

Cover Illustration for *The Last of the Mohicans*, 1919

The Last of the Mohicans, an American adventure tale by James Fenimore Cooper, became an instant bestseller when it was published in 1826. Its popularity continued, and by 1919, when N. C. Wyeth illustrated a new, deluxe edition of the book, Cooper's story had become a fixture in American boyhood. It has since fallen out of fashion, but its importance to American literature is firmly established: the protagonist, Natty Bumppo (called Hawkeye), a white scout raised by American Indians, is the first of many enterprising pioneer heroes to overcome the perils of the frontier. And even though *The Last of the Mohicans* had been illustrated before, Wyeth's pictures, like George Catlin's paintings in the previous century (see 6-B), did much to create an enduring image of the American Indian as a "noble savage."

Wyeth's teacher Howard Pyle had taught him to work only from experience. To prepare for *The Last of the Mohicans*, Wyeth made two trips to the Lake George region of New York, where the novel is set. He tramped through the woods and cooked over an open fire to gain an understanding of the wilderness and to allow the features of the landscape to impress themselves on his mind. Inspired by the crystal-clear summer atmosphere of the Adirondacks, Wyeth bathed his pictures in sky-blue tones that lend an air of tranquility to a violent and tragic story.

It was not possible for Wyeth to make the same careful study of the American Indians who figured in the novel. Cooper himself had confessed that when he wrote *The Last of the Mohicans*, he had never spent time among American Indians, and that most of what he knew of their lives and customs had been gleaned

from books or from stories passed down from his father. The novel takes place in 1757, during the French and Indian War, when the British and French fought over land that had long been home to Eastern Woodlands tribes. Wyeth was yet another generation removed from those historical events; like most Americans of his time, he possessed only the vaguest understanding of the original American peoples.

Although rooted in history, *The Last of the Mohicans* was Cooper's invention. To criticism that the characters were unrealistic, Cooper replied that the novel was intended only to evoke the past. The illustrator took the artist's poetic license one step further. This image, which appears on the cover of the book, was apparently inspired by Cooper's character Uncas, Hawkeye's faithful friend and one of the last Mohicans:

At a little distance in advance stood Uncas, his whole person thrown powerfully into view. The travelers anxiously regarded the upright, flexible figure of the young Mohican, graceful and unrestrained in the attitudes and movements of nature.

Cooper stresses the American Indian's identification with the natural world, and Wyeth accordingly portrays Uncas in harmony with the landscape, framed by a formation of clouds. He retains other elements of Cooper's description as well, notably the account of Uncas's

dark, glancing, fearful eye, alike terrible and calm; the bold outline of his high haughty features, pure in their native red...the dignified elevation of his receding forehead, together with all the finest proportions of a noble head, bared to the generous scalping tuft.

To capture the commanding presence of the character, Wyeth adopted a low viewpoint, so that the powerful body of Uncas appears larger than life as he advances right to the edge of the canvas, the unspoiled American landscape spread out below and behind him. In other respects, Wyeth alters Cooper's portrayal of Uncas. The Uncas whom Wyeth pictures is bare-chested, covered in war paint, and crowned with a feather, even though Cooper points out in the novel that Uncas's "person was more than usually screened by a green and fringed hunting shirt, like that of the white man." Even though the plot of *The Last of the Mohicans* depends upon the American Indians carrying muskets alongside European soldiers, Wyeth portrays Uncas with a dagger, a tomahawk, and a bow and arrow—weapons of precolonial warfare and the customary attributes of an Indian brave. While Cooper suggests the complexity of the character's position as a conventionally educated, English-speaking American Indian, Wyeth generalizes and romanticizes the Indian hero's appearance. In this way, he conforms to his era's understanding of American Indians, which was tightly bound to the ideal of an untamed wilderness.



5-B N. C. Wyeth (1882–1945), *The Last of the Mohicans*, cover illustration, 1919. Oil on canvas, 26 x 31¼ in. (66 x 80.6 cm.). Collection of the Brandywine River Museum, Chadds Ford, Pa., Anonymous gift, 1981. Reprinted with the permission of Atheneum Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division, from *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper, illustrated by N. C. Wyeth. Illustrations © 1919 Charles Scribner's Sons; copyright renewed 1947 Carolyn B. Wyeth.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at the figure and the background of this painting.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E | M | S

Where is the setting of this story?

This is set outdoors in a landscape. Explain that it is in upstate New York and that the shape of the hills and lake are similar to that of Lake George.

E | M | S

How did N. C. Wyeth show distance and space in this painting?

The mountains and river are small in relation to the figure, and the figure is set above the landscape in order to give a wide view of the valley. Middle and secondary students may also note that the background is lighter than the foreground, an artistic technique called aerial perspective.

E | M | S

Ask students to describe this character's clothing.

He wears a rough cloth or animal skin skirt, a leather strap across his chest, a thin belt holding his knife and tomahawk, an arm band, a feather in his hair, and body paint.

How does this clothing tell who he is?

In the early 1900s, this was how most Americans thought American Indians might have dressed. The weapons suggest that he is a warrior without a gun.

How does Wyeth emphasize the form of this warrior?

He makes him large, dark against a light background, outlines him in black, and surrounds him with a cloud that echoes his shape.

M | S

Ask students how Wyeth unified the landscape.

He used the same colors of blue and yellow throughout it.

INTERPRET M | S

What does Wyeth suggest about the health and character of this American Indian?

He shows him to be strong, healthy, muscular, and standing straight. The intense stare of his eyes, his downturned mouth, and the set of his shoulders suggest that he is determined, alert, serious, and ready to act.

S

Explain to students that this painting is an illustration for a fictional novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Ask why they think this is—or is not—an accurate depiction of an American Indian.

Even though James Fenimore Cooper described this character as wearing a shirt, Wyeth shows him shirtless. Wyeth also had very little knowledge of American Indian symbols.

Have students debate whether this novel should or should not have been illustrated with historically accurate likenesses of American Indians.

S

What might the cloud surrounding this character represent?

The cloud gives him a special character. It acts as his nimbus or aura.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: French and Indian War; European colonies in North America; Huron, Mingo, Mohawk, Algonquin tribes and the Iroquois Confederacy; Pontiac's War

Historical Figures: King Philip; Marquis Louis-Joseph de Montcalm; Chief Logan; Pontiac

Geography: Adirondack region

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *The Last of the Mohicans*, James Fenimore Cooper (middle, secondary); *Ishi, the Last Yahi: A Documentary History*, Robert Fleming Heizer and Theodora Kroeber (middle, secondary); *Hiawatha*, Henry

Wadsworth Longfellow (middle); Pontiac's speech at Detroit (1763)

Arts: American Indian art; compare to work by George Catlin