

From Scott to Cooper: Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* as a revisionist history of Women in the Puritan & Patriarchal American Colonial Frontier

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the feminist discourse in the historical novel as exemplified by *Hope Leslie*, a nineteenth-century historical novel written by a woman novelist, Catherine Sedgwick. The study presents an analytical reading of the novel as a conventional historical novel following the steps of the British Scott and the American Cooper. In the light of the Lukacs's *The Historical Novel*, the study discusses some of the historical features in the novel, and approaches the narrative technique that distinguished Sedgwick's revisionist reading of history as a woman, and her portrayal of the revolutionary woman who resists of patriarchy in the American colonial frontier. The study concludes that the narrative structure of *Hope Leslie*, like that of Scott and Cooper is based on a new vision of the past, and an emphasis on understanding of the new meanings in history. Undoubtedly, the nineteenth-century novelists succeeded in unveiling the sequence of moral and cultural conflicts throughout history. And female novelists like Catherine Sedgwick, have inspired generations of marginalized women. Heroines like "Hope" and Megawiska and planted the suppress champions women such as "magawiska" have planted hope in a better future in the hearts of the suppressed and marginalized women of the next generations.

Keywords: History, woman writer, feminist, historical fiction, patriarchy, colonial frontier

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In examining Sedgwick's (1993) *Hope Leslie* as a fictionalized history of the early American women and their suppression, one must relate it to the tradition of the genre of historical fiction as established by Sir Walter Scott in Europe and by J.F. Cooper in America. The theoretical foundation of the connection between Sedgwick and Cooper, and their connection to Scott's development of historical fiction, show in what way *Hope Leslie* can be seen as within or apart from the Scott- Cooper model.

Hope Leslie is an extraordinarily conventional book because it "provides valuable insight into an age which is regarded as romantic conventions not as meaningless stereotypes, but as effective ways of communicating and message that their literature contemporaries would understand" (David Levin, Cited in Bell, 1970, P. 214). According to Bell (1970), *Hope Leslie* is "double conventional", in that it "embodies as a conventional 19th century attitude toward history, a belief in 'progress', and expresses this attitude towards history by means of a conventional romance, in which historical progress becomes identified with the romantic attachment of hero and heroine" (P.214).

Because Sedgwick and Cooper were exact contemporaries, and because Sedgwick indirectly acknowledges the value of Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*, published in 1826, in treating of American Indians, *Hope Leslie*, published in 1827, does not mark the absolute beginning of American historical fiction. However, *Hope Leslie* is perfectly in line with Cooper's work to the extent that it portrays and corresponds to the early development of North America (Lukacs, 1962, P.64). Regarding the pattern of ideas emerging in the book, and the means Sedgwick uses to bring out those ideas, *Hope Leslie* is also consistent with (though not identical to) the historical novel as developed by Scott, as a product of the French Revolution and consequent "transformation of men's existence and consciousness throughout Europe" (Lukacs, 1962,P.31). For if the philosophical and cultural residue of the French Revolution informed Scott's narrative method, the causes and consequences of the American Revolution, which preceded and influenced the French one and which transformed American culture, undoubtedly informed the work of both Cooper and Sedgwick.

With Scott's *Waverley*, published in 1814, there begins "the coordination between an emergent new form, the historical novel, and a new experience of historicity" (Jameson, 1962, P. 1). The coordination and synthesis to which Jameson refers in discussing Lukacs's criticism constitute the thematic and narrative structure of historical fiction. It is dynamic because it explains, not that changes happen, but *why and how and what is important about them*. Moreover, in historical fiction, the truth of the historical explanation is to be found in the smaller details of experience far more than in the broad outline of significant world historical events. This is explained by Lukacs (who has obvious attachment to Scott as the prime mover of the historical novel) in his discussion of why Scott's typical hero is not such a world historical figure as a king or god (as is often true of historical drama) but rather tends to be "a more or less mediocre, average English gentleman... 'middling', merely correct and never heroic" (Lukacs, 1962, P. 33). In this regard, Lukacs explains later that:

What matters is that we should re-experience the historical and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality. And it is a law of literary portrayal which first appears paradoxical, but then quite obvious, that is order to bring out their social and human motives of behavior, the outwardly insignificant events, the smaller (from without) relationships are better than the great monumental drama of world history (P. 42).

This means that the reader is more likely to engage emotionally, intellectually, and psychologically with the concrete example as a means of insight toward the more universal principle than to achieve such insight if presented with the author's direct elaboration of universal principle. The latter authorial enterprise belongs more to the explication of essayist or philosopher of history than the novelist, who after all has set storytelling as the dominant aesthetic exercise. This is touched on by Langer (1953) in his discussion of the difference between the story as novel and the story as reportage:

[The] livingness of a story is really much surer and often greater, than that of actual experience. Life itself may, at times, be quite mechanical and unperceived by those who live it; but the perception of a reader must never fall into abeyance. People in the book may be dull and dreary, but not the book itself. Virtual events, however subdued, have character and savor distinct appearance and feeling-tone, or they simply cease to exist. We sometimes praise a novel for approaching the vividness of actual events, *usually, however it exceeds them in vividness. A slavish transcript of actual life is dim beside the world-created experiences of virtual life* (Langer, 1953, P. 292; [Italics mine]).

On this view, if the historical novelist does have an appeal or a use to citing first principles, he can do so as Scott does, by way of footnotes, prefaces, and epilogues. The impulse toward aesthetic vividness that is implied in the creation process of historical fiction is the background of Lukacs's estimation of Scott's combination of popular spirit and historical authenticity.

Historical authenticity means for him the quality of the inner life, the morality, heroism, capacity for sacrifice, steadfastness etc., peculiar to a given age. This is the important, imperishable and-for the history of literature-epoch-making thing about Scott's historical authenticity and not the much-discussed, so-called "local colour" of the description, which is only one among many ancillary, artistic devices and could never on its own reawaken the spirit of an age...It is neither by analysis nor by psychological explanation of it, ideas that Scott familiarizes us with the peculiar historical qualities of the inner life of an age, but by a broad portrayal of its being, by showing how thoughts, feelings, modes of behavior grow up out of this basis (Lukacs, 1962, P. 50).

Cooper's work fits Lukacs's criterion of synthesis (which constitutes thematic and narrative structure of historical fiction) as it appears to consciously elaborate America's sense of history and of itself, but not through the eyes of its great men. The very opening of *Satanstoe*, published in 1845, illustrates the sense of serious mission that Cooper appears to have: "It is easy to foresee that this country is destined to undergo great and rapid changes" (Cooper, 1990, P. 7). In other words, as Cooper's first person narrator Cornelius (Corny) proceeds to say, something momentous to be covered by "the pages of far more pretending work, than this of mine" (P. 8) supports, or forms, the foundation of the structure of the novel. But his effort will, for this reason, result in a serious document that will increase understanding and appreciation of "the historical mood" (Cooper, 1990, P. 8). Corny cites significant historical events of the mid-18th century, but only with a view toward establishing a context for the principle narrative conflict of the decline of patroonship, when the feudalistic land-rental system in New York and New Jersey was canceled after the "anti-rent" riots of 1839.

Like Scott's heroes, Corny is a more or less average gentleman landowner. The action of the novel eventually explains how the aristocratic life of pastoral New York came to be settled. This appears consistent with Foley's Marxist critique of historical fiction as something that "glosses over the covert nature of bourgeois rule, which equates class interest with popular nationalism"

(Foley, 1980, P. 154). Yet Corny becomes caught up in a love triangle as well as in many adventurous unfolding of events and personalities like the society balls, the flood, and the defeat of Abercrombie by Montcalm at Ticonderoga during the French and Indian War. In this regard, Leisy (1950), in his valuable study, *The American Historical Novel*, says that *Satanstoe*, which is part one of a trilogy concerning patroonships, “is still unsurpassed as a document of colonial manners in New York” (P. 132).

Hope Leslie resembles *Satanstoe* in the fact that it develops as an early colonial document. It also contains elements of narrative adventure, including the conflict between whites and Indians. The heroine of *Hope Leslie*, like the hero of *Satanstoe*, is of the “middling” sort. She is neither as important as the historical Margret Winthrop, nor as insignificant as a servant. But *Hope Leslie* seems more overtly a document intended to examine the moral and social content of customs, practice, and manners as primary gifts of existence bestowed to all humankind, including Indians. In contrast, the story in *Satanstoe* presumes a certain content of social practice and describes action that takes place within it.

Kelley (1987), the editor of *Hope Leslie*, in her introduction to the book, cites Sedgwick’s declaration that she “did not intend to present a literal history of the Puritans; instead, she sought through historical imagination to investigate ‘the character of the times’. *Hope Leslie*, elaborates Kelley, remains... an investigation into the roots of American moral character, particularly into what it meant in America to be a moral *woman*” (Kelley, 1987, P. xiii). Sedgwick’s emphasize that her book is not a history, though she has used some historical events and characters as a ground for the dramatic plots of her story, can be interpreted as a kind of anxiety of the nineteenth-century though of the “accuracy” that the recording of politically and military influential events must have, or may be a justification of the “inaccuracy” in some of the names and events that she has derived from the seventeenth century history.

For example, she changed the name of Sir Christopher Gardiner, well known in the seventeenth century among the Massachusetts Bay colonists as an enemy, and used his character and the character of Anthrope as motivation of her plots and dramatic themes. This emphasis from the side of a novelist, writing a historical fiction like Sedgwick focused the attention of the nineteenth century reader to the meaning that lies beyond the actions of these shadowy characters of the past. Moreover, the illusions of this past serve as the fertile setting of Sedgwick’s romanticism which nourished her imagination and added to the dimension of the novel.

Sedgwick’s claim can be related to Lukacs’s (1962) discussion of “what matters in the historical novel, [which] is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events” (P. 42). In *Satanstoe*, such an awakening is shaped by events that allow those of Corny’s class in particular to arrive at some degree of comfort and security in their future in New York. Because the emphasis of *Hope Leslie* is focused on the character as personality and temper of the times, Sedgwick’s stated enterprise appears consistent with Lukcas’s description of the content of a historical novel “as a phase of mankind’s development which concerns and moves us” (P.42). But in *Hope Leslie*, the awakening appears for a variety of reasons to be more subtle and more decisive.

Kelley (1987), suggests that the heroic qualities of Hope and her Indian counterpart and eventual confidante Magawisca share spring from their deviation from the cultural norms of Massachusetts Bay regarding the social subordination, inferiority, and invisibility of women, as exemplified in the novel by the historical figure, Margret Winthrop. She describes both female fictional characters (Hope and Magawisca) as “foils to this perspective of woman’s being and place,” noting that they rely on their personal conscience in their defiance of authority (xxi). She

cites a reference to Hope's taking "too much liberty of thought and word" (Kelley, 1987, P. xxii), and also cites Magawisca's more overt challenge of the Massachusetts Bay court's jurisdiction to try her for treason: "I deny your right to judge me. My people have never passed under your yoke—not one of my race has ever acknowledged your authority" (Kelley, 1987, P. xxii; Sedgwick, 1993, P. 286).

The deviance of the central character from the social and cultural norms is a significant attribute of Sedgwick's (1993) narrative technique. If Cooper's (1990) work elaborates America's sense of history, then Sedgwick's (1993) elaborates the nation's natural thirst for freedom represented by those two wild flowers, Magawisca and Hope, as well as American woman's struggle in the patriarchal society of the Frontier; and her growing experience of American History. *Hope Leslie* demonstrates a close chronicle reading of Massachusetts Bay as the product of an impulse toward legitimating Puritan ideals and then transforming those who were dissenters and nonconformists into permanent parts of the dominant culture. Becker (1915) explains this dynamic, saying that nonconformists wished rather to get control of the government in order that their own ideas might prevail, and were more disposed to purify a corrupt society by act of Parliament than by passive renunciation and unobtrusive example. . . . [M]any nonconformists, despairing of success at home, began to look to America as God's appointed refuge "from the generale callamitie"; ... [and] under the lead of John Winthrop, a gentleman of Suffolk whose estate was becoming inadequate to his customary manner of living, convinced themselves that they could best serve God by renouncing the struggle against King and bishop in order to set up in America a "due form of Government both civil and ecclesiastical" (Becker, 1915, PP. 90-91).

This is the dynamic that dominates *Hope Leslie*, and it encloses what Kelley (1987) sees as the two basic concerns in the novel: the subjection of Indians by Puritans, and a tale of romance among Puritans (P. xxi). The narrative action which surrounds Hope and Magawisca elaborates marginal experience as woman, Indian, and commoner in the Massachusetts Bay governed and controlled by theocracy (government by officials regarded as divinely inspired). This is the central thematic fact of *Hope Leslie* as a historical novel, and it is essential to understand Sedgwick's (1993) characterization of Hope and Magawisca as revolutionary women struggling for freedom, and resisting patriarchy.

This can be compared with Lukacs's (1962) touching remark about Cooper's (1990) treatment of the enormous historical tragedy of those early colonizers, who emigrated from England in order to preserve their freedom, but who themselves destroy this freedom by their own deeds" (Lukacs, 1962, P. 65).

Leisy (1950) comments on this point and says that *Hope Leslie* "depicts the persecution of the Indians by the Puritan oligarchy" (P. 43) as well as the fluctuations or shifts of Hope's love story. But Leisy (1950) does not develop the point and so ignores what is more important about *Hope Leslie* as a historical novel: the subtle design that reaches beyond a portrayal of Romantic heroism, and the deep narrative structure that goes beyond such simple details as the manifest conflict between Europeans and Indians. The condemnation of Magawisca, which represents the peak of the narrative crisis and which draws Hope and Magawisca together in the defiant escape plot, is, of course, caused by the judicial oppression that masquerades as justice. Ironically Magawisca is aware of the wretched and dirty self-interest in the fact that the Puritans thought it best "to promote, rather than allay these feuds among the tribes, and a war between

these rival and powerful chieftains assured...the safety of the English settlements” (Sedgwick, 1993, P. 341).

But such actions, like the trial of Magawisca, stand for more than a social critique of Puritan injustice and function as more than a platform to display the characters courage. In effect, they are part of a treatment of the conflict between orthodoxy and nonconformity. Being so highly personal and internalized by the individual and collective consciousness of the colonists, this conflict and the results of it determined the American character. This corresponds with Lukacs’s (1962) view of Cooper narrative environment as “a milieu where the immediate economic contrasts and the moral ones arising from them grow organically out of everyday problems” (P.85), although economic concerns are of less importance than social and moral ones. Thus Sedgwick’s (1993) novel is even further away from Foley’s (1980) assertion that historical fiction “points to the qualitative alteration taking place in relations of production, characteristic of an emergent industrial capitalist society” (P.145). Indeed, Foley’s insistence on industrial capitalism and class warfare has the effect of weakening other useful aspects of her discussion, especially her summary of the pattern of action in the historical fiction.

In one historical novel after another, this paradigm repeats itself. Characters constitute a microcosmic portrayal of representative social types; they experience complications and conflicts that embody important tendencies in historical development; one or more world historical figures enters the fictive world, lending an aura of extra textual validation to the text’s generalizations and judgments; the conclusion reaffirms the legitimacy of a norm that transforms social and political conflicts into moral debate. (Foley, 1980, P. 160).

It is in this context that Sedgwick’s (1993) stated intention to illustrate “the character of the times” (P. 7) truly reaches meaning, although in *Hope Leslie* the conclusion has the effect of showing how moral debate forecasts or foreshadows social and political conflict. If Scott, as Lukacs (1962) views him, has the ability to portray the “inner life of an age”, Sedgwick (1993) does also show that the implied meaning of the conflict, within the structure [age] of the Puritan government, was the authentic dynamic that shaped American consciousness. Class warfare which was constructed by the Marxist analysis of the industrial age, is just a part of it, and not as universal as Foley (1980) seems to think. In this regard, Lukacs deplores the assertion of the critic Taine that “Scott’s art propagated feudal attitudes...[and was] nothing but the bard of the colonizing merchants” (P. 48).

The theme of orthodox dominance as conflict is implied by Sedgwick’s (1993) description of the motion of the trial spectators in favor of freeing Magawisca, the conflicted feelings of the Governor who formerly condemns her, and “the strange contrariety of opinion and feelings. Their reason guided by the best lights they possessed, deciding against her —the voice of nature crying out of her” (Sedgwick, 1993, P. 294). The narrative strategy is also consistent with Lukacs’s (1962) discussion of Scott’s “artistic aim...to show the human greatness which is liberated in its important representatives by a disturbance of his all-embracing kind” (P.51). Lukacs sees in Scott’s stories of a “sudden blaze of great yet simple heroism among artless, seemingly average children of people” (P. 51).

Sedgwick’s use of the historical pattern of orthodoxy versus dissension or nonconformity in *Hope Leslie* serves not only to position it well within the tradition of the historical novel as developed by Scott and Cooper, but also to establish a narrative coherence. For example, among the many Shakespearean epigraphs of the chapters there are statements of Roger Williams (the first and the foremost exponent in America of the theory of the absolute freedom of the individual in matters of religion) that acknowledge the humanity of Indians. These epigraphs

assume narrative significance, not only because Cooper (1990) also uses Shakespearean epigraphs in *Satanstoe* or because Williams, as Kelley (1987) notes, was an Indian advocate. The real intensity of both meaning and painful feeling of these epigraphs by Williams emerges from the fact that he turned out to be a religious nonconformist in Massachusetts Bay—and so was banished. Elsewhere, in *Hope Leslie*, employs statements by William Fletcher, **judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit and Federal Courts; and the author of articles in the areas of Jurisdiction, and in Civil Procedure. Judge Fletcher** mentions “poor deluded Mrs. Hutchinson” (Cited in Sedgwick, (1993), P. 191), when he refers to Anne Hutchinson, who, like Roger Williams, and for similar reasons, was banished from Massachusetts Bay. At the close of the novel, Sedgwick (1993) suggests that conflicts of orthodoxy have extended even to the good Mr. Winthrop: “Throughout the whole affair, Governor Winthrop manifested those dispositions to clemency which were so beautifully illustrated by one of the least circumstances of his life, when being, as is reported of him, upon his death-bed, Mr. Dudley pressed him to sign an order of banishment of an heterodox person, he refused, saying--‘I have done too much of that work already’” (P. 343).

Such narrative elements are not only vehicles of storytelling that draw historical personages into the lives of fictional characters, but also devices of narrative design. They enrich the conception of historical fiction as both narrative craft and narrative mission that recreate the past and reflect it on the present, helping the readers to know who they were and who they are now. Thus the actions of Magawisca and Hope, the feelings of the colonists under the Puritan government, and the lack of self-judgment among the Puritan officials and governors, all stemming from the individual lives, generate the mass consciousness about the difference between orthodoxy and freedom that eventually dominated Revolutionary America. Conclusively, the narrative structure of *Hope Leslie*, as well as *Satanstoe*, that of Cooper and before him, Scott’s *Waverley*, does reinforce an understanding of historical tendencies and creates historical meaning in fiction. It was their (the writers of the nineteenth-century historical fiction) enterprise to uncover the sequences of such moral and cultural conflicts for the succeeding ages, and to inspire succeeding generations of women, and other marginalized minorities.

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