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978-0-521-37771-3 - New Essays on the Last of the Mohicans

Edited by H. Daniel Peck

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The Last of the Mohicans is the most widely read and internationally acclaimed of James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales, and has traditionally been regarded as an exciting and well-made adventure story. In recent years, however, critics have found in this classic tale of colonial warfare deeper levels of meaning. In the introduction to this volume, H. Daniel Peck studies these developments, tracking critical responses to the novel from the time of its publication in 1826 to the present day.

The essays that follow present contemporary reassessments of *The Last of the Mohicans* from a variety of critical perspectives. Wayne Franklin shows how Cooper's depiction of Glens Falls – the site of one of the novel's key scenes – represents the process by which the writer dreams his way into the American past. Terence Martin examines the novel's great pivotal episode, the massacre at Fort William Henry, revealing how this specifically historical event marginalizes and displaces even the heroic Uncas and Natty Bumppo, thus replicating the very force of history. Nina Baym positions the novel, critically, between the works of two women writers of the 1820s, Lydia Maria Child and Catherine Maria Sedgwick, showing how their women-centered narratives implicitly challenge Cooper's assumptions about sexual, racial, and social roles. Shirley Samuels, combining feminist and new historicist approaches, considers the theme of cultural miscegenation and demonstrates how the novel's pervasive confusions of identity dramatize an intense fear of women and of natural reproduction. Finally, Robert Lawson-Peebles shows how the carnage of the massacre of Fort William Henry may be understood as a violation of European theories of warfare, and how this violation reveals Cooper's attitudes toward the New World environment.

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★ The American Novel ★

GENERAL EDITOR

Emory Elliott
University of California, Riverside

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Series Editor's Preface

In literary criticism the last twenty-five years have been particularly fruitful. Since the rise of the New Criticism in the 1950s, which focused attention of critics and readers upon the text itself – apart from history, biography, and society – there has emerged a wide variety of critical methods which have brought to literary works a rich diversity of perspectives: social, historical, political, psychological, economic, ideological, and philosophical. While attention to the text itself, as taught by the New Critics, remains at the core of contemporary interpretation, the widely shared assumption that works of art generate many different kinds of interpretation has opened up possibilities for new readings and new meanings.

Before this critical revolution, many American novels had come to be taken for granted by earlier generations of readers as having an established set of recognized interpretations. There was a sense among many students that the canon was established and that the larger thematic and interpretative issues had been decided. The task of the new reader was to examine the ways in which elements such as structure, style, and imagery contributed to each novel's acknowledged purpose. But recent criticism has brought these old assumptions into question and has thereby generated a wide variety of original, and often quite surprising, interpretations of the classics, as well as of rediscovered novels such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which has only recently entered the canon of works that scholars and critics study and that teachers assign their students.

The aim of The American Novel Series is to provide students of American literature and culture with introductory critical guides to

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Series Editor's Preface

American novels now widely read and studied. Each volume is devoted to a single novel and begins with an introduction by the volume editor, a distinguished authority on the text. The introduction presents details of the novel's composition, publication history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by four or five original essays, specifically commissioned from senior scholars of established reputation and from outstanding younger critics. Each essay presents a distinct point of view, and together they constitute a forum of interpretative methods and of the best contemporary ideas on each text.

It is our hope that these volumes will convey the vitality of current critical work in American literature, generate new insights and excitement for students of the American novel, and inspire new respect for and new perspectives upon these major literary texts.

Emory Elliott
University of California, Riverside