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Cooper's Indians: Typology and Function

Michal Peprník

Faculty of Arts, Palacký University, Olomouc

Critics often complain that Cooper divided the Indians into good ones and bad ones, either without any obvious reason, or with an ulterior reason. The paper shows that this is itself a schematic reading because a closer examination reveals a greater complexity of Indian character even though we can hardly expect from Cooper psychological probes of the kind Hawthorne or Melville made, because he was following the tradition of epic romance. On top of that, outside the Leatherstocking Tales there is greater variety of Indian characters. Indians appear not only in all five volumes of the Leatherstocking tales, but also in the Littlepage trilogy, in the novels *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*, *The Wyandotté*, and in *The Oak Openings*. It is no coincidence that these novels are also artistically and thematically most accomplished. Those that fail, such as *The Redskins*, or *The Chainbearer* from the Littlepage trilogy, do so because the Indians do not participate in the plot long enough. The paper focuses especially on the categories of good Indians and the good bad Indian.

1 Introduction

When it comes to J.F. Cooper and his Indians, most of his critics *see red*. They see in fact only one Indian – the Noble Savage. Other critics are not so single-minded and see *black and white*; they distinguish two Indians in Cooper: *the good and the bad Indian*. But then come those for whom two or even one Indian in Cooper is too many and too much. They find no Indians at all in Cooper and consider his Indians as white man's fancy with no ground in reality.

Mark Twain and Bret Harte belong to the first group. Especially Mark Twain saw red when he happened to cross the path of Cooper's Indians. Twain scornfully refers to Cooper's Indians as "the scholarly savages" and comments on the real Indians he met during his travels in the West as follows: "The revelations that came were disenchanting. It was curious to see

how quickly the paint and tinsel fell away from him and left him treacherous, filthy and repulsive” (Twain 1962 [1872]: 120).

Also D.H. Lawrence found Cooper’s Indians too noble and literary:

But Cooper’s presentment is indeed a wish-fulfilment” (Lawrence 1977 [1923]: 43). “If ever any Indian was like Apollo. The Indians, with their curious female quality, their archaic figures, with high shoulders and deep, archaic waists, like a sort of woman. And their natural devilishness, their natural insidiousness (Lawrence 1977 [1923]: 55).

Cooper’s critics often disregard the fact that the Indian culture has been much changed through the contact with the whites. When the war and hunting ceased to be the constitutive part of the life of dominant warlike tribes, the Indian could not be what he had originally been. Neither Twain nor Harte or Lawrence could see the Indians in their original shape and form. This, however, does not mean that Cooper’s portrayal of the Indian should be considered accurate and exhaustive.

Whereas the writers cited felt obliged to compare Cooper’s Indians to real-life Indians, modern critics feel no such obligation and refuse to attach any referential value to Cooper’s Indians. For them they have nothing in common with the real Indian, they are only tropes for the contents of white man’s unconscious. In their critique of Cooper the Indian has become a cultural sign, an icon.

The Indian, the dispossessed scalper, the disappearing primitive, is the symbol in the *Leatherstocking Tales* for what we call the unconscious, what the orthodox once called hell.” [...] “Indian represents to Cooper whatever in the American psyche has been starved to death, whatever genteel Anglo-Saxondom has most ferociously repressed, whatever he himself had stifled to be worthy of his wife and daughters, but the Indian also stands for himself, which is to say, for a people dispossessed in the name of God they do not know and whose claims they will not grant.” (Fiedler 1960: 190)

In all these semi-Freudian readings the Indian transformed into an icon becomes a fundamental component or even a counterpart of white man’s soul and mind. Fiedler argues that the Indian is indispensable in every real western. Fiedler goes as far as to claim that “the heart of the Western is not the confrontation with alien landscape [...] but the encounter with the Indian, the utter stranger for whom our New World is an Old Home” (Fiedler 1968: 21). When one thinks about it, it is a clever and comfortable way of disposing with the problem of the representation of race in American literature. If the Indian is a white man in disguise then no one can complain and accuse the writer or the critic of a misrepresentation of an ethnic minority. Nevertheless even Fiedler finally admits that this icon, this mythic image of the Indian still has at least some vague generic reference to the collective existence of those displaced Indians. In this myth the Indian figures as a Vanishing Indian.

But it is not my objective to discuss the issue of verisimilitude. My point is that Cooper created a greater variety of Indian characters than just two, or one or none. Those who claim so, seldom read more than the five novels of the *Leatherstocking Tales*.

Good and Bad Indians

Reading only the novels of the Leatherstocking Tales may really give us an impression that Cooper's Indians can be divided along the moral line into good and bad Indians. Many critics point out that this division applies both to individual characters and to the whole tribes. In the Leatherstocking Tales, the good Indians are the Delawares and the Mohicans. Both tribes belong to the Algonquian language group. The bad Indians are the Iroquois and the Hurons. This holds true in three volumes of the Leatherstocking tales, only in *The Prairie* the role of the good Indians is delegated to the Pawnees and the role of the bad ones to the Sioux.

A careful reading will reveal two substantial gaps in the argumentation. First, there is a variety and a different degree of badness and goodness in the individual characters from the respective tribes. Consequently, the noble savage is scarcer in Cooper than generally believed. Second, this rough good vs. bad division applies only to the novels of the Leatherstocking Tales. The other Indian novels lack this relatively clear classification.

Cooper's first Indian: *The Pioneers*

Cooper's first Indian appeared in *The Pioneers* (1823). He was the old Indian John or John Mohegan, alias Chingachgook. This old, aging Mohican chief, the last of his tribe, was converted to Christianity by the Moravian Brethren (Cooper [1823]: 134) and decided to stay in the land of his ancestors, even though their land had been sold long ago. As I playfully suggested in my paper at the Olomouc colloquium of American studies, he could be branded as a 'Moravian' Indian.

John Mohegan could also be regarded as a good Indian – he corresponds to Cooper's description of the Indian in peace in his introduction from 1831: "[...] just, generous, hospitable, revengeful, superstitious, modest, and commonly chaste" (Cooper 1985: 473). And yet, he is no Uncle Tom or Nigger Jim. Cooper built into his character dark overtones that help to sustain suspense in some of the scenes in *The Pioneers*. Although John Mohegan was converted to Christianity, his fiery Indian nature, his proud spirit, could not be subdued. The two cultures were obviously at war in his mind. While he was reminded by the pastor of the village that he should be humble, meek, enjoy peace in his heart, his appearance and his clothes clearly indicated the uneasy relationship, pride, and smoldering discontent.

From long association with the white-men, the habits of Mohegan were the mixture of civilized and savage states, though there was certainly a strong preponderance in favor of the latter [...] Notwithstanding the intense cold without, his head was uncovered; but a profusion of long, black hair, concealed his forehead, his crown, and even hung about his cheeks, so as to convey the idea, to one who knew his present and former conditions, that he encouraged his abundance, as a willing veil, to hide the shame of a noble soul, mourning for glory once known [...] The eyes were not large, but their black orbs glittered in the rays of the candles, as he gazed intently down the hall, like two balls of fire. (Cooper 1823: 85)

The struggle of the two cultures is finally resolved in the restoration of the savage state. John Mohegan dies as Chingachgook, a Delaware chief, an unassimilated Indian. Instead of Christian appeasement and confession, he leaves the world dressed in his Indian clothes and decorated with his chief insignia, chanting a war song, getting ready to enter the eternal hunting grounds and not the pastures of Christian heaven. Even though he remains within the

category of the noble savage, he is neither sentimentalized nor familiarized, unlike many other noble savage characters in American literature.

Duality of the Mohicans

In *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) Cooper for the first time used the good vs. bad Indian polarity. But even there the polarity is not absolute and shades of difference were built in the individual characters as more recent criticism has already noticed. As Geoffrey Rans argues, the simple opposition between good and bad Indians is “not allowed full dominance” (Rans 1991: 110).

For instance there is notable difference between Chingachgook and his son Uncas even though both fall under the category of noble savages and good Indians. Chingachgook is simply more savage and sometimes even transgresses our white moral lines. He is no red gentleman: he gives no quarter, collects scalps like stamps, wears a sinister war paint. One of the very disturbing moments which serve to underline his alien savage state is the scene in which he kills a merry young French soldier without any obvious motive when the party with the ladies try to sneak into the besieged Fort Henry. Terrence Martin understands this situation as a clear evidence of the ambivalence of Cooper’s Indian. Chingachgook’s killing is said to anticipate the Huron attack and convey the theme of the ungovernable ally (Martin 1979: 85). Even though Uncas and Chingachgook are both specimens of the noble savage, Uncas appears more noble than his father, or if not more noble, then more generous and more chivalric, more ready for a change, more interested in the white civilization, farther on the path of adaptation. This difference is reflected in their clothes – while his father goes almost naked and is decorated with a terrifying war paint, Uncas uses no paint and wears a green shirt – he is hiding his nakedness. And especially in front of the ladies he does real wonders and becomes a true red gentleman – when in the company of ladies he neither smokes, nor scalps the enemy, and, what is presented as his great achievement, he cooks and serves the ladies. He does not keep the door open for the ladies because there are no doors in the wilderness. In sum, he does more than a proper Indian should and a traditional Czech male would do. Simply – an ideal husband.

Good bad Indians or bad good Indians? Cooper’s Other Indian Novels

Outside the Leatherstocking Tales Cooper tried to achieve more complex Indian characters. With some degree of simplification, we could call them with Leslie Fiedler good bad or bad good Indians. The first such attempt was made in 1829 when Cooper published a remarkable, little known Indian novel, *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish: A Tale*. It is set, somewhat surprisingly for Cooper, in the early period of Puritan settlements, with the climax in King Philip’s war. The main Indian protagonist called Conanchet, a young chief of the Narragansetts, resembles physically and mentally Uncas from *The Last of the Mohicans*. Like Uncas he is exposed to both cultures and represents the noble savage, intelligent, resourceful, elastic, brave, good-looking. Like Uncas he dies in the attempt to save a white person and thus fulfils the role of the vanishing Indian.

There are however two important differences: unlike Uncas, he is motivated by his desire to revenge his father, killed by the Puritans in the Indian wars, and unlike Uncas, he takes a white girl for his wife – and this girl is no woman of color like Cora but of pure Anglo-Saxon stock. Her whiteness is underlined by repetitive references to her fair skin, golden hair and blue eyes. But here the resemblance with the fair lady Alice ends. Since she

was kidnapped by the Indians as a little girl, she is completely assimilated. She is also no lady in terms of the social origin. The motifs of revenge and white wife become very important structural features of Conanchet's character, which will set him apart from all other Cooper's characters and make him also Cooper's most tragic character – one can see, as Fiedler pointed out, that Cooper tried to move farther in his exploration of the theme of miscegenation than he dared in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Conanchet, like the title protagonist in *Hobomok* (1824), a novel by Lydia Maria Child, finally gives up his beloved wife and in spite of her desperate protests sends her with their child back to her Puritan family because he came to the conclusion that it was a mistake to bring the two races together, they should be kept separate (Fiedler 1960: 211). Like in *Romeo and Juliet* the social tensions and contradictions between the two sides are too strong and conspire to the separation of the lovers.

Conanchet definitely fits the category of the Noble Savage but his involvement in revenge and kidnap makes him a controversial character. Cooper shows here that both love and friendship is possible between the antagonized races, engaged in the struggle for America, but rather as an exception to the rule, and even then only at the social periphery, where cultures overlap.

In 1840s Cooper came back to writing the Indian novels and continued his experiments with the character of the good bad Indian. A new variation on the mean and revengeful Magua from *The Last of the Mohicans* can be found in *Wyandotté; or, the Huttet Knoll: A Tale* (1843), another less known novel. The Indian protagonist, Saucy Nick, seems to be the most realistic type Cooper ever created. He fits well the familiar cultural stereotype of the drunken Indian, who speaks a funny, broken English and does various kinds of odd errands for the white masters. In other words, he is an assimilated Indian in the bad sense of the word.

Like Magua, he also has a reason for revenge. His master, captain Willoughby, had him whipped once. Like Conanchet, he is divided in his loyalties. He likes his mistress Mrs. Willoughby because she saved his life during a smallpox epidemic, he likes her daughter too because she treated him decently. He follows the primitive logic rewarding good with good and bad with bad. Therefore he kills captain Willoughby during an Indian attack on the house, but saves at least the young lady. He gets no peace of mind however and is troubled by guilt. After many years, when he meets with the son of his murdered master, he confesses his crime, receives absolution, undergoes a religious conversion and drops dead.

Where should Saucy Nick be placed? Is he a bad or a good Indian? He is also much less of a noble savage than the previous characters. It is obvious that easy generalizations adopted by Cooper's readers do not stand a test by fire.

Cooper's last variation on the Indian character is less complicated. In his last Indian novel, *The Oak Openings; or, the Bee-Hunter* (1848), the main Indian protagonist, Scalping Peter, enters the plot as a scheming, plotting, merciless killer of white people, trying to unite all the tribes to drive the white settlers back to Europe. But under the influence of the martyr's death of a missionary, who in his hour of death preys for his enemies, he undergoes a religious conversion. Peter becomes a member of the white family he originally wanted to murder but then managed to save, and this family looks after him in his old age.

Fiedler somewhat scornfully puts Scalping Peter and Saucy Nick in the same category, "the good-bad Indian come to wisdom", and calls them "a redskin Uncle Tom" (Fiedler 1960: 196). He associates the pattern of religious and moral conversion with sentimentalism and regards it as Cooper's artistic failure and makes this type appear as Cooper's last word, the final solution. But Cooper never offered any final solution, he was not a formalist, his composition has no thematic unity – he was a novelist of ideas who happened to have a unique gift for interesting action, vivid scenes and conflicts with broader thematic implications. Each of his Indian characters tests a different response to white civilization and

the dispossession, assimilation and destruction of the natural environment it brings along. Conanchet and Saucy Nick show the incompatibility of the two modes of life, white and the Indian. The reconciliation and religious conversion are allowed to happen finally but only in the moment of death. Nick repents and dies in the emotional shock of reconciliation and conversion. Scalping Peter tests the possibilities of assimilation through conversion and adoption. Though it may appear sentimental to Fiedler, it was just one of the paths that Cooper explored. In *Trackless*, or the Upright Onondago from the Littlepage trilogy, Cooper explored yet another type of the good Indian and another way of adaptation – Trackless becomes a friend to the landowner family and lives a happy life in a hut in the forest in a kind of one-man wild-life reservation. He is no convert, he remains an Indian in all respects, including his notions of simple justice, good for good, bad for bad. Trackless should be seen as a variation on Chingachgook from *The Pioneers*, who in the moment of death returned to his old faith and traditions. It is a Chingachgook that never lost his old faith.

In fact, the range of Cooper's good Indians suggests that the best Indian for Cooper was the least unassimilated Indian because Cooper must have known that the value of America is not just in meeting with the unconscious desires and fears as Fiedler would like us to believe, but also in the very social sense, the value of America rests in the confrontation with cultural plurality and variety, to which the Indian culture contributes. The loss of Indian culture means a loss to this fabulous richness of America. His mourning for the Vanishing Indian is not a merely sentimental cry for white man's lost boyhood or for an underdog, or a romantic primitivist nostalgia for a heroic age; he mourns the lost dimension of the unique American reality.

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Cooper's Indian Novels:

The Leatherstocking Tales:

- (1823) *The Pioneers; or, The Sources of the Susquehanna*.
- (1826) *The Last of the Mohicans: A Narrative of 1757*.
- (1827) *The Prairie: A Tale*.
- (1840) *The Pathfinder; or, The Inland Sea*.
- (1841) *The Deerslayer; or, The First War-Path: A Tale*.

Littlepage Trilogy:

- (1845) *Satanstoe; or, The Littlepage Manuscripts: A Tale of the Colony*
- (1845) *The Chainbearer; or, The Littlepage Manuscripts*
- (1846) *The Redskins; or, Indian and Injin: Being the Conclusion of the Littlepage Manuscripts*

Other Indian Novels:

- (1829) *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish: A Tale*
- (1843) *Wyandotté; or, the Hutted Knoll*
- (1848) *The Oak Openings; or, the Bee-Hunter*