The "Noble Savage" in American Music and Literature, 1790-1855

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Abstract
In the aftermath of the War of 1812, America entered a period of unprecedented territorial expansion, economic growth, and political unity. During this time American intellectuals, writers, and musicians began to contemplate the possibility of a national high culture to match the country's glorious social and political achievements. Newly founded periodicals urged American authors and artists to adopt national themes and materials to replace those imported from abroad, and for the first time Americans began producing their own literary, artistic, and musical works on a previously inconceivable scale. Though American writers and composers explored a wide range of "national themes," beginning around the 1830s hundreds of novels, poems, and songs sentimentalizing the lives and activities of the American Indians graced the book shelves and piano racks of middle-class American homes. Though the way in which Native Americans were portrayed varied by artist (and even by work), there are several characteristic inconsistencies that reveal a disparity between how American Indians were represented in the emerging national culture and how they were perceived by white Americans historically. By reviewing works such as James Fenimore Cooper's The Last of the Mohicans (1826), Henry Russell's "The Indian Hunter" (c.a. 1837), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's The Song of Hiawatha (1855) in their historical and cultural context – taking into account the relationship between the historical and literary images of Native Americans -- the adoption and persistence of this particular imagery, rhetoric, and musical language reveal the detachment the American public must have felt towards the Native Americans they had displaced, and suggest the way Americans understood Native American life in relation to their own society during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Subject(s)
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A noble savage is a literary stock character who embodies the concept of the indigene, outsider, wild human, an "other" who has not been "corrupted" by civilization, and therefore symbolizes humanity's innate goodness. In English, the phrase first appeared in the 17th century in John Dryden's heroic play The Conquest of Granada (1672), wherein it was used in reference to newly created man. "Savage" at that time could mean "wild beast" as well as "wild man". The phrase later became identified with the