonel Munro agreed to retreat from the fort, but being allowed to keep the colors, arms and baggage. When the English vacated the fort, an incident occurred; over two thousand Iroquois Indians massacre most of the women and children of the defeated garrison. Magua seized Alice and fled, pursued by Cora and David. On the third day following the massacre, Hawkeye and his Indian friends and Heyward and Colonel Munro began to search Alice and Cora. Finally, they reached the Huron Camp and met David. He said that Alice was in the Huron Camp nearby and Cora was with a tribe of Delaware Indians some distance away. Heyward made up as a doctor and entered the Huron Camp and found Alice. Under the help of Hawkeye, they were escaped. They reached the Delaware Camp. The next Magua visited there and took away Cora.

The Delaware, led by Uncas, Chingachgook and Hawkeye, won a victory over the Iroquois in a forest battle; a Huron fatally stabbed Cora. Magua killed Uncas with his knife and Hawkeye shot Magua. The Delaware solemnly buried Cora and Uncas, and Hawkeye and Chingachgook faced future together without the noble Uncas, the last of the Mohicans (Chang Yaixin, 1996).

### B. *Features of the Characters*

The main character Bumppo is a legendary person, he has double background. On the one hand, he is a white, he was educated in church school when he was young, on the other hand, he lives with Indian in forest perpetually and accepted the Indian ruler, so he is the synthesis of the primitive and European civilization are impacted in history

circumstance, but he is not the representative of each aspect, he hovers between the two worlds of Indian and white man. The irresistible pressure of westward move of America—the advance of civilization—that destroyed the American wilderness had driven out Natty. He has his forests and is living as a trapper on the western plains. Cooper endowed him all the advantages which the two worlds could endow. Bumppo loves forest and yearns for freedom of hunt life, and he has the simplicity characteristics, he is not a rat of white society, but compared with the colonialists, he has the nicer characteristics of original, he loves forest and disdains colonial civilization.

Cooper's other two characters are Indians, Chingachgook and his son Uncas. They are the sons of nature and respect nature rules and live under the rules, they have no temporal and have not rotted by civilization. The moral bases of them are very simple: brave, honest and upright. They are Bumppo's good friends and often help him, but his Indian enemy kills the last of the Monicans, Uncas, at last, while his father lives with Natty. His death shows that his tribe will be dying out.

Compared with Uncas, another devilish person is Magua, he also is a strong one, but he is the representative of all evils: craft, perfidy. To Uncas, he is a pad. In order to revenge, he forces Cora to marry him. He is a rat of his tribe, at last, he kills Uncas, but what he gets at last is death, too.

### C. Analyze Cooper's Narration and Description Writing Skills in "The Last of the Mohicans"

#### **Cooper is good at inventing plots especially suspense.**

Cooper is not good at literary style or engraving character in novels. Using narration and description to express theme is his special features. To Cooper, plot is more important than style. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, his vivid scenes, and his fictional pattern of flight, pursuit, capture and escape became dominating conventions in the literature of adventure.

Cooper is good at inventing plots especially suspense. He can complicate one quickly and well. The chase through the novel from beginning to ending, it is an important part of plot. Uncas chases Magua, Magua chases Cora, and Hawkeye chases Magua again. We can find that all the plots are based on chases.

Cooper's usual suspenseful pattern of action is based upon the three words "escape", "pursuit" and "capture". We can find this technique in *The Last of the Mohicans*. But the first example is rather unusual that the successful escape and unsuccessful pursuit of the villain of the piece—Magua. But at the beginning of this novel, the party escaped from Magua's trap, then they are pursued by Iroquis, at last, they are captured by them. At the end of the chapter 6, Hawkeye and his friends heard a mysterious horrific cry. This is Cooper's typical literary technique of ending a chapter on a suspenseful note. In chapter 13, the incident of the Huron stopping to investigate the burial mound conveys that an Indian has respect for his dead, as well as adding a suspenseful moment, when the breathless group in the old blockhouse anticipates discovery and a furious battle. The Huron quietly discuss the matter and then, in respect for the dead, silently withdraw from the scene and eventually become "lost in the depths of the forest" (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, *The Last of the Mohicans*, P.135). Gratefully, the undiscovered party leaves the old fort and heads in the opposite direction. When we read this sentence, we are also breathless with the characters. Another example of suspense in chapter 24 and 25, Hawkeye, disguising as a bear, adds suspense to the plot. At the first sight, readers think it is a real bear and don't understand why a bear follows Duncan and the chief. When Heyward begins to see over the sick woman, the bear lets out a "fierce growl" (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.269). After the chief leaves the cave, the bear waddles up to Heyward and sits himself down in front of the Englishman, and lifts its huge talons to its head and pushes it aside. Now we find it is Hawkeye.

Inventing plots and using suspense are very important in *The Last of the Mohicans*. It is true that Cooper's plots are sometimes quite incredible, for example, at the beginning of *The Last of the Mohicans*, Fort William Henry is besieged by France troops. But to readers' surprise the commander, Munro, allows his daughters to come at this time. The most surprising point is that the two girls are not accompanied by the English forces but only a British officer. It is bewildering why they make such a stupid decision in that dangerous situation.

But those defects do not affect his novels. The story shows the wilds of the American frontier and the vivid drama of the French—Indian war, and it establishes the American frontier as a setting for thrilling adventures, although it bases on history, most of the plots are imaginary. This is also a reason why Cooper has such a high profile; he combines history and imagination in a skilled way. So *The Last of the Mohicans* is immensely intriguing and attracts many readers, and it becomes the most famous one of "The Leatherstocking Tales" for its exciting plots. From it readers also know the ability of Cooper to develop plots and suspenses.

#### **Description of nature sight.**

Cooper is good at describing natural sight, especially landscape description. Besides narration, in *The Last of the Mohicans*, another technique, which Cooper uses, is description. We can find how carefully Cooper describes the physical background of history in the chapter 1. From that, readers can realize that vast tracts of land are between the opposing forces of the English and French. The territory between Lake Champlain and the Hudson River makes up a no man's land, a battleground, occupied by the one who is the stronger or, sometimes the cleverer. No man from either side might be found on expeditions in such deadly place. The story is happened under the great background. We can find description of nature sight nearly in every chapter.

Cooper's landscape description is majestic, especially panoramic descriptions—that is, pictures of huge areas of countryside, seen from one stationary point of view. In chapter 14, Hawkeye's group climbs a high mountain overlooking a valley below. The mountain stands "a thousand feet in air... a high cone ... a little in advance of that

range which stretches for miles along the western shores of the lake” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.142), which sweeps away, far below, “at the feet of the party” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.143). The waters pour northward toward Lake Champlain where they lost in sight among masses of jumbled mountains tops. Near at hand is seen Fort William Henry, its “extensive earthen ramparts and low buildings” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.143) located “on the shore of the lake” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.143). Towards the southeast is the “entrenched camp” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.144) where the British “auxiliary regiments” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.144) are located. To the south rise “numerous dark and lurid smokes” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.144), show that the enemy has lighted its campfires in that area. Further to the west, extending “many hundreds of years from the shores of the Horicans to the base of the mountain” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.144) are seen “the white tents and military engines of an encampment of ten thousand men” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.144). We can find another example of panoramic description near the beginning of chapter 15, Heyward retires to a high wall of Fort William Henry “to take a survey of the siege” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.151). He look out over Horican, contemplating “the wide and varied” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.152) scene a few minutes. Also at the end of chapter 17, Magua, Cora and Alice gaze from the “mountain—top” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.184) to the plain below where “the Massacre of William Henry” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.186) is taking place. And near the beginning of chapter 18, the “smoldering ruin” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.187) of what had been Fort William Henry is pictured. The “whole landscape” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.187) covered with mangled, dead bodies, resembles “some pictured allegory of life” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.187)—some type of lesson as to the horrors of man-made wars and destruction.

When Cooper describes nature sight, he likes putting people’s behaviors into it and describing them together, such as disguises. The common example is disguising footprints. In chapter 20, Hawkeye and his party pursue Magua and his captives, the Munro sisters. Under Hawkeye’s direction, the members of the party land on the shore of a lake. They lift their canoe from the water and carry it on their shoulder into the forest. They cross a stream of water and continue on until they finally arrive at an extensive and naked rock, their footsteps might be no longer visible. In chapter 21, although Cooper doesn’t tell us how Magua hide their footprints directly, we still know that from the procedure that Uncas finds the signs which Magua leaves behind. All of them are put together with descriptions of nature sight in perfect harmony, which attract reader’s attention. At the same time, they make the plots more interesting and show the perfidy of enemy and the cleverness of Hawkeye and his friends. Through those descriptions, Cooper gives us an artistic picture about American western frontier, the vast beautiful virgin land and original forest.

#### **Description of Indian customs.**

Through description, Cooper also paints the original image of Indian and introduces the customs of them to us. In chapter 1 and 3, we can find the description of Indian. Magua, “the native bore both the tomahawk and knife of his tribe” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.7), “the colors of the war-paint had blended in dark confusion about his fierce countenance” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.7). When Cooper describes Chingachgook, he writes like this:

*his body, which was nearly naked, presented a terrific emblem of death, drawn in intermingled colors of white and black. His closely shaved head, on which no other hair that the well known and chivalrous scalping tuft was preserved, was without ornament of any kind, with the exception of a solitary eagle’s plum, that crossed his crown, and depended over the left shoulder. A tomahawk and scalping-knife, of English manufacture were in his girdle* (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.21).

From the description, we can know some live habits about Indian. They like painting colors to stand for something such as death, combat, or peace, different colors stand for different meanings. At the end of this novel, when Uncas prepares to rescue Cora, he appears in his war painting and begins to walk slowly about the post, as he chants a war song. A young warrior tears the bark from a dwarfed pine, another warrior strips the branches from it, a third brave colors the post that is left “with strips of dark red paint... indications of a hostile design in the leaders of the nation” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.338), Uncas is followed by leading warriors of the tribe, each singing his own melody, following his own beat. All of those tell us the warriors will start to join a war. In chapter 30, a warrior seize Uncas shirt and rips it from his body, startled, the warrior stares at the brave Indians, as he points with his finger to the figure of a small tortoise, beautifully tattooed on the breast of the prisoner, in a bright blue tint, there we can know Indian like using animals as the symbol of one’s identity, different animal stand for different tribe. This is a special feature of origin society.

Besides that, the description of the “formal assemblage of the nation” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.309) also tells us when Indian face important event, they will use this way to decide what they should do. In chapter 28, when Delawares are surprised to hear that Long Rifle who is one so famous among the Indian allies of France is within their power, they hold a council meeting of the chiefs followed by a “solemn and formal assemblage of the nation” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.309) at once, where all the Delawares, men, women, and children (over a thousand people), come together. At the same time, they invite the highly respected sage of the Delawares “Tamenund” (James Fenimore Cooper, 1981, P.311), who is a famous patriarch, and then we can know they think the meeting is very important.

Indeed, *The Last of the Mohicans* often describes scenes of devastation. Natural scenes that powerfully suggest the theme of what America has lost is the primitive natural beauty. Nature is humanized: we can not remain indifferent. Along with the poetry of its natural scenes, *The Last of the Mohicans* also reflects Cooper’s scenes of realism. Indeed,

judged by the standard of his time, his wilderness fiction as the whole follows closely the best scenes of Indian studies that established in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, Cooper met and spoke with the most important Indian chiefs of this period. He over all, pictured that general picture, we get in his narration, the tragic, dramatic and ambiguous change. Even his most courageous and energetic characters find themselves in capable of facing the forces of nature and history. According to Cooper, the phenomenon of settlement is the ideal metaphoric expression or the tragedy of American civilization. But in Cooper's narration vision, the frontier is also an image of the sense of opportunity that comes from with change. In this description of the process of settlement, Cooper describes with eloquence the hopes and aspirations of the pioneer and simultaneously the Indian's feeling of loss and displacement.

#### D. *Some Critical Commentary to Cooper's Writing Ways*

Among the American writers, Cooper is the first one who received the most criticism. It is easy to criticize Cooper because his shortcomings of his literature creations are same and clearly in each of his works. He is not a skillful writer, his dialogue is wooden and inconsistent, his Indians hopelessly unreal, his descriptions often longwinded and pretentious, and his plot depending heavily on improbable accidents and absurd mistakes. We can find the example in the second part of this chapter and there are many other examples in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

In chapter 9, David has recovered and proceeds to sing, he is allowed to sing when the frightened group is in hiding, which seems unrealistic—even though Cooper gives us the explanation is that his voice will not be heard under the din of the falls. Cooper rarely has humor in his writing, but in *The Last of the Mohicans*, he uses this skill, but not very successful. We can find it at the end of chapter 21 and the beginning of chapter 22. In these chapters, Heyward finds an Indian village where there are many Indians. He is afraid that those Indians will find them. He thinks they are in danger, but later, David and Hawkeye tells him what he has seen is not a village but a beaver bond. When we come to this part, we feel released because the atmosphere in this part is tense, but it gives more surprise than happiness, so Cooper's this skill is not very successfully.

Another point, which makes us puzzled is Hawkeye's talking when they struggle with opponent in dangerous situation. He is not thinking a way to settle the problem but talking more other things, such as in chapter 32. His actions make us feel that it is impossible to have such mood to talk in that situation.

### III. CONCLUSION

Although there are so many shortcomings in Cooper's work, he is one of the first writers of America who are familiar to people. In his time, American novel is in the stage of enlightenment. So the appearance of Cooper's defect is necessarily. And he creates his best novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*, which tells the story of early American, is a record about the war between western countries who want to fight for colony, at the same time, it shows Cooper's narration and description skills fully to us. It tells the contact and conflict between Indian and European civilization. It portrays the inevitable of opposed cultures and stands as a testament to the ways in which this struggle has been mythologized. It is a memorable depiction of courage and passion, and a precursor to the western genre. Cooper takes the west exploitation as the theme and the history as the background to compose his own style. He despites the stories that take place on American land, which gives us artistic picture about American western frontier, he combines land, people and history in a skilled way, uses nature as the general ground of people's behaviors, paints the original image of Indian.

Cooper imagines Natty, perhaps as the ultimate American—friend of the Indian as well as the white man. Under Cooper's writing, Natty can speak both languages and though the Mohicans are disappearing he can befriend the last of them and fully understand what is being loss as it occurring, though it fulfills wish as distasteful as the thought may be to the white psyche, the white man could not progress in America without the disappearance of the Mohicans and as stated earlier progress is the reason that the white settlers was here and the situation was well. Natty is the prototype of the frontier hero.

So Cooper is by no means a great novelist and a powerful thinker and he becomes a most important landmark in the literary history of the United States.

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