

The Crisis of American Masculinity
in James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*

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In *The Last of the Mohicans*, James Fennimore Cooper presents masculinity as being in “constant crisis” with its environment. Cooper presents multiple models of masculinity through the characters of Heyward, Uncas, Magua, Gamut, and Hawk-eye. There is a sense of incoherence and fragmentation at the root of masculinity’s definition. This fragmentation is created by a sense of lack of control. As cultural norms progress and change, men find themselves in a deeper sense of crisis due to an increased inability to control their environments and their reproductive futures. I am arguing that Cooper depicts men as constantly trying to unify the fragments of their manhood, but ultimately failing to do so due to an unattainable expectation set forth for them by their societies, The crisis itself the only truly defined element of the masculine identity.

I will now define masculine crisis as demonstrated by Nina Baym and Bryce Traister.

The conflict between men and women is what Traister and Baym believe is at the core of crisis within masculinity. The ability or inability of men to dominate women in both society and literature drives the male crisis because it involves a struggle for control. The American man is a metaphor for the individual against the cultural pressure of society, and it is through this conflict that man defines his individual self. Cooper presents differing models of masculinity to demonstrate the complex and socially-constructed nature of American manhood, which is always what Baym would say is “beset,” or subjected to pressures from an ever-changing nation. The

American man becomes his own adversary in his identity development due to a juxtaposition between his conflicted relationship with women and his yearning for cohesiveness as an individual. This tension defines the quest of the American man to make his fragmented self a coherent one.

Cooper presents this through 4 differing masculine models in *The Last of the Mohicans*:

The first model is the character, Heyward, or the fake soldier.

Though our guide through the wilderness, Heyward is an empty, flat character, lacking depth and presence as an assertive man. Heyward is the 19th century masculine hero in crisis and meant to represent everything the “beset” myth hero is perceived to stand for—chivalry, honor, and loyalty. Yet, at the foundation of this masculine myth there is an innate weakness, and it is through Heyward’s uncomfortable presence in the context of the wilderness that Cooper is able to demonstrate his incoherence as a man. Heyward is meant to be a “Jacksonian” masculine ideal, but he fails at his ultimate test of manhood—independence and survival. Heyward must rely on other men, specifically Hawk-Eye, to aid him and his quest in protecting the weaker sex, emasculating him as an antebellum male character and creating a crisis in his identity. Yet, Heyward is able to escape the wilderness and moving on to the new world, but only by domesticating himself, which creates emasculation.

The second model is the natural, or the Native man, as represented through the characters of Uncas and Magua.

The Native American characters possess a more stable and successful means of survival within the wilderness, which is associated with their manhood. Yet, they are ultimately destroyed by Cooper in the novel’s end, making them unstable masculine representations in competition

with the European male characters. Cooper's depiction of the Native American man are dualistically represented in two variations throughout the novel—Uncas, the noble savage, and Magua, the barbaric savage; this contrast seems to reflect the two social opinions of Native Americans at that time.

Uncas embodies the idealized Native American man, naturally honorable in his character. He is self-reliant, physically robust, and honorable in his loyalties. Uncas' destruction eliminates his position in history, which is Cooper's comment on the reality of the noble savage in the modernizing world—nonexistence. Uncas is juxtaposed with Magua, who is a physical threat to women, and acts the metaphorical threat to the future of Western civilization. Magua's influence and threat to female sexuality makes him the most dominating male character in the novel, and therefore gives him a deeper sense of masculine coherence than the other characters. Yet, Magua is still fractured in his manhood. He ultimately destroys himself with his overpowering desire to control his environment, and specifically women.

The third model of masculinity is representative of a fear for the future, emasculation, which is demonstrated through the character of David Gamut.

David Gamut is presented as an "Other" in that he differs from the masculine "Jacksonian" ideal preferred by society at that time. Gamut represents an emasculation of the European man, and also acts as a representative of Cooper's form for the future of the American man fulfilled after industrialization. Cooper presents as completely vulnerable in the wilderness and often times effeminate in nature due to his appearance, sensitive personality, and profession as a religious singer. Pressure is part of what contributes to Gamut's crisis as a man, who is ostracized for a chosen profession that does not embrace masculine violence, control, and

domination over others. Yet, Gamut is one who survives the wilderness with Heyward, and also does so without the aid of female companionship. Gamut is also one of the few characters that possesses a sense of self-understanding and pride in his identity, despite his effeminate position in the novel.

The fourth and final model of masculinity is represented through Hawk-Eye, who is the body which Cooper inscribes his crossing of all models of masculinity.

Hawk-eye is a European man living in and emulating the Native American culture. He chose this lifestyle due to a discontent with European modernization, primarily in their reliance on education rather than physical survival skills. Hawk-eye's demonstration of Native American culture is forcibly masculine. Cooper's writes Hawk-eye as an exaggerated emulation, or performance, of Native American culture, which Judith Butler's work can conclude that he uses the imitation as a means of performing his masculinity. He seeks immerse himself in the native culture to gain self-understanding, but he is adamant about maintaining his white identity, which he repeatedly asserts throughout the novel by being as he says, "a man without a cross." It is Hawk-eye's confusion and insecurity about his cultural practices, white vs. native, that contribute to his crisis as an American man. Hawk-eye's identity crisis comes to represent the crisis within American masculinity, which is reflected in his desperation to maintain his whiteness.

American masculinity is presented as within a constant conflict with itself over the course of history. America as a nation was on the verge of great changes in the 1820's, and *The Last of the Mohicans* served as Cooper's means of expressing the social impact of those changes on the American man. He uses Hawk-eye as a representation of white masculinity reverting back to

native masculinity in an effort to save itself from emasculation. The vulnerability of socially-constructed masculinity is exemplified through Hawk-eye's gendered body. Hawk-eye is an early depiction of the American man seeking to rejuvenate and strengthen his masculine identity through an emulation of Native American culture, which Cooper, and eventually American society, came to consider as authentic American "manliness." Cooper is satirically presenting Hawk-eye as the future of the American man, who will seek to play "cowboys and Indians" in order to protect the masculine identity that he lost in the development of the new and changing nation. Hawk-eye became the American trope for masculinity, and Cooper's means of "saving" the male population from becoming a powerless gender in the wake of feminism and industrialization.

Hawk-eye is representative of how the crisis of masculinity queers the American man.

At the root of the masculine crisis is a socially founded fear of emasculation, which resonates with man's sexuality and his ability to reproduce. If a man is unable to reproduce, he emasculates himself by not fulfilling his cultural role of reproductive validity, and therefore makes himself queer. Lee Edelman believes that queerness becomes a manifestation of society's inherent fear of a failed future in that it does not facilitate reproduction; he uses the metaphor of the Child to represent their society's social investment of the Symbolic future, or an idealized unrealistic fantasy determined by past cultural patterns (20). Hawk-eye ultimately fails in his ability as a marginalized man because he chooses to pursue a future with Chingachgook, remaining in the wilderness, rather than facilitating a heteronormative relationship with a female character. Hawk-eye's queer independence becomes a trope for the mythic hero of the 19th century, and contributes to the failure of the American man in the wake of crisis.

Sexuality is part of socially constructed male identity, and Cooper shows how it can break in times of trauma and change. The idea of American masculinity is unable to be concretely defined because it is constantly transforming to support the definitions of the society that it was trained to protect, yet it never fully meets the standards that are set for it. In turn, due to the oppressive social standards, culture is ultimately killing masculinity by making it unable to reproduce in the same form. Yet, Hawk-eye's character has had a future by projecting himself as the trope for American manhood, ultimately failing as a man, and thereby calling in to question the ability of the modern American man to survive without being in crisis, and normalizing the American man as queer through this crisis.

Cooper's effort to construct a cohesive model of manhood is unsuccessful and instead, always finds fragments. This project has remained central in social efforts to define American masculinity from Cooper's time to the present.

The upper-and middle-class U.S. consciousness at the beginning of the 1900's began to evidence Hawk-eye's projection of manhood into the future. There were concerns for the future of American manhood and a focus on bringing up "real boys." Cooper was also said to be an influence on dime novels and their presentation of American masculinity through the image of the cowboy. Both the cowboy and Hawk-eye are representative of the mythic hero, resisting domestication and thereby institution. . Both are unable to be domesticated by family life, which is neglecting to contribute to a crucial part of the political stability required for modernization. Hawk-eye is in many ways the first American man to play "cowboys and Indians," but he is created to perform as both social roles in a political statement about social structures regarding gender and national identities. Hawk-eye chooses to remain in the wilderness, where he believes he can live as a better man than in the domesticated and industrialized new world. It is

domesticity that Hawk-eye rejects, but what happens to Hawk-eye's future in the wilderness without reproduction?

The masculine crisis is defined not by the aspirations of men, but by the conflict between men and things defined as feminine.

Women can be seen symbolically as the American frontier, opportunity for expansion, and property to be obtained. Janet Dean discusses how women function as both biological and territorial property to men in regards to the frontier and how the female body is symbolic of the frontier. Throughout the novel, the primary concerns of the heroic characters, Hawk-eye in particular, is to provide protection for Cora and Alice. The efforts to protect the Munro sisters are a metaphor for the white man attempting to maintain social order. Cora's character is the focus of masculine desire and control within the novel, especially in the context of the native characters, Uncas and Magua. Cora as the source of contention in *The Last of the Mohicans* represents exactly what both Baym and Traister relate in their definitions of the masculine crisis. She refuses to be subordinate to the men that surround her, and is destroyed by Cooper in the end because her role as an assertive woman is not productive to the well-being of the new world.

In Michael Mann's 1992 film adaptation of the novel, he seeks to revise Cooper's incoherence in his fragmented characters. Hawk-eye and Cora have a romantic interest in one another and move on together in the end. Cora's character is overtaken by her love for Hawk-eye, creating a gendered power dynamic between the two characters and placing her in a position of subordination. Mann's refurbishment could be interpreted as a means of reunification and reconciliation for the mythic fragments of male characters like Hawk-eye, who is written by Cooper to embody an idea of the myth that ultimately fails, and who Mann clearly wanted to

succeed. Yet, the radical changes in the characters in the movie detract from the reality of the male crisis that must be recognized as unsolvable in both history and the future, yet the project to reconcile the masculine crisis continues.

Cooper wrote *The Last of the Mohicans* as a story that defied the cultural biases and expectations of the time. Hawk-eye, the idolized epitome of masculinity, fails as a man in his choice not to procreate. He instead, joins the company of another man, a native man, for the remainder of his years, defying the reproductive validity necessary for masculine power. Through this, Cooper sought to defy the traditional standards of American masculinity, either to motivate his readers to accept the cultural differences and changes **occurring in the new nation, or to promote a sense of fear and anxiety about an emasculated future. Ultimately, the American man cannot be defined by a distinct set of traits, particular to one race, social class, or gender, and his presence in the future is unstable and insecure.** The instability and constant changes associated with masculinity means changes in the cultural dynamics of reproduction, and therefore causes the American man to consistently fail as the facilitator of futurity. The masculine crisis continues because the American man continues to fail. Nonetheless, he still always finds a way to survive and be a presence in the society, though possibly viewed as unrealistic. What will happen modern Hawk-eyes who seek to save their masculine identities by reverting back to natural manhood? Will society continue to entertain their illusion of control, or will they eventually fail? With that then make them like the emasculated males that they are so desperately afraid of becoming? The American man must progress, and his crisis will evolve with him. It is only this crisis that we have as a true means of tracking his identity throughout history..