

GWU Center for the Study of Public Culture and Public History
Wilson Project Teaching Guide
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Film Title:

“The Last of the Mohicans,” Release Date 1992
Director: Michael Mann

Brief Plot Summary:

Time Period: 1757 (French and Indian War)

Based loosely on the James Fenimore Cooper novel of the same name (1826), “The Last of the Mohicans” tells the story of Hawk-eye, a colonial settler adopted by a Mohican family at the death of his parents, as he aids a British military party through the forests of upstate New York during the French and Indian War. In the war for control of the American colonies, the British, with Colonial militia and Mohican allies, take on the French, allied with the Hurons. A budding romance between Hawk-eye and Cora Munro, the daughter of a British colonel, is interwoven into this political story of war and colonialism on the early American frontier.

Age Range: High School (Grades 10, 11, 12)

Last of the Mohicans is rated R by the Motion Picture Academy. It contains violence (graphic battle scenes) and limited sexual content. **Scenes without violence or explicit sexual content have been selected for this teaching guide.**

Concept

This film is an adaptation of an 1826 novel by James Fenimore Cooper. The original novel depicts a time before the American Revolution and attempts to carve out ideas about American identity and the frontier. Historian Michael Kammen tells us that “Cooper was the first major American writer to create a complex myth of white-Indian relations and of life under frontier conditions.” Cooper’s ideas on these issues were not only important to myth-making in the first half of the nineteenth century but have been adapted time and time again through the twentieth century as well.

This teachers’ guide lets us explore the film in three ways:

- ◆ as a key to the historical events of the eighteenth-century French and Indian War.
- ◆ as a rendition of Cooper’s nineteenth-century tale.
- ◆ as a product of contemporary/twentieth-century culture.

This guide uses portions of the film which access historical, literary and visual questions by creating lesson plans around specific moments in the story. Each lesson involves screening

approximately 20-25 minutes of the movie in class (for more detail, see *Lesson Plans* section below).

Curriculum

This guide can aid teachers in planning lessons that address:

- ◆ The French and Indian War, the colonial period of American history, and the seeds of the American Revolution
- ◆ Comparisons across time periods of issues such as national identity and representations of race
- ◆ Explorations of analytic frameworks germane to American culture such as savagery/civilization, national myth, and the idea of the frontier
- ◆ Essential skills such as critical thinking, writing and visual literacy

These uses of the film lend themselves to four major subject areas conceived of in this guide as separate lesson plans:

- ◆ History
- ◆ Literature
- ◆ Visual studies/art history
- ◆ Media

Goals for Students

Students will:

- ◆ Learn about the French and Indian War and gain broader knowledge about colonial America
- ◆ Debate or interrogate the reasons for revolution
- ◆ Explore concepts of American character from the eighteenth through the twentieth century
- ◆ Analyze various media – including film, the fine arts, and the novel – as historical cultural productions
- ◆ Gain knowledge of nineteenth-century art history and literature

Extended Plot Summary and Alternative Teaching/Viewing Strategy

“The Last Of The Mohicans” is an adventure and romance set in 1757 during the third year of the war raging between England and France in the American colonies (The French and Indian War/Seven Years War). The colonial powers have forged alliances with native peoples in the area surrounding Albany, New York. The Huron have allied themselves with the French, while the Mohicans are fighting for the British. Moving through this frontier is Hawk-eye (also known as Nathaniel), adopted son of the Mohican Chingachgook, and adopted brother of his son, Uncas. The Mohicans are threatened with extinction, and these three men are heading west to winter

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with the Delaware in their towns on the Ohio, where Uncas will find a wife and perpetuate their line. Also living on this land are frontier families and single men (some of them former indentured servants from England) who are expected by the British to serve as a colonial militia, but who are torn between loyalty to the Crown and surviving the harsh conditions of the frontier.

Arriving in Albany are Cora and Alice Munro, daughters of a British officer, who, under the guidance of Major Duncan Heyward, set off to meet their father, Colonel Munro, at Fort William Henry. Magua, a Huron disguised as a Mohawk, has tricked the British into entrusting the British into his care. In addition to military motives, Magua has sworn to avenge himself personally upon the entire Munro family for a past injury to his own family. En route to the fort, the Hurons attack the British party, but the ambush is broken by Hawk-eye, Chingachgook and Uncas, who agree to guide the Munro sisters and Heyward to the safety of Fort William Henry.

On the way to Fort William Henry they intend to stay at the frontier cabin of friends, but find the cabin burned and the family murdered by a Huron war party. Cora misunderstands Hawk-eye's decision to leave the dead unburied, which precipitates a conversation between the two about his past and life on the frontier.

Upon arrival outside Fort William Henry they discover the fort under siege by a massive French and Indian army. The surrounding territory is alive with roving war parties. Colonel Munro is indebted to the men who guided his children to safety. Gratitude turns to conflict when Hawk-eye and Uncas report that frontier homes are being raided by Huron war parties allied with the French, and support the colonial militia's demand to be released to protect their homes. Munro, obedient to British military self-interest, denies their story. Hawk-eye is arrested and condemned to hang when he facilitates the colonials' escape from the fort.

Cora, who has never met anyone like the independent and candid Hawk-eye, comes to realize she is in a new world with new ideas which challenge British assumptions. While Hawk-eye is in the stockade, the French launch their final mortar bombardment. Fort William Henry falls to Montcalm, the French commander, who offers generous terms of surrender and safe passage out of French-occupied territory. Behind Montcalm's generosity, however, is deceit as the retreating English column, including Hawk-eye in chains, is attacked by Magua and an army of warriors.

Cora, Alice, Heyward, some British militia, and the Mohicans escape. Realizing that they will be imminently captured, the Mohicans and Hawk-eye retreat. The British are captured by Magua and brought to the Huron camp. Magua hopes to improve his standing with the tribe by offering his captives to the leader (Sachem). As he presents his prisoners to the Huron leader, Hawk-eye arrives on the scene to bargain for the lives of the captives and both Heyward and Hawk-eye offer themselves in exchange for the women's lives. A discussion ensues between the Huron leader, Magua, and Hawk-eye about the values and fate of Native Americans and their culture in the face of destruction by the Europeans.

The Huron leader decides to spare Cora and Hawk-eye, burn Duncan at the stake, and offer Alice to appease Magua's anger. Duncan dies as Cora and Hawk-eye flee, but they follow Magua and

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attempt to rescue Alice with the help of Chingachgook and Uncas. Uncas dies in hand-to-hand combat with Magua, and Alice, face to face with Magua, throws herself from the cliff. Chingachgook kills Magua. The final scene pictures Chingachgook, Hawk-eye and Cora as they perform a ceremony in honor of Uncas. Chingachgook declares himself the last of the Mohicans and the three look westward.(Adapted from Coolmoviestuff.com)

If the teacher chooses to show the movie in full, it can be broken down into four self-contained sections of 20-35 minutes a piece as follows. Teachers should be aware of questions of age appropriateness (see above) if showing entire film:

Min. 0:00 – 34:00. Introduction of main characters and story arc. Moves the plot up until the arrival at Fort William Henry, a British encampment under siege.

Min. 34:00-1:08:00 Covers battle at Ft William Henry; issues of sedition and loyalty debated by settlers including Hawk-eye; and the surrender of British to French.

Min. 1:08:00-1:29:00 Includes the Huron attack on retreating British; the subsequent flight of Hawk-eye with Cora, Alice and Duncan; and finally the capture of British party by the Hurons.

Min. 1:29:00-1:47:05 Depicts negotiations between the Hurons and Hawk-eye; The deaths of Duncan; death of Uncas; suicide of Alice; concluding scene with Chingachcook, Hawk-eye and Cora.

Lesson Plans

This section is designed to help teachers use the film to devise lesson plans (writing exercises, student projects, and classroom activities) in four separate subject areas. Each plan includes video clip(s) of approximately 20-25 minutes.

1. Subject: History

These two lessons will help teachers specifically access study of the colonial time period and questions of the frontier.

a. “The Frontier Experience”: Discuss the meaning of the frontier.

Two viewing clips approximately 20 min. total

Min. 0:00-8:00 -- The first scenes of the movie show Hawk-eye hunting with his adopted Mohawk family and interacting with frontier settlers in their cabin. This section also includes an initial meeting of settlers where Hawk-eye makes known his feelings about service to the British.

Min. 47:20 – 1:00:00 (see description of same clip below)

Questions Raised:

- ◆ How is the frontier defined? Who lives there and why?
- ◆ What are the particular experiences of the frontier settlers? Why might they not see it as in their interests to ally themselves with Britain?
- ◆ How does life on the frontier in this film compare to other colonial experiences you may have learned about (Boston, Philadelphia, Virginia) in textbooks or elsewhere?
- ◆ How does this frontier compare to the typical notion of the Western frontier in the late nineteenth century?
- ◆ What are some twentieth-century frontiers?

b. “Seeds of Revolution”: Explore the changing relationship between British and the American colonials/settlers.

One viewing clip approximately 20 min.

Min. 47:20 – 1:08:10

This section of the movie includes four important discussions of political alliance, loyalty, the interests of the colonial powers (Britain and France), and the role of settlers and Native Americans in their empires. *(Note: This section includes a kissing scene between Hawk-eye and Cora that alludes to but does not display sexual activity.)*

Questions Raised:

- ◆ What are the motivations for fighting for Britain?
- ◆ What are the particular experiences of the frontier settlers? Why might they not see it as in their interests to ally themselves with Britain?
- ◆ How do feelings and allegiances change? How are terms such as loyalty and sedition defined? Are they debated?
- ◆ How can we begin to map out here what is to come 20 years down the line in the American colonies?
- ◆ How do Native Americans figure their own interests and allegiances with the British? French? Colonials?
- ◆ How are political arguments about revolution discussed?

Resources:

Links to information about history of French and Indian War, includes a 1750 map of North America with Spanish, French and British possessions.

<http://history.acusd.edu/gen/classes/civ/mohicanpics.html>

<http://history.acusd.edu/gen/classes/civ/mohicansOH.html>

2. Subject: Literature

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This lesson addresses questions of identity and can work on its own or in combination with a larger unit on James Fenimore Cooper's novel or units on American identity.

“What is an American?”: Investigate Hawk-eye/Nathaniel's character.

Three separate video clips. They add up to about 20 minutes of viewing time.

Min. 0:00-8:00 – The first scenes of the movie show Hawk-eye hunting with his adopted Mohican family and interacting with frontier settlers in their cabin. This section also includes an initial meeting of settlers where Hawk-eye makes known his feelings about service to the British.

Min. 24:00-33:30 – Hawk-eye tells Cora how his family was killed and his adoption by Mohicans. He explains his belief system.

Min. 1:29:00-1:36:00 –In one of the final scenes in the movie Hawk-eye speaks with the Sachem (leader) of the Huron about the practices of Native Americans and Europeans.

Questions Raised:

- ◆ How are Hawk-eye's loyalties formed?
- ◆ What are his notions of savagery and civilization? What are Cora's? Who/What is savage to him? Why?
- ◆ How do we define civilization and/or savagery?
- ◆ How is his outlook similar or different to: A. American settlers. B. English C. Mohicans D. Hurons?
- ◆ With whom does he most closely identify? Can he be seen as a composite character?
- ◆ Who in this film could we classify as an American? Why? What are his/her qualities, characteristics?
- ◆ (Optional) How does he compare with the Hawk-eye character from Cooper's novel?

Resources:

Link to James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) (with interesting introduction by the author):

http://www.pagebypagebooks.com/James_Fenimore_Cooper/The_Last_of_the_Mohicans

Links to brief discussion of story and original illustrations from Cooper's 1826 novel:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/HNS/Indians/last.html>

Link to James Fenimore Cooper's travel narrative: "Notions of the Americans: The Indians," published circa 1855:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/HNS/Indians/notions1.html>

3. Subject: Visual Culture/Art History

(This lesson area asks students to explore how the movie communicates visually? What are the unspoken symbols and clues? It also will help teachers devise more thematic plans which cross or compare time periods.)

a. “Symbols of Group Identity”: Explore ways of life in early America.

Two video clips comprising 20 minutes viewing time

Min. 0:00-14:20 – This early section allows a comparison between a British style of living imported to the colonies (a tea party in Albany with Cora and Duncan and Alice) and the rough, everyday life experienced by settlers on the frontier.

Min. 1:29:00-1:36:00 – This later scene depicts a Huron village during wartime.

Questions Raised:

- ◆ How is European national identity symbolized in the colonies?
- ◆ How does it visually compare to Native American and Colonial identity? Look at costuming (dress or lack of, wigs, war paint) flags, foodways and rituals.
- ◆ What are the complex ways in which savagery/civilization is depicted?

Resources:

Link to production stills of 1992 movie:

<http://www.coolmoviestuff.com/mohicansphotos.htm>

b. “Picturing Native Americans”: Trace and interrogate representations of Indians. *(This lesson is designed to ask thematic questions which cross or compare time periods).*

No video clips. Here a comparison of selected video stills of native Americans in “Last of the Mohicans” can be made with: canonical 19th-century American paintings and/or sculpture and original illustrations from Cooper’s 1826 novel.

Suggested works:

“The Death of Jane McCrea,” (1804), John Vanderlyn

Selected George Catlin pictures (1830’s)

“The Last of the Tribe,” (1867-1872), Hiram Powers

Original illustrations from Cooper’s novel (1826)

Questions Raised:

What are some stereotypes of the Indian?

What is the concept of “The Noble Savage”?

How does this movie rely on or disrupt long-standing visual conventions or stereotypes?

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Link to production stills of 1992 movie:

<http://www.coolmoviestuff.com/mohicansphotos.htm>

Link to Thomas Cole's "Landscape Scene from the Last of the Mohicans, 1827:

<http://www.abcgallery.com/C/cole/cole2.html>

Link to John Vanderlyn's "Death of Jane McCrea", 1804:

<http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst378/art/jane.html>

(Story of Jane McCrea: <http://mail.h-net.msu.edu/~omohundr/hashima.html>)

Link to information about and pictures by George Catlin (1830's):

<http://pantheon.cis.yale.edu/~thomast/art/catlin.html>

Link to Hiram Powers' "Last of the Tribe":

<http://gallery.sjsu.edu/encounters/americas/america-Full.00144.html>

Links to brief discussion of story and original illustrations from Cooper's 1826 novel. Of note: there is an illustration of Magua in this selection which nearly replicates Vanderlyn's "Death of Jane McCrea": <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/HNS/Indians/last.html>

4. Media Studies

This lesson area can also help teachers devise more thematic plans which cross or compare time periods. It may provide a way of exploring contemporary media representations.

"Mohicans for the 21st Century": Contextualize "Last of the Mohicans" as a product of late 20th Century American culture.

Using two scenes of Native American life in the movie (Min. 0:00-8:00; and Min.1:29:00-1:36:00 – described above), think about how Michael Mann's movie reflects the period in history in which it was made. This lesson can be used in conjunction with any of a number of other primary sources as listed below.

Questions Raised:

- ◆ How do depictions of Native Americans and interracial relationships (friendships, alliances) look in comparison to other Hollywood movies of its time ("Dances with Wolves" 1990, "Thunderheart" 1992, "Pocahontas" 1995 etc...)?
- ◆ How do they compare with other versions of Last of the Mohicans (either Cooper's novel or earlier movie versions (1936 film by Philip Dunne starring Randolph Scott)

Resources:

See Jeffrey Walker's piece and related articles in *Hollywood's Indian* (Further Reading section).

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Link to discussion by Russell Means (Chingachcook) on the activist politics of Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans*: <http://users.efni.com/~kristy/means.htm>

Link to production notes: <http://www.coolmoviestuff.com/mohicansnotes.htm>

Further Reading for Teachers:

Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian*, Yale University Press, 1999.

Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (Chapter 3, pp. 62-100), Vintage Books, 1991.

Richard Slotkin, "Introduction," *Last of the Mohicans*, Penguin Books

William Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic*, Vintage Books, 1996.

Jeffrey Walker, "Deconstructing an American Myth: The Last of the Mohicans," from Rollins and O'Conner, eds. *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, University of Kentucky Press, 1998. (Also contains interesting articles on *Dances With Wolves* and *Pocahontas*).

Internet Links

On Cooper

Link to James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) (with interesting introduction by the author):

http://www.pagebypagebooks.com/James_Fenimore_Cooper/The_Last_of_the_Mohicans

Links to brief discussion of story and original illustrations from Cooper's 1826 novel:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/HNS/Indians/last.html>

Link to James Fenimore Cooper's travel narrative: "Notions of the Americans: The Indians," published circa 1855:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/HNS/Indians/notions1.html>

On French and Indian War

Link to information about history of French and Indian War, includes a 1750 map of North America with Spanish, French and British possessions.

<http://history.acusd.edu/gen/classes/civ/mohicanpics.html>

<http://history.acusd.edu/gen/classes/civ/mohicansOH.html>

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On Movie

Link to discussion by Russell Means (Chingachcook) on the activist politics of Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans*: <http://users.efni.com/~kristy/means.htm>

Link to production stills of 1992 movie: <http://www.coolmoviestuff.com/mohicansphotos.htm>

Link to production notes: <http://www.coolmoviestuff.com/mohicansnotes.htm>

On 19th Century Art

Link to John Vanderlyn's "Death of Jane McCrea", 1804:

<http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst378/art/jane.html>

(Story of Jane McCrea: <http://mail.h-net.msu.edu/~omohundr/hashima.html>)

Thomas Cole. "Landscape Scene from the Last of the Mohicans, 1827:

<http://www.abcgallery.com/C/cole/cole2.html>

Information and pictures by George Catlin (1830's):

<http://pantheon.cis.yale.edu/~thomast/art/catlin.html>

Hiram Powers' sculpture "Last of the Tribe" (1868-72):

<http://gallery.sjsu.edu/encounters/americas/americas-Full.00144.html>