The Last of the Mohicans

James Fenimore Cooper

About the author
James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) was born in New Jersey, in the United States. He went to school in Albany, studied for a time at Yale, joined the US Navy and spent five years at sea. In 1811 he resigned from the Navy and married Susan De Lancey settling in Scardale and then New York. His first novel, *Precaution*, was published in 1820. In 1823 he wrote *The Pioneers*, the first book of the *Leatherstocking Tales*. Although he started writing rather late he soon established himself as one of America’s leading authors. He published not only novels and romances but also conservative political essays and non-fictional works. From 1826 to 1833 Cooper traveled around Europe. Cooper died in Cooperstown.

Summary
The book is a romantic adventure story set at the time of the Franco-British war in North America in 1757. Two girls, Cora and Alice, daughters of a British Colonel Munro, are being escorted through the woods to see their father at Fort William Henry. The two girls set off, in the company of a Huron Indian called Magua, and Duncan Heyward, a British Major. On their way they meet Chingachgook, a Mohican chief, and his friend Hawkeye, a white man who has lived with the Mohicans. Hawkeye realizes that Magua has a plan to help the French and the Hurons find them and kill them. He chases Magua away. Then, Hawkeye takes the girls up the river in a canoe to a rendezvous in a cave with Chingachgook and Chingachgook’s son, Uncas. Uncas immediately likes the dark-haired Cora.

Chapters 1–3: Colonel Munro’s daughters, Cora and Alice, arrive in America from Scotland en route to see their father, Colonel Munro. Their father is in Fort William Henry, surrounded by French soldiers. The two girls set off, in the company of a Huron Indian, Magua, who will guide them through the woods, and Major Heyward, an British soldier. On their way they meet Chingachgook, a Mohican chief, and his friend Hawkeye, a white man who has lived with the Mohicans. Hawkeye realizes that Magua has a plan to help the French and the Hurons find them and kill them. He chases Magua away. Then, Hawkeye takes the girls up the river in a canoe to a rendezvous in a cave with Chingachgook and Chingachgook’s son, Uncas. Uncas immediately likes the dark-haired Cora.

Chapters 4–6: A fight breaks out in the morning and several Hurons are killed. Cora tells the men that they have to go to her father and ask him to send some men to help them. At first Hawkeye argues with her but then he, Chingachgook and Uncas jump into the river and swim away. Major Heyward remains with the girls. In the morning the Hurons attack the cave and capture the two girls and Heyward. Magua wants to know where Hawkeye is and is told that he and the Mohicans had swum away.

Chapters 7–9: The Hurons take their captives down the river and make camp. Magua tells Cora about his life and how drinking the white man’s firewater had made him stupid. It had first resulted in him being thrown out of his tribe, and then in him being beaten by Cora’s father. Magua then says he wants Cora to be his wife and she rejects him. The Indians decide to burn the captives alive, but before this, Magua makes an offer. Alice and Heyward would be spared if Cora agrees to be his wife. Again she refuses and a fight starts. Chingachgook, Uncas and Hawkeye arrive just in time to help and chase away the Hurons. They set off through the woods and arrive at Fort William Henry and are welcomed by Colonel Munro.

Chapters 10–12: The French attack the fort and Hawkeye goes to ask General Webb for reinforcements. The French capture him on his return, in possession of an important letter from the General. Munro sends Heyward to talk to the French commander, Montcalm, and is offered a peace deal, which Munro rejects. Munro then tells Heyward of his daughters’ parentage. Cora was the daughter of his West Indian wife and Alice from his
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Scottish wife. Heyward expresses an interest in marrying Alice. At a meeting with Montcalm, Munro learns the content of the letter: General Webb cannot send more men. A peace deal is signed. As the British are leaving the fort they are attacked by thousands of Indians and many people die. Magua takes Alice into the woods and Cora and Gamut, a singer, follow them.

Chapters 13–15: Hawkeye, Munro, Uncas and Chingachgook follow Magua’s trail and come across Gamut. He tells them the girls are well. Hawkeye has an idea to paint Heyward’s face red and blue as a disguise so he can go into the Indian camp and see the girls. He finds the girls in a cave but suddenly Magua appears. Before he can do anything, Hawkeye, dressed in an animal’s skin, hits him and he falls to the ground. They escape into the woods. Hawkeye goes to Uncas, who is being kept prisoner in a cave and gives him a knife, enabling him to escape. Magua and the Hurons find the group and Magua demands to have Cora. Hawkeye offers himself instead but Magua only wants Cora. Cora gives in and agrees to go with Magua. As they are leaving, Uncas challenges Magua. In the ensuing fight, a Huron kills Cora and Magua kills Uncas. While making his get away, Magua slips and falls to his death from the cliff. The group reunite with Chingachgook and Munro. Hawkeye swears to Chingachgook that he will never forget Uncas, who he regarded as his brother.

Background and themes

Racial interaction: There are many instances in the book where people of different races and nationalities are brought together, often with undesirable consequences. The background to the novel is the war between the British and the French. This war also involved the native Indians, who fought on both sides and were the eventual losers. The white man’s influence on the Indian is a bad one, as shown by Magua’s problems with the firewater, alcohol, and Chingachgook’s lament that the Mohican tribe was virtually destroyed by alcohol. The character of Hawkeye is used as a bridge between two cultures. He is a white man but lives with the Mohican Indians, and looks on Uncas as a brother. Race is also an important factor in the character of Cora. She is the daughter of a white man, Colonel Munro, and a West Indian woman. Munro becomes angry when he thinks that Heyward does not want to marry Cora because of the color of her skin.

Disguises: The red and blue painted face of Heyward was a success because the Indians found him funny and didn’t harm him. However, the animal skin of Hawkeye did not fool Magua. David Gamut’s continual singing is also a form of disguise in that the Indians don’t know what to make of him and therefore do not hurt him.

Love: Love is also an important theme. Heyward is in love with Alice, and Uncas with Cora, but it is not clear what the girl’s thoughts are. Even if Uncas had not died, it is unlikely he would have married Cora because at the time, an Indian marrying a white woman was unheard of. However, Heyward’s chances of marrying Alice were very high.

Screen adaptations: There are several screen adaptations based on this book, which could be interesting to see and discuss, such as the BBC’s TV serial, The Last of the Mohicans (1972) with Kenneth Ives as Hawkeye, and the movie, The Last of the Mohicans (1992), in which the main character was played by the famous Irish actor Daniel Day-Lewis. Black Robe (1992), although not based on the book, featured the tribe, the Hurons, who play an important part in the book.

Discussion activities

Introduction

After reading

1 Discuss: Put students in small groups to answer the following questions: When was James Fenimore Cooper born? When did he die? How old was he when he wrote his first book? What were the Leatherstocking Tales about? Where did Hawkeye live? What was the name of the river in The Last of the Mohicans? Why did Cooper write about love? When did they make a movie about the book?

Chapters 1–3

Before reading

2 Write: Tell the students that the story is set at the time of the war between the British and the French in 1757, and also involves the native Indians. In small groups, ask the students to write down all the words they think they will see in the book relating to this period. Then write the suggestions on the board and add some of your own.

While reading (p. 1, after “He doesn’t speak English, or he doesn’t try.”)

3 Pair work: Write the following words on the board: danger, run, apple, car, eat, sleep, fire, food, water, animals, stop, go, left, right, river, mountain, kitchen, restaurant, cold, hot. Tell the students that they have to give Magua an English lesson before he takes the girls to their father. Ask them to discuss if the words on the board will be useful to him or not. Then ask the students to think of any other useful words they could teach him.
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After reading
4 Write and guess: Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from Chapters 1–3. Tell them to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students, who have to identify the mistakes.

Chapters 4–6
Before reading
5 Predict: Tell the students that Magua and the Huron Indians are going to attack. Tell them to predict what is going to happen. Ask them to think of the following possibilities: The Indians will kill the girls/ Hawkeye/Heyward/Uncas. The Indians will take the girls. Hawkeye and Uncas will run away. Hawkeye and Uncas will kill the Indians. The British soldiers will come and help.

While reading (p. 10, after “Cora, Alice and Heyward went into the cave.”)
6 Role play: Put the students in groups of three. Ask them to role play the conversation they have in the cave. Tell them to imagine that Alice is angry with Cora because she sent the other men away, and Cora is angry with Heyward because he stayed.

After reading
7 Pair work: Write the following words on the board: knife, river, cave, gun, bird, fish. Ask the students to talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Chapters 4–6.
8 Write: Put the students in small groups and give them five minutes to write down all the things they can see in the pictures in Chapters 4–6. The group with the longest list wins.

Chapters 7–9
While reading (p. 19, after “You are an animal.”)
9 Role play: Put the students in pairs and ask them to act out a conversation between Magua and Cora. Remind the students that Cora is very angry and doesn’t want to marry Magua.

After reading
10 Write, ask and answer: Write “Who hurt Magua with a knife?” on the board and elicit the answer (Uncas). Now tell students to write similar questions about Chapters 7–9. Students then mingle as a group, asking and answering each other’s questions.

Chapters 10–12
Before reading
11 Discuss: In small groups ask the students to think of all the movies they have seen that have big action packed fighting sequences. Ask them to consider the following questions: Do you like these films? Why/not? When did the fight happen? Where did it happen? Who won? Who were the people? Did they use guns and knives or other things?

While reading (p. 20, after “I would like to marry one of them.”)
12 Predict: In pairs the students try and predict which of the Colonel’s daughters Heyward wants to marry and why.

After reading
13 Write: Put the students in groups of three and ask them to write the conversation that Montcalm, Munro and Heyward had. Tell the students to add some extra information. Then the students change their papers and see if they can identify any mistakes in what their partners wrote. Then the group act out the conversation to the rest of the class.

Chapters 13–15
Before reading
14 Predict: Write these words on the board: dead women, red and blue colors, an old chief, animal skin, knife, cliff. Tell the students that these words all appear in the last part of the story and get them to predict what happens in pairs.

While reading (p. 32, after “It was a man in an animal skin.”)
15 Discuss: Tell the students to imagine that the animal skin Hawkeye is wearing is really a type of fancy dress. Put the students in small groups to talk about a party they went to when they wore fancy dress.

After reading
16 Write and guess: Put students in pairs and tell them to look at the illustrations on pages 26, 29, 31, 33 and 35. Ask them to write sentences to represent what they think each person in the illustrations is thinking. Now put each pair together with another pair and they read out their sentences and the other pair have to guess which person it is.

17 Game: Put the students in pairs and give them the following definitions:
1 You use this to cut things. (p. 1)
2 Years, weeks, days, hours, ………… and seconds. (p. 10)
3 It is an animal that can fly. (p. 13)
4 Magua was stupid when he drank this. (p. 14)
5 It is a color. (p. 16)
6 Someone is this when they have a lot of money. (p. 22)
7 People wear this on their feet. (p. 27)
Students have to find the words in the book. The first pair to do this wins.

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.