“Messengers of Justice and of Wrath”: The Captivity-Revenge Cycle in the American Frontier Romance

A dissertation presented to
the faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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June 2011

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This dissertation titled

“Messengers of Justice and of Wrath”: The Captivity-Revenge Cycle in the American Frontier Romance

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ABSTRACT

ELLIOTT, BRIAN P., Ph.D., June 2011, English

“Messengers of Justice and of Wrath”: The Captivity-Revenge Cycle in the American Frontier Romance

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This project explores the central importance of captivity and revenge to four novels in the genre of frontier romance: Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly* (1799), James Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* (1826), Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie* (1827), and Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Nick of the Woods* (1837). Although a fundamental plot aspect of nearly every work in the genre, the threat of captivity and the necessity of revenge are rarely approached as topics of inquiry, despite their deep connection to the structure and action of the texts. Perhaps most importantly, as critics Jeremy Engels and Greg Goodale note, these twin tropes serve as a way of unifying disparate social groups and creating order; in essence, such depictions function as a form of what Michel Foucault terms “governmentality,” logics of control that originate from non-governmental sources but promote systems of governance. For works in the genre of frontier romance, the cyclical recurrences of captivity and revenge violence—what I term the “captivity-revenge cycle”—become the rhetorical embodiment of the contemporary sociopolitical discourses on proper citizenship, government, and morality.

With these ideas in mind, I examine the role of the captivity-revenge cycle as depicted in the texts studied here. In each novel, the centrality of forms of captivity—male domestic or economic disempowerment and isolation, female abduction and
physical captivity—combine with their accompanying acts of vengeance to create a vision of frontier society that is structured around this cyclical violence; the societies depicted represent a form of participation in the era’s sociopolitical discourses on topics like expansion, citizenship, proper republican morality, and justice. By reinvestigating a genre often dismissed as overly conventional and lowbrow, this project displays the way that frontier romances serve as vehicles for the rhetoric of sociopolitical organization, revealing important cultural work in the contributions of popular literature to the emerging United States.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Paul Jones, whose excellent advice on this project was only surpassed by his cheerful willingness to field all manner of bizarre questions. Additionally, many thanks go to my dissertation committee of Nicole Reynolds, Thomas Scanlan, and Jessica Roney for their helpful suggestions and scholarly guidance. Lastly, a warm thank you to the entire family of the Ohio University English Department. My time here has been nothing short of amazing; I can only hope my next stop is half so wonderful and rewarding an experience.
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CHAPTER 1:
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CAPTIVITY-REVENGE CYCLE: THE EXAMPLE OF JANE MCCREA

Americans! revenge your country's wrongs;
To you the honour of this deed belongs,
Your arms did once this sinking land sustain,
And sav'd those climes where Freedom yet must reign —
Your bleeding soil this ardent task demands,
Expel yon' thieves from these polluted lands...

-Philip Freneau, “America Independent and Her Everlasting Deliverance from British Tyranny and Oppression”

In their 2009 article “‘Our Battle Cry Will Be: Remember Jenny McCrea!’ A Précis on the Rhetoric of Revenge,” authors Jeremy Engels and Greg Goodale examine one of the most enduring myths of early America: the murder of Jane McCrea by Indians serving British General John Burgoyne. What was initially an unfortunate incident became legend in a flurry of retellings that elaborated on and deviated from the sketchy details of the historical facts; the untimely death of Ms. McCrea in 1777 was immediately appropriated and recast into a national atrocity, not only to embellish and enliven it but to make it serve the various agendas of the story’s retellers. The focus of Engels and Goodale’s article explores the tale’s use as a political tool, particularly one for rallying the people, a “battle cry”:

The state thus learned to gain a manner of control over the demos by filling them with hatred for the nation’s “enemies” and then encouraging them to release this hatred in explosive acts of imperialist violence. As

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1 I use the term Indian throughout this study because of its historical appropriateness and because it carries important cultural connotations that are pertinent to the project. I therefore use the term with a full recognition of its implications; the standard Native American is used when deemed more appropriate.
time passed, and as the public sphere expanded, circulating stories in public memory ensured that these wounds never healed. As Americans told and retold, dramatized and visualized, performed and produced the story of Jane McCrea, they acted as unconscious agents of state power.

(95)

The notion that a random event like the murder of Jane McCrea could be turned into a symbolic act around which people could rally is nothing new; what is intriguing, however, is the way that the story of Jane McCrea’s murder becomes conventionalized, recast into more or less standard forms that could be easily communicated and would instantly elicit the “appropriate” responses of shock, horror, and desire for retributive justice from potential audiences. Those audiences have been unexpectedly diverse, ranging from the Revolutionary militia using her death as a rallying point, to the readers of sentimental novels, and even the viewers of a small town play loosely based on the events.² Rather than simply being an example of the mechanisms by which a singular event is manipulated to create multiple forms for popular consumption, however, the multiple versions of Jane McCrea’s death are all directed by conventionalized representation to serve one primary end: to inspire revenge against her murderers and the forces they represent. As Engels and Goodale so aptly remark, “though prior analyses

² Michelle Burnham notes of the spread of stories about McCrea’s death: “its effect on public consensus for the war was immediate, for it reportedly motivated the largest enlistment of patriot soldiers during the Revolutionary War” (75). This was especially notable because the Hudson Valley had many British supporters who were immediately alienated by Burgoyne’s failure to assure their safety from his own forces. For more on this see Namias, White Captives (118-9). McCrea’s death was first converted to sentimental novel form by René Michel Hilliard d’Auberteuil in 1784 as Miss McCrea: A Novel of the American Revolution. Philip Henry Carroll created Jane McCrea: A Tragedy in Five Acts for the 150-year anniversary of her death in 1927.
illuminate various facets of the McCrea myth, we feel that they miss an important component—for McCrea’s death was first and foremost a revenge story” (94).

That one of the earliest American legends would be a revenge story should also be no surprise; American literature is filled with tales of revenge, many of them constructed from the same materials as McCrea’s story. In the genre of the American frontier romance, for instance, beautiful women are continually threatened with the same conventional Indian violence used in the McCrea stories; their lovers, brothers, neighbors, and friends, like their historical counterparts, are roused to vengeance by these threats. These literary reenactments of the McCrea legend point to a lineage of revenge narratives that are intimately tied to America’s conception of itself. As Engels and Goodale say of the McCrea legend, the fact that it is primarily a revenge tale is often overlooked; this same detail often falls by the wayside in analyses of the frontier romance. The goal of the current project is to define and examine the way these tales of vengeance, so central to America’s literary and cultural past, have emerged out of the raw materials brought together in the example of Jane McCrea’s untimely death. The conventions that build McCrea’s legend become the foundations of one of America’s most enduring popular literary genres, the frontier romance. It is a genre where the story of the frontier itself often becomes “first and foremost a revenge story”; by understanding the centrality of this repeated narrative of revenge to some of the foundational works of American literature, we also see how these texts carry on the uniting “battle cry” that brought disparate Americans together in retribution for the death of Jane McCrea.
1.1: Murdering McCrea, Making America

How did Jane McCrea’s death—one among many innocents killed in the course of war—transform her into a martyr in need of such powerful revenge? Ironically, it is linked with the attempts to protect her and other civilians by the man who would suffer defeat at the hands of her revengers, General John Burgoyne. Burgoyne’s famous Proclamation from his camp at Ticonderoga, a prime example of his blustery, high-flown rhetoric, had sought to offer protection for those who would remain noncombatants: “The domestic, the industrious, the infirm, and even the timid inhabitants, I am desirous to protect,” Burgoyne proclaimed, “provided they remain quietly in their houses” and neither hinder his army nor aid his foes. For those who would continue to be the enemies of the righteous British government, “the messengers of justice and of wrath await them in the field; and devastation, famine, and every concomitant horror, that a reluctant, but indispensable prosecution of military duty must occasion, will bar the way to their return” (qtd. in Niles 179). For those who chose to oppose Burgoyne, alienation, exile, and apocalyptic destruction awaited; those who remained loyal or neutral would be protected from the terrible fate awaiting the rebellious.

Unfortunately for Burgoyne, not all the civilians accepting his offer remained safe, and a soldier’s letter printed in the “Philadelphia, August 13” section of the August 13, 1777 Pennsylvania Gazette held Burgoyne’s Proclamation directly responsible:

We brought off the grain and forage, and destroyed what we could not remove; many families fled; those that would not come away, relying on Gen. Burgoyne’s proclamation, were killed, scalped and inhumanly
butchered by the Indians, without any discrimination of Whigs or Tories. A miss M’Crea, who was to have been married to one Jones, a Tory, who had joined the enemy, and who she daily expected to bring her off, was dragged by the Savages out of her house, shot twice through her body, her clothes torn off her back, and left scalped in the bushes. This brutal scene was transacted by four Indians, under cover of three hundred British regulars, drawn up at a small distance, and in sight of an advanced party of ours, who could give her no assistance. Several families, whom we know, have been murdered and scalped by the Indians, man, wife and five or six children, and their negroes. Many families, we know not, have fell a sacrifice to their credulity in Burgoyne’s proclamation, which promised protection to all who remained peaceably and quiet at their houses, with their stock, &c. &c. (3)

In addition to emphasizing the duplicity of Burgoyne’s guarantees of safety, this account highlighted the depraved and barbaric nature of the complicit British soldiers and the Indian mercenaries in their employ. This report and others like it, which took the murder of Jane McCrea and transformed it into a sentimentalized atrocity of the worst kind of injustice and brutality, precipitated the fierce American response that would allegedly turn the tide of the Revolution.³ While Burgoyne had sought to simultaneously paint himself as the merciful sparer of the weak and avenging angel of the wicked, the failure

³ As Engels and Goodale state, there is no proof that the large enlistments reported after McCrea’s death were linked to that event. It was nevertheless portrayed as key to rallying American forces that would win a decisive battle at Saratoga, a turning point in the war. For examples of the popular linking of McCrea to American victory, see Engels and Goodale (100).
of his Proclamation to protect noncombatants had instead opened the opportunity for the Americans to fashion themselves even more the righteous party, transformed from rebels into “the messengers of justice and of wrath.”

While revenge may be the primary trope behind the various versions of the legend, it is not the only one. Among the most popular embellishments of the story is the demonization of Indians as the perpetrators of the crime and the sentimentalization of McCrea:

As the story goes, McCrea was murdered in her wedding gown by Indians entrusted to escort her from a friend’s residence near Fort Edward across the battlefield into the loving arms of her Tory fiancé, David Jones, an officer in Burgoyne’s army. Her escorts did not deliver on their promise, however. Disagreeing over who deserved the largest share of the reward of rum, the Indians raped, scalped, and murdered McCrea. (Engels and Goodale 93)

The inclusion here, as in the above newspaper account, of a heavily-stereotyped party of Indians—drunk, vicious, and greedy for money and rewards from equally immoral British exploiters—serves to recast the McCrea myth into one of the revenge story’s closest companions, the captivity narrative. In the letter reprinted in the Pennsylvania

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4 It was Burgoyne’s own failure to retaliate against McCrea’s Indian assailants that drove much of the anger against the British. Although he intended to punish the responsible parties, Burgoyne was advised that such an act would cause the Indian forces to not only desert but possibly retaliate themselves. Fearing the consequences of this, Burgoyne left them unpunished, which in turn fueled the American ire against him. For more information, see Richard M. Ketchum Saratoga: Turning Point of America’s Revolutionary War (New York: H. Holt, 1997): 276 and Colley Captives (232-3).

5 Later versions of the McCrea story sometimes included positive Indian figures of the Noble Savage type who either attempted to defend McCrea or avenge her death. See Haywood (161) and Engels and Goodale (103-4) for more information.
**Gazette**, McCrea was simply the innocent victim of the spread of wartime violence, “dragged by the Savages out of her house” and killed in roughly the same location; as the story circulated and grew into the “standard” account presented by Engels and Goodale’s above quotation, McCrea’s escort across the battlefield loses the trappings of war casualty and takes on those of abduction and captivity, the imperiled female in the wilderness forced to rely on inhuman savages for protection. This latent captivity trope becomes more apparent in other versions of the story, including the first novelization based (very) loosely on the incident, in which McCrea is detained in her father’s house by British soldiers early on and the scene of her murder embellished with details like those typical of the Indian captivity genre.6

These twin tropes of captivity and revenge work together to conventionalize the representation of Jane McCrea’s unfortunate demise into a rather typical narrative of distressed femininity, Indian cruelty, and the requisite vengeance for such horrific crimes. I refer to this combination disempowerment and reciprocal attack as the captivity-revenge cycle, a gesture to both the interconnectedness of the two tropes and the ways in which they feed into a self-sustaining, repetitive form of retributive violence.7

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6 For a thorough description see Haywood 158-162 and 165-170.  
7 The combination of terms provides a succinct expression of the complexities and interconnectedness of the individual acts of abduction and retribution. While actual captivity does not always occur, the continual threat of it—especially the threat to domesticity—is often omnipresent; along these same lines, situations not properly thought of as captivity, such as McCrea’s escort across the battlefield or alienation and social isolation of males, are often strongly marked by the conventions of captivity narratives. Strongly connected to the fear of captivity is the notion of revenge, both as the repayment of a previous wrong and as an act of preventative violence against those who may prove enemies in the future. Much of the violence in frontier romances is driven by this combination of pursuit and reprisal, a seemingly endless parade of chases and attacks on heroes who immediately become pursuers and attackers. This is why I refer to this combination of themes as a cycle: the reversals and exchanges of roles create a circular logic to the violence, systematizing it and giving it a life of its own. Some critics of the conventions of frontier romance see this cycle as a cheap mechanism for sensationalism; I would argue that it is a fundamental aspect of
retellings of the McCrea story in works like René Michel Hilliard d’Auberteuil’s 1784 novel Miss McCrea and Phillip Henry Carroll’s 1927 play Jane McCrea may alter the story to serve their individual sociopolitical ends, but the basic tropes of revenge and captivity persist, reminding audiences of their centrality in the national consciousness across historical eras.

The elevation to the level of myth of captivity and revenge tales like those spawned by Jane McCrea’s death is not an isolated incident; neither is the use of such a tale as a political motivator. As Ian Haywood notes, “In the American revolutionary war, the genre was utilized by the Americans to boost national morale, and some of the early narratives of female capture, such as the story of escapee Hannah Dustan, who scalped her captors, were reprinted in great numbers” (166). Richard Slotkin’s groundbreaking Regeneration Through Violence likewise explores captivity and revenge as it ties the Myth of the Frontier into its eventual incarnation through the archetypal hunter, notably based in the figure of Daniel Boone, one-time captive, Indian fighter, and woodsman who “is the lover of the spirit of the wilderness, and his acts of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against that spirit and her avatars” (22). Throughout American history understanding the meaning of violence and a person’s place in the frontier world. For more information, see below.

8 Carroll, for instance, turns the focus of the story to conflict between McCrea’s brother and her fiancé; Jane is listed late in the character list and is killed off in the middle of the play. McCrea herself becomes a “patriot” rather than a Tory sympathizer, further emphasizing the tragedy’s role as “political pageantry.” See Engels and Goodale 104-5 for more information.

9 Even Mary Rowlandson, the quintessential passive sufferer, received a violent makeover. According to Burnham, Rowlandson’s narrative saw “an unprecedented seven editions […] in the 1770s alone, after having been reissued only once—in 1720—since its original year of publication” (65). The renewed interest was accompanied by the conversion of Rowlandson’s tale of pious submission into one of spirited resistance. The original title, The Sovereignty and Goodness of God becomes A Narrative of the Captivity, Sufferings, and Removess of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, with a frontispiece woodcut showing Rowlandson wielding a rifle against suspiciously Redcoat-esque attackers. For more information, see Burnham 63-67; Colley 231.
and literature, we continually see the twin tropes of captivity and revenge paired together in endless permutations, a common symbolic heritage for a country “founded and preserved by acts of aggression, characterized by a continuing tradition of self-righteous violence against suspected subversion,” and galvanized, as Engels and Goodale argue, by the willingness of its citizens to unite in upholding that tradition (Davis viii).

It is in the linking of the frontier with the captivity-revenge cycle that the current project finds its genesis. Among the many offspring of the Boone archetype as traced by Slotkin are the literary texts that fall into the genre of frontier romance: texts like Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly* (1799), James Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* (1826), Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie* (1827), and Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Nick of the Woods* (1837) take the tropes of captivity and revenge as their central actions, the twin motors that drive virtually every aspect of their plots. My project explores these combined tropes from the standpoint suggested by Engels and Goodale in detailing the expansion of Jane McCrea’s murder into legend: as a form of rhetoric, especially “as a historically conditioned, circulating discourse of power” by which people could be socially and politically organized. In short, the twin tropes of captivity and revenge on the frontier could be used as an unofficial—and perhaps unrecognized—form of governance, a way of introducing and describing the duties and behaviors appropriate to good citizens.

As Ian Haywood shows in his discussion of distressed femininity in *Bloody Romanticism*, “the cultural power of the imagery of female peril did not derive solely from the eighteenth-century sentimental tradition, but also from an iconographic tradition of political propaganda which was constantly recycled and appropriated” (162). Jane
McCrea’s murder, recast in the long-standing form of Indian captivity and placed alongside captivity narratives like Hannah Dustan’s, presented a strong discourse of imperiled femininity that served to empower a defensive rhetoric of revenge. This rhetoric, founded on a fear of continued depredations and creating a cultural imperative through senses of injustice and duty to respond, is what many saw as enabling American revolutionary victories. When the United States found itself a newly free nation in the wake of the Revolution, this deeply embedded iconography of captivity and revenge, so essentially American in character, remained; it became a powerful persuasive tool for connecting disparate groups of people and transmitting sociopolitical information in the form of what Stephen Hartnett calls cultural fictions, common ways of symbolically and discursively capturing a people’s collective experiences. As turmoil in the new nation sprung up around social and political issues like national security and expansion, the roles of government and citizen, and the creation of both public and private order, literature took up its place as an unofficial institution of governance: “literature, at least in the nineteenth century,” Davis tells us, “occupied a position somewhere between the unofficial values of various social and religious groups and the dominant morality of religion and law. Hence the values of fiction were shaped to bridge the disturbing space between sentiment and law […]” (Davis 234). Not only did “writers of fiction […] sometimes [act] as a national conscience,” they became disseminators of national character as well (245). As Slotkin says of James Fenimore Cooper, the most successful

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10 “Our ancestors produced their own stories, norms, explanations, icons, justifications, and sustaining myths and […] these coping mechanisms were often constructed and conveyed much like fiction, as tales that were heard, discussed, altered, debated, puzzled over, and then retold to give the world order, meaning and purpose” (Hartnett 2).
and well-known writer of frontier romance, “he made literature the field of patriotic action and a forum to address the concerns of public life” (Fatal 82).

The aim of the current project is to explore this nexus of national political discourses and aesthetic conventions as it occurs in frontier romance, particularly as it is integrated into the greater rhetoric of nation building and progress in a newly formed America just finding its identity. The mythologized murder of Jane McCrea feeds directly into the same aesthetic of violence and revenge that becomes the driving plot point behind frontier romances like those of Brown, Cooper, Sedgwick, and Bird; even the liminal space of the battlefield finds a parallel in the simultaneously dangerous and promising threshold world of the frontier wilderness. Through the medium of popular literary fictions as “a forum to address the concerns of public life,” the private battles of the frontier romance’s characters become exemplary public acts, circulated and mythologized like those of the McCrea story or the Boone character as analyzed by Slotkin. The conventions used to portray the historical fictions of the aforementioned frontier novels become a symbolic discourse of disempowerment, violation, and retribution that is self-sustaining, recast from novel to novel and time to time to serve the purpose of representing the trials of the current society. If America was indeed a “nation […] conceived in and born out of violence,” in its earliest periods up through the Revolution, violence quickly became a symbolic language that continued to see use as a way of describing the young nation’s growing pains (Feldberg 88).

My exploration of the uses of the captivity-revenge cycle as the underlying structure of frontier romance is meant to correct an assumption about the transparency of
this descriptive system akin to that of assuming linguistic transparency. Scholars touching on these tropes in early American literature often treat them as given, as self-evident in their origins and meaning—as transparent acts that are merely vehicles for carrying the weight of the narrative. But what do we actually mean when we say that someone is a captive? Is “captivity” more than simply a physical state, and why is it so powerfully a part of the American psyche that it becomes prevalent in our imaginative literature? Why is captivity so often paired with retaliatory violence, and why is this an excused, even encouraged, response? What does the act of revenge mean to Americans? Along these lines, I believe the usual approach to captivity and revenge as “given,” easily understood tropes leaves a gap in our understanding of how the captivity-revenge structure’s acts of violence are themselves meaningful, symbolic occurrences that serve a descriptive or communicative purposes. Beyond simply being functions of genre or empty conventions, captivity and revenge have a deep aesthetic and sociopolitical significance in the frontier romance that this project seeks to uncover and analyze.

As the focus of political and social energies turned from the patriotic applications that highlighted the use of the McCrea myth in the revolutionary period to the issues of governance and national security that marked Brown’s era and grew to include the concerns of expansion, national identity, and Indian policy in the transition from Jeffersonian to Jacksonian democracy in the time of Cooper, Sedgwick, and Bird, so too did the genre’s conventions become adapted to (and by) the era’s political discourse, sometimes complicating but ultimately reinforcing the literature “as unconscious agents of state power” (Engels and Goodale 95). This study traces the ways that the genre
conventions surrounding acts of violence on the frontier grew into an aestheticized version of the circulating political discourses of national security, national identity, and national expansion, functioning as an important vehicle for recreating political discourse in the form of cultural fiction. By reexamining the convergence of the state and cultural myth in the generation of these enduring fictional visions of the frontier, I hope to highlight the ways that literary acts of violence came to serve as a vehicle for governance shared culture, especially in the transitional years of the 1790s, 1820s, and 1830s.

The rationale behind the following essays, therefore, is fairly simple: the literary depictions of revenge and captivity in frontier romances are part of a wider symbolic language used to represent the sociopolitical experiences of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in America. The uses of these tropes are not unalterably linked to one particular point of view; as Ian Haywood says of a similar notion in his own work, “the bloody vignette cannot be pinned down to a particular ideological viewpoint, as it was a highly mobile trope which was readily appropriated by warring political factions and even self-divided Romantic writers” (4). What these tropes accomplish instead is the creation of a standardized language of representation, an aestheticized discourse built around the culturally defined reactions to the conventional depictions of these violent acts. When an enemy like the British army attacks, citizens may not know what to do because the foes are civilized and Burgoyne has said noncombatants will be spared; when Indians attack, citizens have a wealth of folklore and history demonstrating the appropriated response. In order to ensure the desired response, the storyteller therefore
recreates the British wartime assault as an Indian atrocity, and the citizens respond as expected.

By exploiting these expectations, writers could not only aestheticize the reflections of the current sociopolitical climate that found their way into the novels, they could present a standardized, expected response to them as well—not only the way the world is, but the way it ought to be. In effect, their texts become rhetorical objects or systems, not unlike propaganda, that repackage one discourse into another. The rhetoric of national security, for example, becomes that of the dangerous frontier, as the political and social discourses of the Revolution were converted through the McCrea myth into the sentimental, moral language of distressed femininity and righteous retribution. The reader is given models of proper behavior that apply to multiple, analogous situations—for instance, true forms of physical captivity or mental, social, or economic forms of disempowerment that mirror that of captivity—that he or she may encounter; whether an individual’s safety is threatened by a loss of economic security or the possibility of Indian abduction, the proper response is to retaliate violently. As Gary Hoppenstand says of these conventional depictions, “this type of narrative naturally demands that someone (or more importantly, something) is repaid for a moral injustice with the coin of violence” (51).

With these ideas in mind, the following chapters present a series of case studies in the way that frontier romance, a genre heavily invested in the use of captivity and revenge tropes to drive the plot and provide emotional resonance, can be seen as examples of this literary propagandic function. This is, however, by no means a complete
review of all frontier novels or historical romances, nor should it be implied that this
propagandic function is universal to the genre or even deliberately included by the
authors. Rather, the texts examined here show the various ways that genre conventions
like the captivity-revenge cycle take part in greater cultural conversations beyond the
narrow sphere of popular entertainment. Not only can a work of art act as a mirror to the
times, it can also serve to create and perpetuate belief and action; like the McCrea myth
as it served to unify and mobilize individuals for a common cause, frontier romances
based around tropes of the captivity-revenge cycle can themselves become “messengers
of justice and of wrath.”

1.2: Literary Scholarship and American Violence

The exploration of cyclical violence as a form of symbolic sociopolitical
discourse is a direction rarely taken in literary studies; there is, however, a significant
amount of previous scholarship on captivity and the captivity narrative as a genre in
American literature, as well as various forms of violence, including revenge. While
studies of individual texts and acts of violence and captivity are legion, there are a few
notable sustained, longer inquiries that form an important background for the present
study. The works of primary importance here are Richard Slotkin’s excellent studies on
frontier mythology, especially *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973) and *The Fatal
impact on American literature and character lay out a valuable narrative history of the
development of a symbolic vocabulary of frontier violence that still carries great weight
in the American consciousness even today. Providing examples in the phrase “play
Cowboys and Indians” as used by a soldier in Vietnam and similar analogies of Indian
fighting and frontier security by various politicians, Slotkin holds that “such metaphors
are not merely ornamental. They invoke a tradition of discourse that has historical roots
and referents, and carries with it a heavy and persistent ideological charge. All of these
public figures and writers speak and think within that tradition of discourse, using a
symbolic language acquired by them through the usual processes of accumulation and
education” (Fatal 18). He emphasizes this again shortly after in a way that makes clear
the ties such mythological language and thinking have with the frontier romance:

Myth is acquired and preserved as part of our language. We observe its
operation in the quality of historical (or pseudo-historical) resonance that
attaches to terms like “Frontier,” “Cowboys and Indians,” or “Last Stand.”
These terms appear to be historical references, but in fact they are
metaphors. They implicitly connect the events they emblematize to a
system of values and beliefs; and they are usually used in a way that
suggests an analogy between the historical past and the present situation.
(23-4, emphasis added)

For Slotkin, the images and icons that become part of American popular myth are
tied to the “‘myth of the frontier’—the conception of America as a wide-open land of
unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual” that descends
from the older conceptions of the West as an Edenic wilderness whose latent powers lie
in wait of someone to exploit them (Regeneration 5). This conceptualization of the New
World as a promised land to be claimed by those who could utilize it—it is important to note that the Native Americans expressly *could not* utilize it—created a tradition of rugged woodsman and frontier settlers as heroes: “In American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who [...] tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness” (4). This mythic tradition sets up Slotkin’s study of the image of the frontier and its heroes, particularly the way that notions of progress—the vision of white fitness and dominance that has since become the standard starting point of scholarship on U.S. imperialism, continental and abroad—centered on violent conflicts in the liminal spaces of the frontier, where worlds collided and previously separate characteristics mingled. “New versions of the hero emerged,” Slotkin explains, “whose role was that of mediating between civilization and savagery, white and red. The yeoman farmer was one of these types, as were the explorer or surveyor and, later, the naturalist” (21). These archetypal figures become the anchors for the mythologization of American character and the destiny of the nation as an example to the world that would dominate the discourse of politicians from Thomas Jefferson to Andrew Jackson and down even into the modern era. The development of these characters, especially through the violent trials for survival in the crucible of the frontier wilderness, provides an allegorical discourse for encapsulating the American national experience.

In particular, it was the image of border warfare between the white heroes and Native Americans that came to dominate this mythic discourse:
The Indian wars proved to be the most acceptable metaphor for the American experience. To all the complexities of that experience, it offered the simplicity of dramatic contrast and direct confrontation of opposites. It became a literary means of dealing with all sorts of social tensions and controversies—between English and American Puritans, between classes and generations within American society, and between political and religious controversialists. Part of the reason for its wide acceptance as a myth-metaphor derives from its recognition that the most significant peculiarity of the American environment was its substitution of racial and cultural divisions for the traditional English divisions of class and religion.

As Slotkin states, the obvious binary opposition of the two factions’ representations creates a simplicity of purpose to the action that makes resolving difficult and complex questions much easier for those looking for quick answers in a complex world: in the lawless desert wilderness of the frontier, isolated and removed from the legal institutions of civilization and moral institutions of religion, it is easier to justify a Manichean, “kill or be killed” worldview as necessary for survival. Moreover, the immediacy of need creates justification for the administration of both preemptory violence and retribution against enemies.

It is here that the captivity-revenge cycle explored in the present study finds its birth as a discursive structure, a self-justifying set of tropes that yield virtually unmistakable imperatives for action; we must defend ourselves from danger, even if it
means removing the threat by primary aggression, and we must swiftly repay any aggressions against us with equal or greater force. While authors like Cooper, Sedgwick, and Lydia Maria Child would at least partially problematize these clear distinctions and seek to muddy the moral waters of racial separation through additions of Noble Savages and other sentimental or romantic images, the structural integrity of the violent tropes generally remains intact, and the final resolutions of their texts are unambiguous enough to short circuit much of the complication they introduce. Overall, Slotkin’s studies are astute examinations of frontier mythology, especially its violent aspects; as such, they provide useful starting points for any examination of literary violence in a frontier setting.

My own study of the captivity-revenge cycle, springing from a similar interest in the ways cultural fictions encapsulate cultural meaning, provides a new pathway for understanding many of the fundamental ideas Slotkin traces in his scholarship.

Also useful is David Brion Davis’s *Homicide in American Fiction, 1798-1860* (1957). An exploration of the shifting social values that found their way into American texts, *Homicide*’s “central theme is the imaginative reaction of writers to a growing awareness of violence in American life, and to the disunity implicit in material expansion accompanied by a comparative weakness of paternal and governmental authorities” (xiii). Davis traces the way that themes of alienation and moral evil become the justification of acts of violence against the perceived perpetrators of crime and atrocity, especially the ways in which changing values and psychologies work to construct our images of heroes, villains, and victims in imaginative writing; as Davis frames it, “such literary conventions
and devices as the superman, the renegade, and the monomaniac have a psychological meaning which reflects fundamental social values” (xii).

Davis’s study explores these ideas in fiction as a manifestation of the prevailing concerns of citizens during the period he covers: “According to modern students of aggression, the murderer accomplishes through direct action what other men achieve through such symbolic gratifications as the writing and reading of literature. If we accept these contemporary theories, it is evident that imaginative fiction must express, either consciously or unconsciously, an individual’s associations and emotional reactions” relating to such aspects of life as property, social and sexual relations, social and political controls on individual behavior, and “images of evil and liberation, as seen in villains and heroes” (xii). These ideas are relevant to the present study in many ways, especially in the possibility of their participation in a “feedback loop” of sorts, in which the social and psychological material that finds its way into a literary work is re-presented back into the popular imagination through that work, shaping opinions just as much as it is shaped by them. This is the process we see in the growth of a cultural fiction like Jane McCrea’s murder and the “Cowboys and Indians” trope, and it is in this capacity that my project examines the captivity-revenge cycle in frontier romance; as such, Davis’s scholarship is useful in providing a model for part of that process and its socio-psychological aspects.

Along similar lines is Karen Halttunen’s Murder Most Foul (1998), a study in the construction of murder and the murderer in the “Gothic imagination” as it developed in early America. “In American culture,” Halttunen says, “the dominant narrative expressing and shaping the popular response to the crime of murder underwent a major
transformation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century” (2). Where previous scholarship focused on the emergence of popular murder narratives as a form of sensationalism, Halttunen’s approach is different: “My own premise is that, though salvation history\textsuperscript{11} was losing cultural power in the late eighteenth century, the search for meaning in the face of violent transgression did not disappear with that older framework. The new secular accounts of murder endeavored to replace the sacred narrative with a new mode of coming to terms with the crime” (3).

This new mode was to encode murder in the conventions of the Gothic, especially the conventions of horror and mystery that served to distance the murderer from the normal citizen, an idea connected to Davis’s notion of alienation. “The most important cultural work performed by the Gothic narrative of murder,” Halttunen posits,

was its reconstruction of the criminal transgressor: from common sinner with whom the larger community of sinners were urged to identify […] into moral monster from whom readers were instructed to shrink, with a sense of horror that confirmed their own “normality” […], and with a sense of mystery that testified to their own inability even to conceive of such an aberrant act. The new Gothic murderer—like the villain in Gothic fiction—was first and last a moral monster, between whom and the normal majority yawned an impassable gulf. (5)

This analysis of the use of the Gothic and its conventions, as well as the social and psychological aspects of division and alienation, are valuable concepts that can also be

\textsuperscript{11} Halttunen uses this term to refer to the Puritan religious narrative of murder, which focused not on the act but on the murderer’s contrition as an example of God’s grace and forgiveness. As with the captivity narrative, it is employed for vicarious edification.
applied to the captivity-revenge cycle and the conventionalized treatments of it in frontier romance as I examine them in this project. Frontier romances, particularly Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*, often resemble the Gothic or draw heavily on its conventions to create excitement and suspense. Additionally, the changing social functions of the descriptions of murder mirror similar changes in the role of the captivity narrative in the later eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries, helping to recreate captivity as a cause for justified retribution that becomes culturally mandated.

Although it focuses primarily on British Romanticism, including only a single chapter on American literature, Ian Haywood’s *Bloody Romanticism* is nevertheless a valuable theorization and exploration of literary violence as a form of spectacle, particularly one based on culturally determined tropes that helped to structure audience responses, similar to the captivity-revenge cycle. Focusing on what he terms the “bloody vignette,” Haywood seeks to illuminate the role of this repeated trope as the way acts of violence were converted into spectacles that operated as “a vital and indelible component of those two foundational discourses of Romanticism: sensibility and the sublime” (3). As Haywood theorizes, “The affective power of both of these discourses was based on the reaction of a spectator to a suffering body […]. More accurately, the affective gaze of both […] was theorized as deriving from a dramatic confrontation of three bodies or subject positions: one in a situation of power, one in a situation of distress and a third body (the spectator, viewer or reader) observing the other two” (3). This structure became a popular way to create a spectacle of suffering that was “designed to carry a highly charged emotional and moral message” (3). Haywood’s exploration of the various uses
this trope was applied to shows the ways such a formulation can become a strong sociopolitical discourse, as many of its uses overtly or covertly operated as propaganda. In addition to the helpful theorization of the application of such culturally empowered tropes as carriers of meaning on a basic discursive level, Haywood’s examination of spectacular violence as “one of the main tributary discursive streams which nourished the Romantic literary imagination” finds great applicability in my inquiry into a similar importance for the captivity-revenge cycle (4). The useful overlap of these critical approaches with similar aspects of the current study makes Haywood’s book, like those of Slotkin, Halttunen, and Davis and the Engels and Goodale article previously mentioned, an excellent contributor to the critical conversation this project seeks to join and expand.

Studies in the captivity narrative also have a fair representation in literary scholarship. The best known is likely June Namias’s *White Captives*, an examination of captivity literature and the various ways it “helped the Euro-American culture struggle through questions of cultural and genre identity during periods of extreme change and uncertainty” (10-11). Michelle Burnham’s *Captivity and Sentiment* presents a reading of captivity narratives through the lens of ambivalent sentimentality, often most obviously presented in the tears cried in simultaneous pleasure and sadness over a sympathetic captivity tale. For Burnham, this sentimental response not only invites readers to a kind of vicarious escapism but also to feelings of “national community that [are] experienced affectively precisely because [their] claim to integrity (whether geographical or moral) depends on remembering to forget the border transgressions and colonial violence that
have secured it” (4). A recent addition to the list comes in the form of Teresa Toulouse’s *The Captive’s Position*, a study addressing the appropriation and use of female captivity narratives by male authority figures for political purposes. As Toulouse frames the argument, “a popular literary form, developed from stories about orthodox New English women’s captivity among Indians, helped dominant male colonials to address and to negotiate profound transformations in their own sense of personal and cultural identity during a crucial transnational period at the end of the seventeenth century” (2). All three of these helpful studies point to the ways that captivity narratives as a popular genre performed cultural work by allowing the writers and readers to find common ground and organizing principles for life in times of turmoil or upheaval. My study explores a similar take on the uses of the captivity-revenge cycle in frontier romance and the ways that the inclusion of culturally encoded captivity and revenge provide readers with a common symbolic structure for interpreting their own times.

The present projects seeks to join this family of texts and their shared exploration of the meaning of violent acts in the American literary tradition; I hope, however, to correct what I see as an oversight with regard to the primary place of the specific act of revenge—springing almost invariably from episodes of captivity—in this tradition. As in Slotkin’s analysis of “Cowboys and Indians” as a discursive structure capable of reducing a myriad of differing situations into a neat, easily intelligible metaphor for transferring information pertinent to the episode at hand, the captivity-revenge cycle I identify as central to frontier romance performs a similar act of figurative concentration. A plethora of complex experiences—mental and physical disempowerment, dispossession of cultural
or economic valuables, displacement, alienation—are concentrated, through the medium of romantic genre conventions, into the figure of captivity. As it does in physics, this compression requires increased pressure; when the pressure becomes too much, the captive explodes into an equal and opposite reaction—revenge. The mechanisms of converting this natural process into metaphor also naturalize its results; thus we see the weight of Revolutionary pressures concentrated into the synecdoche of Jane McCrea’s murder, and the concomitant release of pressure through community-endorsed revenge violence becomes the expected, reasonable, required—natural—response.

The examination of this metaphorical compression and expansion, while sometimes part of the greater discussion in the scholarship presented above, is rarely the focus of and just as rarely receives significant treatment in most studies. My project seeks to fill in this little-explored space by examining more closely the ways that the captivity-revenge cycle, as the central trope around which a greater discourse of conventionalized beliefs about moral and social behavior are anchored and organized in frontier romance, serves to direct responses and provide a form of governance in its modeling of society. In other words, for these works of frontier romance the captivity-revenge cycle becomes the foundational aspect of their world order, and, by extension, the world order they project outward as the greater American experience. Like Jane McCrea’s story, these novels make every narrative “first and foremost a revenge story.”
1.3: Theorizing the Captivity-Revenge Cycle

The combination of tropes that I am calling the captivity-revenge cycle is, like Haywood’s bloody vignette for Romanticism, one of the primary tributaries to the American frontier romance novel. In the four texts primarily covered by this study, it is in fact the foundation through which the rest of the story is realized: for *Last of the Mohicans*, for example, Haywood follows the reading of Louise K. Barnett in claiming that “the driving force behind the novel’s plot [is] the chivalric quest to protect and retrieve the novel’s two heroines Cora and Alice. From the outset, their captivity is a dramatic device for enforcing the lurking, predatorial and sexualized violence of Magua and his tribe, and for valourizing the countervailing endeavours of Hawkeye and the Mohicans” (172). In this view, the novel’s historical setting and beautifully crafted frontier woodlands are little more than a finely wrought backdrop against which to stage what amounts to a series of escalating acts of spectacular heroism and vengeance. Yet I would argue that to take the prominence of captivity and revenge as the equivalent of relatively cheap theatrics is to short-change the fundamental sociopolitical power of the twin tropes as demonstrated by the McCrea myth. In a statement about Cooper that applies equally well to the other authors, Richard Chase holds that “the vitality of his romances, the very form in which he sees things, the actions that he is able to make vivid—these stem from the political contradiction at the center of his thought” (52).

This yoking of the action of Cooper’s works with his political and social thought helps to emphasize the connectedness of the captivity-revenge trope with social

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formation and organization. The seemingly contrived violence that is often suggested to serve as nothing but an excuse for derring-do can also be read as fundamental to the establishment of Cooper’s fictional society—the same sort of function Engels and Goodale suggest the McCrea myth served during the Revolution and in its subsequent appropriations. As I shall discuss in more depth in chapter four, Magua’s reintegration into his native society is conflated with his decision to pursue revenge on Munro; likewise, the coming together of the novel’s good characters in their pursuit of Magua culminates in a full-scale revenge battle, a Delaware “revolution” against the Hurons that bears striking resemblance to the American response to McCrea’s abduction and murder. Indeed, the depredations of those marked as enemies of the community—in most cases, “bad” Indians—not only draw retaliatory violence from the “good” groups in all four novels but serve to help define the revengers as both good and a group. To become a member of the community is to become an agent of revenge and vice versa.

These same functions are true for the occurrences of captivity and revenge in other frontier romances. The individual acts of revenge are not just artificially strung together, a series of violent beads linked not by meaning but for ornamental purposes only; they are the building blocks of each novel’s fictional society, the scattered parts of sociopolitical experience that are to be lined up and organized as part of the text’s cultural work, just as the McCrea myth operated in various incarnations.13 “Not only are

13For instance, Engels and Goodale see Carroll’s McCrea play as “clearly a product of the progressive era—which made political pageantry a central part of civic education. This play taught Americans how to act when confronted with a grievance” (104). Many versions of the McCrea myth emphasize national unity and/or patriotism, a rather anachronistic projection of uniformity for 1777. This emphasis demonstrates the way that the isolated act of murder and its requisite revenge become a symbolic anchor for a greater organizational principle, one that spreads beyond the local to encompass a national order. Revenge makes
Cooper’s novels disorganized technically,” Chase explains of the view of Cooper’s works as aesthetically flawed by the disconnectedness and fragmentation of its parts; “It was inevitable, given the time and place in which Cooper wrote, that the culture his novels depict should also be disorganized. As Yvor Winters says, Cooper’s writings are ‘a mess of fragments […] but the fragments are those of a civilization’” (46).

My argument, then, is that the perceived technical and artistic flaws in frontier romance, stemming from the genre’s reliance on the highly conventional tropes of captivity and revenge, are not in fact badly realized aesthetics but attempts to present the fundamental (re)construction of civilization through the common organizational aspects of cyclical violence. The frontier settings immediately provide a world without the institutional supports that would help to provide external social organization; as such, the reader can watch the “natural law” of the frontier become the institutional law of civilization, watch the conversion of personal violence into publicly sanctioned action. “The frontiersman, often remote from the courts and authorities of established communities, not only had to enforce his own law, he elected which laws should be enforced and which ignored”; he did, however, have laws and enforce them, and in doing so began the process of building civilization and order from perceived savage violence and chaos (Hollon viii). What Davis casts as “the ancient conflict between social stability and violence, between the law of tradition and the ‘natural law’ of individual retaliation” is revealed to be a conflict only in established societies (239). In the frontier romance, the negotiation of natural law into social law and the establishment of social stability is the

one not just a member of a community, but a member of a country. For more information, see Engels, especially 104-6.
result of the process of individual retaliation, and it is this conversion and the mechanics of its process that become the focus of the action in these texts; it is the “turn from the tragedy of fraternal strife” between members of the brotherhood of humankind “to the classical quest of the republic’s heroic ages, the mission to bring light, law, liberty, Christianity, and commerce”—that is, the Western definition of civilization—“to the savage places of the earth” (Slotkin Fatal 8).

The mechanics of this conversion process are illuminated by the theories of sacrifice developed by René Girard. In Violence and the Sacred, Girard makes the claim that the basis of social organization lies in the act of sacrifice: “The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric. Everything else derives from that” (8, emphasis added). For Girard, sacrifice is a recasting of the cycles of reciprocal violence—the same conflicts that make up the captivity-revenge cycle—into a sacred form, a reinventing of individual retaliation not as a human act but as a function of a higher principle, be it religious, legal, or some other form of systematized belief. “The mechanism of reciprocal violence can be described as a vicious circle,” says Girard: “Once a community enters into the circle, it is unable to extricate itself” (81). Sacrifice becomes the mechanism for breaking this cycle, a method of substitution that creates a “sacrificeable” victim who will stop the endless loop of reciprocity by a death that leaves no room for revenge; the contagion of violence is checked by the ritualization of the act (30). “Men can dispose of their violence more efficiently,” Girard claims, “if they regard the process not as something emanating from within themselves, but as a necessity imposed from without, a divine decree whose least
infraction calls down terrible punishment” (14). This decree need not be divine solely in the religious sense—the “divine” requirements of duty or of institutionalized justice carry the same type of weight, and “while acknowledging the differences, both functional and mythical, between vengeance, sacrifice, and legal punishment, it is important to recognize their fundamental identity” (25). As Girard bluntly puts this inherent-but-disavowed identity, “Centuries can pass before men realize that there is no real difference between their principle of justice and the concept of revenge” (24).

It is from Girard’s recognition of the close connection of vengeance and sacrifice that my theorization of the role of the captivity-revenge cycle in frontier romance finds its origins. While Girard presents sacrifice as a finished institutionalization of violence, a conversion of essentially private acts of revenge into public acts of justice or defense, I argue that we see the workings of this mechanism play out in the violent acts of frontier romances. The communities presented in frontier romances are, after all, “unfinished”: the reader witnesses the struggle of these emerging societies to build their own institutions, to establish their own systems for dealing with the business of organizing and regulating. In essence, we witness the same formation Girard sees stemming from the “the self-regulating mechanisms of violence” (Dumouchel 14). The violent acts of the frontier romance replay for the reader the formations of society by these same acts: the cyclical infection of violence spreads and threatens the nascent society as the captivity-revenge cycle plays out. The novel’s resolution also mirrors the conversion of revenge into justice, as a victim or victims suffer the required destruction that effectively ends the
cycle; the private is converted to public, institutionalized, and the novel, like the cycle, ends.

More than simply ending, we are presented with the foundation of a functioning society, the same social fabric Girard presents as woven from the metamorphosis of vengeance to sacrifice. The frontier romance, in presenting the reader with a glimpse into the past at an earlier stage of society, actually captures the mechanisms of social formation and organization theorized by Girard as the ritualization of violence into sacrifice. If the murder of Jane McCrea could serve as the catalyst for a strong communal response for America—helping to unify disparate groups and truly playing a role in the formation of national American society through revenge—the use of a similar trope in the frontier romance demonstrates the same principles in a fictionalized version of emerging society as well. The strong similarities of the violent action in frontier romances to the mechanisms Girard lays out make his work in *Violence and the Sacred* an excellent starting point for a new theory more directly descriptive of the literary frontier world and the larger American society with which it interacted.

To fully understand the captivity-revenge cycle, we must first dig deeper into the basic structure and function of the tropes and their connections. The strong cultural position of the captivity narrative in American literature helps to provide a historical basis for understanding the development and role of the captivity-revenge cycle, especially as it becomes a tool for informal governance; the addition of revenge to captivity to form a tightly connected, cyclical trope helps to recondition the pair for use in the emerging post-Revolutionary society as a new model for behavior, one that ultimately
helps to excuse the violence and appropriate it for organizational purposes. As we see it emerge in the frontier romance, the captivity-revenge cycle becomes a self-sustaining system, the end of which signals transition to a higher plane of civilization; this advancement reinforces the cycle as both natural and progressive and allows its positioning as the center of the rhetoric of national progress and security prevalent from the late 1790s to the late 1830s.

*Captivity* as I use it throughout this study applies to a greater series of experiences than simply the physical abduction we see in the classical captivity narratives of Puritan writers. Although frontier romances almost always feature the typical physical form to some extent, captivity is as much a state of mind as it is a bodily experience, especially if the “captive” is male. The features of physical captivity—forced separation from the victim’s home culture, isolation among an alien society with unclear or harmful intentions, and feelings of disempowerment and displacement—find analogous mental forms, such as alienation, despair, guilt, and feelings of injustice, powerlessness, and desperation. Mary Rowlandson’s view of her physical abduction, for instance, also has a significant mental component: her “removes” are not just instances of bodily relocation but distance from civilization. The wilderness for Rowlandson is not just forest but Godless desert, a harsh physical environment and a more hostile spiritual one. It is this mental captivity, often brought about by circumstances like the loss of fortune, social status, or cultural power, that drive the captive to finally attempt a remedy for his or her losses through violence.
The excess of the reaction—Hannah Dustan does not just escape, she escapes and returns to scalp her former captors—moves the violence from simple defense to revenge. When the captive’s feelings of injustice and disempowerment are recognized and understood by others, revenge begins the work of social formation; one person’s captivity becomes a form of attack on the growing collective, and the group is unified in response. This is the conversion from private to public in Girard’s theory, where a “natural law” becomes mob rule, which in turn becomes institutional law. The captive’s enemy becomes an enemy of the law, an enemy of the church, an enemy of the people; revenge becomes coded as sacrifice to the greater good established by the rules of these institutions, the definition of civilization for the society. With this institutionalization, order is created and maintained, citizens unified.

Captivity narratives long served such an edifying purpose in American culture for the theocratic Puritans; however, like the execution sermons and salvation histories discussed by Halttunen, captivity literature “underwent a major transformation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century” from a religious purpose to a secular use (2). The captivity narrative was for the Puritans a form of conversion experience: “Mather’s preface [to Mary Rowlandson’s narrative] reinforces the theological significance of Rowlandson’s experience by presenting her story as a singular example ‘of the wonderfully awfull[sic], wise, holy, powerfull[sic], and gracious providence of God’” that should remind the reader of his or her fallen state and need to submit to God’s will (Burnham 11). “If Rowlandson experienced conversion through captivity,” Michelle Burnham contends, “Mather implies […] her readers should experience conversion as a
result of reading about her captivity,” a point Mather reinforces throughout his preface to her account (11).

As mentioned above, however, the captivity narrative’s social uses changed with the times. The reprinted captivity tales used as propaganda during the Revolution no longer emphasized the docile submission to divine providence and the testing of faith that marked the Puritan usage; instead, the emphasis lay on the accentuation of victimhood and the possibilities of retribution. The various versions of McCrea’s legend carefully construct her tale as one of victimization, its lessons not the power of God but the cruelty of Indians and the immoral, cowardly complicity of the British.14 Hannah Dustan’s narrative found revival not because of her submission to providence but her willful resistance of it, choosing to escape where Mary Rowlandson had chosen to bear captivity and wait for physical and spiritual redemption. Notably, it is Dustan’s explicit rejection of the spiritual aspects of captivity and her act of revenge on her captors—the fitting reversal of killing her would-be killers with their own weapons in their own manner, scalping those who would scalp her—that allows an act of abhorrent violence to be excused as justice, a nearly complete inversion of the traditional social uses of the

14 Hilliard’s novel, for instance, incorporates common tropes from captivity narratives, such as McCrea and her servant being bound to a tree and tortured, threatened with rape, etc. Hilliard also emphasizes the feminine weakness of McCrea by reducing her age to 16, when the real Jane McCrea was in her mid-twenties. The various newspaper and popular accounts began to embellish McCrea’s beauty and charms almost immediately after her death, casting her as an iconic imperiled woman and thus tapping into that tradition along with the tradition of Indian cruelty; an excellent example is Vanderlyn’s 1804 painting, usefully analyzed by Colley in Captives (228-30). British weakness was also commonly emphasized, and the placement of the British soldiers into such close alignment with Indian savagery served to thrust a similar implication of debauchery and uncivilized cruelty onto the Europeans, so much so that some works conflated the two groups.
genre. This alteration of purpose would continue into the nineteenth century, where tales of captivity changed focus yet again, now read as sourcebooks for information on Indian cruelty and ammunition for removal policies and the rhetoric of national security. These uses also focused on the excusing of violence, a justification of the use of force that painted it squarely within the realm of morally sanctioned revenge.

As demonstrated in the development of the Jane McCrea legend, the incitement to revenge comes not simply from the abduction or killing itself, but of the circumstances of the victim: McCrea goes from simply collateral damage to dragged from her house and butchered, to a bride to be, to a victim of foul play, greed, cowardice, and weak European morals and intellect. This chain of escalating affective positions evokes a sense of injustice and moral outrage that demands satisfaction. The building of this intense reaction is predicated on the increasingly symbolic position of the victim: not only is McCrea innocent, she is tied more and more closely to domesticity as the various tales evolve. The sense of betrayal and injustice felt at the failure of Burgoyne’s

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15 As noted above, even Rowlandson’s narrative was given an overhaul to better align with contemporary values. See note 8 above.
16 For example, James E. Seaver’s *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* contains many conventional depictions of Indian cruelty and violence, despite the fact that Jemison herself was fully assimilated into Seneca society and reluctantly rejoined white society near the end of her life. Although Seaver could not help applying certain moral tones to his framing of his interviews with Jemison, the majority of the text is purportedly the words of Jemison herself. It is interesting, then, to consider how standardized the view of Indian violence was, even when reported by a woman who was ambivalent, if not openly sympathetic, to the Indians themselves. See James E. Seaver, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison*. Ed. June Namias. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1992.
17 Dustan’s narrative is instructive here, especially of the way that the captivity-revenge cycle conflates the two separate tropes in combining them. Dustan and her companions carry out the exact same atrocities her Indian captors would have been expected to perform, mirroring them so far as to ask them how to tomahawk an enemy, then killing the Indians with their own weapons while they slept. This attack takes place in the Indian camp, a parallel to the assault on the home and domestic spaces by the Indian raiders. Dustan and her companions escape via canoe, but most remarkably they return to the scene to scalp their captors, collecting a reward for them. It is notable that the act of paying for scalps was one of the policies for which Burgoyne was most vehemently condemned.
18 Hilliard’s novelistic version, for instance, opens with the 16-year-old Jane assailed in her father’s house.
Proclamation to protect noncombatants is exacerbated by the recreation of McCrea in the form of exemplary virginal bride; this complete disregard for purity, innocence, and femininity demands a retributive justice, not only on the perpetrators of the crime itself but on those whose negligence and moral infirmity allow it to take place. McCrea must be vindicated, her assailants must be stopped from performing the same acts again, and the conditions that made such an atrocity possible must be remedied. This is the conception of the captivity-revenge cycle that forms the basis of the McCrea legend, the same structure that most often forms the basis for the frontier romance as well.

The notion of these two tropes combining to form a cycle is an important one: the cyclical nature of this retributive struggle is one of the features of the frontier romance, one that does not always appear in the real life manifestations. McCrea’s death, after all, is a (supposedly) real event that happens within time; it is an origin to the struggle that is knowable and traceable. The captivity-revenge cycle in frontier romance is projected as natural and self-sustaining because its origins lie outside of the purview of the text: the Indian attack in Edgar Huntly is speculatively linked to their earlier displacement; Magua’s revenge in Last of the Mohicans is for his embarrassment at the hands of Colonel Munro in a scene specifically not contained in the novel; the attacks in Hope Leslie are explained as rescues of Magawisca and Oneco from a captivity that, while continuing into the narrative present, predates the novel’s opening; the Indian attacks in Nick of the Woods are driven by a subplot of conspiracy predicated on questions of inheritance that happen prior to the book’s first scene. Because the original causes of violence are not the initial narrative aggressions but actions outside of the narrative itself,
we are always already placed into the middle of the cycle; all violence is positioned as reaction, retaliation for an earlier transgression that is beyond the scope of our knowledge to verify as the original cause.

The inability to fully understand and trace the beginnings of the violence recreates the powerlessness of the captive as the role of aggressor shifts back and forth—the sides are forced to react, driven by seemingly external demands to repay the attacks against them. As Girard says, “Men can dispose of their violence more efficiently if they regard the process not as something emanating from within themselves, but as a necessity imposed from without, a divine decree whose least infraction calls down terrible punishment”; hence the requirement of revenge, often portrayed as the demands of destiny, nature, honor, or security (14). The initial act of retaliation creates a new form of captivity: captivity to the cycle of escalating revenge violence itself.

Because the impetus to violence appears to be external to the story as well as the characters, the battles become timeless. No matter how early the initial acts of violence are dated, there is always a suggested preceding act that converts the supposed initial act into retribution; every act is revenge. Because the cycle seems timeless or without a definite origin, it becomes natural, a requirements of life on the frontier; the local occurrence of the novel’s events figures as one more example in a chain of retaliation, and it too will elicit retribution until the cycle is broken by the appropriate conversion to a sacrificial structure resembling Girard’s system. This typically takes the form of a genocidal final conflict, the wiping out of the entire community to prevent further
retaliation. Innocent blood is often spilled during such an action, the pure sacrifice of ritual that allows the cycle of violence to finally cease.

Perhaps the clearest example of this aspect of the captivity-revenge cycle is a satire of such a conflict in its classic form: the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud from *Huckleberry Finn*. Buck Grangerford’s explanation of the conflict highlights both its cyclical nature and the naturalization of it:

“Well,” says Buck, “a feud is this way: A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then that other man's brother kills him; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the *cousins* chip in—and by and by everybody's killed off, and there ain't no more feud. But it's kind of slow, and takes a long time.”

“Has this one been going on long, Buck?”

“Well, I should reckon! It started thirty year ago, or som'ers along there. There was trouble 'bout something, and then a lawsuit to settle it; and the suit went agin one of the men, and so he up and shot the man that won the suit—which he would naturally do, of course. Anybody would.”

“What was the trouble about, Buck?—land?”

“I reckon maybe—I don't know.”

“Well, who done the shooting? Was it a Grangerford or a Shepherdson?”

“Laws, how do I know? It was so long ago.”

“Don't anybody know?”
“Oh, yes, pa knows, I reckon, and some of the other old people; but they
don't know now what the row was about in the first place.” (117-8)

For Buck, the origins of the feud are obscure and, notably, unimportant; what is
important is the continuation of the violence (“which he would naturally do, of course.
Anybody would”) until both parties have managed to wipe each other out. Revenge has
ceased to be a personal conflict for any one member of the two groups and has become
instead a communal activity, a source of definition for each side in the same way that
Jane McCrea’s murder galvanized disparate American forces around the common cause
of vengeance for her mythologized martyrdom. Huck’s telling question about the
origin—“What was the trouble about, Buck?—land?”—connects the feud with the theme
of displacement and dispossession that fuels many of the tales of masculine captivity.
This is exacerbated by the powerlessness created by the lawsuit, and the results are
alienation and isolation in what feels like a hostile culture to the loser; these personal
feelings spread to the community, and the response is the “natural” explosion of violence.
Although Twain is satirizing the romantic glorification and mindlessness of self-
sustaining, cyclical revenge, his exaggeration serves to highlight the fundamental
operations of the trope that will appear with more subtlety in the frontier romances
burlesqued in *Huck Finn*.

1.4: The Captivity-Revenge Cycle and the Discourses of Governance

The simple, direct nature of the actions of the captivity-revenge trope—no matter
how convoluted the path we take to get there, the acts of captivity and revenge are, at the
foundational level, essentially all the same—allow them to function as the anchors for a larger system of symbols and related values that can be considered a kind of discourse, a descriptive system that compresses a variety of disparate experiences into a uniform, widely intelligible form. Because the reader immediately understands the acts and implications of captivity and revenge, this discourse of violence can form the starting point for more elaborate representations of experience; in other words, the conventionalized acts of the captivity-revenge cycle can support the variety of uses to which authors put them because they are so easily understood, so elemental in the discursive system applied to American experience. Jane Tompkins applies a similar notion in *Sensational Designs* to the idea of stereotypes, a model Girard also touches on in *Violence and the Sacred*:

I saw that the presence of stereotyped characters, rather than constituting a defect in these novels, was what allowed them to operate as instruments of cultural self-definition. Stereotypes are instantly recognizable representatives of overlapping racial, sexual, national, ethnic, economic, social, political, and religious categories; they convey enormous amounts of cultural information in an extremely condensed form. As the telegraphic expression of complex clusters of value, stereotyped characters are essential to popularly successful narrative (Tompkins xvi).19

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19 Compare this to Girard’s discussion of classical tragedy and the failure of modern critics to understand the importance of conventions of representation for structuring the audience’s response: “Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides all utilize the same procedures and almost identical phraseology to convey symmetry, identity, reciprocity. Nowadays critics tend to assess a work of art on the basis of its originality. […] Such criteria cannot apply, of course, to Greek tragedy, whose authors were not committed to the doctrine of originality at any price. […] It is readily apparent that [the authors] shared certain literary traits and that the characters in their plays have certain characteristics in common. […] It is my belief that these
As with this “conventionalization” of character, conventionalized or stereotyped actions also carry “clusters of value.” A Puritan audience had a specific way of reacting to murder or abduction within the community—the edifying properties of the execution sermon or captivity narrative—that was conditioned by their sociopolitical values; values that, over time, changed along with the reception and cultural uses of those same acts. These alterations are fundamentally discursive, changes in the “telegraphic expression” of the meanings assigned to the actions and those who performed them. The edifying Christian discourse surrounding murder in earlier times is replaced by a Gothic discourse focusing on horror and mystery; Burgoyne’s attempt to paint American rebellion in loyalistic and legalistic rhetoric quickly loses power when faced with the rhetoric of morally necessary revenge for the perceived martyrdom of an innocent woman by savages and tyrants.  

The connection to an audience’s ability to recognize and understand the text’s discursive functions highlights the final aspect of the captivity-revenge cycle: its uses as a form of informal governance. As Tompkins says, books are “attempts to redefine the social order” (xi). Not only does a novel or narrative reflect the world from which it comes—Chase’s point that “it was inevitable [that Cooper’s novels were technically disorganized], given the time and place in which Cooper wrote, that the culture his novels depict should also be disorganized” (46)—it also projects another version of it: “novels

’stereotypes’ contain the very essence of Greek tragedy. And if the tragic element in these plays still eludes us, it is because we have obstinately averted our attention from these similarities” (46-7).

20 The mocking reply to Burgoyne’s Proclamation highlights the discrepancy between the supposed righteous defense of the constitution in the British rhetoric and the reality of immoral tyranny in the minds of Americans: “We foolishly thought, blind as we were, that your gracious master’s fleets and armies were come to destroy us and our liberties; but we are happy in hearing from you (and who can doubt what you assert?) that they were called forth for the sole purpose of restoring the rights of the constitution to a froward and stubborn generation” (Niles 179).
and stories […] offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment” (Tompkins xi). This proposing of solutions is expressly the function of romance described by Chase as it comes down through the American tradition; it should be no surprise, then, to find in the frontier romance the presentation of social formation and organization that suggests a certain kind of world and a certain set of beliefs and actions that are appropriate in it.²¹ The birth of societies as displayed by the frontier romance mirrors the violent birth of America, an emergence from the cycle of captivity-revenge into the institutions and governance of civilization. This progress served as a demonstration not only of how America formed but how it should continue to grow and organize, overcoming the various factors dividing citizens and forming the U.S. Constitution’s “more perfect Union”; “Thus the story of the Frontier and the materials of local folklore were taken up by the literary and ideological spokesman of ‘the nation’—a group that had its own localistic loyalties, but which projected from them an ideology capable of organizing America as a nation-state” (Slotkin Fatal 39).

The uses of governing forces outside of the recognized boundaries of the government of the state itself shares much in common with Michel Foucault’s theories of governmentality, the modern form of governance in which the state’s political power comes as much from a web of interconnected cultural and social systems as it does from specific aspects of sovereignty. According to Engels and Goodale, “one outcome of

²¹ For more information, see Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition.
Foucault’s work is the decentering of the state, for he poses biopower\textsuperscript{22} as an alternative to sovereignty”; in essence, it is the organization of the citizenry, not of the power of the state, that serves to govern the population (94-5). As Matthew Hannah describes this “distributed” governing in \textit{Governmentality and the Mastery of Territory in Nineteenth-Century America}, “technologies of control are unavoidably intertwined with many different sorts of ideological and material mediations. These mediations originate in the ‘external’ cultural and political environment into which new logics of social control emerge, but they may nevertheless play fundamental roles in determining precisely how social regulation operates” (22). In effect, the pressures to conform to a sociopolitical system come as much from the community as from the state, and regulate behaviors on all levels, from individual all the way up to the entirety of the nation: “Government as an activity could concern the relation between self and self, private interpersonal relations involving some form of control or guidance, relations within social institutions and communities and, finally, relations concerned with the exercise of political sovereignty” (Gordon 2-3). As noted above, literature becomes one of the extragovernmental “technologies of control” that exerts an influence over individuals, one that can be understood as a tool for disseminating discursive practices and modes of behavior that are governmental at base. “To govern individuals,” as Graham Burchell states, “is to get them to act and to align their particular wills with ends imposed on them through

\textsuperscript{22} Biopower in Foucault is “forms of power exercised over persons specifically in so far as they are thought of as living beings: a politics concerned with subjects as members of a \textit{population}, in which issues of individual sexual and reproductive conduct interconnect with issues of national policy and power. Foucault reintroduced this theme of biopower or biopolitics in his 1978 lectures, in a way linking it intimately with his approach to the theme of government” (Gordon 4-5). Captivity and revenge, as acts based around the exertion of power over the bodies of others, operate in a similar fashion.
constraining and facilitating models of possible actions” (119). The captivity-revenge cycle provides one such facilitating model, as we have seen demonstrated through the legend of Jane McCrea and the public reaction to her murder; the collective action that resulted from this model is an example of this type of informal governance.

The case studies in this project are an effort to examine the points of contact between all these ideas as they reveal themselves in the four frontier romances taken as subjects here; these texts become the “constraining and facilitating models of possible actions,” conversions of the sociopolitical discourses (and sometimes the replies of their oppositions) circulating at the time into the culturally powerful discourse of the captivity-revenge cycle. As the cultural fiction of Jane McCrea formed a focal point that allowed the conversion of individual and community outrage into a powerful national outrage, so too do these frontier romances present the struggles of individuals and small groups to form the necessary social structures and organization for survival, presenting models of behavior that are not just descriptive but prescriptive. “Foucault saw it as a characteristic (and troubling) property of the development of the practice of government in Western societies to tend towards a form of political sovereignty which would be a government of all and of each, and whose concerns would be at once to ‘totalize’ and to ‘individualize,’” explains Colin Gordon; it is this same operation we see in the conversion of the isolated frontier heroes and their unstable, fledgling communities into “civilization” through the processes of the narrative’s advancement (3). The frontier romance, with its foundations of violence, becomes a synecdoche for the nation, “articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment,” as Tompkins states. As
Slotkin frames this action of reflection and proposition in the terms of Frontier and Metropolis, “it is not surprising that ideas and doctrines would be developed, and stories told, that would explain the meaning of the Frontier to the citizens of the Metropolis, and project policies for dealing with the consequences of growth. It was inevitable too that over time such ideas and stories would take on conventional patterns, become ideologies and myths” (*Fatal* 15).

This is not to suggest that the novels studied here, while often highly conventional and similar in actions and representations, are also uniform in the problems they address and the solutions they provide. The proto-frontier romance of *Edgar Huntly* operates in a time and context far different from that of *Nick of the Woods*; while *Hope Leslie* is in many ways a direct reply to *Last of the Mohicans*, we should not be fooled into thinking it is simply the “other side of the story,” so to speak, and not a distinct vision. Each of these works enacts and reacts to the captivity-revenge cycle in differing ways, and these individual expressions generate differing models for the enactment of governance. The myriad details surrounding the captivity-revenge cycle are focused and compressed by passing through the trope itself; on the other side, however, they expand again and assume new patterns and forms, sometimes widely divergent from their frontier romance kin.

As previously stated, the following chapters take on the form of case studies of four frontier romances. These texts were chosen because they provide an interesting coverage of the conventions and uses of the genre; they should be taken as examples only, not as forming the boundaries of the genre or as an exhaustive examination of its
salient features. I make no attempts at being comprehensive but rather seek to reexamine these four texts through the lens of the captivity-revenge cycle and its implications for their narratives and their roles as cultural artifacts. While history and politics are of obvious importance to this project, my goals are those of the literary critic, not the historian or political theorist. As such, my address to those fields is intended to be functional but necessarily cursory.

By this same token, my critical methodology is derived from several sources. While there is a clear debt to historicist thinking—particularly the desire to explicate context and situation for these works as cultural artifacts—my analytical approach is generally more interested in the text itself than the history surrounding it. There are also strong elements of structural and post-structural thinking here, mainly invested in the figure of the captivity-revenge cycle and its adaptable discursive properties. In general, I approach these texts from both a structural and historical standpoint, exploring the ways that genre conventions and narrative aspects like male domestic captivity, female abduction and physical captivity, and cyclical revenge violence participate in the era’s symbolic and sociopolitical discourses on citizenship, expansionism, justice, and proper republican moral behaviors in the new United States. In a genre often disparaged for its conventionality and lowbrow popularity, this reinvestigation of the social and political nuances of the frontier romance and the cultural work done by these texts helps to rediscover their importance in the emergent U.S. At the end of the day, however, it is the symbol system that underpins the texts themselves—and that continues to play such a vital role in America’s self-conception—in which I am most interested.
The chapters of this study do not proceed with the works in chronological order; instead, I present them in an order I hope serves to make the captivity-revenge cycle’s conventions and organizational uses more available. In chapter two I examine Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*, which may rightly be called a proto-frontier romance and the model for the genre. The international mindset of Brown, and particularly his concerns for the role of government and its ability to properly regulate and create models for citizen behavior, comes to the fore in the examination of Brown’s Gothic frontier adventure. Brown creates a series of suggestive parallels between colonial activities in England and those of Pennsylvania, and the linking of Anglo-Irish violence and colonialism with the similar history of Quaker-Indian conflict and settler colonialism creates a complex setting for acts of cyclical brutality and revenge, notably manifested by characters with psychological problems and taking place in a surreal, ambivalent, and often hostile, nightmarish landscape.

As the earliest work published of those being examined—and the one most likely to be taken as overtly political, given the author—*Edgar Huntly* serves as a sourcebook for many of the themes, tropes, and repeated symbols used in the later texts, such as the double, hybrid, or split personality, male domestic captivity and female abduction, hostile natives as an insurrectionary force, etc. In parsing out the roots of the captivity-revenge cycle’s power in frontier romance, Brown’s development of multiple tales of captivity and ensuing revenge establishes *Edgar Huntly* as another instance of the continuation of a cultural myth as a form of unifying public rhetoric. As Tompkins shows in her discussions of *Wieland* and *Arthur Mervyn*, Brown’s novels can be read as sociopolitical
allegories meant to expose risks and model possibilities for correcting them; the actions in *Edgar Huntly* mirror the circulating public concerns of national security, identity, and issues like the role of republicanism, displaying the ways that Brown’s literary depictions of personal violence can become representative of a communal or widespread discourse. In addition, the structural nature of Brown’s text allows the underlying mechanisms of the captivity-revenge cycle to be presented in their most basic forms, making later elaborations on these features more intelligible in relation to the later texts’ foundations in these cyclical acts of violence.

Chapter three deals with Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Nick of the Woods*, chronologically the latest published of the texts studied. *Nick* presents the most complicit nationalist stance of the studied texts; in its straightforward, gratuitous destruction of purely “bad” Indians, *Nick* creates a rhetoric of us vs. them that reframes even the divergent characters of Roland Forrester and Nathan Slaughter into part of a community whose identity is built upon the commonality of violence against an enemy that is wholly Other and inhuman, including any whites who choose to side with the natives. The novel projects this community formation as a legitimate history of Kentucky, one that can be used as a basis for understanding the subsequent character of the United States; Bird’s Kentucky in *Nick of the Woods* serves as both a monument to a heroic past and a model for the development of the nation as a whole.

*Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans* provides another view of the colonial world of the frontier in chapter four. Where the novels of Bird and Brown focus more on the integration of the individual into burgeoning but basically established societies, Cooper’s
novel displays the more basic level of social formation, the coalescing of disparate individuals into groups. Centered on the idea of loyalty over obedience, *Mohicans* traces the impending failure of European sociopolitical values in the American wilderness; once these Old World forms of obedience have fallen, the emergent societies in the New World can reform based around true loyalty to people and ideas rather than an empty formal obedience to social code. *The Last of the Mohicans* employs the conventions of romance to display these breakdowns, dismantling stale European forms in the novel’s first half and reassembling a new American society through the same logic seen in the McCrea mythology, an example of the captivity-revenge cycle’s most fundamental sociopolitical mechanisms.

In chapter five Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie* complicates the greater narrative of settler-Indian relations by providing a complex, nuanced vision of frontier conflict as a primarily legalistic affair. Moving much of the action from the frontier to the settlements, *Hope Leslie* presents the fundamental identity of revenge and justice discussed by Girard by recreating the captivity-revenge cycle through the themes of legal punishment and sacrifice. Sedgwick’s novel gives its readers a vision of parallel worlds—the frontier and the Puritan settlements—that operate on the same fundamental laws of reciprocity; through a continual echoing of one society by the other, she demonstrates both the organizational aspects of the captivity-revenge cycle and the inherent sameness of Indian ritualized revenge and Puritan institutionalized justice. If *Hope Leslie* is a rebuttal to Cooper’s *Mohicans*, as some critics claim, it is also an instantiation of the other end of the spectrum; where *Mohicans* displays the most basic level of sociopolitical formation in
the coming together of disparate individuals through revenge, Sedgwick gives the reader a vision of the continuation of this organization from one community to another, a feeling of déjà vu through the captivity-revenge cycle’s foundational place in American society.
CHAPTER 2:

EDGAR HUNTLY: THE ROOTS OF CAPTIVITY AND REVENGE IN THE “LAND OF PITS”

“Offensive operations oftentimes are the surest, if not in some cases the only means of defense.”
-George Washington

“When the peasants lay hands on a gun, the old myths fade, and one by one the taboos are overturned: a fighter’s weapon is his humanity.”
-Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface to The Wretched of the Earth

While the frontier romance is generally associated with James Fenimore Cooper, William Gilmore Simms, and other writers of historical romances in the 1820s and after, Edgar Huntly can safely be viewed as the original text in the frontier romance family tree. As Emory Elliott says of Brown, “he became the first American novelist to appeal to fears and fantasies about Indians. His use of a wilderness setting and his portraits of struggles between Huntly and his Indian enemies stand at a pivotal point in American literature between the firsthand accounts and the later tales of western adventure and frontier violence” (266). Beyond simply being an ancestor of the more popular works of the likes of Cooper and Simms, Brown’s text can be read as fundamentally defined by the captivity-revenge cycle, so much so that the cycle itself is imbricated in virtually every facet of the novel’s content and aesthetic. The complicated, often obscure connections created by the various doublings and recurrent patterns of the novel have often troubled critics and readers for an explanation; viewed as expressions of captivity and revenge, the novel’s multiple voices can be aligned and understood more easily. In addition, Edgar Huntly’s use of the captivity-revenge cycle will help to establish the genre conventions,
such as split personalities or doubling of characters and male captivity via isolation and social alienation, that will become prevalent in frontier romances of the later period. Because of this powerful influence, exploring Brown’s often complicated and intricate invocation of the captivity-revenge cycle is helpful in untangling the similar uses by authors like Cooper, Sedgwick, and Bird.

_Edgar Huntly_ is a novel that is hard to do justice in a summary. The bulk of the novel takes the form of an extended letter from Edgar to his fiancée Mary, the sister of his recently murdered best friend and mentor, Waldegrave. Edgar’s letter is a rehearsal of the extraordinary events that have taken place since he last saw Mary: his renewed hunt for Waldegrave’s killer and his pursuit of the suspect, Irish immigrant and serial sleepwalker Clithero Edny (who in turn believes himself to be the murderer of his benefactress, Euphemia Lorimer; he is not); Edgar’s attempts to befriend the contrite Clithero and save him from his own remorse after Clithero flees into the nearby area of the Pennsylvania wilderness known as Norwalk; the appearance of a stranger named Weymouth who has claim to Mary Waldegrave’s inheritance from her brother; and, last but not least, Edgar’s own adventures in the wilderness after he awakes in a Norwalk pit (he later discovers he too is a sleepwalker), where he becomes a bloodthirsty Indian killer and almost single-handedly stops a Delaware war party from massacring the neighborhood’s white settlers. The novel ends with a series of short letters recounting the continuing unfortunate results of Edgar’s misguided benevolence: his attempt to console Clithero by revealing that Lorimer is alive and happy in New York (and, oddly enough, married to Edgar’s former tutor Sarsefield, who also happens to have served a similar
role as friend to Clithero), which sends Clithero off on a homicidal mission to finish the act he thought he already performed; this results in Lorimer having a miscarriage and Clithero supposedly drowning during an escape from Sarsefield and the authorities. So much for “generous sympathy” (Brown 24).

The seeming glibness of this account is, in fact, the result of attempting to distill the complex series of coincidences and disjunctions in the text. These complexities were once taken to be serious, nearly fatal flaws across the entire catalog of Brown’s work; “Hastily, even furiously, written,” says Michael Davitt Bell, voicing the commonly held perspective of critics before the mid-1980s, “[Brown’s novels] exhibit glaring defects; but, for all their flaws, they possess […] originality, intelligence, and power” (Development 41). Critics such as Jane Tompkins would soon recognize that what were taken for failings in Brown’s works were instead indicators that scholars had missed some important aspect of the author’s method, reading the texts through a modern lens instead of considering the ways Brown himself assumed they would be read. As Tompkins says of Wieland, a novel similarly “flawed” like Edgar Huntly:

While I do not wish to deny the relevance of some modern discussions of the novel, especially those that emphasize its relation to the intellectual trends of its day, I think that there is a better way to explain what happens in Wieland, one that seeks to understand the text, as Brown did, in the light of its use. Brown staked the reputation of his novel not on its claims

23 Because of the complexity of the novel’s plotline, I will provide summaries of the individual story arcs and important details throughout the chapter when necessary.
24 As Tompkins points out, Brown emphasized Wieland’s utility in his preface to the novel, indicating that its “usefulness” would ultimately give the book “a lasting reputation” (41). In Tompkins’s view, Brown
to artistic merit, but on its efficacy. This means that the key to *Wieland*’s meaning lies in the historical situation that the novel itself attempted to shape. (43)

By considering the text as an active participant in the historical conversation, “this contextual reading [...] provides the bizarre and painful events of *Wieland* with a more satisfactory explanation than has yet been available, because it is able to account for portions of the text that have hitherto been seen as irrelevant, inadvertent, or simply ‘bad’” (43).

The strange and convoluted plotline of *Edgar Huntly* can also benefit from a similar recognition that the narrative is built around a different set of structures than the ones favored by modern critics; my reading of the novel, for instance, is organized less around the coherence of the narrative’s details as an artistic production and more around the increasing accumulation of parallels between characters, such that it could be said to offer not a single, multifaceted tale, but the aggregate retelling of a more elemental tale multiple times. *Edgar Huntly* is, as Tompkins says of *Arthur Mervyn*, “a novel that must be read structurally—that is, as a series of abstract propositions whose permutations and combinations spell out a message whose intent is to change the social reality which the narrative purports to represent” (67). The elemental tale repeatedly told is that of captivity and revenge, disempowerment and retribution, varying in form and detail but stretching across the analogous stories of multiple characters. In particular, it is centered on the dyad of the novel’s two most prominent characters and their individual and obviously expected his text to have a practical value, an expectation modern readers and critics had lost sight of in the changes from one era’s reading habits and aesthetic values to another.
intertwined adventures in two different parts of the world: Clithero in Ireland and Edgar in frontier America.

Criticism of *Edgar Huntly* has often recognized the role of captivity and revenge in the novel, but they have largely gone unstudied as important in their own right despite their centrality to the work. Slotkin’s mentions of the book in *Regeneration Through Violence* focus on the novel’s continuity with the captivity mythology of America, as he believes “[Brown’s] intention is essentially the same as that of the Puritan composing a personal narrative of a conversion of captivity. […] Like the protagonist of the Puritan confession, Edgar Huntly is a hero isolated in space and time; his acts relate essentially to the drama of self-discovery and *only tangentially to social conditions and issues*” (376, emphasis added). For Slotkin, as for so many critics, the captivity-revenge cycle is simply a fact of the story’s structure rather than a meaningful trope by itself or part of the social utility Brown—and indeed, Puritan captivity authors—saw in it. As Tompkins has persuasively shown, Brown’s desire for his works to be useful in a sociopolitical way highlights the need to consider the novel as more than just “tangentially” connected to such concerns.

Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds’s “Charles Brockden Brown’s Revenge Tragedy: *Edgar Huntly* and the Uses of Property” is the most direct exploration of revenge as an organizing element in the novel: reading the work through the lens of the revenge tragedy tradition, Hinds explores the novel’s violence as a reaction to the shifting economics of the United States, the movement from an older, land- and patronage-based system to the speculative and mercantile world of capitalism. These changes are part of the collective
forces that remove Edgar’s Old World support structure based on inheritance and private connection, positing his revenge as the violent reaction to his forced transition into New World entrepreneurial capitalism. The valuable alignment of *Edgar Huntly* with the traditional genre of revenge tragedy works to emphasize the importance of disempowerment/loss and violent revenge as an essentially *social* as well as private action, an indicator of “a society undergoing change on a grand scale” (51). Edgar’s revenge is indicative of not just the individual realm favored by Slotkin but a greater realm of *communal* feelings, a collective sense of offense and the need for justified retribution; this same form of community outrage sprang from the murder of Jane McCrea, and its continued manifestations are the focus of my project. Brown’s tale is not, as Slotkin suggests, simply one more stop along the line of captivity narratives; it is itself a web of captivity tales, suggesting that the natural pathway to freedom—revenge—is also the pathway to a unified, stable nation via this common experience.

Outside of Hinds’s work, most other readings simply take the novel’s uses of captivity and revenge as Slotkin does—as given, implicit parts of the work’s operations that need little elucidation and serve little in the way of greater uniting purpose. Hinds, however, recognizes the greater social implication of Edgar’s individual struggles, and like Tompkins places the text into conversation with the era’s most pressing sociopolitical issues. Hinds’s connection of the violent actions of *Edgar Huntly* with the shifting economics of early America is part of a greater trend in Brown scholarship since the 1980s to examine the author’s works for their sociopolitical content: as Bryan Waterman states, “The historicist criticism that has dominated the field from the 1980s to
the present has set aside many of the aesthetic judgments that long made Brown suspect to New Critical formalists” (235). According to Jared Gardner, most readings of *Edgar Huntly* prior to this time focused on the novel’s psychological aspects, following the line of Slotkin’s or Leslie Fiedler’s portrayal of the work as an initiation story and mainly symbolic internal struggle, where “the landscape is internal, the shadows and doubles are projections of the divided self of the narrator, and the Indians are figures for the ‘dark’ (uncivilized, savage) nature with which Edgar must do violent battle in order to claim his civilized self” (429).

Gardner’s influential “Alien Nation: Edgar Huntly’s Savage Awakening” is among the earlier breaks from the Slotkin/Fiedler school of thought, approaching the novel not as an individual or primal tale of growth, but as a broader exploration of identity that “is importantly national rather than (generally) human or (particularly) individual,” specifically framing this struggle as one against the alien Other as it was defined in the political arguments of the late 1790s (430). As Waterman notes, “The claim of Brown’s centrality to the literary culture of post-Revolutionary America has, in recent criticism, been less grounded in assessments of the quality of his writing than in the quality and range of his engagements with early US culture—including sexuality, politics, nationalism, and race,” especially the ways these topics are connected to issues of early national ideology (236). Much of the scholarship done in the recent past has, like Gardner’s essay, gone into the nexus of these other topics and Brown’s contemporary sociopolitical discourse.25 My current project continues in this line of inquiry, at least

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25 Brown’s own political stances have become contested as critical readings of his novels and later works have generated differing images of his allegiances to both radical and conservative ideas. See W.M.
insofar as I assume *Edgar Huntly* to have the inherently political undercurrent built into the captivity-revenge cycle. Like its manifestation in the story of Jane McCrea’s death, the entwined tropes of the captivity-revenge cycle form the foundational structure of *Edgar Huntly*’s conceptions of sociopolitical unity, allowing Brown’s novel the same use as an instructive tale of revenge-as-citizenship that became an integral part of McCrea’s story.

My own reading of *Edgar Huntly* expands on Gardner’s excellent work in connecting the novel with the circulating discourse of paranoia over aliens, foreigners, and national security that led to widespread fear of conspiracies and the creation of laws like the Alien and Sedition Acts. This works in tandem with Hinds’s presentation of Edgar’s revenge as part of a greater sociopolitical reorganization of the community’s fundamental structure. I align the period’s xenophobia with the discursive uses of the captivity-revenge cycle to explore the ways that *Edgar Huntly*’s repetitive revenge violence operates as the foundational principle of the novel’s varying social systems. Ultimately, Brown depicts revenge structuring not just primitive or past society but the emerging world of modern America, an evolving world he knew well from the rapid changes in his home state of Pennsylvania. The text’s multiple presentations of captivity help to facilitate a conversion of the Old World discourses of sympathy, benevolence, and honor into the New World discourse of revenge and violent retribution that serves as the organizing sociopolitical principle for the emergent American state. Brown’s text

Verhoeven, “‘This blissful period of intellectual liberty’: Transatlantic Radicalism and Enlightened Conservatism in Brown’s Early Writings” in *Revising Charles Brockden Brown* for examples of the varying traditional takes on Brown’s politics in both halves of his career, as well as Verhoeven’s own view of Brown as an “enlightened conservative.”
ultimately argues that participation in this revenge—presented as necessary and a form of justice—is the pathway to proper citizenship.

Gardner’s choice to focus, as most critics do, on Edgar’s violence against the Delawares provides an excellent reading of the political potential in *Edgar Huntly*’s violence; I wish to extend the examination in a direction Gardner does not explore with the same depth: the role of Clithero—and especially the story of his life in Europe—in setting up the sociopolitical violence that characterizes the novel’s second half. Gardner’s analysis of Clithero does much to explain the ways the novel recreates the rhetoric of identity through detection of the alien, as well as the conversion of the European into the Indian; this does not, however, explain the many complexities introduced into the narrative by Clithero’s own history. By examining Clithero’s role through the structure of the captivity-revenge cycle, we can place his history, as well as the attendant wrinkles it adds into the story, into the greater repetitive framework that characterizes the text’s many examples of captivity and revenge. Specifically, this complicates what is often elided by critics who trace only the conversion of European to Indian: Clithero as the source of corruption for the community. Whereas Gardner’s reading focuses on the discourse of *detection* as laid out in the Alien and Sedition Acts, my analysis will explore instead the rhetoric of *infection*, the immediate concern of the 1790s; Girard’s recasting of violence as a form of communal contagion becomes a useful lens here. By examining the ways that Clithero’s previous violence is passed into his new community through its “infection” of Edgar’s sympathy, we can see how Girard’s sacrificial structure works to explain Edgar’s “cleansing” through revenge. In this way, Clithero’s iteration of the
elemental captivity-revenge tale becomes an example of impure violence that contaminates and endangers the emerging American state; Edgar’s iteration becomes the tale of purifying his own retaliation and purging the community of the plague of impure foreign violence.

2.1: Edgar Huntly, Aliens, and the Violent 1790s

“There was nothing in the first view of his character calculated to engender suspicion,” Edgar says of Clithero Edny, the man he now suspects as the murderer of his friend Waldegrave; “the neighborhood was populous. But as I conned over the catalogue, I perceived that the only foreigner among us was Clithero. Our scheme was, for the most part, a patriarchal one. Each farmer was surrounded by his sons and kinsmen. This was an exception to the rule. Clithero was a stranger, whose adventures and character, previous to his coming hither, were unknown to us” (Brown 12). After witnessing Clithero’s sleepwalking at the spot of Waldegrave’s murder, Edgar reopens the investigation into his friend’s death that had previously faltered due to lack of evidence; now, as Edgar had hurried home on a dark night several months later, “the insanity of vengeance and grief into which I was hurried [by the murder], my fruitless searches for the author of this guilt, my midnight wanderings and reveries beneath the shade of that fatal Elm, were revived and re-enacted” (6-7). The renewed desire to find the killer, which had earlier “foster[ed] sanguinary purposes,” added to Clithero’s bizarre somnambulism at the scene of the crime, leads Edgar to confirm him as the likeliest suspect.
During his previous search for Waldegrave’s killer, “the image of [Clithero] did not fail to occur; but the seeming harmlessness of his ordinary conduct, had raised him to a level with others, and placed him equally beyond the reach of suspicion. I did not, till now, advert to the recentness of his appearance among us, and to the obscurity that hung over his origin and past life” (12). Clithero has become, due to his foreignness and status as a recent immigrant, the prime suspect in Edgar’s investigations. “But now these considerations appeared so highly momentous,” Edgar says, “as almost to decide the question of his guilt” (12). Whereas “harmlessness” of conduct and “intellectual attainments” work to dismiss implications of guilt, foreign birth and obscure origins confirm it, and Edgar forms a plan to follow and interrogate Clithero that sets off the rest of Edgar Huntly’s bizarre series of events (12). In addition, Clithero’s isolation from the rest of the community—“he always rambled away, no one knew whither, and without a companion” on Sundays, refuses to divulge information about himself, and “His evenings he spent in incommunicative silence”—adds to the suspicion and mystery that implicate him as “the perpetrator of some nefarious deed” (19, 11).

That Clithero’s status as foreigner or alien, along with his silence and secrecy, would be grounds enough to confirm suspicion should not be surprising for a novel written in 1799 in the newly formed United States. The young nation had been going through considerable growing pains as it worked to establish an identity for itself and its people; the energies of this struggle for self-definition had led to increasing political and social turmoil. The unifying spirit founded in a sense of moral virtue, communal grievance, and retributive justice that had caused the various fragments of American
society to coalesce during the Revolution had long since dissipated. It was replaced by growing factionalism and paranoia over threats to national security from without and within. Insurrections, rebellions, and revolutions, like the Whiskey Rebellion in the U.S. and the French and Haitian revolutions abroad, stoked fears of spreading revolutionary violence; conspiracy theories implicated everyone from the French and their American sympathizers to the Illuminati, with special vitriol directed at the groups of Others already in the country—namely, Indians, slaves, and immigrants. The diverse mixture of races, ethnicities, creeds, and heritages trumpeted by writers like Crèvecoeur in the image that would eventually become the “melting pot” were now seen as dangerous pockets of difference and potential for corruption. A widespread fear of the “alien” and the “foreign” ensued.

Charles Brockden Brown was born in Philadelphia in 1771, growing up in the age of the Revolution and its aftermath. As Barnard and Shapiro note in their introduction to Edgar Huntly, living in Pennsylvania in a Quaker family “Brown was shaped by that community’s history of dissenting relations to mainstream Protestant and Anglo-American culture and by the history of William Penn’s Pennsylvania”:

From its founding as a Quaker colony in 1682 to Brown’s lifetime, Pennsylvania experienced a number of basic historical transformations that Brown addressed in his writings: the rapid commercial expansion of Philadelphia as a wealthy trading center that enriched and often bankrupted its Quaker merchant elite; the gradual erosion of Quaker political power and community unity as other immigrant and ethno-
religious groups came to outnumber Quakers in Pennsylvania; and the history of conflicts in the Pennsylvania backcountry or frontier […] that pitted Quakers against Indians on the one hand and other European immigrants groups (particularly the Irish) on the other. (x)

The rapid changes undergone in Pennsylvania mirror similar developments throughout the new United States, and it was the dynamic pressures of such cultural and sociopolitical changes that caused increasingly divided communities to lash out at each other in what often came to be framed as revenge for some misdeed, real or imagined, to which they had fallen victim.

It is into this complex world of unrest that Brown was born, and it should be no wonder that a novel like *Edgar Huntly*, set to “exhibit a series of adventures, growing out of the condition of our country” in the open realm of the frontier, would reflect this condition in the form that was so deeply ingrained in the common imagination: the captivity-revenge cycle. In his novel about the isolated communities of the frontier, Brown displays the dangerous fracturing of society as a way for the aliens and foreigners on our borders and in our midst to infiltrate America; the fears of infection and intrigue by such menaces recreate the mental space of captivity. The proper response to this is retribution against the agents of chaos, the communal revenge in the name of national virtue that bonds a society together.

Although there were many concerns for citizens and statesmen in the new American republic immediately after the revolution—such as whether or not the republic could even be sustained much past the end of the revolution that gave birth to it—the
1790s was among the most violent and most agitated decades in United States history. “One of the characteristics of the 1790s that strikes the attention even upon first glance,” says John Howe, Jr., “is the peculiarly violent character of American political life during these years” (147). Conflicts over the Constitution and the powers it gave to the federal government had begun the process of what would eventually be intense political division, coming “to a dramatic head between 1798 and 1801, when the nation was rocked by the XYZ affair, the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts, and the vitriolic politicking surrounding Thomas Jefferson’s election to the presidency” (Hartnett and Mercieca 80).26 Howe reminds us just how much “evidence abounds that the last decade of the eighteenth century constituted a time of peculiar emotion and intensity”:

For example, the physical violence, both actual and threatened, which appeared with disturbing regularity. Note the forceful resistance within the several states to the authority of the central government. In Pennsylvania, the flash-point of civil disturbance seemed particularly low, as the

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26 The XYZ affair was the result of President John Adams attempting to negotiate with the French in 1797. Adams sent three envoys to Paris in hopes of ending the “half-war” between the United States and France; the results were the French requesting money before even beginning negotiations. According to the French ministers, if they did not receive these “loans,” there would be continued piracy and danger to economic and national security for the U.S., essentially blackmailing the Americans in order to support their war efforts elsewhere. Adams provided the evidence of this extortion to Congress, which published the materials, sparking massive anti-French sentiments and fears of French influence in the government (namely Jefferson and his supporters). The names of the French blackmailers had been changed to X, Y, and Z in the documents Adams presented to Congress, and the series of events became known as the XYZ affair. See Hartnett and Mercieca for more information and extensive sources.

The Alien and Sedition Acts were a direct result of the implications by Mr. Y that there were already foreign agents infiltrating the U.S. and its government. The Alien and Sedition Acts were made up of four separate laws—the Naturalization Act, which made official citizenship more difficult; the Alien Enemies Act and the Alien Friends Act, which gave the president the power to deport aliens deemed dangerous, and the Sedition Act, which criminalized harsh criticism of the government. The collective purpose of these laws was to silence opposition to the Federalist agenda and to set citizens in surveillance of each other, a self-policing for “un-American” behaviors resulting in a wave of paranoia, xenophobia, and suspicion against immigrants, Native Americans, and U.S. citizens alike. See Gardner for more information.
Whiskey Rebellion and John Fries’ brief rising attest. [...] the Alien and Sedition Acts and the [Federalist] Provisional Army, [...] the bands of Jeffersonian militia, [...] armed and openly drilling, preparing to stand against the Federalist army. (147)

At the heart of all this discord was one fundamental issue: national security. While the eastern border of the country was relatively secure, it was the only one that was; every other border was controlled either by a foreign power, or, like the western area won in the Revolution, “ceded but still occupied” (Watts 81). John Witherspoon made these fears clear in a speech before Congress during debates about boundaries: “This nation was known to be settled along the Coasts to a certain extent; if any European country was admitted to establish colonies or settlements behind them, what security could they have for the enjoyment of peace? What a source of future wars!” (qtd. in Weinberg 23-24).

In addition to the fears of external threats, the rapid expansion of the United States, along with its traditionally diverse population, weakened the feeling of unity between communities at all points on the scale. As seen in the McCrea myth, unity during the Revolution was achieved by the creation of a common enemy: the morally inferior European and his savage mercenaries. When this unity began to break down after the war, widespread fear of factionalism was milked by Federalists to justify the creation and maintenance of an army, both for enemies inside the country and from abroad; as Andy Doolen argues, “Federalists designed the Alien and Sedition Acts and revised the Naturalization Act so that they could undercut the political influence of German and Irish
immigrants,” while fears spread that “on the Caribbean frontier, imperial foes were plotting invasion with slave rebels in the West Indies” (40). Frontier uprisings like the Whiskey Rebellion, where “These settlers […] were, as often as not, Revolutionary War veterans not of the officer class, many of whom had immigrated from Scotland, Ireland, Switzerland, France, or Germany,” proved even more frightening; if those who previously risked their lives could now turn against the very country they fought for by placing another faction first, anyone could potentially be an enemy (Watts 84). Improper allegiances could split the community and result in violence or corruption, and the Federalists began a campaign of assuring, by force if necessary, that citizens had their political priorities in order.

The primary concerns in this anxiety about national security—foreign or alien threats to sovereignty and factionalism leading to social disintegration—became the foundations of the political discourse circulating at the time of Edgar Huntly’s composition. As Doolen reminds us, “Charles Brockden Brown wrote all his major novels from 1797 to 1801, a remarkable time of creative outpouring that coincides with a period of political extremism and war crisis that ended the Federalist control of U.S. politics” (39). “No political bystander,” says Doolen, “Brown and his journal disseminated a Federalist ideology” (xxv). While some readings of Brown’s career have divided his fiction from his journalism along lines of republican vs. Federalist, Jared Gardner points out that “we can begin to see the continuity of Brown’s career,” as the “concerns raised by Edgar Huntly became his prime focus” when “he called for an aggressive defense of the nation against all alien forces” (431).
This “aggressive defense” in *Edgar Huntly* is built around the captivity-revenge cycle, as the threat of captivity and alien violence creates the violent reaction that becomes revenge for that threat itself. As this chapter’s epigraph from George Washington makes clear, proactive violence was (and is) often justified as a defensive measure, a protection from all forms of captivity and disempowerment. The display of proper behaviors toward the threat of foreign encroachment—suspicion, aggressive defense, and violent, generalized retaliation—becomes the utility Brown sought to include in his novel, the model for what to do and what not to do. Brown presents a world fractured by excessive privacy and isolation, misguided sympathy and attempts at benevolence, and factionalizing allegiances; the Pennsylvania frontier communities of *Edgar Huntly* are brought together, as the Americans were in the Revolution via the McCrea myth, by revenge on the untrustworthy foreigners threatening the destroy the community’s peace and safety.

2.2: Clithero’s Captivity, Violent Contagion, and National Security

Despite Brown’s assertion that his book would be free from “Gothic castles and chimeras,” the second half of the novel begins with Edgar waking in complete darkness, a darkness he assumes is a “dungeon or den” and that he has been brought there by command of “some tyrant who had thrust me into a dungeon of his fortress, and left me no power to determine whether he intended I should perish by famine, or linger out a life in hopeless imprisonment” (4, 108). Edgar’s assumptions of captivity at the hands of an unknown tyrant are telling: they mirror the paranoia over foreign influence within the
new United States, the ability of an unknown, “alien” faction to not only broker influence in the government and stir dissent among slaves and marginal groups in the uncontrollable areas of the western frontier but to ultimately inflict a gothic—and therefore essentially European—captivity on American citizens (4). Indeed, we may read Edgar’s predicament as the result of such foreign influence: his fall into the pit is directly due to his contact with Clithero, whose isolation and somnambulism—as well as his alienation and revenge—spread to the highly sympathetic Edgar.

That Edgar’s situation quickly takes on the appearance of the quintessentially American Indian captivity, rather than a gothic imprisonment by a tyrannical villain, bridges the Old World form to the New, performing the act that the story of McCrea’s murder carried out during the Revolution: the alignment of corrupt European behaviors with Indian “savagery” and the repurposing of Indians as the face of the alien on our borders and the enemy faction in our midst. In the shifting social world of the new republic recreated in *Edgar Huntly*, the dangerous foreign threat is projected onto the traditional “enemy” of the white settler, the ever-present Other of the Native American. Gardner states this projection simply: “Aliens become Indians; Americans become Indian-killers” (450). It is no accident, then, that Edgar tracks Clithero as the suspected murderer of Waldegrave, only to substitute a dispossessed Delaware alien as the killer later in the book; Waldegrave is the victim of Indian vengeance and the natives, in turn, suffer the justice and wrath of the settlers’ revenge.

The convergence of European and emergent American aesthetics in the scene of Edgar’s supposed captivity in the Norwalk pit is indicative of the transitional nature of
American identity in the post-Revolutionary years, according to Stephen Shapiro: “the dialectics of interstitial culture means that even as Edgar Huntly looks incongruously forward to a new identity, it does so by appropriating increasingly obsolete, and hence contestable, mediums of expression. For Brown, in the 1790s, these newly residual forms are those of sentiment and captivity” (224). This act of conversion of obsolete forms is the same action by which a traditional captivity narrative like Mary Rowlandson’s could be converted for use by America as propaganda during the Revolution, a tale of passivity and edification repurposed as activity and resistance. In the same way, Edgar’s awakening in the pit is a multivalent experience that connects multiple Old World experiences with experiences of the New World: the gothicized aesthetic connects us with Clithero’s tale of his own history, as well as his disappearance(s) into the pits and caves of Norwalk; Edgar’s association of the pit with the “Black Hole of Calcutta” aligns his experience with that of Sarsefield in India, as the novel “finds in the western wilderness not the essence of America but, ironically, more marks of European empire and the United States’s entanglements with it” (Goldman 557). Edgar’s captivity is simultaneously emblematic of the older discourses of imperialism and colonial resistance and the currently circulating discourse of xenophobia and national security against imminent alien hostilities. Not surprisingly, the intersection of these various discourses

27 After Sarsefield is forbidden to marry Lorimer, she secures him a position with the East India Company. While serving, Sarsefield endures captivity and travels over much of the world until returning to marry Lorimer. His legacy as an imperial soldier is symbolically passed to Edgar through the double-barreled musket that itself came to Sarsefield from a soldier in Bengal. Sarsefield’s association with revenge is made even more complex through the associations with India, especially the “Black Hole of Calcutta,” an act of revenge by the Indians that spurred an even greater series of revenge attacks from the British, emphasizing the cyclical escalation of violence. For more information, see Goldman, “The ‘Black Hole of Calcutta’ in Charles Brockden Brown’s America” and Sarsefield’s story and the attendant footnotes in the Hackett edition of Edgar Huntly (42-44).
find outlet in the cyclical revenge violence that marks the captivity-revenge cycle and has become synonymous with the action of the frontier romance.

While Edgar’s “captivity” in the pit in Norwalk and the ensuing bloodbath are the most visible offering of the use of captivity and revenge in the novel, they are not the only occurrences of these cyclical tropes. As Shapiro notes, “At its heart, Edgar Huntly is a series of male captivity narratives (Waldegrave, Weymouth, Sarsefield, Wiatte, Clithero Edny, Edgar Huntly, and, to a lesser degree, Selby and the absent Scot whose cabin the Delaware Indian Old Deb occupies)” (225). While secondary and even nameless characters are all implicated in the complex interweaving of captivity with the other events making up the book’s narrative, it is the novel’s main two—Clithero and Edgar—who present the clearest cases of captivity’s role in the novel’s acts of violent revenge. While the captivity-revenge cycle is more obvious in its application to Edgar, it is Clithero’s captivity of a different sort that sets up important parallels with the sociopolitical discourse of national security circulating in America at the time and the spread of violence by contact with the “unclean” alien or foreigner.

At first glance it may be difficult to see how Clithero is a captive. While he does endure Indian captivity, this is late in the novel and presented only as a way to clarify the divide between the Irishman and Sarsefield; “He was mangled by the tom-hawk in a shocking manner, and there was little hope that human skill could save his life,” skill that the vengeful Sarsefield is unwilling to provide (Brown 180).  

28 It is not Clithero’s

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28 Sarsefield refuses to aid Clithero due to their shared history in Ireland. Clithero’s parents were peasants in Euphemia Lorimer’s service; she eventually takes Clithero into her family as a companion for her son. Sarsefield, a bourgeois surgeon, courted Lorimer but was forbidden to marry her due to his class. After her
American captivity by Indians that is of primary importance in *Edgar Huntly* but rather his captivity at the hands of his former patroness and the current wife of Sarsefield, Euphemia Lorimer. While Lorimer herself seems to be a beneficent force and willing to ignore the rules of the feudal-aristocratic society that governs British-colonized Ireland, Clithero’s situation of dependency—both publicly as a vassal and servant and privately in the indebtedness he feels to her benevolence—places him in “domestic captivity,” where the “trope of physical duress within an alien culture” that marks the traditional captivity narrative is converted into entrapment in a sociocultural situation that disempowers the domestic captive in a similar manner (225-6). This is the form of Clithero’s captivity to Lorimer, and his strange attack upon her family after his accidental killing of her dangerous twin brother Wiatte becomes, when cast in the light of his domestic captivity, an act of revenge analogous to those of other displaced, disempowered, and disinherited characters like the Delawares, Edgar, and Sarsefield.

Clithero’s story of his life begins, fittingly, with the markers of his station in feudal Ireland: “I was born in the county of Armagh. My parents were of the better sort of peasants […]” (Brown 26). He assumes he would have continued in this location in the husband’s death and Lorimer’s independence, Sarsefield eventually returns and marries Lorimer. Clithero attempts to murder Lorimer in a fit of madness after he accidentally kills her brother in self-defense.

29 Shapiro lays out this system thus: “On the one hand, the rising middle class uses the slogan of merit to unleash themselves from the aristocratic hierarchies of blood, territory, and mythic origin. On the other hand, although the bourgeoisie invoke the egalitarian rhetoric of consensual contract as a tactic against upper-class hegemony, they actually liberate themselves from premodern constraints through a system of accumulation that relies on prior instances of coercion against the lower classes, a coercion typified by the appropriative violence of enclosure, enslavement, and colonial/imperial domination. The bourgeoisie’s dual struggle, against the felt cloistation of ‘unjust’ aristocratic hierarchies limiting middle-class advancement and ‘useless’ subalterne peoples ‘wasting’ potentially profitable resources, coalesces into the fundamental Western experiential narrative form: captivity” (225). Clithero can be said to suffer both the entrapment of the lower class and the rising class’s feelings of cloistation thanks to his liminal position in Lorimer’s family, effectively doubling the burden of captivity.
hierarchy “if an event had not happened,” his being noticed and the consequent removal to the city by Lorimer after her husband’s death (26-27). Lorimer, as mistress to the “peasants” on her estates, has full control over the child Clithero’s fate; the language Clithero uses to describe this reflects Lorimer’s absolute sovereignty, as “She was please with my vivacity and promptitude, and determined to take me under her own protection” (27). While he claims that his parents “joyfully acceded to her proposal,” there is no mention of the terms of this “proposal,” only the “determination” of an aristocrat and the acquiescence of an underling. It is safe to assume that, had Clithero’s parents even considered it possible to resist the dictates of their lady, the strength of her position and will would have ultimately won the day.

While the terms of Lorimer’s proposal are never mentioned, Clithero is careful to include the restrictions inherent in his situation: “There were certain accomplishments, from which I was excluded, from the belief that they were unsuitable to my rank and station” (27). In language that mirrors another version of the domestic captivity—the slave narrative—Clithero notes the dangerous effects of education on “a servile station,” and “In proportion as my views were refined and enlarged by history and science, I was likely to contract a thirst for independence, and an impatience of subjection and poverty” (27). Even as a child, Clithero is aware of his entrapment in the “alien culture” of the metropolitan aristocrat, a state that emphasizes his subjection by carefully proscribed social and mental boundaries that find parallels in the physical restrictions of Indian and slavery captivity. Like captives in these situations—whites who learn from the Indians and use that knowledge to best them like Daniel Boone, Natty Bumppo, or Hannah
Dustan, or slaves who acquire education and use it to escape their situation like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs—Clithero’s training will ultimately lead to revolt against his captors, although with nothing of the exultation usually felt by one freed from bondage. Such is the power of a domestic captivity cloaked in benevolence and the naturalized hierarchy of a feudal society.

Perhaps the most telling display of Clithero’s captive position is during his attempt to part from Lorimer’s service. Feeling that he cannot remain in his current position because of his socially unacceptable love of the higher-class Clarice, Clithero wishes “to leave [her] service, and to retire with the fruits of [her] bounty, to my native village, where I will spend my life, I hope, in peace” (38). The yoking of peace and his native village position Clithero’s request for release from service as a desire to return to the situation Lorimer removed him from in childhood—a freedom from his captive state, however beneficial and advantageous his captivity may have been. Lorimer’s reaction is one in which she assumes more and more command as the discussion continues, asserting her superior position and ability to retain Clithero against his wishes, eventually using Clarice as the bargaining chip in his retention. Although it is presented in the least objectionable terms and to the benefit of all, it is important to note the mental subjection, as well as the actual physical detention, of Clithero. It is this alienation and feeling of powerlessness within the boundaries of another culture that creates the captive. Despite

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30 Clarice, considered by Lorimer to be her daughter, is actually her niece. Her father is Arthur Wiatte, Lorimer’s twin brother, a criminal who is believed to have died during a mutiny on the ship transporting him to a penal colony. Note that the disempowered state of Clarice reinforces the theme of domestic captivity as well; the lack of control the female characters in the novel display over marriages and their bodies is echoed in the dangerous situations of Lorimer, Clarice, Edgar’s sisters, and most notably, by Mrs. Selby and the young girl taken captive by the Delawares.
the positive outcomes at the time and the benevolent motives of Lorimer, Clithero’s will and future are still controlled by his social superior, now empowered with the ability to control even his reproductive powers. As Clithero himself notes of what we may consider his benevolently conceived “abduction,” “for a long time, I regarded [this event] as the most fortunate of my life; but which I now regard as the scheme of some infernal agent and as the primary source of all my calamities” (26).

If Clithero’s service to Lorimer is read as domestic captivity, his violence against his captor then becomes converted into the act of revenge. The catalyst in this conversion is Arthur Wiatte, the sinister brother of Euphemia Lorimer. Girard speaks in *Violence and the Sacred* of the contamination of communities by violence, which spreads, like disease, in a form of contagion; the ritual of sacrifice stops this spread by symbolically destroying the agent of disorder, and “if the sacrificial catharsis actually succeeds in preventing the unlimited propagation of violence, a sort of *infection* is in fact being checked” (30). The reason for the contagious qualities of violence is that it is inherently mimetic, Girard says, and the rituals of sacrifice are created with purifying aspects built in, to cleanse those who carry out violence in the name of the community and prevent the sacrificial violence from spreading anew as cyclical revenge.

Wiatte, the desperate criminal ever threatening his sister with revenge for allowing his transportation and unwittingly killed by Clithero during an attack, infects Clithero with his impure violence that failed to be stopped by the sacrificial system of legal punishment; in effect, Wiatte’s desire for revenge on his sister becomes a blood corruption transferred to Clithero through the act of killing, igniting the same disease that
had been latent in the disempowered Irishman. Clithero’s descriptions of his physical and mental state after Wiatte’s death are those of illness and medicine, as noted by Barnard and Shapiro: “I was […] laid prostrate with wonder!”; “When I emerged from my stupor […]”; “The sickness that had seized my heart penetrated every part of my frame” (Brown 52, 53, 54). Wiatte had sought retribution on Lorimer for allowing his legal captivity; Clithero will now seek it for his domestic bondage, manifested in madness as a confused form of duty and gratitude.

Clithero, tainted by his contact with the impure violence of Wiatte, sees it as his duty to save his benefactress from the suffering her brother’s death will cause by sacrificing her and balancing the unclean blood spilled with Lorimer’s clean blood. Furthermore, this act of sacrifice would also cleanse Clithero, removing his guilt over causing his mistress such pain and protecting him from the consequences of her reaction to his part in Wiatte’s death. 31 This sense of duty is subtly undercut by an accusatory tone:

What had become of my boasted gratitude? Such was the zeal I had vowed to her. […] From a contemptible and dastardly regard for my own safety I had failed in the moment of trial, and when called upon by heaven to evince the sincerity of my professions.

She had treated my professions lightly. My vows of eternal devotion she had rejected with lofty disinterestedness. She had arraigned my

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31 Lorimer and Wiatte are twins, and she believes that their fates are intertwined. Despite reports that Wiatte had died in the mutiny during his transport, Lorimer continues to believe he is alive; so strong is her belief in this “sympathetic” connection that Clithero believes she will die when she finds out that he was alive and has since been killed by Clithero in self-defense.
Clithero reiterates here his domestic captivity via Lorimer’s refusal to release him to his native place; the burden of his devotion causes alienation, guilt, despair—and a creeping sense of contempt and anger. The years of servility and subjection placed on Clithero come to fruition in his willingness to do anything for the benefit of his mistress, including murdering her to spare her future pain. As William Gilmore Simms says of such devotion, “the zealots of all countries and religions are almost invariably creatures of strong and violent passions, to which the extravagance of their zeal and devotion furnishes an outlet, which is not always innocent in its directions or effects. Thus their enthusiasm […]” (qtd. in Davis 43).

Clithero’s captivity, like that of Daniel Boone and Hannah Dustan, ultimately becomes a story of vengeance upon the captor with the captor’s own tools: Clithero, the perfect servant, reconstructs his own revenge as the ultimate form of service to his mistress, as well as acting as the vehicle for Wiatte’s revenge. The disempowered Clithero simultaneously becomes destroyer of the criminal, performer of sacrifice, and agent of revenge; as Girard says of such intermixing of violent motives, “While acknowledging the differences, both functional and mythical, between vengeance,
sacrifice, and legal punishment, it is important to recognize their fundamental identity” (25). This cocktail of violence will travel with Clithero in his exile to America, to be passed to Edgar.

2.3: Edgar, Information, and Infection by a Foreign Body

Yet Clithero’s revenge does not appear to be sanctioned by Brown, an odd incongruity if the text ultimately supports revenge as a social unifier. The problem with Clithero’s violence against Lorimer is not so much the act itself, but the actor: Clithero’s violence is the contaminated revenge of Wiatte, misdirected against family, social order, and the innocent; it is not the correctly applied retribution of Edgar and the settler war party. Clithero is the infectious agent of impure violence, the noxious carrier of the germ of foreign revolution so feared in the 1790s. Edgar’s reaction to the dangerous alien is improper; rather than condemning Clithero as he should have done—as Clithero himself even does—Edgar embraces him and attempts to “cleanse” him. The mechanism of contagion is the mimetic “fatal sympathy”: Clithero, contaminated by Wiatte, passes the contagion to Edgar by telling him the story of his history.

As Tompkins demonstrates for Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn*, the passing on of knowledge and information works as a social currency, a way for both beneficence and malignancy to circulate between people; the parallel of misinformation to the plague of yellow fever in that novel provides an excellent conceptualization of the same mechanics at work in *Edgar Huntly*. Rather than a physical illness, however, *Edgar Huntly* deals with the contagion of morally corrupted, impure European violence: when Clithero

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33 See Tompkins, especially 71-77, for more information.
recounts his history to Edgar, he shifts “the burthen” of both Lorimer’s beneficence and his guilt onto the listener, infecting Edgar with the same sense of duty that drives Clithero to assault his patroness. Edgar’s obsessive pursuit and mirroring of Clithero are the symptom of the infection, and the burden of Clithero’s captivity and remorse eventually push Edgar to the same acts as the agent of his infection. The same powerful sense of duty motivates Edgar, he too becomes a sleepwalker who hides the writings of his former benefactor, and he too unleashes an unexpected explosion of violence. The connection of knowledge and violence is made clear by Clithero’s telling remarks on considering the effects of Wiatte’s death on Lorimer, “The bearer of these tidings will be the messenger of death” (54).

The difference is that Edgar’s vengeance falls on alien enemies of the state, the outside of society rather than the inside. Clithero’s revenge, like the malice of Wiatte, fractures society, breaking social cohesion and unity. Edgar’s vengeance, although contracted from Clithero, finds outlet in the “right channels” when he ceases to follow the personal path of benevolence and takes up the publicly endorsed path of revenge against the alien menace. Clithero is a criminal; Edgar is a hero, and his proper acts of revenge against alien threats have served the role of sacrifice, cleansing the community of the contagion of violence. Like the Revolutionary soldiers reacting to the death of Jane McCrea, Edgar now avenges innocent blood by destroying its spiller(s), not seeking to bestow comfort or “emulate a father’s clemency, and restore this unhappy man to purity, and to peace” (24).
Unfortunately, Edgar’s own “fatal sympathy” reinfects the community when he foolishly embraces the alien Clithero once more. At the novel’s end, when Edgar reveals that Lorimer has survived her shock at the previous attempt on her life, Clithero’s words are those of the avenger: “Thou hast once more let loose my steps, and sent me on a fearful journey. […] If she be alive then I am reserved for the performance of a new crime. My evil destiny will have it so. If she be dead, I shall make thee expiate” (192). Edgar’s interference has broken the mechanisms of sacrifice, reviving the plague of violence; if Clithero cannot finally complete his revenge on Lorimer—and even after he believed her dead, his self-inflicted punishment has continued him in the role of captive, leading directly to his Indian captivity—he will have it on Edgar. Like the Delawares forced from their homes, Clithero’s exile from his own peasant home in Ireland leads to a potentially bloody reprisal, and the cycle continues.

More than simply setting a precedent for domestic captivity as a primary plotline in many frontier romances, Clithero’s iteration of the captivity-revenge cycle reflects the circulating discourse surrounding fears over national security in the late 1790s. The essential element of the political rhetoric was the danger of being surrounded, as the domestic captive is, by a foreign culture capable of impinging on the rights to autonomy and self-determination. The multiple borders shared by the new United States with foreign imperial powers—France, Britain, Spain—exacerbated the growing fears that the emerging nation was vulnerable to invasion. As John Adams said in 1778, “So long as Great Britain shall have Canada, Nova Scotia, and the Floridas, or any of them […] so long will Great Britain be the enemy of the United States” (qtd. in Weinberg 21).
Samuel Adams presented this argument as one clearly about national security when he argued that Canada and Nova Scotia were necessary for safety, especially from unclean foreign infection: “The Cession of those Territories would prevent any Views of Britain to disturb our Peace in future and cut off a Source of corrupt British Influence which issuing from them, might diffuse Mischiefe [sic] and Poison thro the States” (qtd. in Weinberg 23). A similar statement appears in Humphrey Marshall’s poem “The Aliens: A Patriotic Poem” from 1798, where there are “good aliens” who are innocent, but “there is another ‘class’ of alien that plagues the nation, ‘poison[ing] our minds, with false speeches,’ one that demands an aggressive and participatory method of surveillance” (Gardner 434-35). So strong was this concern over danger to the United States, both as an independent nation and as British colonies, that Benjamin Franklin had requested that Canada be ceded twice, in 1760 and again in 1782 (Weinberg 24). Beyond the dangers of a possible Canadian staging ground for invasion, Britain threatened the United States in the 1790s with “mischief and poison” in the form of immigrants, many of them Northern Irish associated with revolutionary violence; Pennsylvania was a common destination, opening up the possibility of a contagion of violence like that transmitted from Wiatte to the Northern Irishman Clithero, who brings it with him in his migration to the America frontier.

Clithero, like Marshall’s bad aliens, poisons the community with false speech through the telling of his history; this is the realization of the fear leading to the Sedition Act’s criminalizing of anti-government communication. Marshall includes the proper course of action for dealing with such enemies in his poem:
For Aliens, who’ve crossed the seas,
In language strong and firm accost them;
The innocent—be they at ease,
The guilty—make haste, and arrest them. (qtd. in Gardner 434)

Rather than following the proper course of action against a revealed criminal, Edgar instead allows himself to be swayed by his dangerous words. Like the non-combatant settlers fooled by Burgoyne’s Proclamation into believing themselves safe from the threat of a foreign power, the peaceful Edgar and the people of Solebury and Chetasco have been deceived by the tale of an alien into believing themselves safe from his violence. Similarly, they have ignored Old Deb, whose “chief employment […] was to talk,” allowing her to remain among them; the results are Waldegrave’s murder and a near insurrection, the revolutionary violence so feared. The connection of Clithero with Old Deb through her nickname of Queen Mab\(^\text{34}\) highlights the repetition of the pattern: the isolated alien, surrounded by a culture not her or his own, opens society to the danger of infection and contamination with impure, misdirected violence. Only by purging the greater community of these carriers of discord can a society avoid the seemingly inevitable contagion.

This fear of contagious alien violence created an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion. There was a growing feeling that the only way to defend American rights was to remove these foreign threats by preemptive acts against the possibility of invasion and war. These feelings intermingled with expansionist thought, suggesting territorial control

\(^{34}\) Edgar bestows this nickname on the old woman when he is a child. According to Irish legend, Mab was a warrior queen associated with revenge, war, drunkenness, and sexuality. See Brown 139 and Barnard and Shapiro xxxix-xlii for more.
as the best, and possibly only way of ensuring national security. Brown portrays these circulating concerns through the series of convergences that simplify and recast the dilemma in the guise of the ingrained American form, “incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness” (4). The instigator of the Delaware resistance, Old Deb, is also Queen Mab to Edgar and the settlers, simultaneously one of the infectious Irish foreigners and internal Native American enemies. As Barnard and Shapiro discuss in their introduction, the tradition of depicting the Irish as shapeshifters finds expression in the implication of Clithero’s possible transformation into a panther; in another example of synchronicity, this shapeshifting is again linked through Old Deb/Queen Mab, whose dogs “might be thought of as transmuted Delaware warriors, later restored to human form so that they can enact Deb’s vengeance on the colonizing white settlers” (xl).35

Edgar, then, in stopping the Delaware attack simultaneously stops the dangerous foreign infection of subversives fomenting rebellion from outside national borders (the Delawares had been displaced farther west), as well as from within (Deb had “declared her resolution to remain behind, and maintain possession of the land,” and fittingly “The village inhabited by this clan was built upon ground which now constitutes [Edgar’s] uncle’s barn yard and orchard” [137]). The novel appropriately ends when the source of corruption, Clithero, dies in the pursuit of his “evil destiny” while trying to escape the agents of the law, those pursuing the course Edgar should have chosen. Lorimer’s

35 See Barnard and Shapiro’s introduction to Edgar Huntly (xxxix-xlii) and Gardner’s “Alien Nation” for further discussion.
miscarried child provides the pure blood to counteract the spilling of impure blood and the order destroyed by the improper internal violence of Wiatte and Clithero is restored to society. The novel’s hero, the disinherited Edgar Huntly, is restored to society through his vengeance and reunited with Sarsefield, the father figure who promises to provide for him. The conversion of revenge into sacrifice, following the pattern of displacement traced by Girard, ends the novel’s recreations of the captivity-revenge cycle manifested through Clithero’s storyline and with it the threats to the security of the novel’s microcosmic community.

Everywhere Americans looked, there were threats to their ability to maintain national security and national sovereignty. Like Clithero, individually colonized under the hierarchical feudal system and living in an Ireland colonized by British imperialism, the United States saw itself as increasingly held captive by its position on the North American continent and in danger of being infected with unclean European imperial and revolutionary violence. The wisest choice was to preemptively strike out and avenge this disempowerment, as Edgar does when he emerges from the pit, to inflict pain now to preserve peace later. This is the New World reproduction of the deranged Clithero’s Old World domestic captivity and attempted revenge on Lorimer in Ireland, properly directed; the journey into the American landscape of the frontier wilderness facilitates the redirection of revenge violence onto the right targets, the alien rather than the citizen.

36 Lorimer’s unborn child is the perfect sacrifice, as one connected to the events but not directly part of them. See Girard’s discussion of sacrificial substitution and displacement of violence onto marginalized or indifferent sacrifice victims in Violence and the Sacred (4–8).
2.4: Edgar and the Land of Pits

“When, at the very end of the story, and almost as an aside, Waldegrave’s ‘initial’ murder is solved” says Hanjo Berressem, “the reader, who has wondered with Edgar for no less than 281 pages who the murderer is, learns that Waldegrave’s murder was a purely chance event” (58). As the purpose of Berressem’s article is to explore the random nature of events in Edgar Huntly, the fact that Waldegrave became a victim of violence by being in the wrong place at the wrong time seems to support his claims. However, the continuation of the above quote reveals a breakdown in this line of thinking: “An Indian, a member of a band forced to postpone an attack on a group of settlers ‘would not depart without some gratification of his vengeance’” (58). While the fact that Waldegrave is a victim of “the first American drive-by shooting […] A random act of violence” is true because the victim is random, the act of violence itself is not—it is clearly marked as an act of revenge by the Delaware, the first blow of the coming insurrection averted by Edgar.

Even the randomness of Waldegrave’s victimhood can be questioned, as he is one of the community of settlers whose presence in the region has previously displaced the Delawares from their ancestral lands. As a purely inexplicable and disjunctive occurrence of frontier violence, the death of Waldegrave operates as a bewildering obscurity, a motiveless malignancy that troubles Edgar and the community—and readers like Berressem—by its inherent lack of meaning; as an act of revenge, Waldegrave’s murder and the Delaware insurrection prevented by Edgar become part of a larger scheme of historically interconnected actions, an example of the threat of organized foreign invasion
and attack by a hostile group—a threat to national security like the ones posed by the proximity of British, French, Spanish, and Native American landholdings on the U.S. borders.

Even worse, the Delaware hostility hints at the possibility of riot and rebellion within our borders, from settler groups and other communities feeling disenfranchised, like the participants in the Whiskey Rebellion or the Paxton Riots—or the isolated Clithero, or disinherited Edgar. Contrary to Berressem’s claims of randomness, the grounding of Waldegrave’s death in an act of revenge is important specifically because it is not random but part of a greater threat of hostile factions and dangerous conspiracies, as well as a chain of historical, cyclical violence. Like Jane McCrea, Waldegrave becomes the innocent victim of a larger sociopolitical struggle and the catalyst in provoking the community’s revenge through the chain of Edgar’s pursuit of justice. The displacement of suspicion from Clithero to the Delawares converts the isolated foreigner into a conspiratorial menace, one whose dangerous potential is better rooted out than left to fester and grow; Edgar’s private actions with regard to the murder become public actions against this conspiracy, matching this shift in scope.

The alignment here is with the various Alien and Sedition Acts, a proactive measure that, in its own turn, is itself a form of revenge for the “infiltration” of American society and the attack yet to happen. Edgar’s captivity results in a rampage in the wilderness that prevents any serious Delaware insurrection beyond the isolated slaying of Waldegrave and the failed attempt to burn the Selby home. Edgar’s vengeance—the result of a confluence of events including various acts of disinheritance and the murder of his
parents, as traced by Hinds—stops the greater threat of alien invasion, just as the rhetoric leading to the Alien and Sedition Acts would create a feeling of captivity to foreign powers and a sense of justified retribution by rooting out the aliens already hidden in the community. As the united communities of Chetasco and Solebury muster a war party to carry out justice on the Delawares and their infiltrator, Old Deb, Edgar’s personal revenge becomes a group effort to ensure security. This vigilance and “aggressive defense” is what the Federalists presented as necessary to national safety and what Brown displays as proper behavior when faced with menacing Others.

As noted above, viewing Waldegrave’s death as an isolated act creates a disjunction in the thread of continuity that connects life in rural Pennsylvania; Edgar’s recollection of his behavior at the event mirrors the disruptive power of the murder, its choppy sentences and sparse description presenting progress as a series of events rather than a continuous thread of happenings:

I hung over the dying youth, whose insensibility forbade him to recognize his friend, or unfold the cause of his destruction. I accompanied his remains to the grave, I tended the sacred spot where he lay, I once more exercised my penetration and my zeal in pursuit of his assassin. Once more my meditations and exertions were doomed to be disappointed.

(Brown 7)

The loss of connection at Waldegrave’s death due to his “insensibility” breaks the unity of events in the community’s life, and this disruption is amplified by the complete inability of Edgar and the community to solve the crime, as there were “no traces of the

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slayer visible, no tokens by which his place of refuge might be sought, the motives of his enmity or his instruments of mischief might be detected” (7). Waldegrave’s impeccable character, along with the invisibility of his assassin, paints his death as a realization of the possibility that there may be killers already in the community, their motives and modes of operation obscured from public eyes. This fracturing of communal continuity caused by the murder is representative of the greater concern in the 1790s with factionalism and disunity among the citizenry that ultimately manifests itself in the Alien and Sedition Acts. Matching Halttunen’s view on the transformation of murder into a crime emphasizing terror and difference, the threat is recreated as one of foreign spies and alien intriguers already in the nation’s midst, as suggested by the XYZ Affair. These hidden threats, like the deceptive Clithero and the lurking Delawares, are revealed to be sources of “mischief and poison,” carriers of sedition and factional infection in the virtuous United States.

Brown would return to this theme a few years later in his 1803 pamphlet *Address to the Government of the United States on the Cession of Louisiana to the French*: “The nation’s weakness” argues Brown’s fictitious French councilor, “results from a lack of unity among a people who ‘call themselves one’ even though ‘all languages are native to their citizens: All countries have contributed their outcasts and refuse to make them a

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38 The description of Wiatte’s death after attacking Clithero and the ensuing actions echo the death of Waldegrave: Wiatte too is “insensible to all around him” (51). Clithero’s flight after his failed attempt on Lorimer’s life likewise makes him “invisible” and his location and movements unknown to Sarsefield and Lorimer, another similarity between the murder of Waldegrave and the events surrounding Wiatte’s death. The linking of the dark alleyways of Dublin with the paths of Norwalk, as well as the references to pistols (the only mention of pistols is in connection with these two deaths), may serve to parallel the two events enough to implicate Clithero as the murderer of Waldegrave (recreating the events in Dublin while sleepwalking in America). Waldegrave was also not scalped, problematizing the notion that he was killed by a Delaware. Perhaps Edgar was right after all.
people’” (Axelrod 5). The goal of Brown’s pamphlet was to drum up support for war; as the McCrea myth and the search/war parties in Edgar Huntly demonstrate, a common enemy upon which to enact revenge for an injury is the quickest way to unite a divided people. It is the beginning of the way that, as Jared Gardner puts it, “the act of exorcising from the land the alien […] allows American identity to come into existence” (430).

The lack of clues in the renewed investigation for Waldegrave’s killer sends Edgar on a blind search, and this importantly spreads into the wilderness of the frontier: “Had I not extended my search into the neighbouring groves and precipices? Had I not poured upon the brooks, and pryed into the pits and hollows, that were adjacent to the scene of blood?” (Brown 7). This description is notable because it highlights the symbolic features of the landscape—pits and precipices—that are markers, like Waldegrave’s murder, of disjunctions and isolations in the text. As Paul Downes points out, “Edgar’s characteristic rhetorical gesture consists of aporetic antitheses,” a linguistic equivalent of the pits or holes into which both characters and ideas disappear, only to reappear in different forms (414). Edgar begins the text describing the divide between his experience and his ability to put it into words; as the writing moves forward and attempts to bridge this gap, he traces through the narrative his journey from the linguistic aporia into the physical one.

Ed White notes the use of pit imagery in his reading of Wieland, “Carwin the Peasant Rebel.” Tracing the occurrences of pits and precipices throughout the novel, White proposes a “recurrent narrative structure taking shape around the geographeme of the pit” (53). The rough outline of this structure is that of a character moving toward an
ideal, with the pit representing a “catastrophe” or major disruption, and this disruption itself “interrupted by arrival at a precipice, where there is a moment of perception or comprehension” (54). In White’s analysis, these geographic symbols stand in for history: “If pits suggest geography and geographical structures suggest history, the narrative pits signal nothing less than the interruption of narrative by ‘History’ […] understood as the structural potential for human actions” (55).

This reading presents a powerful way of conceptualizing Brown’s use of landscape as a device for controlling narrative, and pits and precipices play a similar role in *Edgar Huntly*. These particular spots are the places where substitution occurs: where the discourse of sentiment noted by Shapiro is converted into the discourse of captivity as Edgar seeks out Clithero, only to become trapped in the mountain pit; where the isolated foreigner is converted into a conspiratorial invasion force, as Clithero disappears into the broken crags of Norwalk and is replaced by hostile Indians; where friends become enemies, as the community search party fires on Edgar on the cliffs; and where forces of civilization and settlement become forces of empire and revenge. Edgar’s awakening in the pit is the turning point of the novel, and his fall into it notably has not been accompanied by a moment of perception at the edge of the precipice. Edgar does not recognize his fall into history, the greater cycle of Indian-settler revenge violence that is the key to escaping his foreign infection and rejoining society.

Previous readings of Edgar’s return to consciousness in chapter 16 have often circled around the symbolism of birth and the new state of experience into which

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39 The footnote on page 87 of the Hackett edition lays out the two halves of the novel (each 12 chapters) and the “hinge” in the middle of chapters 13-15, where Waldegrave’s letters are discussed and Weymouth appears.
Edgar—and the nation he synecdochially stands in for—is now thrust. Eric Goldman sums up some of the previous critical takes as such:

Bill Christophersen suggests that the cavern into which Huntly sleepwalks and falls into a pit is ‘a precultural setting’ and ‘a projection of the psyche,’” and asks, ‘Why does Brown render Edgar’s experience in such mythic terms?’ For Christophersen, the answer is that such mythic vagueness foregrounds Edgar’s awakening to his barbaric, primitive self. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s reading of the scene is similar. For her, the pit is a symbolic American womb out of which Edgar emerges into a new, savage self that he never manages to transcend. Despite Rosenberg’s otherwise historically grounded reading of *Edgar Huntly*, she sees the ‘pit’ much as Christophersen does. Alan Axelrod, in a different version of this ahistorical reading of the pit, suggests that it is a symbol of the bewildering ‘metaphysic’ darkness of the new world” (564).

Goldman himself places this episode into a different context, one suggested by Edgar’s association of his own “captivity” in the pit with that of the British soldiers held in the “Black Hole of Calcutta” (563). This understanding of the pit as symbol follows a similar trajectory to that of White’s reading, a place where a grounded, real part of “history” interrupts “Edgar’s seemingly all-American captivity narrative” and aligns it with a deeper connection to wider history (563). My reading of the scene goes in a similar direction: the pit acts as the point of disjunction where the discourses of the novel’s first half—the improper course of sympathy and benevolence and a focus on domestic
captivity in an Old World system of mental and social disempowerment—are converted into the discourses that structure the second half—physical captivity and properly directed revenge. These are the same discourse conversions performed on Jane McCrea in converting her from collateral damage to victim of sensational atrocity; as such, they also provide connections between the various tales of captivity and revenge that link the novel’s characters. Ultimately, the divided communities and isolated homesteads come together, yielding a more symbolically unified social system centered on the wise authority of well-traveled, city-dwelling Sarsefield, a Washington-like father figure who leads the combined forces of the formerly isolated settler groups.

As White tellingly states, “The historical state of America in the late 1790s is that of a land of pits—a site of perennial eruptions (the Paxton Riots, Pontiac’s Conspiracy, Shays’ Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion) over which concerned citizens gaze from the precipice” (56). These private, socially isolated factions become a problem because they, like the remorseful Clithero or the vengeful Delawares, are aliens who disappear into the “pits and precipices” of the physical frontier landscape and the obscurities and hidden agendas of the private sociopolitical one, only to resurface in violent retribution on the greater community. The organizing principle of installed government order favored by Federalists—although seemingly incongruous with the vision of American politics—hinged on being able to paint such eruptions as attacks from foreign or alien factions that required swift retribution and preventative measures—both offensive and defensive.

40 The Whiskey Rebellion provides an excellent example: Hugh Henry Brackenridge, speaking on behalf of the rebels, famously asked “If Indians can have treaties, why cannot we have one too?” See Edward Watts, “‘If Indians Can Have Treaties, Why Cannot We Have one Too?’: The Whiskey Rebellion and the Colonization of the West,” in Messy Beginnings for an analysis of the issues of identity on the frontier demonstrated by the Whiskey Rebellion.
revenge for the captivity to fear and the damage to economic and social unity caused by their contagious conspiracies.

The dangers of factionalism go beyond the simple isolation of various individuals or groups, the imperfection of their judgment, and the obscurity of their motivation; it is the possibility of wider effects from these individual deviations that recreate the private citizen as a factional menace, the alien conspirator to be weeded out by the vigilance of the Alien and Sedition Acts. Waldegrave becomes the prime example of this in the concern Edgar expresses over the contents of the bundle of letters in his possession. “Thou art not fully acquainted with the intellectual history of thy brother,” Edgar tells Mary in the letter:

Waldegrave, like other men, early devoted to meditation and books, had adopted, at different periods, different systems of opinions, on topics connected with religion and morals. His earliest creeds, tended to efface the impressions of his education; to deify necessity and universalize matter; to destroy the popular distinctions between soul and body, and to dissolve the supposed connection between the moral condition of man, anterior and subsequent to death. (88-89)

Although “the revolution that afterwards took place in his mind” would bring the author back to the fold of acceptable beliefs, Waldegrave’s letters evince scandalous beliefs as a “materialist and deist, and in his letters he develop[s] late Enlightenment arguments against religion and superstition” (89n1). Such radical beliefs would most likely have painted Waldegrave as a dangerous progressive, especially in a time where they would
still have strong association with revolutionary activities in France and Haiti; the letters may have presented Waldegrave as a member of the conspiring Jacobin factions infiltrating the United States to stir up internal dissent and spark slave and Indian rebellion. His connections with the free-school would also have associated him with Abolitionists, another indicator of dissenting and possibly dangerous factionalism.

The burden of Waldegrave’s radicalism, like Clithero’s burden of guilt and remorse, falls on Edgar through the communication of his history, pushing him to mirror Waldegrave as well: the novel opens with Edgar partaking in a similar nighttime walk to the one he warned his friend against, and that will bring him into contact with the likewise infectious Clithero at the scene of Waldegrave’s murder, the fittingly isolated Elm “in the midst of a private road” (8). As he does in his choice to save rather than condemn Clithero, Edgar chooses to hide Waldegrave’s illicit thoughts rather than expose them to the community for judgment; in doing so, he risks his own contamination and alienation by separating himself from public regulation of his own thoughts and actions. As Edgar notes of himself, he “did not entirely abjure the creed” of Waldegrave’s radicalism, aligning him with revolutionary potential as well; especially dangerous is his continued belief in his own judgment and benevolence rather than the authority of society or a mentor like Sarsefield. If, as Paul Downes argues, Clithero is a figure of revolution and the attendant crises of understanding that accompany it, the many convergences and doublings between he and Edgar help to solidify Edgar’s position as a dangerous member of a radical faction (418-21). “Waldegrave’s amoral and anti-religious materialism was the creed of a radical at the time” Link states; “Huntly joined Waldegrave in that
rebellious philosophical wilderness, only to have his mentor pull a bait-and-switch in his conversion back to Quaker piety. Thus, as Huntly wanders the wilderness of Norwalk, he is alienated threefold: physically (he is literally lost in the wild), psychologically (he is a somnambulist with a deeply troubled mind), and philosophically (he is a materialist in the midst of religious piety)” (96).

Brown’s concerns about the power of the community as a regulatory system have often been the subject of critical attentions, such as Jane Tompkins’s reading of Wieland and Arthur Mervyn, in the past; they emerge again in Edgar Huntly’s skepticism over individual isolation and secrecy and the potential for factionalism and discord to spring from them. In the character of Waldegrave, Brown presents the perfect moral citizen operating in the public sphere; this presentation is subtly undercut by the cumulative negative effects of Waldegrave’s private isolation and secrecy, ultimately resulting in his death. It is, after all, Waldegrave’s venturing out at night alone that makes him the victim of the Delaware assassin: “his inexplicable obstinacy; his resolution to set out on foot, during a dark and tempestuous night, and the horrible disaster that befel [sic] him” emphasize Waldegrave’s separation from Edgar’s “social” voice of reason and the “inexplicable”—that is, secret and private—reasons for his actions (6).

Yet another burden becomes Edgar’s to bear with the appearance of Weymouth⁴¹; another tale of captivity is transmitted via a character’s history, and Edgar is left to make a private decision about the legitimacy of Weymouth’s story: “I know that my claim has

⁴¹ Weymouth is a friend of Waldegrave who had entrusted a fortune to him to keep safe. Like most of the other central characters, Weymouth has been a captive: he was held in various locations in Europe—often monasteries, a typically gothic environment—during an illness following a shipwreck. Weymouth’s claim on Mary Waldegrave’s inheritance has significant consequences for Edgar, as this money is the only pathway by which Edgar and Mary can be financially secure enough to marry.
no legal”—that is, public—“support” (102). Edgar’s sympathy is once again the path through which he takes on the concerns of Weymouth’s physical, emotional, and financial difficulties. As with Clithero and Waldegrave—and now Edgar—Weymouth is another night traveler arriving in night’s obscurity whose “necessities and schemes” are not fully revealed (102). After taking on this last burden of someone else’s history of captivity and alienation, Edgar goes to a troubled sleep; he awakes in the Norwalk pit, and the stage is set for him to unleash the pressures of captivity through an outburst of revenge.

Edgar’s fall into the pit represents the completion of his separation from the community—his “factionalization”—in his continued 

*individual* pursuit of Waldegrave’s murderer. The choice to act as a private agent of justice sets Edgar apart from the rest of the settlers in the area who have given up the search; this isolation is marked by his uncertainty about how to handle the confrontation with the suspect, the conflict over his own feelings, and his questioning of how—and even if—to proceed. “But it suddenly occurred to me,” Edgar recalls, “For what purpose shall I prosecute this search? What benefit am I to reap from this discovery? How shall I demean myself when the criminal is detected?”; his final question in the series—“Is it wise to undertake experiments by which nothing can be gained, and much may be lost?”—reiterates the private nature of Edgar’s pursuit, since a legal outcome to the murderer’s discovery is not among his thoughts (13). This is made clear by the image of personal confrontation Edgar foresees: “Man to man,” not community to criminal, “I need not dread his encounter” (15).
Edgar’s contact with Clithero furthers this as he continually isolates himself with his lengthy midnight surveillances of the Irishman, an effect made most evident when he is infected with Clithero’s somnambulism and violence. The discovery of Clithero, alone at the Elm and indulging in private, obscure behaviors and laments, sets off the mirroring of the two characters; while sleepwalking, Clithero symbolically digs a pit in which to mourn his isolation, foreshadowing Edgar’s own increasing isolation and eventual descent into a pit of his own.

Further than this, the triangle of Clithero, Edgar, and Waldegrave presents a repeating pattern—the retelling of the captivity-revenge cycle—that makes up the foundation of the novel’s action. The iterations of the cycle are layered together in the novel’s first half as Clithero’s captivity in Ireland and Waldegrave’s radicalism, and even Weymouth’s captivity and poverty infect and burden Edgar, culminating in his disempowerment, disinheriance, and mirroring of all three men as his midnight rambles become sleepwalking into the pit. When Edgar recognizes his own alienation through the savage action of killing the panther during what he believes to be gothic captivity, he begins the journey back to social integration in the novel’s second half; this journey is brought about by breaking the bonds of captivity and enacting revenge on the foreign agents, the Delawares.

2.5: “Similar events have frequently happened on the Indian borders”

As Paul Downes summarizes his reading of Edgar Huntly, “[the novel] narrates the process whereby a young American in the sway of an ‘ungovernable’ curiosity comes
to substitute a capitulation to the wisdom of a charismatic authoritarian for a ‘lawless’ commitment to individualized justice’ (414); the recognition of progress from an individual, self-driven, essentially private pursuit to a submission to a greater “charismatic” (and therefore social) authority in Sarsefield helps to highlight the division of the novel into two halves: the first focusing on Clithero and the story of his (and increasingly, Edgar’s) social isolation and the second on Edgar’s reintegration with the community. The novel’s second half, then, is the story of the combatting of isolation and factionalism, the battle against the alien and its infectious corruption. It is the story of Edgar’s liberation from captivity, both in the physical world of entrapment by insurgent Delawares in Norwalk’s pits and precipices and the social world of individual isolation and separation from the publicly defined morality of the 1790s. As Gardner presents it, “Having spontaneously degenerated to this lowest state of savagery [his captivity in the pit and the bestial killing and devouring of the panther], […] Edgar turns in disgust and begins his long journey back to civilization. It is the project of the second half of the novel to bring Edgar back to his rightful place in society” (444). This reintegration is achieved when Edgar sheds the sympathy and benevolence that characterize his pursuit of Clithero and his nonviolent persona, instead embracing violent retribution against the Delaware insurgents that murdered his parents and brought him into the chain of events that leave him dependent and disinherited.

As several critics, including Leslie Fiedler and Dennis Berthold, have noted, “as Edgar becomes more wild the further into the wilderness he proceeds, he becomes more ‘civilized’ the closer to settled territory he returns” (Hinds “Deb’s Dogs” 330). This
civilization is accompanied by his reintegration into more social modes and a move away from his previous isolation in a private world. This process begins with Edgar’s choice to rescue the young girl held captive by the Indians in the cave outside of the pit. Although Edgar’s initial plan is to escape alone and return with help later, he decides to risk saving her immediately instead: “there was something dastardly and ignominious in withdrawing from the danger, and leaving an[sic] helpless being exposed to it. The parents might deserve that I should hazard or even sacrifice my life, in the cause of their child” (Brown 121). His realization that such a move might not be simply privately reprehensible (“dastardly”) but publicly condemned (“ignominious” denotes a public disapproval or disgrace), as well as the recognition of a greater, more communal responsibility to the child’s parents, sets Edgar onto a path of concern with public affairs and the civic-minded virtue held as the cornerstone of republican society.

Edgar’s “return” to society is convergent with his violent explosion into revenge on the Delawares. As he emerges from the pit and finds himself in view of the Indians at the cave’s mouth, he is reminded of the death of his parents. “My father’s house was placed on the verge of this solitude [Norwalk, on the Solebury frontier],” Edgar reveals. “Eight of these assassins assailed it at the dead of night. My parents and an infant child were murdered in their beds” (116). The house was also destroyed, placing Edgar and his sisters in the position of dependency on their uncle that now highlights Edgar’s financial concerns throughout the novel. This former slaughter is aligned with Edgar’s projected but incorrect vision of a sequel at his uncle’s home when he finds the double-barreled rifle—a gift from Sarsefield, Edgar’s mentor, surrogate father, and a veteran British
soldier who endured captivity in India—in the hands of the Delaware war party: “I
needed no proof of my calamity more incontestable than this. My uncle and my sisters
had been murdered; the dwelling had been pillaged, and this had been a part of the
plunder” (124). Edgar, until now declaiming violence as best he could, finds his
“emotions totally changed: I was comforted in thinking that thus much of necessary
vengeance had been executed” by his killing of the Indian outside of the cave (124-25).
Edgar will go on to kill several more of the marauding Delawares, as he has “imbibed
from the unparalleled events which had lately happened a spirit vengeful, unrelenting,
and ferocious,” recalling the infectious nature of violence noted by Girard (128). Edgar
has indeed “imbibed” the spirit of vengeance by listening sympathetically to the
dangerous histories of Waldegrave, Clithero, and Weymouth; his sympathy has allowed
him to be contaminated by their captivity experiences, and he must now act out their
unfulfilled revenge acts. Fittingly, Edgar speaks of being “born to a malignant destiny,”
as Clithero had spoken of his own history as “the scheme of some infernal agent” and
will speak of his own “evil destiny” (124, 26, 192).

The progress toward civilization is marked by landscape, just as his separation
and decline was marked by the pits and precipices dividing him from others in the wilds
of Norwalk. Edgar goes from the rudest of possible dwellings—a cave—through a series
of increasingly sophisticated habitations: Deb’s hut, the simple farmhouse where he
receives directions, the Selby home, and finally a full return to his own neighborhood,
where he is reunited with Sarsefield and the now-unified settler party. Edgar, mistaken
for an enemy and fired on by his own community in the Norwalk wilds, is now
reintegrated by his return to “civilization” as an Indian killer. Edgar, unlike Clara Wieland, Waldegrave, Clithero, and those who remain isolated by their privacy and failure to join the community’s regulatory system of “public virtue,” leaps from the precipice and ascends from the pit, reborn and reconfirmed as an American through his participation in the community’s revenge.

When Jared Gardner says that “Brown leaves his young hero […] to single-handedly meet the crisis of identity facing the nation as a whole,” he overlooks the importance of Edgar’s place in part of a greater cycle, that of the frontier history of captivity and revenge. Edgar’s isolation is driven by his infection with the burden of sympathy for the alien, captive, and foreign-minded radical, present in the characters of Clithero, Waldegrave, and Weymouth; his reenactment of the captivity-revenge cycle allows him to cast off these burdens by rejoining the public in its rejecting of the agent of infection. Once Edgar eschews his isolated world for that of the wise father—Sarsefield, enlightened surgeon, veteran warrior, and correct judge of character since he recognizes Clithero’s true nature—he becomes the virtuous citizen Brown projects all his readers will be.

In this way, Brown’s novel is an excellent precursor to the frontier romances that will follow. The depiction of Clithero as domestic captive and Edgar as beholden to outmoded forms of social duty find numerous analogs in the romantic protagonists of

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42 In Brown’s *Wieland*, the Wieland family is notable for a history of separation from society and dissenting religious opinions. This isolation is one of the prime factors in their victimization by the outsider Carwin, eventually resulting in Theodore Wieland’s madness and the fracturing of their family group. The continual failure of the members of the Wieland community to rely on each other and a communal, “public” judgment, rather than personal, private judgment, is ultimately what serves to alienate them from each other and allow Carwin to manipulate them.
Bird, Cooper, and Sedgwick; the alienation of these characters often becomes the driving force behind a given novel’s main revenge actions, as it is in *Edgar Huntly*. This important detail is lost if we fail to recognize Clithero’s status as a captive and its implications for Edgar, a path the captivity-revenge cycle helps to illuminate. In addition to this, Brown’s advertisement for the novel in his *Monthly Magazine* describes the surreal and mostly ahistorical events of *Edgar Huntly* as both realistic and a part of wider history: “The following narrative is extracted from the memoirs of a young man who resided some years since on the upper Delaware. …Similar events have frequently happened on the Indian borders; but, perhaps, they never were described with equal minuteness” (qtd. in Gardner 455n5). Brown sets up his text as an exemplary description of a common experience, the continual cycle of Indian-settler violence that stretches back far into the past; this pseudo-historicity will become an important feature of the other frontier romances drawing from the tradition of *Edgar Huntly*. Just as Jane McCrea’s death was used as a synecdoche for all the unjust, impure violence of the Revolution, Brown uses his story of one man’s alienation and return to civilization as a synecdoche for the dangers of alien infection and the cleansing power of properly directed revenge, the basic tale that has “frequently happened on the Indian borders” and instructs citizens on how to behave in all parts of the new United States. It is the same tale that continues to be told over and over in the frontier romance genre, underpinning the cycles of violence that define the fictional life of the emergent American nation.
“It is not easy for those living in the tranquility of polished life [...] to conceive the depth and force of that unquenchable, indiscriminate hate which Indian outrages can awaken in those who have suffered them. The chronicles of the American borders are filled with the deeds of men, who, having lost all by the merciless tomahawk, have lived for vengeance alone.”

-Francis Parkman, *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*

“The whole continent of North America appears to be destined by Divine Providence to be peopled by one nation, speaking one language, professing one general system of religious and political principles, and accustomed to one general tenor of social usages and customs.”

-John Quincy Adams

At the other end of the spectrum from Charles Brockden Brown’s surreal tale of somnambulism is the brutal world of *Nick of the Woods*, the violent frontier romance of Brown’s fellow Philadelphian, Robert Montgomery Bird. Chronologically the latest of the novels covered by this project, Bird’s 1837 tale of pursuit and revenge in the Kentucky wilderness displays the clearest example of the development of the captivity-revenge tropes and romantic themes latent in *Edgar Huntly*. *Nick of the Woods* continues the direction taken by Brown of a purely villainous Other, a continuity of presentation that helps to emphasize the other shared traits, such as male captivity and social isolation derived from the genre’s romantic conventions. However, the change in times and attitudes from the 1790s to the 1830s also alters these common features, an evolution of the genre that mirrors similar sociopolitical evolution in the greater culture. In particular, the rise of the Jacksonian “common man” and a more egalitarian, less patrician vision of democracy inform the world of *Nick of the Woods*, where Bird’s Kentucky becomes a
model for both the nation’s past and its glorious future through the social organizing power of the captivity-revenge cycle.

While Bird’s novel shares with Edgar Huntly the alienation and captivity of masculine figures, most clearly embodied in Clithero and Edgar, it revises the fear of factionalism into a positive understanding of the power of sectionalism as a form of patriotism and cultural consciousness; this mirrors changes in the discourse over expansionism and Indian removal circulating from the mid 1820s into the 1830s, especially that dealing with the desire of Southern citizens to see states “unified” through the appropriation of Indian lands in the East. Bird’s more specific use of historical setting and regional character presents a cogent past of violence for the establishment of present society through revenge, converting Brown’s singular “memoirs of a sleep-walker” into the “tale of Kentucky” that ultimately unifies the narrative of Nick of the Woods. As opposed to the more surreal Edgar Huntly, Bird’s frontier romance was often praised (and criticized) for its apparently realistic portrayal of the violent frontier conflicts on Kentucky’s “dark and bloody ground.” This greater feeling of realism, coupled with a greater feeling of historicity, allows Bird to create a story of the national past that “suggests an analogy between the historical past and the present situation” presented in the discourse of Indian Removal in the 1830s (Slotkin Fatal 24).

Although Bird’s writing career is mostly forgotten in American literary studies today, he was nevertheless an important figure in the 1830s, as one of the United States’ best-known playwrights and most popular fiction writers. “Dr. Robert Montgomery Bird was clearly the best and strongest of the members of this group of Philadelphia
dramatists,” says Oberholtzer in his 1906 *Literary History of Philadelphia*, referring to the group of playwrights whose plays won the prizes offered by Edwin Forrest; the judging panels included “William Cullen Bryant, Fitz-Greene Halleck, and other literary men,” and “although hundreds of works were submitted and the judges were nearly all New Yorkers, the prize invariably fell to Philadelphian writers,” with Bird arguably the most successful (249, 242). Vernon Parrington calls Bird the “most brilliant successor” of Charles Brockden Brown and “probably the ablest man of letters that Philadelphia produced” (183). *Nick of the Woods*, “generally considered Dr. Bird’s most important contribution to American fiction,” according to Cecil B. Williams’s introduction to the novel, was widely read and saw multiple editions (xxii). Parrington notes that, “Published in Philadelphia in 1837, it has been reissued in successive editions, more than twenty in all down to the present [1927]. It was translated into German in 1838, into Dutch in 1877, and into Polish in 1905” (183).43

Yet despite this seemingly wide popularity, *Nick of the Woods* and Bird’s work in general have not seen wide critical inquiry in the modern era. This limited interest is most likely the result of the disfavor into which the frontier romance as a popular genre has fallen, as even Cooper’s works have suffered a lack of interested study over the years. Slotkin, echoing the wider critical viewpoint toward frontier romance, calls *Nick* “a more promising work [than Simms’s popular *The Yemassee*], and hence a more tragic failure” (Regeneration 510). The last major edition of *Nick* came out in 1967; the 1939 printing

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43 The financial climate of the time may also have affected the sale and reprinting of the novel, as the panic of 1837 hurt book sales; copyright at the time also meant that pirated books damaged returns, and Bird had unsuccessfully tried to secure publishers in England previously. For more information, see Williams’s footnote on xxiii.
edited by Cecil B. Williams, including maps, chronology, and various other scholarly apparatus is the closest to a critical edition currently available. The novel has fared only slightly better in terms of literary criticism; although it has often received mention in general histories of American fiction or chronicles of the time period (due to its popularity and Bird’s perceived place in “the front rank of American novelists,” according to James Rees), in-depth studies and detailed analysis have been limited to a few pages in larger texts and a handful of scholarly articles (qtd. in Bird 7). While the 2008 publication of Bird’s Sheppard Lee, with an introduction by Christopher Looby, may help to reignite Bird’s reputation and reinvigorate studies of his other works, the once popular novelist remains a secondary and mostly forgotten writer for the time being.

Despite the relatively small number of pages devoted to Nick, the focus almost invariably lands on the novel’s exciting adventures and ample frontier violence, especially Bird’s unfavorable portrait of Indians; this negative presentation, he claims in his preface to the first edition, is meant to balance the romanticized images of writers like Cooper and Sedgwick: “we confess, the North American savage has never appeared to us the gallant and heroic personage he seems to others” (28-29). Bird apparently received enough criticism over his depiction that he returned to the topic in the preface to the novel’s revised edition, and it is the virtually unrelenting viciousness of his Indians and the analogous reciprocal violence of the Kentucky settlers—particularly the novel’s namesake, the Indian-terrorizing Nick of the Woods—that has remained a topic of interest for many scholars.
While the present study also addresses the violence between the settlers and Indians, my focus shifts away from the typically covered aspects of Bird’s Indians and Nathan Slaughter, in favor of examining the novel’s connections to the captivity-revenge cycle I outlined in the introduction and whose roots appear in *Edgar Huntly*. In particular, the trope of domestic captivity found in Clithero’s more European storyline in Brown’s novel becomes part of the romantic storyline surrounding Roland and Edith Forrester in *Nick of the Woods*; similarly, the explosion into violent revenge that marks Edgar’s reaction to his own disempowerment finds a parallel in Roland’s own acts of revenge. Unlike *Edgar Huntly*’s tale of the reintegration of the alienated individual through revenge-sacrifice, however, *Nick* ultimately uses the captivity-revenge cycle to display a powerful patriotic binding of the frontier community, a reflection of the same effect in the McCrea legend. If *Edgar Huntly* is the story of one man’s reintroduction to society, *Nick of the Woods* is the story of a society’s strengthening through the organizational power of communal revenge.

Closest to the point of the current project are two articles focusing on the cyclical uses of violence in *Nick*: Terence Martin’s “From Redskin to Redneck: Atrocity and Revenge in American Writing” and Gary Hoppenstand’s “Justified Bloodshed: Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Nick of the Woods* and the Origins of the Vigilante Hero in American Literature and Culture.” Martin’s brief article echoes the lessons taught by Engels and Goodale’s examination of the McCrea myth and my own conclusions about the centrality of the captivity-revenge cycle: namely, that there is a “fundamental story of atrocity and revenge that has long captured the imagination of American writers” (2). Martin lays out
a pattern—drawn initially in the article from John Grisham’s *A Time to Kill*, but equally applicable to the basic captivity-revenge cycle and resultant stories like the McCrea legends—that he believes becomes an enduring structure in American writing: “The essential ingredients of such narratives are standard and significant. All have victims (conventionally innocent) who are sacrificed at an early point to precipitate the action; all include predators or bad guys (typically stereotyped) who are drawn from groups society views with disdainful hostility; and all feature relatives (frequently fathers) who are driven by the need to avenge the loss of innocence” (2). 44

Although Martin applies this description immediately to the three works his article concentrates on—*Nick of the Woods*, Grisham’s *A Time to Kill*, and Brian Garfield’s *Death Wish*—it is easy to see this set of features in the frontier romance genre as a whole; of importance to the present chapter is Martin’s awareness of the necessarily conventional nature of the roles of victim and villain, the same conventionality that has often led to the dismissal of frontier romance as predictable, trite, or overwrought. Also excellent is Martin’s vision of the greater social implications of the repeated narrative structure and its essential reflection of my formulation of the captivity-revenge cycle: “To note who is assigned to these roles in specific instances and to observe further the evolving consequences of revenge is to encounter matters of enduring social import. For as such narratives unfold and move toward resolution they enact impulses and biases that tell us something about ourselves as we were in an earlier day and as we are today” (2).

44 The various McCrea myths rely on these basic structure quite heavily: McCrea’s innocence is foregrounded by emphasizing her as a bride or young woman; her murderers are always depicted as monstrous enemies, usually foreign or Indian; and the recasting of the tale brings in the lover or, in the case of Carroll’s 1927 play, the brother, as her avenger. An interesting point, of course, comes from the notion that the larger population too is converted into family by synecdoche.
The choice of the language of sacrifice in his description of the narrative pattern helps to reveal the links between Martin’s vision of this fundamental revenge structure and my theory of the captivity-revenge cycle as a tool of sociopolitical order.

Martin’s analysis focuses mainly on the estrangement of the revenger from himself and his society, represented in *Nick of the Woods* by Nathan Slaughter; while this pattern is clearly true in the frame of Martin’s character-based examination, I would argue that it is not necessarily true for the society Bird constructs within his novel. While Nathan is clearly outside of settlement society, his open acceptance of violent revenge in the narrative’s climax does not estrange him from this community; instead it actually provides his “pathway to citizenship,” a citizenship he ultimately rejects. Likewise, Roland Forrester proves himself a fit member of society by embracing revenge, although he too rejects permanent membership in the Kentucky community. While this may appear to reinforce Martin’s point about estrangement, it is important to note that it is the characters, not the community, who are doing the rejecting; in *Nick*, revenge is embraced and welcomed by Kentucky’s frontier society. Despite the differences in analysis of revenge between his reading and mine, Martin’s valuable recognition of the underlying structure of the captivity-revenge cycle and its social implications helps to lay the groundwork for understanding the greater role of revenge—social unifier and pathway to community acceptance—in *Nick of the Woods*.

In a similar vein to Martin’s article as it shifts focus to the hero figure bent on revenge is Hoppenstand’s “Justified Bloodshed,” which explores another enduring structure of American literature: the vigilante hero. “The vigilante hero is a powerful
archetype” Hoppenstand says, “one of the most powerful in all of American culture” (51). Beginning from the recognition that Bird’s rebuttal of the “noble savage” stereotype is itself an “outrageously negative stereotype” (echoing Martin’s typically stereotyped predators and bad guys), Hoppenstand reveals the necessity of this demonizing presentation to the justification of the hero’s revenge: “attacks on Bird’s characterizations of Indians, whether leveled in the middle of the nineteenth century or today, fail to recognize that this outrageously negative stereotype is meant to be just that—outrageously negative—and that the function of this stereotype is to help establish a moral environment in which the hero of the story enacts an epiphanous retribution” (51). This is akin to the impetus to revenge in the captivity-revenge cycle, where the “moral environment” creates sociopolitical imperatives that, when embraced, creates a form of community-mindedness that might be considered epiphany of sorts.

Like Martin, Hoppenstand also recognizes a basic social function of revenge, both as it appears in the form of the isolated vigilante and the mobocratic rule of the novel’s Regulators, as “Bird’s use of the negative Indian stereotype is not so much an attack against the Indian as it is an attack against what the Indian stereotype represents as a formulaic device: barbarism, social chaos, and precocious brutality against women and children,” the innocents of Martin’s paradigm and the conventional victims of Indian

45 Hoppenstand notes that “Even Bird himself outlined a defensive literary posture about his treatment of Indians in his ‘Preface to the First Edition’ in Nick of the Woods,” something he would do again in the next edition’s preface (51). Reactions to Bird’s depiction of Native Americans were both positive and negative; for example, Dahl mentions that the April 1837 Southern Literary Messenger “praises Bird particularly for his true representation of the wild frontiersman and the wild Indian,” while “British novelist Harrison Ainsworth in his introduction to an English edition [of Nick] published the same year […] deprecates what he considers Bird’s unfair treatment of the Indians” (8). Hoppenstand begins his essay with a telling anecdote about some marginalia he discovered in a turn of the century edition while doing research: “Scribbled in pencil under the title on the ‘Contents’ page was the comment: ‘Totally worthless novel—unrealistic portrayal of Indians’” (51).
captivity narrative (53). Like the essentially organizational function of the violence of the captivity-revenge cycle, Hoppenstand’s reading of vigilante retribution in *Nick of the Woods* is one of social importance; he sees Bird’s narrative stemming from “Three basic social issues of [the] time”: “1) violence and the colonial experience; 2) Manifest Destiny and its relationship to concepts of racial purity; and 3) Puritan conversion and the Calvinist paradigm involving the function of suffering” (55). The overlap of these powered much of the rhetoric that stressed Indian Removal as a way to avoid internal boundaries and the presence of a subjected nation within the United States, which in turn fed into the demonization of the Indian Other at a time when some tribes, like the Cherokees in Georgia, had begun to embrace increasingly democratic, agricultural, and “civilized” lifestyles. The ability to recreate these Indian groups as alien enemies of the state—the transformation used in both the McCrea mythology and *Edgar Huntly*—allowed the actions against them to take on the aura of justified revenge, and the organizational properties of the captivity-revenge cycle brought separate American communities together in a shared feeling of patriotism and national destiny.

The concern with the meaning of Indian “nature” in *Nick of the Woods* as a foil for white identity also appears in Michael T. Wilson’s “‘Saturnalia of Blood’: Masculine Self-Control and American Indians in the Frontier Novel.” Wilson explores the uses of stereotypical Indian figures in Simms, Cooper, and Bird as a way to define positive male behaviors for white men against the depictions of uncontrolled savagery by Native Americans. “How did violence, the ideal of masculine self-control, ethnic stereotyping, and the expansion of the western frontier interact as societal issues in order to question or
reinforce the existing social order and masculine identity?” Wilson asks, positing each of
the three authors he examines as “offer[ing] a unique solutions to this problem” that
“occupied politicians, clergymen, and writers alike” (131). For Wilson, the violence in
*Nick*, while unrestrained on both sides, is cast in such a way as to allow the white
savagery to be “justified repeatedly” as a response to Indian “deviltry” (139); this
reactive property of violence Wilson terms a kind of “disease” (140) that infects the white
characters, recalling Girard’s notions of violent contagion and its demonstration in *Edgar
Huntly*; this corruption drives them to reciprocal attacks against Indians whose own
violent tendencies are instead deemed “natural” (139). Although Wilson does not
explicitly discuss the novel in terms of the characteristics of the captivity-revenge cycle,
we can see here the same ideas already circulating in language similar to that of Girard
and Engels and Goodale, a similarity emphasized when Wilson states that “*Nick* endorses
almost all forms of violence against Indians in alleged retaliation for Indian atrocities”
(141).

Finally, Dana Nelson provides two excellent readings of the greater social
purposes of the (dis)placement of violence onto the frontier: “Romancing the Border:
Bird, Cooper, Simms, and the Frontier Novel” in *The Word in Black and White* and
“Frontier Democracy and Representational Management.” Both essays discuss the role of
the Native American Other as a vehicle for the projection of negative American
sociopolitical feelings; “Romancing the Border” focuses on “the sociological and textual
dimensions of colonial representations of ‘race,’ and the actual usefulness of those
representations in displacing social frictions” as well as “collective guilt” over Indian
removal and extermination (*The Word* x-xi), while “Frontier Democracy” investigates the “ideological relocation of radical democratic possibility in the US onto the pre-political frontier Indian,” showing that *Nick* “poses arguments about the negative effects of brotherhood for American ‘democracy’” (“Frontier Democracy” 215). These valuable insights into the potential social uses of both the unregulated space of the frontier and the dehumanized Indians (as what might be called Girardian scapegoats) help to establish a critical tradition of thinking about the sociopolitical importance of these border conflicts in the greater context of Bird’s novel in a similar fashion to that of the captivity-revenge cycle.

In addition to these two essays, Rowland Hughes’s “Whiggery in the Wilderness: The Politics of Indian-hating in Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Nick of the Woods (1837)*” provides an exploration of Bird’s personal politics as a possible influence on his depiction of the frontier and its violent inhabitants. According to Hughes, Bird’s Whig beliefs suggest that “the novel critiques the radically expansionist ideology of Jacksonian America, suggesting that unregulated extension of the nation’s boundaries to the West will expose American society to the chaotic and degenerative forces latent in the wilderness, retard the progress of civilization, and prevent the American people from developing a crucial attachment to the land of their birth” (para. 6).

These valuable resources go far in setting up the outlines of the vital role the captivity-revenge cycle plays in *Nick of the Woods*. What we see in *Nick* is the evolution of the latent potential of captivity and revenge as vehicles for social organization and

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46 Forthcoming in *Literature in the Early American Republic*, volume 3. Many thanks to Dr. Hughes for providing me with a copy of his work prior to its publication. References to this work are by paragraph number in the manuscript.
meaning in *Edgar Huntly* transformed into much clearer expressions of the same ideas through the use of the genre conventions of romance and frontier adventure. Although Bird differs from writers like Cooper, Sedgwick, and Child, which he sees as having “thrown a poetical illusion over the Indian character […] [as] gentle, loving, refined, honorable, romantic personages—nature’s nobles, the chivalry of the forest,” he nevertheless recognizes that encounters with natives on the frontier provides an apt situation for the expression of fundamentally American sensibilities and experiences, as Brown had indicated in his Preface to *Edgar Huntly* (Bird 32). Bird, however, takes the shadowy and surreal world of Brown’s gothic frontier and situates it in a clear historical frame, grounding it in a usable past that can inform and influence the reader’s views of the contemporary world. Where *Edgar Huntly* is suggestive of the abstract problems facing the emergent country and their potential solutions, *Nick of the Woods* is more explicit in both its problems and its answers. This evolution is based mainly on ascendance of the captivity-revenge tropes, from the hidden motivator of so much in *Edgar Huntly* to the main attraction of *Nick of the Woods*.

The plot of *Nick of the Woods* is deceptively simple: Roland and Edith Forrester, cousins from Virginia swindled out of their inheritance by a lawyer named Braxley, are sojourning into the Kentucky wilderness to start a new life. They stop at Bruce’s Station, one of the frontier strongholds, under the control of Colonel Tom Bruce; here they meet characters who will figure prominently in the rest of the tale, such as mockingly named “Bloody” Nathan Slaughter, the peaceful Quaker outcast, and Roaring Ralph Stackpole, the “captain” of horse-thieves and exemplar of the frontier boasters like Davy Crockett
and Mike Fink; also present is Telie Doe, daughter of a renegade white man who has gone native. When Roland and Edith’s journey is delayed by Stackpole’s theft of Roland’s horse, the two are left to catch up to the rest of the emigrant party while waiting for the horse to be recovered. During this interval, a messenger arrives to reveal that an Indian army has begun attacking settlements, adding new dangers to the journey of Roland and Edith through the Kentucky woodland.

Roland and Edith set out in the afternoon after the return of Roland’s horse, under the direction of a reluctant guide who would rather be killing Indians with the rest of the people from Bruce’s Station; after leading the party part of the way, Roland dismisses the guide in an act of petulance. Telie Doe soon appears to act as the new guide, and the party stumbles across Ralph Stackpole, astride one of the stolen horses and strung up by Bruce’s Regulators, completely dependent on the temperament of the skittish horse to prevent his being hanged in an act frontier justice. Edith convinces Roland to spare him, and Stackpole swears himself her faithful servant before Roland sends him away. Soon after, they encounter the Yankee peddler Pardon Dodge, who informs them of roving Indian bands swarming the area. The party takes to the woods, quickly becoming lost.

As night falls and the dangers increase, the group discovers a recently slain Indian; the corpse bears the marks of the Jibbenainosay, or “Nick of the Woods,” an Indian slayer believed to be the devil or an evil spirit that terrorizes the local tribes and protects the white settlements. Nathan Slaughter appears shortly after and agrees to guide the group to safety after it is revealed that they are being tracked by a Shawnee war party. Nathan leads them to a ruined cabin, once the home of the Ashburn family, brutally
slaughtered by the Shawnee when they did not heed Nathan’s warning. Unfortunately, the Shawnee warriors stalking the group have anticipated this retreat, and put the group under siege at the cabin. After a series of misadventures in which Ralph Stackpole reappears, the group is captured; Stackpole disappears over a riverbank in the ensuing scuffle, and Edith and Roland are separated as prisoners.

After Roland and Edith are separated, Roland is rescued by Nathan; although he has continually avowed his peacefulness and has shown great remorse when forced into acts of violence, Nathan becomes increasingly willing to kill Indians to protect his friends. Roland, with information from Nathan, discovers that the attack and abduction of Edith is at least in part a plan by the villainous Braxley to marry Edith and legalize his theft of her inheritance. Nathan and Roland set off to rescue her, eventually joined (yet again) by Ralph Stackpole. As Nathan is on the verge of rescuing Edith, Ralph and Roland foolishly bungle the attempt (yet again), causing all to be captured. As the inheritance plot is revealed by Braxley and Abel Doe, Telie’s father, and Roland is about to be killed, the Kentucky militia arrives and saves them; Roland and Edith, their inheritance restored, return to Virginia. While the majority of the characters live happily ever after, Nathan Slaughter—revealed, in what is virtually a split personality, to be the Jibbenainosay—vanishes into the wilderness; the atrocities he committed are unbearable to his conscience, and a fear of being exalted by non-Quakers and causing scandal to the Quaker faithful forces him to continue to wander alone on the wild frontier.

The twin plotlines that make up the narrative’s back story—Roland and Edith’s disinheritance and Nathan’s loss of his family to Indian violence—recreate the forces of
the captivity-revenge cycle, as the characters are first alienated by loss of social identity and then physically held captive, pushing their resistance to these forces from simple defensive reaction into the realm of violent retribution in the unregulated spaces of the frontier. In this way, Bird’s novel operates as a form of revenge tragedy, following a similar setup to that traced by Hinds for *Edgar Huntly. Nick of the Woods*, however, is not a tragedy, and is even lacking in the ambivalent ending of Brown’s text; aside from the continued self-imposed alienation and exile of Nathan Slaughter and the death of Tom Bruce the younger, everyone lives, and happily ever after at that. These differences mark the differences between Bird’s alignment of the novel with a reinterpretation of the social forces that haunt Brown’s work and drive the revenger in his “society undergoing change on a grand scale” to react with violence to the accumulated effects of disempowerment (Hinds “Revenge” 51). The increased safety of the United States in terms of outside threats pushes the generic convention of hostile foreign forces that informed Brown’s revenge text into the service of different sociopolitical needs: a history promoting sectional allegiance as a form of patriotism compatible with nationalism.

To display this idea, Bird employs captivity and revenge as a way to emphasize the operation of a workable, unifying democracy on the frontier based on violent opposition to the group that continued to fracture an otherwise whole American society: the Indian. The continued occupation of lands within the United States by native tribes made them the perfect enemy to place in a struggle against the various and separate groups coming together on the frontier; violence against this common foe, and the conversion of unwholesome whites into Indians, allowed Bird to create a unity among
countrymen in the novel’s historical setting, as well as providing a history of hostilities against which to define retribution both then and in the 1830s. In essence, Bird’s instantiation of the captivity-revenge cycle reaffirms sectional and national unity while presenting the continued program of Indian hostility and removal as an unchangeable, accepted fact of historical record rather than a question of contemporary politics.

3.1: History, Realism, and Nationhood in the 1830s

Perhaps the most notable difference between Edgar Huntly and the other frontier romances in this study is that the novels by Cooper, Bird, and Sedgwick are also historical romances. Brown’s nightmarish, convoluted tale is difficult to place in time; although there are vague references to historical realities, such as Penn’s Treaty and the Walking Treaty, the narrative itself has little connection to any historical events and does not seem particularly tied to a specific time.47 In contrast to this situation, Bird’s tale is set in a very specific time—August 1782, as announced in the novel’s opening pages—and historically grounded by character discussions and authorial asides about real-world battles and people. As in the novels of Scott and the other writers of historical romance, Bird’s placement of the tale within a larger narrative of important historic events helps to add an affective dimension, a human touch, to the cold, hard facts of history. As Bird puts it in the preface to Nick’s revised edition, “he aimed to give, not the appearance of truth, but truth itself—or what he held to be truth—to the picture” (31).

47 Scholars generally accept the year of the novel’s action as 1787, placing it in the first year of the new United States. As Barnard and Shapiro note, Weymouth’s citing of the date “the tenth of August 1784, combined with the timeline Weymouth presents in Chapter 14 […] sets the novel’s action in 1787” (Brown 101). This is the only date included in the novel itself, making the exact date of the occurrences available only by untangling the anecdotal time frames provided by Edgar’s narration.
This intimate connection with the past is a vital part of *Nick of the Woods*’s operations as a cultural artifact: it establishes Bird’s text as a version of history, a sociopolitical retelling of the past that is also connected with the present. More than this, Bird’s tale of Kentucky is literally and symbolically a story of establishment, providing a foundational narrative, a “myth of civilization” similar to that of the classical epic’s retelling of the founding of a city and a people. These epics provided a guide to behavior for the citizens, a past to which the present and future could be connected and by which they could be structured. In this same way, Bird’s “Tale of Kentucky” becomes a version of this foundation tale; and, as Engels and Goodale argue in the case of the McCrea myth, that tale is, at its most basic level, one of revenge.

By creating a usable past that serves as a structure for the present, Bird presents his readers with a form of historical continuity; this continuity helps to alleviate the dividing forces and separating factors that split the nation into fragmented groups, in essence giving the disparate communities a single origin. As Dana Nelson explains, novels like *Nick of the Woods* “explore social problems, the solutions of which are forgone, their legacy a matter of historical record. As such, the novels’ ‘larger meanings’ are read most typically as attempts to mythologize and symbolize […] or psychologize […] the American frontier experience” (*The Word* 40). The kinds of unity generated by these generalized depictions are the same kind of unity the McCrea myth created when it mobilized the disparate American communities against the British and their Indian agents; by recreating these experiences as part of a shared past, Bird’s novel creates an image of *community*, a community that extends beyond its geographical and
chronological boundaries to form, as the classical epic does, a nation. As Bird expressed it in reference to writing about American topics, “the national character you wish to impress on the work—can only be looked for at home. Indigenous subjects …, then, are those I would drive at—the peculiarities of our own character and country—our vices and virtues—our tendencies social and political … all that can excite public feeling, interest, or curiosity” (qtd. in Williams xxix).

Bird’s idea of using historical events to create a form of representative national past is one of the methods Benedict Anderson notes as combatting unrest and discord among populations, especially those undergoing a loss of faith:

Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary.
Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning. As we shall see, few things were (are) better suited to this end than an idea of nation. If nation-states are widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical,’ the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future. (11-12)

As Anderson makes plain, the unity established between the past and the present helps to create a continuity that evens out bumps in the now, bridges apparent divisions; as Nelson states, the current issues are ‘solved’ by seeing them solved in the past, making the current issue itself, as the saying goes, “a thing of the past.” Bird utilizes the founding of Kentucky in just such a manner, creating an exemplary instance of American success
that suggests the present America too is a success, despite any evidence to the contrary that may spring from Indian Removal in the 1830s and concerns over westward expansion. Kentucky and its battles to subdue the wilderness and its savages, then, in Bird’s tale becomes representative of America.

The bedrock of this foundational tale is the captivity-revenge cycle. Bird sums up the basic premise of his novel in language fitting a classical epic, saying

he naturally sought to construct such a story, marked by such events and characters, as would illustrate the more remarkable features of frontier life in the not yet forgotten days of frontier heroism. The savage and the man who fought and subdued the savage—the bold spirits who met him with his own weapons in his own hunting-grounds and villages, and, with a natural vengeance, retaliated in the shadow of his own wigwam some few of the cruel acts of butchery with which he so often stained the hearthstone of the settler—necessarily formed the writer’s *dramatis personae*. (31)

The past world of heroism is marked by conflict, the most basic of confrontations between “the savage and the man who fought to subdue the savage”; this conflict is one in which vengeance is the natural form of action, the settlement of Kentucky an eternal act of revenge for unceasing hostilities from an ever-threatening enemy. It is also a drama, a performance; once the action does end, and the “frontier heroism” takes the day, the need for revenge is over and the future—the world of Bird and his contemporary readers—can begin. This is Anderson’s theory of nation played out in pseudohistory, the
disintegration and absurdity resolved by being converted into continuity and a “limitless future.”

From the very beginning, *Nick of the Woods* was seen as an essentially realistic novel, a much-needed corrective to the more romantic frontier adventures of Cooper and like artists. This view of the text has managed to hold on even into the twentieth century: “But if *Nick* is a rousing tale of adventure,” says Curtis Dahl in his introduction, “it also has the merit of being an extraordinarily vivid and realistic picture of an important era in American history” (Bird 8). Williams likewise praises Bird’s careful use of numerous contemporary sources on western history and frontier life; after listing several of these works and the incidents borrowed and adapted by Bird, he concludes that “Dr. Bird evidently endeavored to make his novel historically as accurate as possible” (Williams xi). This historical accuracy was vitally important for making Bird’s project of creating a tale of foundation a success; as much as possible, the historical record must corroborate the mythic one for the projected past and present to be continuous. In setting his foundation story on the frontier, Bird placed his settlers in opposition to the Indian, relying on the “vanishing Indian” trope of much of the literature of the frontier to help buttress his own project of displaying a unifying democratic history. As such, the past and the present converged around the problem of the Indian, the emblem of American frontier danger as well as the internal alien population that was portrayed as dividing Bird’s contemporary society. Native Americans once again became the scapegoats sacrificed to achieve peace and break the cycle of violence.
The fear of factionalism that had been such a powerful sociopolitical force in Brown’s time had become shortly after that a fear of sectionalism, a concern that the expansion of the United States would result in large, powerful communities with aims divergent from those of the general population. Representative Griswold expressed these concerns in debate over Louisiana and its threat to republican government, saying that “the consequent dispersion of our population […] and the destruction of that balance which it is so important to maintain between the Eastern and Western States, threatens, at no very distant day, the subversion of our Union” (qtd. in Weinberg 104). Similar fears would continue throughout the early decades of the nineteenth century; however, by the 1820s, most of the anti-expansionist concerns proved to be false, and “The fear that the inhabitants of the distant sections would subvert the liberties of their eastern fellow citizens also proved unfounded. The Eastern States learned that their western kinsman were not only the strongest of unionists but also the most democratic of the democrats” (106).

The fear of internal strife did not disappear, however; it was instead displaced onto the ambiguous allegiances and status of the Native American populations still living among the settled U.S. territories. Much as they were in Edgar Huntly, Indians became a dangerous subgroup in the national mind, a liminal community that was suddenly “out of place” on lands that had belonged to them for generations. “American Indians themselves are defined by the Constitution of the United States as both foreign nations and a domestic, intracontinental ‘problem,’” Stephanie LeMenager reminds us, and the discontinuity of their land possessions among the lands claimed by the “accepted” U.S.
citizens served to fracture the otherwise continuous white community (47). This was one of the main ideas behind the Indian Removal movement; “The impetus for this movement came not from the Western pioneers,” whose land claims were already fractured by borders and dispersion, “but from Eastern States. It did not arise because of any need of lands; […] The movement arose because of the desire of Southern States to remove interruptions to their jurisdiction […]” (Weinberg 80).

Although some advocates believed Indian Removal was actually better for the Indians themselves, protecting them from white aggression and corruption and that it should occur only with tribal consent, the movement was less about benefits to the Native Americans and more about the whites and their ability to form cohesive communities: “Largely unconcerned with real American Indian interests,” says LeMenager, “white advocates of Indian Removal created ‘the Indians’ as a nation at a sub-governmental, emotional level; they created ‘one people’ of the Indians at a time when it was beginning to be feared that scattered populations of whites in the United States would not coalesce” (52). These uniform, undifferentiated Indians are the ones that appear in Nick of the Woods: routinely cruel, drunken, lazy, debauched, incapable of intellectual achievement or moral improvement; in other words, the perfect Other against which to define and unify the virtuous whites. As Nelson aptly phrases the notion, “To know one Indian is to know them all, and by the same token to have reason to kill one is ample rationale for genocide” (The Word 53).

Bird’s choice for this representative picture of American settlers united against an Indian menace was the series of events in the second half of 1782, “a particularly
dramatic moment in Kentucky history, the period of Estill’s defeat and the disastrous, but colorful, Battle of the Blue Licks” (Williams xl). The famous losses accrued at this point in history work to make the novel’s actions more dramatic and to help establish the necessity of revenge for “the cruel acts of butchery with which [the Indian] so often stained the hearthstone of the settler”; it is Nelson’s “reason to kill one.” Revenge was forthcoming in historical reality as well, and “after Clark’s punitive expedition to the Miami towns [the basis for the militia’s assault on Wenonga’s village in Nick] following the disaster at Blue Licks, there were no more major Indian invasions in Kentucky” (Williams xl). Bird’s tale displays the dramatic losses and eventual victorious revenge of the western settler, Weinberg’s “strongest of unionists but also the most democratic of the democrats,” as a way of hinting that unity and nation have been established in the past, and are therefore facts of the present. As with so many romantic depictions of natives, the Indian’s heyday belongs to this same past; we see the last display of their power in Nick, invariably to see it fall to the proper successors in control of the wilderness.

“Bird thus has his characters share in the events of the turning point of Indian warfare in the region,” Williams notes; “But in the interest of the unity of his novel, he telescopes historical events considerably,” altering the timing of real events to match up with plausible timing within the story (xl). Additionally, Bird alters the historical outcome: “Dr. Bird also differs from his sources in showing the final battle as causing bloody losses to the Indians; historically, they seem to have been apprized of the approach of the whites and to have escaped almost without casualties” (xli). Sticking to the historical record here would not only damage the unity of Bird’s novel but the
accomplishment of its dramatic purpose: the triumph of the virtuous messengers of democracy and justice and the unification of divided whites. Instead, Bird emphasizes the thorough overthrow of the divisive Indian forces, the forgone conclusion to the conflict and the past accomplishment that forms a continuous line with images of virtuous republican unity in the present.

Bird accomplishes his purposes through the use of captivity and revenge as the central structuring events for the frontier world. As in Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*, the main male characters are forced into some form of captivity—economic and domestic disempowerment resulting in isolation and alienation—and are brought back to power and established into the community through revenge. While Nathan Slaughter’s vengeance is the most obvious and remarked upon in the narrative and its scholarship, the romantic plotline featuring Roland and Edith and their captivities is actually the driving force of the overall text. The unifying effects of communal revenge are illustrated through the actions of the Kentucky militia, especially young Tom Bruce; it is the generalized revenge of the new generation, those destined to control the frontier and begin its march toward the national future, that becomes the exemplary action of republican frontier heroes. It is the success of such rough and tumble American heroes, Bird claims, that justifies the democratic experiment and proves the nation of the present is in good hands, thanks to this violent past. “Their success may be considered a phenomenon in history” Bird says, “but the philosophic examiner will perhaps find in it an illustration of the efficacy of the republican principle in enlarging the mind and awakening the energies, of men whom the influence of another code of political faith
would have kept in the darkness […]” (28). It is democracy and revenge, Nick of the Woods makes clear, that establishes the future of Kentucky and ends its days as the “dark and bloody ground.”

3.2: Roland, Romance, and the Captivity of Exile

“If one likes stirring action that is certain to end in blood-letting,” says Vernon Parrington, “there is good foraging in Nick of the Woods, despite its excesses of conventional romance” (184). This apparent disdain for the “conventional romance” plot of Nick is not isolated to Parrington; it is a common feature of much of the criticism written about the novel. Williams reminds us that, while Nathan Slaughter was reportedly based loosely on tales of a real person, “Roland and Edith Forrester, Richard Braxley, and Telie Doe are evidently purely fictitious characters. The love story is invented and, even the admirer of Dr. Bird will admit, largely conventional” (xlviii). Perhaps the best summation of this viewpoint comes from Dahl’s introduction to the novel, echoing his sentiments from Robert Montgomery Bird:

Foremost among these weaknesses is the general flaccidity of the ostensible hero and heroine, Roland and Edith. Both are pasteboard.

Roland Forrester—his very name implies a noble knight of the forest—is moody, gloomy, unnecessarily dejected, overbearing, hasty, ungrateful, prejudiced, and stupid. […] Edith does almost nothing throughout he novel but plead and weep and fear and faint; she is helpless, timorous, and
feeble. What Roland sees in her, or indeed what she sees in him, is
difficult to say. (Bird 13) ⁴⁸

Such harsh criticism of the novel’s romance plot has led to the widespread neglect of it in
much of the criticism. As Joan Joffe Hall puts it bluntly, “The main plot in Nick need not
concern us much” (173).

Yet Dahl makes an important point about his litany of flaws: “most of them [are]
attributable not so much to Bird himself as to the tradition in which he wrote” (Bird 13).
This recognition, inherent in the complaint against the plot as conventional, suggests the
actual importance of the romantic plot to the story itself. This is partially evident in the
possibility of extensive revisions indicated in a Williams footnote: “The author felt that
he had not done his best by his materials, and even began a radical revision which would
have made the story a kind of autobiographical novel with Roland Forrester the narrator”
(xxiii n35). The obvious centrality of the romance plot to Bird is indicative of its overall
necessity to understanding the text: it is the bridge that connects the characters of
differing backgrounds together by setting up the unifying structural elements—captivity
and revenge.

Again displaying the heritage of Bird’s novel from the groundwork laid by
Brown, the romance plot of Nick of the Woods is the story of the main character’s
disinheriance and subsequent revenge on those who have robbed him. This story arc is
traced by Hinds in her discussion of Edgar Huntly as revenge tragedy, and her criticism
in that article provides a strong framework for understanding the similar action of Nick’s

⁴⁸ See Curtis Dahl, Robert Montgomery Bird (New York: Twayne, 1963), especially 100, for more
complaints with character and storyline.
romantic plot. In the story of Edith and Roland we find the same mix of elements that powered the multiple storylines of *Edgar Huntly*: disempowered male figures forced out of their native states, a clash of cultures and classes, and a series of losses of wealth that create a form of captivity and ultimately drive the male characters to a violent, bloody retribution on a native population implicated in this disempowerment and captivity.

Bird’s version of this structure, while differing from Brown’s, replays these same concerns through its tale of the frontier wilderness, the same area of nascent social organization that allows the isolated hero to enact his vengeance and reestablish his connection to the greater society.

The initial presentation of Roland Forrester, son of “one of the earliest martyrs to liberty,” (Bird 60) immediately displays him as a character trapped between levels in the social hierarchy: the whole band of people migrating to Kentucky are several times referred to as “exiles,” and Roland is separated even from them, as “the only individual who, on this occasion of rejoicing [the arrival at Bruce’s Station], preserved a melancholy countenance, and who, instead of riding forward, like the others, […] betrayed an inclination to avoid their greetings altogether” (43). Already, Roland separates himself not just from the emigrants but the people of the station, stubbornly remaining apart from both parties.

Perhaps most telling are not those he refuses to join, but those with whom he remains: “With this youthful officer, the rear guard, which he commanded, having deserted him, to press forward to the van, there remained only three persons. Two of whom were Negro slaves, both mounted and armed, […]. The third was a female” (43-
Roland’s pretensions to gentility as a member of “one of the most ancient and affluent families” in Virginia mark him not only as “old guard” but “rear guard,” left behind by those who are ostensibly his inferiors once they reach the freedom of the democratic frontier. His only remaining companions emphasize this alienation, as Roland is quite literally left among women and slaves, the trappings of domesticity and disempowerment that gesture toward the hierarchical, aristocratic system he has left behind to come to the “new” world of Kentucky. The fact that the slaves are both “mounted and armed” reveals the dangerous situation of those trapped between realms: they are simultaneously the protectors of their oppressors and the threatening image of slave uprising and violence that fueled so much of the xenophobia and violence earlier in the century and would continue to be an ever-present threat in the minds of Southerners.

This is reiterated by Roland’s distancing of himself from the settlers at the Station, as he rebuts Edith’s claims of welcome by saying “Where shall we look for friends and kinsfolk, that the meanest of the company are now finding among yonder noisy barbarians?” (44-45). Roland’s constant class-consciousness places him in the isolated situation of stranger in a foreign culture, as he aligns the rest of the emigrant party with the Station’s people, “kinsfolk” to the “noisy barbarians.” Like the alienated Clithero of Edgar Huntly, brought from his native world into a foreign culture and left bereft of power there, Roland is placed into a form of captivity, a domestic captive left standing among the similarly captive slaves and females.

49 Consider, for instance, that Nat Turner’s rebellion is in 1831, six years before the publication of Nick of the Woods. Bird also deals with the theme of slave insurrections in Sheppard Lee, published in 1836. At least one critic has gone so far as to see slavery as a central (although coded) aspect of Nick; see Patricia Roberts-Miller, “Robert Montgomery Bird and the Rhetoric of the Improbable Cause,” Rhetoric Society Quarterly 35.1 (2005): 73-90.
It is the presence of Edith that also alters the dynamic of the little group of leftovers in the “rear guard.” Like Brown’s Euphemia Lorimer, Edith Forrester is the de facto mistress of Roland, despite all of her seeming weakness. It is she who chides him for his moodiness and class-based pretensions, placing herself among the “noisy barbarians” in spirit: “Are they the society from whom Edith Forrester should choose her friends?” asks Roland, to which Edith replies, “They are, […] and Edith Forrester asks none better” (45). Edith’s alignment of herself with the frontier’s dominant social group further pushes Roland into the liminal space he occupies, and he fittingly acts as Edith’s servant and protector, “mounted and armed” like the other servants; he again is reminiscent of Edgar Huntly’s Clithero, the most accomplished of servants, whose consciousness of class makes integration into the dominant—a step up for Clithero, a step down for Roland—a difficult prospect that results in moodiness and violence.

But if Roland mirrors Clithero, he mirrors Edgar as well, another male character dependent on a female for his success. In Edgar Huntly, the heirs of fortune that allow male characters independence are invariably female: Lorimer’s wealth provides for Sarsefield, Mary Waldegrave for Edgar, and the potential union with Clarice for both Edgar and Clithero. The loss of connection with Lorimer forces Sarsefield to adventure on the colonial frontiers of the British Empire, as Roland’s disinheritance (notably, for an illegitimate daughter of his uncle) forces him onto the Kentucky frontier. Mary’s inheritance in Edgar Huntly is compromised by the appearance of Weymouth, as Edith’s is in Nick by the uncle’s will to his illegitimate daughter. Mary Waldegrave’s potential loss of fortune overthrows all of Edgar’s plans for the future, and the very next scene
finds him lost on the Pennsylvania frontier, enacting a brutal revenge on his original dispossessors, the Delaware Indians whose tribesmen killed his parents; Edith and Roland’s parallel dispossession likewise sends them into frontier exile.

It is in this state of domestic captivity that Roland appears on the frontier, sulking among the servants and slaves; worsening this economic captivity is the sense of emasculation presented by his exile in an alien land where the rules of his world do not apply. Tom Bruce’s mistake in believing Roland and Edith to be siblings highlights both the oddity of their relationship—they are cousins who treat each other, by turns, as siblings and lovers⁵⁰—and the fact that, as the children of twin brothers, Roland literally looks like the frail, stereotypically feminine Edith, despite being “tall and athletic” (43). Compared to the giant Tom Bruce and the rough and tumble men of the Station, the aristocratic Roland is effete and moody; he is further emasculated by being given “the rank and nominal title of second captain” in the emigrant party, despite the fact that he is actually the commander and better suited to leading than the group’s ostensible commander (43). Roland, an actual captain, is demoted in rank by his civilian charges and further embarrassed by the association of his title with “Captain” Ralph Stackpole, horse thief and buffoonish Salt River roarer easily tossed while wrestling with the elderly Nathan Slaughter. Roland suffers a similar fate when grabbed in the crushing hug of an Indian during the standoff at the Ashburn cabin; although his “resolution and activity [...]
preserved him from a destiny at once so fearful and ignoble”—being carried off as women often were in captivity narratives—Roland is unable to save himself, relying instead on the intervention of the supposedly pacifist Quaker (159). “Thee fights like unto a young lion, or an old bear,” says Nathan, but not, notably, like a seasoned soldier in his prime (160).

This inexperience and immaturity is repeatedly emphasized in the face of Roland’s pretensions not just to social status but also to manhood. As Michael Wilson notes about the frontier romances featuring violent conflict with Indians, they “allow white men the opportunity to ‘play Indian,’ [...] with their protagonists out-Indianing the Indians in terms of woodcraft and manliness” (132). Roland, however, does not outdo anyone at anything, and his unwillingness or inability to operate by the rules of the frontier indicates that a failure at one aspect—woodcraft—displays a failure at the other—manliness. After young Tom Bruce announces the discovery of a corpse with the mark of the Jibenainosay, Roland is incredulous; the boy—we should recall that he killed his first Indian at 14—points out clearly Roland’s neophyte status:

“Stranger,” said Big Tom Bruce the younger, with a sagacious nod,
“when you kill an Injun yourself, I reckon,—meaning no offense—you will be willing to take all the honor that can come of it, without leaving it to be scrambled after by others. Thar’s no man ‘arns a scalp in Kentucky, without taking great pains to show it to his neighbors.” (65)

Nathan will repeat these attacks on Roland’s manhood and fitness for his role as leader and protector after he finds them lost in the woods: “It was a tempting of Providence,
friend, for thee to lead poor helpless women into a wild forest,” he mockingly says (130), and in perhaps the clearest statement of emasculation, “thee is a babe and suckling in the woods” (138). These scenes are continually underscored by reminders of Roland’s brashness and petulance, as he repeatedly threatens Nathan and insults him over the perceived lack of manhood in his pacifism; ironically, Roland is more helpless and feminized than the apparently pathetic Nathan Slaughter. After their eventual capture, his emasculation and captivity are punctuated when Edith—his only hope of regaining fortune and the inheritance denied to him by his own foolishness—is carried off: “He would have called upon the wretches around for pity, but his tongue clove to his mouth, his brain spun round; and such became the intensity of his feelings, that he was suddenly bereft of sense”; in the moment of his greatest challenge, the brave Captain Roland Forrester, the supposed knight of the forest whose youth “had been passed in camps and battles,” faints (190, 43).

The completion of his disinheriance—the loss of Edith—drives Roland, as it did Edgar, into the path of revenge, a reassertion of his manhood that begins to recuperate his reduced status and bring him back in line with the greater white social collective; essentially, by choosing the path of retaliation, Roland finally becomes a man. As Wilson states, “Nick endorses almost all forms of violence against Indians in alleged retaliation for Indian atrocities” (141). Roland has, until this point, not been part of this retaliation, instead attempting to run from and avoid confrontation because of the presence of Edith and Telie and the cowardliness of Emperor, Dodge, and Nathan. After Edith’s captivity, however, Roland’s outlook alters:
“You have told me she is dead—murdered by the foul assassins,” said Roland; “and if it be so, it avails not to deny it. If it be so, Nathan,” he continued, with a look of desperation, “I call on Heaven and earth to witness, that I will pursue the race of the slayers with thrice the fury of their own malice,—never to pause, never to rest, never to be satisfied with vengeance, while an Indian lives with blood to be shed, and I with strength to shed it.”

“Thhee speaks like a man!” said Nathan […]. (228)

The many parallels here to aspects of *Edgar Huntly*—the move to revenge based on the supposed or impending death of family or benefactors, the semi-religious vow of vengeance—are a stock part of revenge in the revenge tragedy tradition. Here, however, Nathan’s reply makes perfectly clear what this alteration means for Roland—“Thhee speaks like a man!” Nathan’s own embracing of violence comes with the revelation of the circumstances powering his own exile and soon-to-be-revealed revenge, the similar loss of support system with the murder of his family by Wenonga, the Shawnee chief now deeply involved in the plot to abduct Edith and legalize the theft of her inheritance. In embracing violence for the purposes of revenge, Roland finally “becomes a man” on the Kentucky frontier.

Roland’s integration into the Kentucky frontier culture, although temporary, is reminiscent of the unity created in the wake of the mythologization of McCrea’s murder. The terms of Roland’s retribution—“I will pursue the race of the slayers with thrice the fury of their own malice,—never to pause, never to rest, never to be satisfied” until he
has destroyed not just those responsible but the whole race—reflects not just the typical lack of proportion in revenge tragedy but the attitude of the Kentucky settlers as a whole; recalling the “one Indian” idea of LeMenager and Nelson, they do not recognize differences in tribes or individual Indians, instead seeing the whole Indian race as a dangerous Other in need of removal. Hinds presents a condensed version of the problem of proportion in the revenge tragedy tradition:

The revenge hero, as critics of the genre explain, does not act from the simple reflex of retaliation; if the wrong to be avenged were merely murder, the revenge hero would have, in the end, performed deeds far more brutal than the originating crime. Rather than responding directly—taking just one eye for an eye—the revenge hero effects what Thomas Pavel calls “generalized” revenge. “As if made aware of the impossibility for revenge to strike accurately the limited area inhabited by the culprits,” he participates in what “looks more like a sacred frenzy, like a trance, during which the killing is indiscriminate.” (56)

The “sacred frenzy” as hinted at by Roland is enacted by Nathan’s role as Jibbenainosay; it is also carried out by the Kentucky militia, most notably in their attack on the Shawnee camp. Pardon Dodge famously notes the signs of indiscriminate attacks—“‘Everlasting bad work, Cunnel!’ cried Dodge; ‘they’re a killing the squaws!’”—and despite the narrator’s assurances to the contrary, at least one woman, Wenonga’s wife, is killed (Bird 336). More than this, the angry mob chases Abel Doe; as befits one with his name,

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51 Many critics have commented on the rather half-hearted assurance by the narrator that “the women and children,” despite “honest Dodge’s misgivings to the contrary […] were in no instance designedly injured” (340), even though there are several instances of uncontrollable violence detailed in the battle.
he is cast as the generic victim of all their hate, as they yell “Kill the cursed Tory! Kill the renegade villain!” and curse “all white Injuns and Injun white men,” conflating all the enemies they can think of into the form of one man with no discrimination of guilt or involvement (337). Roland’s ascension to the status of revenger clearly aligns him with the generalized revenge violence continually carried out by the Kentuckians; by embracing the need to avenge wrongs not just on those who directly committed them but on all enemies, real or perceived, all the alienated outsiders—Dodge, Nathan, and Roland—achieve temporary integration into the sociopolitical world of the frontier. Their acts of vengeance make them men of Kentucky, and they are finally fully welcomed into the frontier community.

3.3: “Hurrah for Kentucky!”

The death scene of Tom Bruce the younger, the previously destined leader of Bruce’s Station and already the head of the Station’s frontier Regulators, reveals to the reader an interesting series of concerns for the young man:

“If—if you think I’ve done my duty to the stranger and the young lady,” said the young man; and added, feebly pressing the father’s hand,—“and to you, dad, to you, and mother, and the rest of ‘em.”

“You have, Tom,” said the colonel, with somewhat a husky voice—“to the travelling stranger, to mother, father, and all—”

“And to Kentucky?” murmured the dying youth.

“To Kentucky,” replied the father. (333)
With this dying breath the boy will repeat this last item, shouting “Hurrah for Kentucky!” with the last of his strength, a “cry, so often uplifted,” the narrator continues, “in succeeding years, among the wild woodlands around” (334). Bruce’s final consideration of his duty to Kentucky, the sociopolitical manifestation of the unified frontier settlers, marks how strongly the notions of generalized revenge had worked to build a true “revenge culture”; the retaliation against the Shawnees and other tribes is not the result of the specific episodes of violence within the boundaries of the text’s action, but those that occur outside of it, in the past. If, as in the cases of Roland and Nathan, to be a man in Kentucky is to be an agent of revenge, Kentucky itself becomes an embodiment of that revenge. As Engels and Goodale frame it for the McCrea myth, “Learning to desire revenge against the nation’s enemies was one of the ways that people in the United States came to see themselves as ‘Americans,’ and one of the ways that they learned how to behave as citizens in the new nation”; for Bird, this same process defines what it means to be a citizen of Kentucky (109).

This form of group membership echoes the ideas Benedict Anderson presents as a nation’s roots in an “imagined political community”: “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (15). For characters as diverse as Dodge, Nathan, Roland, and the men of Bruce’s Station, whose time together and personal interactions are quite limited, their communal bonding experiences are available only through their shared dislike of Indians; Nathan’s unwillingness to engage in violence makes him an outcast, and young Tom Bruce’s
statement to Roland that “when you kill an Injun yourself, I reckon […] you will be willing to take all the honor that can come of it” makes obvious the necessity of this violence to “communion” in Anderson’s terms, as it was for the larger nation via the McCrea myth.

Indeed, young Tom’s gesture of the path to inclusion—“when you kill an Injun yourself”—is repeatedly enacted throughout the novel as a bonding experience between the men: Roland and Tom Bruce are introduced to each other with stories of military service against Indians and the recent defeat of the Blue Licks; Dodge’s encounter brings him into the traveling party, and his willingness to fight raises him in status throughout the novel; Nathan’s tragic losses and the mounting “sacred frenzy” that is fulfilled in his revenge on Wenonga earn both Roland’s and the militia’s respect, although much to Nathan’s chagrin. As Anderson says, “it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (16); in Kentucky, that horizontal comradeship is based on “killing yourself an Injun,” a generalized retaliation for Indian wrongs committed (usually) against others in the past.\(^{52}\) Those who would be added to this revenge culture have Indian atrocities committed against them in the course of the text, proving their fitness for and justifying their integration into, albeit temporary, this “imagined political community.”

\(^{52}\) Note Roland’s definition of settling: “to fell trees, raise corn, shoot bison and Indians, and, in general, do any thing else that can be required of a good Virginian or good Kentuckian” (58, emphasis added). Also useful to note is that Ralph Stackpole is tolerated because he is a renowned Indian killer, despite being a horse thief, among the most serious offenses on the frontier.
Bird’s presentation of this egalitarian world ultimately sets the Kentucky frontier settlement as a model for democratic, nationalistic behavior by creating a society that values the "right" sorts of behaviors and beliefs: a commitment to patriotism, justice, courage, and heroism. It should come as no surprise that these are the values that the McCrea mythology also sought to encourage in citizens, especially in the incarnations dealing in what may safely be called melodramatic jingoism. *Nick of the Woods* is, after all, subtitled "A Tale of Kentucky"; even more than this, the book’s main title is the name of the white settler’s Indian-killing devil, the avenging spirit of the wilderness that embodies the revenge violence defining Kentucky as a community in the text. The mark of the Jibenainosay, the cross carved into his victims, sends the signal that the forest is the property of the Christian future, not the heathen past; even the bodies of the “children of the forest” are subsumed by the white settler’s vision of Kentucky. The stereotypically sensational murder of Nathan’s family serves as a synecdoche, like that of Jane McCrea, of all the Indian atrocities on the frontier; moreover, the denial of Nathan’s offered friendship and sympathy, the failed discourses of *Edgar Huntly*, leaves only one recourse: cleansing the woods of the plague of irredeemable Indians.

The peaceful Nathan cannot remove mental savagery with sympathy, integrating the Indian into the white Kentucky, so Nick of the Woods must remove the savage with physical violence. In this way, the novel’s title and subtitle combine to encapsulate the narrative’s action: the story of revenge is the tale of the territory, the shared mindset Anderson posits as forming a nation. If, as Matthew G. Hannah argues, “the workings of ‘governmentality’ […] are *inherently and fundamentally spatial*”—that is, “state
formation must be inherently geographical” (1-2)—Bird shows the chiasmus of intellectual-spatial geography working in the opposite direction: Kentucky, the “dark and bloody ground” built on cyclical violence perpetuated by a belief in necessary and generalized retaliation against an Indian threat, is a state of mind.

This conversion of physical space to mental space is an integral part of Bird’s vision of what his works would do. As Williams notes, “it appears that in his study of Western materials, Dr. Bird was particularly intent upon making a contribution to national social and cultural solidarity” and “patriotic nationalism” (xxix). For Bird, as for many other writers, the landscape of the American continent could easily be made to represent American history and mentality, two things the new country was still working to establish as independent and unique. An example of this same convergence appears out of Bird’s trip to Mammoth Cave: “In 1833 with Grimes he explored Mammoth Cave, which so impressed him that he later contemplated an epic poem to be entitled ‘The Cave,’ which was to have its setting in the region but was to be a representation of national ideals” (xiii-xiv). Bird’s vision of a specifically spatial image—“the cave”—becomes a point where the various and separate ideals of scattered sectional communities become focused into “national ideals,” the linking materials of Anderson’s imagined community. This same idea would reappear as “Kentucky” in Nick of the Woods, a specific regional setting that serves as a stand-in for the entire region and nation at large.

As Williams says of his attempts to locate the real-world counterparts to the novel’s

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53 Oddly enough, a similar experience inspired Cooper to write The Last of the Mohicans: a trip to Glens Falls August 1824. According to the recollections of Susan Cooper, a member of the party suggested the location’s fitness for romance, and Cooper agreed to include it in a future work. For more information see James Beard, “Historical Introduction,” The Last of the Mohicans, Albany: State U of New York P, 1983, xx.
fictional locations, “although Bruce’s Station may not be modeled directly on any one early station, either Harrod’s or Cox’s fits Bird’s description in a fairly satisfactory manner. But a definite identification may not be either possible or desirable since Bird was writing representative fiction rather than authentic history” (xliv).

The resulting frontier world, “Kentucky,” becomes a model of patriotic affections by the members of the unified community. Importantly, it is the succeeding generation, the young Tom Bruces of the world, that are most adamant in their support of this new sociopolitical space; the sacrifice of youth to ensure an organized, common future generates the kind of emotional connections that help to solidify the imagined community and were essential to the type of solidarity Bird himself envisioned.54 “The affection for the land of our birth is strengthened and perpetuated by the existence of objects and places endeared to our recollections and pride” Bird wrote in an 1835 letter;

it will be a happy day for America, when every spot of holy ground throughout the State, shall be known, reverenced and loved. When this shall have happened, when such places are marked with monuments, and distinguished by pilgrimages and festivals, when our beautiful rivers and valleys have been made, as they should be, the theme of our poets and musicians, the subjects of romance and song, we shall have objects at home, whereon to bestow our affections, much more honourable and profitable than any we can seek in our fatherland. (qtd. in Williams xxix-xxx)

54 Roland does this as well by joining the army; he sacrifices his social “life,” the inheritance ostensibly denied him by his uncle due to their political differences.
Bird’s novel is itself a manifestation of the second half of his conception, a picturesque and vivid revelation of the landscape where his adventure takes place, a pilgrimage of sorts to the historical lands where battles were fought and a monument to the patriotic spirit in which they were fought; it is young Tom Bruce’s allegiance to Kentucky as a concept that manifests the first half of Bird’s nationalistic vision, where the boy’s reverence and love are not for a particular space in the wilderness but for “Kentucky,” a world constructed out of endless retaliation against Indians who uselessly and maliciously withhold control of the new Eden.

Yet this allegiance to the idea of Kentucky should not be misconstrued as the kind of factionalism or sectionalism that was cause for alarm in Brown’s work. According to Williams, Bird was against the sorts of “extreme sectionalism” that marked threats of secession and similar controversies; as he notes, the later sketch “My Friends in the Madhouse” reveals Bird’s views when a character states he will “tear all sectional feelings from [his] bosom, to forget that Virginia lay on one side of Mason and Dixon’s line and Massachusetts on the other, and remember only, as Washington had done before [him], that [he] was an American” (Williams liii). Bird’s rejection of sectional politics in favor of national unity makes clear the uses of Kentucky not as a physical place but as a conceptual one, the aforementioned “holy ground” for which his novel would act as monument. As with the McCrea myth’s ability to serve as a national unifier over an explicitly regional or sectional one, Bird’s Kentucky is explicitly a demonstration of
“American” spirit, its revenge culture therefore a national culture based on exorcising the
“rale children of Sattan,” the Indian, from the land (Bird 265).55

This expulsion mirrors the national concern over the problem of internal borders, of the politically separate Indian population inhabiting what was seen as American land: “The resultant prospect of permanent imperia in imperio was so repugnant,” to the South especially, Weinberg notes, “that from 1820 to 1840 the acquisition of Indian lands overshadowed every question of national boundaries” (72). The continued distaste of Americans in the annexing of lands populated by “inferior” peoples pushed this agenda of acquisition; as Horsman frames it, such lands “were not annexed, because the strong belief that inferior peoples should not be allowed to participate equally in the American system of government was accompanied by a continuing belief that colonial possessions would corrupt the republic” (189-90). This explains Bird’s expansion of Kentucky from a specific location to a representative mental landscape—it prevents it from being a “colonial possession” in the way areas like Western Pennsylvania were during times of unrest like the Whiskey Rebellion—as well as his depiction of the Indians as irredeemable savages.

55 Slotkin comments on similar aspects of Kentucky in his many discussions of Filson’s The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke (1784). Filson’s book was “an elaborate real estate promotion brochure designed to sell farm land in the Dark and Bloody Ground to easterners and Europeans” (Regeneration 268); Slotkin holds that Filson’s text projects Kentucky as utopian, especially in a political sense: “nature in Kentucky induces the growth of admirable institutions among those who emigrate thither. The growth of political democracy among the inhabitants is seen as the product of a happy conjunction of their preparation by Anglo-American political institutions and the environmental advantage of rich farming soil. The Kentuckians’ background makes them capable of forming social organizations, and their soil enables each farmer to be relatively independent and self-sustaining” (273). Slotkin notes that “Filson was […] an important source” for Nick of the Woods, and “Boone’s description of Kentucky from the commanding ridge is quoted with approval on the first page of the novel” (511). Thus a tradition of Kentucky as “the seat of an American republic-empire in the West” passes down from Filson to Bird, with Nick becoming another “prophecy” of white ascendance that “follow the Boone narrative and the essays on the Indians, each new conclusion voicing a more sweeping vision of American glory” (273).
The possible integration of native populations with the white culture had become a sore spot for many Americans, particularly the Southern states; most explicitly, “The Georgians […] were particularly perturbed when the Georgian Cherokees in 1827 set up the framework of a permanent government modeled after that of the United States” (Weinberg 82). The Cherokees had even turned to agriculture, short-circuiting the rhetoric of utility often used to paint Indians as savage and lacking right to the land by natural law. The rise of scientific racism made easier the justification of Indian Removal and the displacement of tribes from inside the areas controlled by white Americans to those outside of them. As Horsman notes about the “noble savages” of earlier frontier romances, “On a popular level, […] this literary image of the Indian as a complex, tragic figure was to a large extent offset by the widespread, horror-laden captivity literature and by the novels of figures such as Robert Montgomery Bird, who depicted the Indian as an expendable wild beast” (191). More than simply displaying Indians as irrevocably fallen inferiors to be moved, Bird’s text uses historical conflicts to build a past that justifies the present; the Indian is always already an enemy of the state, the foil against which Americans are defined. As Stephanie LeMenager helpfully presents it, “Historical romances of the 1830s through the 1850s typically resolve contemporary political problems by displacing them onto a deep past in which similar problems have already been conclusively worked out” (53-54). Indian atrocities in the past provoke the creation of the captivity-revenge cycle, as white existence in the American landscape, as it is in the Kentucky landscape and the “Kentucky of the mind” that unifies frontier settlers, is forever a series of reprisals for earlier Indian hostilities.

56 See Weinberg (85) and Horsman (192) for more on this point.
It is in this ageless history that the pidgin greeting of Bird’s Indians—“Bo-zhoo, brudder”—becomes a meaningful gesture; as with the conflation of Abel Doe with Tory, traitor, and white Indian, the Shawnees become simultaneously French agents, inferior, uneducated, and uncivilized savages incapable of correct speech, and irredeemable murderers whose mock attempts at “brotherhood” and integration are a malicious joke and a prelude to violence. The continual reiteration of the Indian as “red niggur” reinforces this view of their inferiority while also recalling the fears over insurrection and internal strife, especially linked (again) to the French and the potential flow of dangerous revolutionaries into the United States from the Caribbean. In his efforts to make the Indians into a one-dimensional, uniform Other against which Americans could define themselves through revenge violence, Bird constructed the savage out of old parts, an enemy embodying all enemies and completely lacking any ability to assimilate or civilize. Their contact with unwanted whites—the villain Braxley and the renegade Abel Doe—serves to solidify the presentation that Indians and their associates have always been, and always will be, a threat that must be removed for the safety of valued citizens.

3.4: “The slayer has been here before us”

If the Kentucky community is intended by Bird to be a model for good republican behavior, how should we explain the departures of those who were integrated into it, namely Roland and Nathan? After all, the unity created by the fulfillment of revenge is only temporary; once the enemy is slain, the party fractures back into its constituent parts, leaving the frontier democrats to continue the project of civilizing the wilderness. How,
then, is this an image of unified America? The answer to these concerns lies in Bird’s own Whiggish political leanings, especially the belief in hierarchical social structure.

As Feldberg notes, “The presidency of Andrew Jackson meant an end to predominance by ‘the rich, the well-born, and the able,’ and its replacement by the ‘Age of the Common Man’” (96). Bird’s careful portrayal of Colonel Tom Bruce and the other settlers as this “Common Man” type—“a plain yeoman, endowed with those gifts of mind only which are necessary to his station, but with virtues which are alike common to forest and city”—marks them as essentially good people; perhaps not as sophisticated as the aristocratic Edith and Roland, but positive figures nonetheless (47). These settlers are the founders of the West, the people who Weinberg says become the standard bearers for democratic behavior in the popular mind.57 While Bruce and his followers are not perfect—their propensity for Indian-like acts of violence, like scalping, seems to generate some squeamishness in the novel—they are the examples of “frontier heroism” Bird cites in his preface to Nick’s revised edition.

Furthermore, the coming generation is presented as an improvement on this type: young Tom Bruce’s death is linked to “the heroic efforts, so overpowering and destructive in his disabled condition, which he had made to repair his father’s fault; for such he evidently esteemed the dismissing of the travellers from the Station without sufficient guides and protection” (334). While Colonel Bruce and the man assigned to guide Edith and Roland are good people but lacking in certain regards, the young frontiersmen are already correcting the faults of their parents, even at the cost of their

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57 Edward Watts discusses the paradoxical role of the frontier settler, at once an agent of the state and yet not fully recognized as a citizen, in “‘If Indians Can Have Treaties, Why Cannot We Have one Too?’: The Whiskey Rebellion and the Colonization of the West,” Messy Beginnings 81-102.
lives. The rough borderers—“the very men, in fact, for the time and the occasion”—are on the path to becoming the people for the future time and future occasion, bearers of good traits forward from the past to the present (Bird 28).

The departure of Roland and Nathan at the end, the two most important revengers brought into society by their embracing of retaliatory violence, does not weaken the vision of a united society; in fact, it actually strengthens it. As Hughes notes in his study of Bird’s Whig politics in Nick, “The Whigs, according to Harry L. Watson, ‘stressed the compatibility of all classes and interests’” (para. 8). The unity of the community around revenge displays this compatibility: the elemental act of violence as a response against threats cuts across differences in background, class, and station, bringing together people as different as Nathan, Roland, and Tom Bruce; it is the community’s protective conversion of private revenge into the public ritual of sacrifice as traced by Girard. For a Whig, society does not have to be uniform to be united; the expulsion from the garden of everyone’s shared enemy eclipses regional, social, or political interests.

It is true then that “Dr. Bird apparently believed in a graduated society,” as Williams says; it is somewhat questionable whether he also held to “a more aristocratic than a strictly popular government” (liii). Bird certainly mocks democratic excesses in government in “My Friends in the Madhouse,” but this is not the kind of government displayed in Nick of the Woods; here he presents real democracy, the active pursuit of communal and individual happiness that is waylaid in the bickering of Congress and the zealous extremism of rabid republicanism. More than this, young Tom Bruce’s corrective gestures bring the frontier leader closer to the aristocrat: his sacrifice is one to the
requirements of social propriety, the “correct” gestures of hospitality and communal support that have been weakened in the current generation. The “natural aristocrats,” Edith and Roland, are a people of the past; they are not the leaders of tomorrow but a dwindling breed, “the last of our name and race,” as Edith says (45). Edith and Roland’s strange relationship is unproductive and confused, pointing to the eventual end of the line for an aristocracy that has disappeared by Bird’s time. The future is instead in the progressing generations of frontier heroes.

Likewise, Nathan Slaughter is a man of the past: he is literally stuck in the past as he seeks revenge for the deaths of his family, and he is part of the Quaker sect losing power. As Barnard and Shapiro note in the introduction to Edgar Huntly, the once powerful influence of Quakers in Pennsylvania was dwindling even at the end of the eighteenth century; Nathan has left Pennsylvania for Kentucky, departing the place where his faith may have been valuable for the mockery and derision of a frontier world that does not value his religious convictions. Once his family is avenged, Nathan is a man without a world, unable to return to the Quaker fold and similarly unable to accept a place in either Roland’s world or that of the frontier. Like the unproductive aristocrats, Nathan’s fixture in the past means the time of his people is over; he can temporarily join society through the shared goal of vengeance, but permanent acceptance hinges on an identity he is unwilling to accept. Roland and Nathan cannot completely agree to the terms of Whiggish societal compatibility, so they depart, leaving the future in the hands of those who can accept the necessities of Kentucky while simultaneously improving themselves and their society.
In this way, then, Bird presents a foundational tale that replays the captivity-revenge cycle: the male characters are faced with various forms of disempowerment and captivity, necessitating their revenge; this revenge becomes the link that binds and builds community, a community that will triumph over sociopolitical division in the formation of what is eventually a nation. As Bird himself says, “it becomes us to trace the footsteps of our progenitors, and do honour to the sites made memorable by their labours and sufferings. There is no fear that local attachments will degenerate into sectional jealousies” (Williams xxx). In *Nick of the Woods*, Bird creates just such a tracing of footsteps, showing the triumph of the heroes of the past as part of a continuous path of improvement that exists even down to his present day. Like the novels and plays based on the McCrea myth, that patriotic connection is built upon a foundation of cyclical violence, a continuous battle between the forces of civilization and savagery for dominance of “the dark and bloody ground” that would become the United States.
CHAPTER 4:

THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS: OLD WORLD FAILURES AND THE NEW WORLD GIFT OF REVENGE

“Through the loss of their own blood and the shedding of the Indians’, ‘the brave pioneers who led the van of civilisation’ felt that they had paid the price for their new world inheritance. Having established their right by conquering the original inhabitants, Americans could eject the strongest foreign claimant—the mother country.”

-Louise K. Barnett, The Ignoble Savage

While *Edgar Huntly* is perhaps the root text for the frontier romance genre, it is the works of James Fenimore Cooper—especially the five texts known collectively as the Leatherstocking Tales—that serve as the exemplars for most critics and readers. Although Cooper produced writings ranging from an Austen-style novel of manners to sea tales to topical novels of social criticism, it is his historical romances, adapted from the example of Walter Scott and set on the American frontier, for which he is most remembered. As many scholars have since declared, Cooper’s works were among the first, and certainly the most well known, to answer the call for a new, particularly American literature; as Joel Porte presents in response to Richard Chase, “Surely Chase is right in insisting that there emerges from Cooper’s work in the Leatherstocking Tales ‘an original conception of the life of man and its significance’ in America that was to be of lasting importance for all serious American authors—and, one should add, for American culture at large” (8). As evidenced by the centrality of Cooper’s texts to the “myth and symbol” critics like Henry Nash Smith and Slotkin, the frontier romances of the Leatherstocking Tales have become more than simply adventure stories that prompted widespread imitation in Westerns and dime novels; they are the codifiers and presenters
of many of American’s primary cultural fictions. Not surprisingly, at the heart of these texts is often the foundational structure of the captivity-revenge cycle, inseparably bound to the picturesque landscapes, cliché romantic plotlines, and sensational narratives of pursuit and violence presented with a tincture of nostalgia.

Of the five novels that make up the Leatherstocking Tales, *The Last of the Mohicans* is certainly the most famous; it is also the most likely to be held as shallow and unliterary, thanks to the focus on conventional plotlines and spectacular violence. “Peopled by storybook savages and cardboard heroes, and dotted with scalpings and hairsbreadth escapes,” Tompkins explains, “*The Last of the Mohicans* seems to cater to a popular taste for melodrama rather than to serious-minded speculation” (95). It is this clinging to the trappings of popular literature that has tended to push all of Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales—*Mohicans* more than any other—into critical disfavor in the past; it is a case of too much of “the color and suspense that made the Leatherstocking novels so enormously popular in their own day, and the melodramatic features that have caused them to be relegated to the category of children’s literature in our own” (96). As Tompkins bluntly frames it, “even the most sympathetic of Cooper’s critics in this century have been hard put to it to explain why they should continue to be fascinated by a novel which, by their own accounts, is replete with sensationalism and cliché” (95).

As with the other novels in the present study, it is these very conventions—or more precisely, their assumption of the form of captivity and revenge, carried down from the combined traditions of the Indian captivity narrative and the European romance—that give the text its imaginative resonance. In particular, Cooper points to the captivity-
revenge cycle’s act of group formation: personal revenge is metamorphosed into large-scale group revenge as a response to forms of social and physical disempowerment. More than this, *The Last of the Mohicans* provides the reader with action centered on perhaps the two most important forces for provoking retributive violence: duty and loyalty.

Through the tale’s “heavy clutter of adventure, plotiness, and the ridiculous decorum of sentimentality” (Kaul 113) we are given a picture of the most basic workings of group formation through vengeance, as feelings of loyalty and the requirements of duty bring individuals together into meaningful—and violent—sociopolitical communities.

As noted in this study’s introduction, some critics have seen the entire narrative of *Mohicans* as nothing more than a thinly veiled excuse to present a series of pursuits and escapes, captures and retaliations; yet at the heart of this convention-soaked, much-maligned frontier adventure narrative is the captivity-revenge cycle. As Leland Person notes, “Even a quick survey of Cooper’s fiction reveals a remarkable number of scenes whose basic structure and elements we take for granted and seem deeply embedded as a kind of deep structure in our imaginations” (9). It is this sense of a deep structure that has powered the myth criticism so common in Cooper studies, the recasting of the story and its characters into archetypal terms that represent some aspect of a universal American experience; along those same lines, I would argue that *The Last of the Mohicans* centers on the “deep structure” of the captivity-revenge cycle and its capacity for creating social organization. Even more elemental than a myth, this fundamental (re)action crosses boundaries and unites disparate groups at a very basic level. In *Mohicans*, captivity and revenge do not simply provide groups with a sense of communal identity, as myths
might; they allow those groups to define themselves. As with the other texts covered in this study, these group definitions arise not in spite of the conventions Cooper employs, but because of them and their connections to the captivity-revenge cycle.

Despite the criticisms of Cooper’s choice of conventions and aesthetics, *The Last of the Mohicans* has never been out of the realm of scholarly analysis. As the popular writings of one of America’s most famous authors, Cooper’s works have attracted critical attention from the beginning; as “his most exciting wilderness tale,” *Mohicans* has been the subject of a large amount of scholarly work (Peck 11). As John McWilliams sums it up (with an echo of the required apology discussed by Tompkins58), “By all external measures, *The Last of the Mohicans* has retained the authority of constant presence. Never out of print since its publication, it […] is one of those books everyone knows something about, even if one has not read it. Despite its faults, it remains inescapably here” (*Last* 11-12).

In comparison to the multiple plots of *Edgar Huntly*, *Hope Leslie*, and *Nick of the Woods*, *The Last of the Mohicans* is relatively simple; the backstories are nowhere near as convoluted and have much less direct impact on the story’s present actions than the complex chain of connections and causality in the previously examined novels.59 There is virtually no need for backstory on Munro, Montcalm, Heyward, Gamut, or Alice, and

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58 See Tompkins’s chapter on *Mohicans in Sensational Designs*, particularly 96-99, for her ideas on the required critical apologies for the novel’s aesthetic failings by previous scholars.

59 Because of the scholarly embarrassment over the novel’s conventional nature described by Tompkins, the secondary elements and backstories are often emphasized as the hidden, important “margins” potentially disfigured by the main plotline. The best example is probably Cora’s mixed blood, a detail that has led critics from Leslie Fiedler to Shirley Samuels to see “miscegenation as the ‘secret theme’ of the Leatherstocking series” (Samuels “Generation” 89). While these analyses are of great scholarly value and insight, they continue to participate in the mitigation of the novel’s explicit features by its implicit, “secret” ones.
consequently there is very little included. Of the principle characters whose histories might or do matter—Natty and the Mohicans, Cora, and Magua—it is really only those of the Mohicans and Magua that have any material impact on the novel; even Cora’s “rich blood” from her mother’s Creole heritage, much discussed in critical circles and presented as the reason for her inclusion in what will become a triangle of Magua, Uncas, and Cora, is of secondary importance to the effects of Uncas’s noble lineage and Magua’s desire for revenge.

It is this lack of individual depth in so many characters, including those of main importance, that makes possible the reading of kinds and stereotypes by Tompkins and that led Cooper’s contemporary reviewers to see the novel as “intense and breathless,” with “no break, no pause, no abiding place of rest” where a reader can stop to take in and understand the deeper aspects of character (qtd. in McWilliams Last 16). It is “the visions of a long and feverish dream,” as one reviewer noted, and like the characters in a dream, Cooper’s are more representative than individual, projections of the present moment without fixed histories and pasts to distract from the current action (16).

Cooper’s main plot also follows the pattern of his characters, a retelling of the elemental captivity-revenge tale as adapted through the McCrea narrative. Cora and Alice Munro, like Jane McCrea, set out from Fort Edward to meet a loved one; it is their father, the commander of Fort William Henry, rather than a lover. Fort William Henry is currently besieged by the French General Montcalm, and the commander of Fort Edward,

60 The “feverish dream” may be at least partially true: Susan Fenimore Cooper recalls in Pages and Pictures that Cooper dictated the battle between Chingachgook and Magua during an episode of possible sunstroke. Cooper had already been inspired in other details of the novel, such as the siege at Glens Falls. See James Beard, “Historical Introduction,” The Last of the Mohicans, Albany: State U of New York P, 1983, xx and xxv for further details.
General Webb, is sending reinforcements to aid Munro. The daughters are under the protection of Major Heyward, a family friend, suitor to Alice, and leader of an American regiment currently at Fort William Henry; with them also is Magua, an Indian scout engaged to lead them through the wilderness to their father by a different path, as a precaution against hostilities aimed at the reinforcements. Joining them shortly after their departure is David Gamut, the Ichabod Crane-like psalmodist whose ineptitude at virtually everything but singing must have been meant mainly as comic relief. This unlikely party, like Jane McCrea, sets out into a wilderness transformed into a battlefield.

Magua turns out to be driven by a vendetta against Munro, who whipped him for drunkenness; his plan for revenge is to abduct Munro’s daughters (and to marry Cora, it is revealed) while pretending to lead them through the forest. The party comes across Natty Bumppo and his Mohican allies in the wilderness, and the woodsmen, suspecting foul play, attempt to catch Magua. He escapes, and soon the party is besieged by Magua’s Huron warriors. Heyward, Cora, and Alice are eventually captured; they are, of course, saved in the nick of time by the woodsmen as Magua and his band are about to kill them. A series of pursuits by the Hurons and escapes from French scouts ensues, but the party eventually arrives at Fort William Henry with the aid of Natty, Chingachgook, and Uncas.

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61 A large amount of scholarly work has gone into the discussion of Cooper’s historical accuracy. While Cooper certainly takes artistic license with certain aspects of the Fort William Henry massacre in August 1757, David P. French states that “The bare outlines of the story clearly coincide with history: the fort [William Henry] was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Monro (spelled Munro in Cooper); Montcalm did besiege it for several days before it surrendered; he did offer unusually generous surrender terms; and his Indian allies later did treacherously attack the helpless British and provincial soldiers as they marched back defenselessly to Fort Edward some few miles away” (30). French also notes that Cooper demonstrates a “precise knowledge of detail” about the events he incorporates into his novel, so that “it seems clear that Cooper knew not merely the main lines of the campaign but many of its minutiae as well” (31).
At this point the historical events become central: Munro’s forced surrender after General Webb refuses to send additional aid and the massacre of the British soldiers by French Indian allies during the supposedly safe abandonment of the fort. During the chaos of the massacre, Magua again abducts the Munro daughters, still bent on carrying out his revenge. Cooper’s rendition of the Fort William Henry Massacre places Magua as the instigator of the atrocity: his personal desire for revenge, coupled with the failure of the French to provide the Indians with adequate rewards and spoils, leads to the horrific bloodletting in the stereotypical style of sensational Indian violence. Magua takes his hostages and flees toward Canada, returning to the Huron camps to complete his dual revenge-marriage.

The woodsmen, Heyward, and a mentally defeated Munro emerge from the carnage unscathed and set off in pursuit of Magua and his hostages. They eventually catch up with them, and through a series of episodes of disguise and trickery, manage to escape to the nearby Delaware encampment. When things look dark, Uncas steps forward and reveals himself as the last Mohican chief, a rightful leader and renewed hope of the Delaware tribe, immediately freeing his associates from Magua’s claims on them as prisoners. The sticking point is that Cora was delivered to the Delawares as Magua’s prisoner, per Indian custom; while the others are not considered Magua’s prisoners and

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63 For an excellent discussion of the conventional representations of Indian brutality, see Haywood’s Bloody Romanticism: Spectacular Violence and the Politics of Representation, 1776-1832, especially 158-162 and 165-170.
therefore are not to be handed over, she is. Magua leaves with Cora, while Uncas makes clear that the Delawares will pursue and destroy the Hurons.

The Delawares, led by Uncas, defeat the Hurons, their long-time oppressors; Magua continues to elude everyone, and in the climactic scene on a narrow mountain trail, challenges Cora one more time to choose between marriage and death. She chooses death, of course, and while Magua hesitates Uncas leaps from a precipice above to attack. Magua kills Uncas, and one of his warriors kills Cora. On the verge of escaping yet again, Magua is shot by Natty, finally ending his reign of terror. The Delawares wipe out the Hurons, avenging and inverting the atrocity of the William Henry Massacre in the novel’s first half climax. The Delawares and the remaining heroes mourn the loss of Uncas and Cora in what is often seen as a combined funeral-wedding, and Tamenund, the famous Indian oracle, speaks of the time of the white man and the possible rise of the Indian again in the future.

Although there has been a diversity of approaches to both the novel’s contents and its style, the majority of analyses have fallen into two major camps: the “myth and symbol” school’s exploration of the text as part of the “Myth of the Frontier” and its role in the formation of a unique American national character, and the socially directed examinations of what we might call Cooper’s romantic historicism, focusing largely on the ways his revised romantic plotlines contribute to the discussion of subjects of national importance such as Indian Removal, questions of gender and class, and so forth. While there is, of course, significant overlap between these two approaches, there is also a fundamental difference in the way these two viewpoints read Cooper’s most action-
packed frontier adventure, one that is itself indicative of a classically American concern with the individual and his or her place in society. While the prolific violence of Cooper’s wilderness tales has never been lost to this scholarship, the exploration of it as a specifically meaningful act in and of itself has not been foregrounded by many of the numerous studies on Cooper’s extensive writings. Like the romantic conventions taken as given, Cooper’s violence has also been overlooked—taken for granted, to use Person’s phrase—and seen as a by-product of narrative exigencies rather than an integral part of them. As in *Edgar Huntly* and *Nick of the Woods*, however, the combination of romance tropes and the tropes of the captivity-revenge cycle make use of this violence to provide a framework around which *The Last of the Mohicans*’s sociopolitical world is organized.

The mythological view, stemming from D.H. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* and made famous by writers like Leslie Fiedler, Richard Chase, and Henry Nash Smith, focuses on the open possibility of the frontier as a place of potential human rebirth. The exploration here is of the ways that an archetypal individual struggles for self-definition; as such, these analyses present characters as players in an abstraction, more symbol than person and fighting an epic battle of individual—and by extension, national—creation of the self in the crucible of the desert wilderness. As Tompkins summarizes this point of view, these critics “interpret the Leatherstocking tales, accordingly, as expressions of primordial truths that transcend, or lie ‘deeper’ than, history. While this position accurately identifies Cooper’s characters as allegorical, it has the effect of limiting his fables to the repetition of one or another ‘eternal’ paradigm and makes of Cooper a forerunner of Jung, Freud, Joseph Campbell, or Mircea Eliade” (102).
As part of Tompkins’s list hints, the direction of this type of criticism usually tends toward an abstract examination of the individual in relative isolation; like the similar trend in readings of *Edgar Huntly* and *Nick of the Woods*, the myth/archetype readings of *The Last of the Mohicans* tend to focus on one character—Edgar, Nathan Slaughter, Natty Bumppo—as the locus of a ritualized, basic human experience, an initiation into the mysteries of personhood via the trial of survival.\(^6\) Even when the scholarship is directed at interpersonal connections and interactions between characters, as it is in Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel* when he explores the recurring images of male friendships like that of Natty and Chingachgook, the emphasis is on individuals, apart from society and operating on personal or extrasocial codes of conduct, their experiences being held as indicative of a fundamental American or human experience of life in this new world. In these examinations, the violence is that of myth, the struggle against symbolic forces of life and death that lead to an initiation into the mysteries of nature and the self.

Foremost of the myth and symbol works discussing Cooper’s uses of violence is Slotkin’s work, particularly *Regeneration Through Violence* and *The Fatal Environment*. These lengthy studies trace the development of America’s violent hunter myths, with a notable focus on Cooper’s Natty Bumppo and Filson’s work on the life of Daniel Boone as the ideal representations of this frontier mythology. Slotkin’s inquiries are directed at the possibility of redemption and renewal—the return to a prelapsarian-like form of

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\(^{64}\) This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by Denise Mary MacNeil’s *The Emergence of the Frontier Hero 1682-1826*, which employs Joseph Campbell’s heroic journey structure in situating Mary Rowlandson’s narrative as the origin of the frontier hero character. MacNeil features chapters on both *Edgar Huntly* and *The Last of the Mohicans*.\(^{64}\)
innocence that has always been the promise of the West, perhaps best embodied by the birth of the United States as the preeminent progressive national experiment—and the ways that the figure of the hunter and his wilderness violence are initiation rites into the ownership or inheritance of the land. “The hunter myth provided a fictive justification for the process by which the wilderness was to be expropriated and exploited” explains Slotkin; “It did so by seeing that process in terms of heroic adventure, of the initiation of a hero into a new way of life and a higher state of being” (*Regeneration* 554).

As Slotkin says of this process and the evolving views of the wilderness and its heroes, “while the images may readily exhibit changes in response to the play of social and psychological forces, the narrative or narratives which relate them to each other have or acquire a certain fixity of form. Their structure and character may be more clearly articulated through the passage of time and the operation of historical forces on the mind of the audience, but their essential nature remains substantially the same” (*Regeneration* 9). The major thrust of this statement—the fixity of form underneath an adaptive surface that is recreated out of the materials of the time—perfectly explains the ways that the older captivity tradition became altered into the captivity-revenge cycle that consolidated disparate groups of colonial Americans into a unified group of patriots; this same force has continued to serve as one of the primal unifiers of society in the United States. For Slotkin, this unification is derived from the mythology surrounding the frontier and its hunter-heroes, and he explores both the adaptation of the older captivity paradigm and its transformation into a more violent form throughout the history of the U.S. and its literature.
Slotkin, like many other critics, importantly notes the centrality of social concerns to both frontier mythology in general and Cooper’s contributions to it through his fiction: “But Cooper’s reach went beyond the personal and became a fictional codification of ideas about the significance of the Frontier to the ideology of Jeffersonian republicanism” (Fatal 86). As Girard says of the uses of sacrificial violence, “Myths are the retrospective transfiguration of sacrificial crises, the reinterpretation of these crises in the light of the cultural order that has risen from them” (64); seeing Cooper, as Slotkin does, as “the clarifier, codifier, and popularize of a language of myth already at work in his society” helps to reinforce this notion of a preexisting “deep structure” that is being recast into a current, broadly intelligible form (Fatal 109). Cooper’s social concerns and criticism became central aspects of his fictional recreations of American historical events and society, just as sociopolitical issues were at the heart of Brown’s novels and would continue to be of utmost importance to writers like Sedgwick and Bird. “As we have seen,” holds Slotkin, “[Cooper’s] fiction brought together most of the major concerns for post-revolutionary republican ideology, and dealt with them in the imagery of the Myth of the Frontier,” a myth I claim to be founded on the twin tropes of the captivity-revenge cycle (109). The Last of the Mohicans, as “part of a broader cultural response to the changes taking place in American society” in all of Cooper’s fiction, presents the organization of emerging American society via the foundational acts of violence that underpin even the mythic organization detailed by Slotkin (109).

While myth and symbol critics like Slotkin often recognize the importance of the social connections inherent in their readings, the ultimate focus is on the text as
something outside the realm pure social commentary; myths are, after all, generative as much as reflective, and myth and symbol critics emphasize the individual over the group as the locus of a form of creation rather than of pure depiction. “This way of reading the Leatherstocking novels not only divorces them from their political and social context, which Cooper’s best critics have shown is a crucial determinant of his fictions,” holds Tompkins; “it also fails to account for the configuration of his adventure narratives at the level of detail, preferring to rest in broad generalizations about the archetypal nature of the novels, based on one or two selected incidents” (102). The approach to Cooper’s works as more socially reflective—more historically situated and group centered—is typically found in the strain of critical work examining the texts as a form of either social or historical discourse. Like the analogous inquiries into Edgar Huntly, these explorations have grown out of the influence of New Historicist, Feminist, and similar paradigms of analysis; as such, critical inquire into this side of Cooper’s texts have emphasized his depictions of gender, class and social status, the troubling approach of the time to the Indian question, and Cooper’s views on more topical sociopolitical issues like the Anti-Rent Riots. Scholars like Tompkins, George Dekker, John P. McWilliams, Nina Baym, Dana Nelson, Wil Verhoeven, and Robert Spiller have all emphasized this more socially situated method over the more abstract readings of the myth and symbol school.

Of particular importance to the current project is John P. McWilliams’s Political Justice in a Republic: James Fenimore Cooper’s America. A broad-ranging inquiry into Cooper’s views on the circulation of justice in the emergent American society, McWilliams’s book provides a useful way of understanding the struggles—particularly
the violence—that permeate Cooper’s many novels. As McWilliams frames it, “All readers of Cooper are confronted with the obvious but troubling fact that a Cooper tale is an uneasy mélange of derring-do with abstract political and social commentary”; this is linked to the author’s use of his writings as inherently social objects, and “the few [letters about his ideas] that remain […] explicitly connect his fiction to his politics and indicate that his writings were to provide a defense for his nation—its lands, its history and, above all, its unique polity” (6,1). Like Charles Brockden Brown before him, Cooper apparently saw himself as a political thinker operating in a literary world, and like Brown’s own fable-like vision of the potential pitfalls and possibilities of the new nation, “His tales would deal with local struggles or historical events of lesser importance, yet through them Cooper would discuss the most grandly national of issues” (11). Perhaps in only slightly less fantastic a form than Brown’s surreal, gothic texts, “As a commentator upon national politics, Cooper repeatedly saw the largest of issues in the smallest of events” (12).

McWilliams’s study, covering what he defines as Cooper’s ever-present “search for principles of political justice in [the] still unsettled land,” explores a large cross-section of the author’s canon, including the frontier adventures and Indian war novels; he intentionally passes over The Last of the Mohicans in favor of novels more suited to his focus on directly political conflict. For McWilliams, the unsettled world of the frontier is too far removed from the structure of civilization to make examination of expressly political justice easily workable; while there are more available social worlds against which to frame the struggles of political vs. natural or other forms of justice in the texts
he does discuss at length, *Mohicans*, perhaps in an echo of the apparent failures used in the critical apologies noted by Tompkins, is simply too directed by its narrative, too much about the “derring-do” and not enough about “abstract political and social commentary.”

While he addresses the novel in passing, McWilliams’s ideas apply very workably to *The Last of the Mohicans* when considered from the standpoint of the captivity-revenge cycle. As I argue, the cycle is itself constitutive of a form of social organization, inherently always already a political and social structure created or imposed by the very acts that make it up; Williams’s search for political justice is more easily traced when we recognize that *Mohicans* too is a story about the coalescing of groups into workable social units driven by a firm belief in justice as a collective necessity—as revenge passed through Girard’s process of conversion from individual to group act, from emotionally and physically close to a greater, more bearably distant undertaking. As McWilliams believes, we can learn much about Cooper’s world from studying the manifestation of the search for justice of varying kinds that appears in his novels; we can also find these same ideas in studying the forms of sanctioned violence committed by social groups, even when there is not what we normally consider “society.”

This hybrid approach of the captivity-revenge cycle—an overlapping or combining of both structural and abstract aspects with the detailed examination of the applied sociopolitical consequences of this form of organization—is immediately supported by the novel itself. The opening paragraph of *The Last of the Mohicans* shifts between these two formations as it sets up the action of the plot:
It was a feature peculiar to the colonial wars of North America, that the
toils and dangers of the wilderness were to be encountered before the
adverse hosts could meet. A wide and apparently an impervious boundary
of forests severed the possessions of the hostile provinces of France and
England. The hardy colonist, and the trained European who fought at his
side, frequently expended months in struggling against the rapids of the
streams, or in effecting the rugged passes of the mountains, in quest of an
opportunity to exhibit their courage in a more martial conflict. But,
emulating the patience and self-denial of the practiced native warriors,
they learned to overcome every difficulty; and it would seem that, in time,
there was no recess of the woods so dark, nor any secret place so lovely,
that it might claim exemption from the inroads of those who had pledged
their blood to satiate their vengeance, or to uphold the cold and selfish
policy of the distant monarchs of Europe. (1)

The presentation here is a mix of primal, elemental, and mythical struggles—dangerous
wilderness, impervious boundaries, quests for courageous action—with inherently social
and political contexts—wars, colonies, provinces, France, England, Europe, America.
The contrast of the last sentence in the meeting of the pledge of blood to vengeance with
the coldness of monarchical policy displays the Girardian shift of personal to state
violence he posits as the work of ritual. “Such killings in Cooper, acts of violence
‘quicker than thought,’” says Shirley Samuels, “have traditionally been seen in mythic
and sacrificial terms. This way of reading emphasizes the ritualistic character of these
frontier rites of passage, mythologizing the act of entering the wilderness, but it also, perhaps inevitably, ignores the specific transformations of identity involved in such violence” (“Generation” 87). The present study traces one of these transformations through specific acts of violence: the movement of the individual from isolation to group membership through the struggles of captivity and revenge.

The reader is confronted from the very beginning with the point of intersection of these two dominant ways of reading Cooper’s work. In the ensuing narrative this intersection will be traced in both an isolated context—the captivity-revenge cycle as played out by a small group of adventurers on the frontier—and greater, national ones—the conflict between England and France through the Fort William Henry Massacre and the climactic battle between the Delawares and Hurons. Along the way the mechanics of the captivity-revenge cycle appear in a manner like that depicted in the murder of Jane McCrea and its aftermath. Cooper simultaneously presents the reader with the abstract, mythological conflict of primal acts of capture and retribution as well as presenting the ways that these fundamental actions create social formations and help structure a functioning frontier society; he does this, not by burying the ideas beneath the surface of a conventional frontier adventure narrative but by displaying them through its actions.

In essence, then, *The Last of the Mohicans* addresses a different aspect of social formation than the novels examined in the previous two chapters. *Edgar Huntly* is a cautionary tale of sorts, a depiction of the dangers that division and alienation pose to a burgeoning community and the ways that captivity and revenge can “cure” these divisive social ills; *Nick of the Woods* presents the opposite end of this spectrum, where the
nascent community is strengthened and advanced by embracing revenge as a defining way of communal life. *The Last of the Mohicans*, in an operation like that of the Jane McCrea myths, presents what may be considered an earlier stage of social formation, the beginnings of the societies that go on to be depicted in the novels by Brown and Bird. Through the romantic storyline and its central character of Duncan Heyward and the repeated captivity-revenge occurrences culminating in the William Henry Massacre and the Huron-Delaware battle, Cooper presents the tale of social foundation and community birth through violence. This presentation, written as it was during a time of national transition in the new United States from the more aristocratic Jeffersonian view of the polity to that of Jacksonian democracy and the rise of the common man, captures the feeling of new social formation circulating at the time. In a nation where the Old World values of lineage have finally been rendered meaningless, it is in action and association that worth is decided; in the New World wilderness that is the destiny of America, that action is revenge, which is, as Natty Bumppo is fond of saying, an Indian—that is, truly *native American*—“gift.”

4.1: Miss Munro, Miss McCrea, Mister Jefferson, Mister Jackson

“Again and again in Cooper’s novel,” says Robert Sheardy, Jr. the two white heroines find themselves in the hands of red men in scenes reminding us of the painting of Jane McCrea’s murder. Again and again, Cooper threatens the reader with impending murders, rapes or scalpings of Cora and Alice which, as in the arrested action of the painting, never
actually occur, until the penultimate chapter. Then, the murder of Cora at the hands of two Indians duplicates in pose—and in the hesitation of the would-be murderer—the event depicted in Vanderlyn’s painting (94). As many critics including Sheardy and McWilliams have noted, Cooper almost certainly built aspects of the action in Mohicans around the story of Jane McCrea, especially the more provoking versions of the tale that informed the incident’s depiction in Joel Barlow’s The Columbiad and Vanderlyn’s painting commissioned for the poem.65 One version of the story has Miss McCrea in virtually the exact same geographical location, after all, “linking Cora and Alice to the legendary historical figure […] who, like Cora and Alice, had left Fort Edward under the protection of Indian escorts supposedly allied to the British army” (McWilliams Last 70).

Sheardy’s description of the connections between Vanderlyn’s painting and Cooper’s narrative makes clear one of the functions of the text often noted by critics for a slightly different purpose: the extension of the novel’s internal implications to its external audience, the reader. It is, after all, “Cooper” who “threatens the reader with impending murders, rapes or scalpings of Cora and Alice,” not Magua threatening the girls themselves (emphasis added). This focus on the wider implications of the story of Cora and Alice and their journey through the frontier wilderness forcefully links the two separate halves of the McCrea legend—the death, both in its historical uncertainty and its

65 “Death of Jane McCrea was commission in 1803 by Joel Barlow (1754-1812) as an illustration for his epic poem The Columbiad, then in progress” Sheardy reports. “The painting was shown at the Paris Salon in September of 1804 and at the American Academy in New York in November the same year. It was the first visual interpretation of a story popular since first reported in the Connecticut Courant on August 5, 1777” (93). According to McWilliams, “Cooper almost surely saw [Vanderlyn’s painting] exhibited in New York City in 1825” (Last 70).
embellished mythologized form, and the reaction to that death in the form of revenge—into a single tale where all the elements are interpolated and cast into a unified narrative. This mirrors the recreations of the McCrea myth mentioned by Engels and Goodale, especially those that, like the twentieth-century Carroll play, focus the majority of the emotional and physical energy on those avenging McCrea’s death rather than on McCrea herself. If, as Engels and Goodale hold, McCrea’s story is a “précis on revenge,” Cooper’s version of the tale can be seen, like Carroll’s drama, as the complete story of revenge, including a display of the forms it takes and a modeling of the behaviors of the community left to vengeance.

Like Cooper’s Revolutionary novels that focus on “the neutral ground,” *The Last of the Mohicans* is also a novel of action in the boundaries. These boundaries are not just the physical ones of the civilization and wilderness that form the frontier or British versus French holdings that form national-political jurisdictions but the boundaries of historical eras, the times of transition that also marked Scott’s historical romances. As McWilliams notes, “While Cooper was growing to maturity, the older notion of rule by an elected and educated elite chosen from leading families was still prominent […] in the society as a whole” (*Last 5*). This paradigm, part of the worldview Jefferson proposed for his land of yeoman farmers, would soon give way to a worldview where a man like Andrew Jackson would represent the polity, a transition Cooper’s best-known novel embodies through the actions of the captivity-revenge cycle.

“During the early national period (1783-1815),” explains McWilliams, “the seaboard merchants, planters, educators and lawyers who formed the Federalist party
believed in a strong Patrician Senate, an appointive judiciary, suffrage restrictions, a strong navy, and even in some instances, an established state church” (4-5). This feeling manifested itself in the hope that America would naturally drift back into a system where the “betters” of society—people like the aforementioned merchants, lawyers, and wealthy landholders—would come to power; as John Adams held, “democracy never has and can never be so desirable as aristocracy, or monarchy,” and he and other Federalists hoped the separation of powers in the Constitution “could cushion some of the force of the elected legislatures and even created a de facto oligarchy” (Davidson 239).

Although Jefferson was strongly against the Federalist notions embodied in this quote, he also dreamed of a rather oligarchical world, where his yeoman farmers would recognize the limits of their own knowledge and appoint enlightened representatives to conduct politics for them. “The Founding Fathers spoke in quite a different voice among themselves,” says Cathy Davidson, “castigating the American mob and fearing that they ruled, tenuously at best, a nation on the verge of financial ruin or political chaos” while publicly “they attempted to ingratiate themselves with the lower electorate, with the ‘mob,’ that some of them, such as Washington, despised, and that even the most magnanimous, such as Jefferson, distrusted” (242).

So, while Federalists and Republicans differed in their beliefs about the fittest representatives, “neither party, however, was set to embrace the faith in the common man (the ordinary wage earner and small tradesman) that would characterize the politics of the era of Andrew Jackson” (McWilliams Last 5). The changing opinions that would allow this transition to take place were already in the air when Cooper began his writing career;
in *The Last of the Mohicans* Cooper presents a physical manifestation of this
sociopolitical transition, a reenactment of such shifts on the neutral ground of the frontier.
Whatever Cooper’s personal allegiances to the older systems of birth and station may
have been, his most famous novel depicts a world where that system comes into contact
with the newer system soon to gain ascendance in the Jacksonian era. In creating a lens
through which to understand the history surrounding the Fort William Henry Massacre,
Cooper brought the changing worldview of his own time to light; he chose to show the
reorganization of society through the structure of the captivity-revenge cycle, the same
form that had helped clarify the similarly shifting times of the Revolution.

As Slotkin admits in his introduction to the novel, “the premise of historicity
operative in the first part of *Mohicans* has been rather thin. The setting of the scene
invokes the war situation; the concluding chapters describe the siege of 1757. But
between these episodes, fictional characters journey through an unchanging and
archetypal wilderness, undergoing adventures that are not out of history books” (xx).
What there is of history in this half is put there merely through reference and feel, a
flavor of the world as it was then, Slotkin argues; hence his attribution of the events as

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66 “As the son of Judge Cooper and the husband of a De Lancey, Cooper was linked both to the old Tory
aristocracy and the new Whig aristocracy that had displaced it. When that American aristocracy was in turn
challenged by the economic and political claims of the hitherto deferential lower classes, Cooper was
equipped with a historical analogy or metaphor which allowed him to interpret it” (Slotkin “Introduction”
xiii). As Slotkin says “The white-versus-Indian opposition of Cooper’s fiction is the symbolic
representation of a deeper and more complex pattern of social and ideological conflict, which Cooper saw
as the central theme of American political life. Cooper’s perception of these conflicts was derived not from
party platforms but from the complicated experiences of his nurture and education. He had been reared in a
frontier community where the lifestyle was ‘democratic,’ with a widely diffused suffrage and relatively
small differentials in conspicuous consumption. But government in that society was entrusted to men of
wealth and standing like his father, the ‘natural aristocrats’ idealized by Jefferson, the ‘natural rulers’ cited
by English republican philosophers as early as the Commonwealth days. […] The Revolution, of necessity,
had upset and overthrown the existing set of rulers, […] and it had offered as a rationale for its actions an
ideology that opposed natural rights to traditions of deference” (“Introduction” xiii).
archetypal and unchanging snapshots rather than depictions containing any real depth.

This has been the vision of Cooper’s text used by those who view it as an instantiation of myth, as summed up nicely by Verhoeven:

The significance of Cooper’s fictions in terms of national pathos did not and does not derive from his skill in resolving fraternal and paternal conflict or in deciding legal and ecological debates, but from its successfully clearing the scene of his imaginary America of all traces of conflict and discord by projecting those elements […] to the transcendent realm of myth. (James Fenimore Cooper 73).

In other words, Cooper’s situation of his fictional narratives into history diffuses their discord through the distance of time; along with this diffusion of dangerous energy comes a conversion of potentially disruptive real conflict—fraternal or paternal, legal or ecological—into idealized conflicts of the heroic order where such nuances are subsumed by the vigorousness of the action and characters. Everything is romanticized and removed, pushed off the realistic historical record and placed on the record of mythological antiquity, even if that era is less than a century passed.

There is another vision of Cooper’s works possible, however, one hinted at by Slotkin in his evidence of Cooper’s ahistoricity in Mohicans: “Even the historical massacre is attributed to the influence of Magua, motivated by the desire for revenge on Munro through his daughters. But Magua and Munro are fictional characters, and therefore their motives are fictional as well” (xx). This is an odd point for Slotkin to make because it implies that the fictional is not representative of a kind of reality; yet
history itself shows that these motives, while perhaps not tied to real people at the real events of Fort William Henry, are nevertheless very real and very prevalent. Magua and Munro may be fictional characters with or without historical bases, but their motives, separate from the men themselves, are anything but fictional.

What Cooper’s fictionalized history and characters, armed with real and very basic motives, provide for the reader is a structure of support that makes understanding a historical event like the Fort William Henry Massacre possible for an audience removed from that time and mental space. Verhoeven explains this approach in his discussion of Cooper’s second novel and first historical romance:

In *The Spy*, then, the historical conflict known as the American Revolution has been neutralized, effaced, and the raw historical data have been recast to form a rendering of the national drama as it never took place, and in which the difficult choices of allegiance and authority were decided on the basis of a national ideology that never existed. (*James Fenimore Cooper* 86)

Cooper, in making the events of the Revolution intelligible to his readers, has imposed upon them an order and set of ideological beliefs that may or may not have been part of the original; this same recasting is the way that an event like Jane McCrea’s death can be converted into a synecdoche for “national drama as it never took place,” a widespread, uncontrolled wave of Indian aggression and British negligence that was more threatening than the English armies that existed in actuality.
The corollary is that a random act of violence becomes the anchor of “a national ideology that never exited,” the sense of injustice that would unite disparate sociopolitical groups behind a feeling of shared grievance, making an apparently meaningless event meaningful and intelligible to an audience beyond those immediately connected. This is the same process Cooper applies to the Fort William Henry Massacre: by giving a seemingly inexplicable event an intelligible system of motivation and causation, the readers can begin to understand it. And, as with both *The Spy* and the death of Jane McCrea, there is a retroactively applied ideology—revenge as justice. What *The Last of the Mohicans* provides for its readers is a recognition of the building of communities through collective violence; the novel displays the starting point of the revenge community idea Hinds connects to *Edgar Huntly* and that carries down through the frontier romance genre derived from it. As it is in Brown’s novel, the reader’s path of access to this process is the conventional romantic storyline.

4.2: Heyward, Duty, and “dogs to their women”

As it does in much of the scholarly work on *Nick of the Woods*, the search for the “hero” of *The Last of the Mohicans* typically falls on the character deemed more interesting and less conventional, the figure of the American frontiersman: so it is with Nathan Slaughter in *Nick*, and so it is with Natty Bumppo in *Mohicans*. Although Cooper himself makes Natty the eventual hero of the connected series of novels that will come to bear one of his many names—Leatherstocking—Natty is questionable as the hero of either of the first two texts in the collection. Indeed, it is safe to say that the hero of *The*
*Pioneers* is Oliver Effingham; a similar but more problematic statement can be made for Duncan Heyward, a figure of the natural aristocrat like Oliver, in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Although Heyward is questionable as a hero in terms of his effectiveness in virtually every situation requiring it, he is, like the later Roland Forrester who so much resembles him, arguably the novel’s central character. He is, also like Roland, a man trapped in a state of captivity by cultural and physical forces beyond his control, pushing him into an important role as a member of a larger revenge community.

Heyward’s centrality to the romance plot of *Mohicans* is one of the primary indicators of his importance to the text’s narrative; as Nina Baym points out,

> the novel’s center is occupied by Duncan Heyward, a very white white man. [...] The only mind entered regularly is Duncan Heyward’s. We often read of his feelings, his attention, his painful doubt, his hope, his confidence, his hearing, his fancies, his shame, his uneasiness, his interest, his belief. [...] Moreover, Duncan’s line of sight organizes the action, and some awkward plotting (like his ludicrous disguise to enter the Huron camp) is required to carry this through consistently. Duncan is present in every scene in the book, and all of them are viewed from his perspective except for the Fort William Henry Massacre. (73)

Like the heroes added to the fanciful retellings of the McCrea murder, Duncan Heyward becomes “the reader’s surrogate, the position from which readers would view the action if they were *in* the action,” and, presumably, the character demonstrating the “correct” reactions to the given situation (Baym 73). While the reader may not wish to emulate
Heyward’s moments of bumbling, he or she would most likely approve of the Major’s motives. Those Heyward respects and loves, we should respect and love; those he seeks to protect and avenge, we too should seek to protect and, when necessary, avenge.

But Heyward, like both Edgar and Roland, is also quite good at bungling even the simplest of plans. As critics have often noted, Cooper seems apt to censure and criticize his ersatz hero; “In chapters 22 through 27 […] we see Cooper focus on Duncan Heyward specifically to undercut his arrogance, his pride of identity” according to E.W. Pitcher (10), and Ian Dennis summarizes similar conclusions: “Forrest G. Robinson speaks persuasively not just of his ‘erratic’ judgment and bumbling, his being ‘a little thick,’” but also of his larger ‘shortcomings,’ […] Donald Ringe goes further, detailing the way Heyward’s ‘false heroics’ are ‘consistently mocked.’” (Dennis 2). Dennis himself discusses what he sees as the “text’s contempt” of the Major, “an animosity too intense to be a plausible expression of Cooper’s overall view of the white, male officer-caste of the day” (2). Noting the critical “movement away from an acceptance of Heyward as a mere cipher, a blandly conventional projection of the contemporary readership’s approval” as I mention above, Dennis and others see Heyward, like Bird’s Roland, as a mockery of the chivalric pretensions of the typical romance hero (2). Rather than being the reader’s surrogate, as Baym believes, Heyward is instead the target of derision by the text, its author, or both.

The question remains why someone so integral to the text—and so forcibly and often artificially inserted into its actions, in Baym’s view—would be such a figure of ineptness. Dennis holds that Heyward’s “inadequacies go far beyond a mere
demonstration that he is out of his element,” (2) and I would agree: what we see is not simply an awkward “fish out of water” blundering his way through a world that does not operate by the accustomed rules, but a captive, both physically and mentally, struggling to find any means of survival in a system completely alien. Heyward is not simply inadequate or inept—he is trapped and disempowered, the support structure he relies on taken away and replaced with one that emphasizes his dependence rather than his autonomy. The captive, as shown throughout this project, is subject to forces outside of his or her control, the “destinies” that drive Edgar and Clithero, the conspiracy that haunts Roland and Edith, and in *The Last of the Mohicans*, the exigencies of a mixed frontier culture of Indian-European warfare that traps those who approach it solely from one tradition or the other. These are, not surprisingly, the same types of external powers that drive the revenger and, like both Edgar and Roland, Heyward eventually becomes part of a group centered on the act of retribution for its disempowerment and captivity.

The opening of *Mohicans* presents a frame that emphasizes the disempowered nature of both Heyward and the American people he can be seen as representing even before we meet him in the narrative. From the statement of “the cold and selfish policy of the distant monarchs of Europe” proceeds an indictment of the mother country: “The imbecility of her military leaders abroad, and the fatal want of energy in her councils at home, had lowered the character of Great Britain from the proud elevation on which it had been placed by the talents and enterprise of her former warriors and statesmen. No longer dreaded by her enemies, her servants were fast losing the confidence of self respect” (13). The language here emphasizes powerlessness—“servants,” not citizens,
chained to a country that has lost its former glory and fallen into selfish stupidity. As we saw with Clithero’s domestic captivity in the service of the aristocratic Lorimer, such a state of dependence without control pushes even the most congenial person into dangerous territory. The United States would play out this same struggle in the Revolution, the revenge act against disempowerment and servitude to a master whose station and values are alien and alienating to those in service.

Cooper continues: “In this mortifying abasement [the loss of former glory], the colonists, though innocent of her imbecility, and too humble to be agents of her blunders, were but the natural participators” (13). In turning to the colonists, Cooper here points up the captive position of the American settler, a “participator” but not an “agent,” a passive “innocent” in the follies of Britain rather than an active player. Americans are, in this light, dragged into the problems unwittingly and forced to make the best of a situation in which they have no control. As Cooper’s 1831 footnote indicates, even this success—represented here by Washington and his heroics—is appropriated by the master: “In this manner does the mother country absorb even the fame, under that system of rule” (13).

Completing this introductory revelation of disempowerment and captivity of the New World colonist and soldier is the failure of Britain to protect her subjects from the dangers she has brought onto them by placing them there, a model we have seen previously in Clithero’s encounter with Wiatte in the alley and one reiterated by the repeated failures of romance heroes to protect their own charges, namely women.67

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67 Wiatte’s attack on Clithero occurs while Clithero is on a financial errand for his mistress. Although it is unclear whether or not Wiatte’s attack is premeditated, Clithero is put in harm’s way specifically because of his servitude to Lorimer. The colonized Irishman aligns well with colonies in America and the
Cooper sums up this unprotected state of colonial America thus: “In short, the magnifying influence of fear began to set at nought the calculations of reason, and to render those who should have remembered their manhood, the slaves of the basest of passions” (13). As they did in the cases of Clithero and then Edgar, the continual pressures of disempowerment, uncertainty, and fear—emotions that play a large part in creating mental captivity—result in a violent outburst against the agents of the captor and an embracing of “the basest of passions,” including the laws of nature and the most rudimentary behaviors of society. And, in Girard’s words about the conversion of revenge into sacrifice, “The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric. Everything else derives from that” (8). In Cooper’s novel, the weakening and destruction of the social fabric brought on by the failure of Old World protections allows for the reformation of a new social order; this New World order is one of group allegiance through loyalty made manifest through action—specifically the action of revenge. The text’s two halves play out this decay and rebirth through the captivity-revenge cycle, beginning with the disempowerment of Duncan Heyward.

It is into the decaying system that Major Heyward is introduced, and his unfitness for the tasks he will encounter, like the “innocence” of the colonists and soldiers pulled into a conflict by their subjection to social captors, is hinted at immediately: “A young man, in the dress of an officer, conducted to their steeds two females, who, it was apparent by their dresses, were prepared to encounter the fatigues of a journey in the complaints Cooper voices here over the failure of their “mistress” to provide adequate support and insurance to her “servants.”
woods” (Cooper 18). The contrast in clothing presented here—the females are at the very least dressed for “the fatigues of a journey in the woods,” while the young man is dressed as “an officer,” an apparently inappropriate outfit for such a journey—marks just how separated from the realities of his task Heyward is; even Roland Forrester is aware enough to make his journey to Kentucky in “a hunting-frock of the plainest green color, with cap and leggings of leather, such as were worn by many of the poorest or the least pretending exiles; like whom also he bore a rifle on his shoulder, with the horn and other equipments of a hunter” (Bird 43).

These indicators of Heyward’s alienation from his surroundings continue through the novel: as Ian Dennis points out, “His much-fingered pistols are worthless, [and] ‘his slight sword was snapped in the first encounter’” (2). Perhaps most damning in this vein is Heyward’s disguise as “a juggler from Ticonderoga”; while others are assuming the aspects of totemic animals like the bear and the beaver, Heyward asks them to “alter me to any thing—a fool” (Cooper 229, 228). Natty’s reply, possibly encoding the disdain for the Major that critics have detected from the author, is tellingly ambiguous: “It is not for one like me to say that he who is already formed by so powerful a hand as Providence, stands in need of a change” (228). Perhaps this is pious regard for the work of the creator in making the handsome, valiant young man; perhaps it is an acknowledgement that “he who is already formed” a fool by Providence needs no further help in proving it. The archetypal figure of the Fool, a European import, has no place in the frontier world; Heyward proves himself a real fool by once more failing to recognize the inapplicability
of Old World forms—like his uniform, cavalry horse, and saber—to his present situation on the New World frontier.

As it was with Bird’s Roland Forrester, the first introduction of Heyward also serves to emphasize his separation from his normal sociocultural surroundings. The soldiers have already “left the encampment with a show of high military bearing,” complete with fifes and drums, by the time Major Heyward appears (15); Heyward, rather than accompanying the military men, is instead left to be the escort of the two women and David Gamut, an awkward non-combatant as unprepared for the journey as Heyward seems to be. This is the same sort of “guilt by association” that marked Roland’s first appearance in Nick of the Woods; in Heyward, however, it is displayed not as a separation by choice—the appearance created by Roland’s aloofness and apparent class-based pretensions—but by the necessity of his charge. Unlike Roland, the “knight of the forest” who sees himself as a soldier, Heyward the soldier sees himself as a knight; the repeated emphasis on Heyward’s European-style chivalry noted by critics like Donald A. Ringe is shown to be a failing system in the American wilderness. Cora recognizes this when she makes the pragmatic decision to send the woodsman for help rather than to have them stay and all be captured or killed in the cave at Glen’s Falls. On the frontier, where living to fight another day trumps dying with honor, Heyward’s dream of himself as “a knight of ancient chivalry” is not only delusional and outmoded, but dangerous (129). It is a pure fantasy of devotion and duty that forces Heyward into an obedience

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68 See, for example, Ringe’s “Mode and Meaning in The Last of the Mohicans” in Verhoeven, James Fenimore Cooper (109-24).
69 Although Heyward stays with Cora and Alice at Glen’s, the exchange between them is telling: Heyward’s reinforcement of his chivalric duty is spoken “smiling, mournfully, but with bitterness.” Cora’s vision of
he would rather not pay in reality, judging by his hasty abandonment of his “re-captured princess” at his earliest convenience (129).

After all the hardships of the journey to William Henry and the terrors of captivity, Heyward abandons Cora and Alice the moment his own soldiers appear: “He knew them for his own battalion of the Royal Americans, and flying to their head, soon swept every trace of his pursuers from before the works” (145). If, as Baym suggests, Heyward’s perspective is the organizing one of the majority of the narrative, it is telling that he “swept every trace of his pursuers” away, not their pursuers or even the pursuers. This implication is deepened by the description of Heyward’s movement as “flying”: it simultaneously describes the swiftness of his movement to his battalion’s head and from the undesirable task of accompanying the women. Despite the ostensible attachment he professes to the women under his protection, he fails to even deliver them into the fort before running to join the charges he apparently favors, his men. What Clithero requests of Lorimer in Edgar Huntly—the opportunity to return to his place of birth and his native culture—Heyward departs for the instant his alienating “service” is even remotely fulfilled, “flying” from this domestic or dutiful captivity.

As the text notes, “For an instant, Cora and Alice had stood trembling and bewildered by the unexpected desertion”; when Heyward finally meets the two girls a few days after his hasty departure, Alice playfully upbraids him with a reminder of his dereliction of duty, fittingly cast in the language of romance:

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these pretensions—“This is not a time for idle subtleties and false opinions”—helps to emphasize her recognition of the real emptiness of Heyward’s Old World gestures (Cooper 80, emphasis added).
“Ah! thou truant! thou recreant knight! he who abandons his damsels in the very lists!” she cried; “here have we been days, nay, ages, expecting you at our feet, imploring mercy and forgetfulness of your craven backsliding, or, I should rather say, back-running—for verily you fled in the manner that no stricken deer, as our worthy friend the scout would say, could equal!” (149)

Duncan excuses himself by citing “what [he] then believed to be a soldier’s conduct”; this emphasizes the point that his native world operates in a manner different from that of the one expected by his “captors,” the Munro sisters (149). Although he often casts his actions in the frame of chivalry, as with his dream of being a knight while he is failing to keep watch, he abandons this female-centered paradigm for that of the soldier when the opportunity to join “his own battalion of the Royal Americans” presents itself.

Heyward’s insistence on keeping watch in the aforementioned scene also helps to reiterate his disempowerment in the wilderness; in a language familiar to us from its use in *Nick of the Woods*, Heyward’s determination to act as watchman causes Natty to reply that “If we lay among the white tents of the 60th, and in front of an enemy like the French, I could not ask for a better watchman, […] but in the darkness, and among the signs of the wilderness, your judgment would be like the folly of a child” (128). In his own milieu of European-style warfare, Heyward is a respected and effective man; in the forest, he is as much a child as the infantilized and helpless Alice, who suggests—apparently without jest—that he sleep while she keeps watch (130). These repeated indictments of Heyward’s behavior, cast as failures or derelictions of chivalric duty and delivered by a
woman, serve to display his continued subjection to his “mistress,” Alice Munro. Like the half-serious, half-joking reprimands and entreaties of Euphemia Lorimer to Clithero Edny as he attempts to free himself from her service, Alice’s ribbing of Heyward highlights his failures as her servant and protector—in the formulations of the novel, his failures as both a man and the “knight” her Old World cultural sensibilities expect.

Magua’s sneering comment that “the pale faces make themselves dogs to their women” not only reiterates this disempowerment of Heyward by the requirements of his “service” to Alice and Cora, it implicitly connects this episode with wider implications of captivity for both Heyward and Magua (42). The repetition of men as dogs—the Hurons have “driven [Magua] from their wigwams like a dog” (95) and Munro has “the Huron chief […] tied up before all the pale-faced warriors, and whipped like a dog” (103) brings together disempowerment, alienation, and physical captivity; in opposition to its repeated use as an insult throughout the novel, these connected images rely on the image of the weakness brought on by domestication, the removal of an animal from its native habitat and its forced exile and servitude in an alien world. Magua’s reduction to the status of “dog,” like the weakening servility he sees in Heyward’s chivalry, is directly tied to his alienation from the masculine sphere of the warrior: he is prostrated before both the wigwam and the white soldiers, driven and whipped like a cringing beast. Tellingly, the reader is never given the reason for Magua’s banishment form his own people; instead, the whipping by Munro—an act committed when Magua is subject to alien service in a system of duty and justice he does not understand—becomes the central grievance,
subsuming his exile from the Hurons in his captivity to a foreign master that precipitates the novel’s events.

Magua’s response to his domestication is to invoke captivity’s sister trope, revenge:

When this recital of events was ended, his voice once more changed, and became plaintive and even musical, in its low guttural sounds. He now spoke of the wives and children of the slain; their destitution; their misery, both physical and moral; their distance; and, at last, of their unavenged wrongs. Then suddenly lifting his voice to a pitch of terrific energy, he concluded by demanding: “Are the Hurons dogs, to bear this? Who shall say to the wife of Menowgua, that the fishes have his scalp, and that his nation have not taken revenge!” (106-7).

Men who are free to act, who are not captives, do not behave and are not treated like dogs; instead, they avenge themselves against those who would make them captives and disempower them. Again, the reader is not provided with the details of Magua’s return to status with the Hurons; instead, his pursuit of revenge against Munro serves as the nexus of his reassimilation into his own culture. In the novel’s presentation, Magua’s exile from his native culture is conflated with his English military service; his rejection of this service and acceptance of the “Indian gift” of revenge is once again conflated with his reintegration with his native community. Unlike Duncan Heyward, whose reaction to alienating service in the form of chivalry is flight when given the chance, Magua chooses to fight. To fail to avenge yourself—both individually and, as Magua’s gesture to the
Huron tribe indicates, nationally—will bring down a punishment analogous to that inflicted on Duncan Heyward: they become dogs, captive and captivated, and “The women will point their fingers at us” (107).

4.3: Virtuous Daughters, Stolen Wives, and Marriage and Revenge as Social Foundations

The continual foregrounding of the role of women in these scenes speaks directly to their function as gatekeepers of cultural duty in *The Last of the Mohicans*; their place as the targets of abduction also points to their greater importance in the world of the frontier romance. This importance is not simply symbolic, with women serving as the emblems of civilization and virtue in the wilderness, the threats to them representing the threats of wilderness evil to the civilizing forces of good destined to sweep over the land; as we have seen in both *Edgar Huntly* and *Nick of the Woods*, women are also the pathway to wealth and success within cultures, virtually a form of currency to be traded—or stolen—by men. Clithero, Sarsefield, and Edgar are all dependent on the fortunes of women, and Roland Forrester’s inheritance is presented as claimed by two women, an illegitimate daughter and his cousin Edith, before finally coming to him in his uncle’s true will. Cooper, as Janet Dean argues, continues this depiction of women as items of exchange, although she holds that “the finality with which Cooper forecloses the possibilities of interracial exchange in the funeral scene [for Cora and Uncas] suggests that the paradigm does not hold up on his imagined frontier” (47). I would argue that, perhaps, the culmination in marriage, and with it a uniting of races, does not happen, as Dean suggests; the use of women as currency—and with them a form of
disempowerment that exacerbates or creates a kind of captivity—not only holds up but underpins the entire plot of the novel.

Dean helpfully summarizes this idea of exchange as social formation, as it is passed down from Levi-Strauss through Gayle Rubin, thus:

The momentary union of two families, two races, and two cultures forged over the body of a woman calls to mind the paradigm Gayle Rubin famously terms “the traffic in women.” Building on Claude Levi-Strauss’s theories of marriage as the basis of all social structures, Rubin describes a system of legal conveyance in which men exchange women in order to forge exogamous unions among themselves, consolidating their material and cultural property and power. For Rubin, as for Levi-Strauss, marriage has little to do with romance and everything to do with relationships “between men.” (46)

Although the marriage plot seems almost an afterthought to the central actions of *Mohicans*, the notion that the control of women serves an essential social function for the formation of community is of great importance. Unlike the men in *Edgar Huntly* and *Nick of the Woods*, Heyward’s future is not attached in a monetary way to his marriage to Alice—he is “a young gentleman of vast riches” (Cooper 38)—but is mostly invested in the sociocultural notions connected to her. As Ian Dennis says of Magua, he “is shown to desire Cora—in vengeance—largely because of the enormous value placed on her by the white men, something the text has shown Heyward foolishly revealing to him” (8). As Dennis presents it, Magua’s desires for Cora are “purely imitative” (8), reflective of his
recognition of Cora’s cultural value to the whites as a woman; while I agree that this is certainly part of his motivation, this is not the complete summation of her “value,” especially in the act of her “theft” as revenge.

“Exchanging women becomes a key starting point in the cultural transmission of identity,” Shirley Samuels says, “because identity will be transmitted not only through the woman’s body via [reproduction], but also through the process of exchange by which the woman’s body stands for the symbolic capital (and sometimes the actual capital) of the culture” (“Women” 59). As Magua reveals his intentions to Cora, he cites exactly what he expects her abduction to accomplish: “When Magua left his people, his wife was given to another chief; he has now made friends with the Hurons, and will go back to the graves of his tribe, on the shores of the great lake. Let the daughter of the English chief follow, and live in his wigwam for ever” (Cooper 104). Clearly, Magua sees this as not only a path to revenge on Munro but as an exchange—Cora for the wife “given to another chief.” The connection of Magua’s restored standing with his tribe helps to emphasize this point: when he was banished from the community, he lost access to his wife. His reintegration into this community is linked here with the acquisition of a new wife, even one as unwilling as Cora. Magua does not see Cora as a transaction between cultures, however, as some critics have read her and Dennis’s reading of Magua’s motives would imply; her value is that of wife and pathway to revenge, not as an economic or intercultural currency. “Her bosom cannot nurse the children of a Huron,” Magua claims as he threatens her; their potential offspring, rather than being instilled with Cora’s national identity, will take only Magua’s (108). Magua sees Cora’s exchange value in
terms of her purely physical replacement for his former wife and as metonymy for Munro: “The daughter of Munro would draw his water, hoe his corn, and cook his venison. The body of the gray-head would sleep among his cannon, but his heart would lie within reach of the knife of Le Subtil” (105).

This substitution of Cora for both Magua’s previous wife and for her father, as well as the bearer of cultural value indicated by Dennis’s reading and the reaction to her “theft,” highlights the multivalent possibilities of women as both objects of exchange and as sociocultural gatekeepers. Cora’s embodiment of the virtues of white culture as the picture of propriety make her iconic in her native world; what she represents demands Heyward’s service even when her own requests are pragmatic and driven by necessity. Like the Huron matrons whose very presence demands an explanation of the warriors for their failures to avenge the fallen, Cora’s continuing existence is analogous to “point[ing] their fingers at us” for every failure of duty (107). As the Samuels quotation implies, women can serve to make cultural demands simply by existing as carriers of sociocultural value, either in exchange or in abstract representation. It is this value that drives the pursuit and revenge necessitated by the abductions and endangerments that threaten to dispossess the community’s men of these heavily invested goods. Clearly, the “possession” of women serves an important function regardless of the culture under

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70 This point is emphasized by the many critical readings of the frontier as connecting women to land, either in exchange, like Samuels’s “Women, Blood, and Contract,” or as metaphor, like Smith’s Virgin Land or Kolodny’s The Lay of the Land; Edgar Huntly again provides a useful demonstration, as Old Deb becomes the emblem of her people and their physical and legal dispossession, while the Delaware avengers are introduced as, initially, the captors of a young girl and insurgents who bring territorial control of the frontier into dispute.
discussion; this is the mechanism that underlies marriage—the legal exchange of women—as “the basis of all social structures.”

If the required services rendered to women create forms of domestic captivity to duty and other cultural imperatives, the “theft” of these women is even more damaging; it also leads almost invariably to some sort of revenge (as it did in the case of Jane McCrea), another instantiation of the captivity-revenge cycle. Magua uses the value of Munro’s daughters as a means of revenge by capturing them; Heyward and his allies are forced into action by the loss of these valuables and endure their own captivities as well as carry out their own retribution. This is the same trope used to justify much of the violence against Native Americans in the period. In an exemplary statement of this kind of justification by Andrew Jackson, the “Proclamation on Taking Possession of Pensacola” in 1818, the protection of women becomes the central image rather than the claiming of the land: “The Seminole Indians inhabiting the territories of Spain have for more than two hundred years past, visited our Frontier Settlements with all the horrors of savage massacre—helpless women have been butchered and the cradle stained with the blood of innocence” (qtd. in Dean 49-50). As Baym says of the use of these same ideas in frontier adventures like *Mohicans*, “The narratives alleged that Indian brutality—above all the slaughtering of women and children—was compelling proof of inherent Indian viciousness. This viciousness was adduced to transform territorial aggression against Indians into defensive action, saving the lives of white women and children and preserving the civilization they embodied” (67). Ian Haywood places the novel’s opening
comments into this tradition, “establish[ing] an historical and political framework for perceiving Indian violence as both sensational and distortedly hyperbolic” (170).

Although Haywood’s use of “political” here refers to larger national and geopolitical conflicts, it is also an apt term for the convergence of these various ideas—women as currency, social formation, and defensive or retributive violence—and their roles in uniting individuals into functional groups. What we see happening in *The Last of the Mohicans* specifically and in frontier romance more broadly is the use of these ideas to track a fundamental shift in the organizational principles of sociopolitical groups; at base, it is a movement from Levi-Strauss to Girard, a movement from marriage to violence as the foundational element. 71 Rubin’s “traffic in women” allows social groups to form around the exchange of females for sociopolitical purposes; when this currency is threatened or, in the case of Indian captivity or atrocity, stolen or destroyed, the basic organization of the social group switches from Levi-Strauss’s idea of marriage as the foundation of society to that of Girard’s revenge-sacrifice system. When Jane McCrea’s marriage is marred by her abduction and murder, the story of her potential exchange becomes one of required revenge. This system also allows the recreation of social groups along lines other than the familial or hereditary ones that stem from the marriage-centered exchange paradigm; anyone and everyone can participate, and those most fit for task, especially the rough-and-tumble adventures of the frontier, are moved to the fore. This is the reason why characters like Nathan Slaughter and Natty Bumppo becomes the

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71 Interestingly enough, Girard himself addresses Levi-Strauss’s marriage exchange ideas, but he does so in terms of its implications for kinship systems as a form of symbolic language brought about by sacrificial substitution rather than a possible alternative foundation, as I argue here. See “Levi-Strauss, Structuralism, and Marriage Laws” in *Violence and the Sacred* for more information.
“heroes” of a story that is generally not their own, while the “natural aristocrats” like Heyward and Roland are forced to submit to being led by those who would generally be considered their inferiors in rank and status. This is also why we see characters like Edgar Huntly, Young Tom Bruce and Oliver Effingham of Cooper’s *The Pioneers*—essentially hybrid characters combining the traits of both frontiersman and aristocrat—as projections of a transitional national future, where the best traits of all lines come together to ensure a brighter tomorrow.\(^2\) It is these types of characters Sam Houston was discussing when he spoke of “These hunter-legislators, these squatter-founders…A young hero-people, a new Rome, coming out of the forests, walking in light, clothed in strength” (qtd. in Slotkin *Regeneration* 430).

The transitional nature of this switch from marriage to revenge is itself reflected in the transition from Jeffersonian republicanism to Jacksonian democracy. Jefferson’s vision was populated by a yeomanry capable of recognizing their natural superiors and placing them into positions of power; this recognition is one of socially determined excellence, the same natural aristocracy that finds its way into the conventional romantic story devices of frontier adventures. Jackson, by contrast, made on his reputation as an Indian fighter and man of action, is the frontier hero whose experience and coming of age

\(^2\) It is worth noting the difference between this formulation and that of Slotkin, where the frontiersman is a hybrid of Indian and white, a moral white man with savage skills, as opposed to a renegade who takes his white skills and “goes Indian.” The projection here is that the frontier skills are aligned with the space of the frontier, not the person of the possessor; despite Natty’s continual attempt to divide “gifts” along racial lines, he recognizes that anyone can adopt these gifts as the situation requires. It is the necessity of life on the frontier, not some sort of essential racial component, that generates the gifts. As such, these hybrid characters represent truly liminal figures, in that they combine the ways of different spaces as much as different races, the behaviors of both gentlemen and frontiersman/Indians. Interestingly, Uncas would also appear to be a member of this group (due to the continual emphasis on his gentlemanly, heroic behavior), but Cooper chooses to kill him instead of reward him with the conventional romantic plot resolution of marriage. Perhaps his chivalric actions are too closely aligned with the dying Old World systems, making him a member of two vanishing worlds at once and therefore truly beyond saving.
in the wilderness trumps the Old World, hereditary or social “excellence” that is often ineffective or openly scorned in frontier romance. The novels depicting these fundamental alterations in the social organization capture the same transitional changes on the level of national mentality and character, reforging social bonds on the basis of shared experiences of captivity and revenge rather than marital exchange and nuptial relationships. As demonstrated by the story of Jane McCrea, a society organized around the Old World’s system of marriage exchange can lead to divided, apathetic citizenry; Jane forsakes her country for a Tory lover, and the frontier Burgoyne faces is littered with non-combatants. When McCrea is murdered—the valuable female currency lost—the system is reorganized around New World retribution—the supposedly Indian “gift” that Natty presents as widely available for everyone on the frontier when the situation calls for it—for this theft and destruction; suddenly, citizens are united and no longer apathetic. People of differing backgrounds and stations in life—those generally divided by hereditary and aristocratic culture and excluded from the marriage exchange by the limited community participation involved in the ritual—come together in a system based on the ideal of individual virtues being paramount in the coming action. The leaders earn their positions, like Jackson or the Washington of Cooper’s footnote, rather than being granted or molded into them, as in Jefferson’s vision of the republic. And, as in Jackson’s Pensacola Proclamation, the Jane McCrea legend, and frontier romances like The Last of the Mohicans, the focusing event that allows virtue to be demonstrated is the threat to women and children—the embodiments of cultural capital—by the savage thief or murderer.
4.4: The Rising Sun and Revenge as Democratic Action

“The bifurcation of the novel [at the Fort William Henry Massacre] is crucial,” Richard Slotkin says of the division of The Last of the Mohicans into halves, “for with the massacre we leave the stage of ‘history’ and firmly enter the world of myth” (Introduction xx). Many critics have recognized this essential division in both tone and theme as a place where Cooper’s novel shifts from one form to another, generally aligned along a movement from a more literal or historical frame into a mythic or symbolic—even psychological—one; while these views are compelling and certainly justified by the text itself, I would submit that the two halves are different in superficial terms only. When considered through the lens of the captivity-revenge cycle, the two halves of Mohicans display a parallel, rather than divergent, focus: the establishment of communities through collective violence. Like the interlaced plotlines of Edgar Huntly, Cooper’s novel is a recasting of the elemental structure of captivity and revenge, the same fundamental organizational impulses behind the Jane McCrea myth and the attendant communal reaction of America’s soon-to-be citizens. The central event of the novel, the massacre at Fort William Henry, is the culmination of the conversion of Magua’s personal revenge into a communal or national act; the analogous event at the end of the novel, the battle between the Delawares and the Hurons, displays the same conversion of the individual desires of Natty, Heyward, and the Mohicans. Each half of the novel traces the development of communities through the trials of captivity and revenge; while the mode of depiction may change from historical to mythical, we do not
leave “the stage of history” for “the world of myth” but rather are shown the shared world between them through the primal human struggles of captivity and revenge.

Linking both halves of the novel is the overarching theme of Magua’s revenge. An event occurring outside of the narrative proper, Magua’s domestic captivity in his service to the British army and his adoption by the Mohawk tribe heighten the alienation and dispossession of the exiled Huron; the culmination of his captivity is the beating administered by Munro, a public shaming that emphasizes Magua’s powerless, subjugated status and throws into clear relief the great distance between his native culture and that of British military service. As mentioned above, Magua’s banishment from the Hurons begins the process of his alienation and eventual captivity, with the symbolically powerful whipping “like a dog” making clear his physical as well as mental disempowerment.

The discussion of this punishment with Cora during her first abduction draws out the differences between the British viewpoint and that of Magua’s native sensibilities:

“He [Munro] made a law, that if an Indian swallowed the fire-water, and came into the cloth wigwams of his warriors, it should not be forgotten. Magua foolishly opened his mouth, and the hot liquor led him into the cabin of Munro. What did the gray-head? let his daughter say.”

“He forgot not his words, and did justice, by punishing the offender,” said the undaunted daughter.

“Justice!” repeated the Indian, casting an oblique glance of the most ferocious expression at her unyielding countenance; “is it justice to make
evil and then punish for it? Magua was not himself; it was the fire-water that spoke and acted for him! but Munro did not believe it. The Huron chief was tied up before all the pale-faced warriors, and whipped like a dog.”

Cora remained silent, for she knew not how to palliate this imprudent severity on the part of her father in a manner to suit the comprehension of an Indian. (103)

The reader is here confronted with the clash of two worlds—not the historical and mythical, but two differing worlds’ forms of “justice.” Magua, exiled among the whites and forced to fight “against his own nation,” is entrapped in a system of justice beyond “the comprehension of an Indian,” where the victim of an external force—alcohol—is punished by those who make the crime possible. Cora recognizes only imprudence in her father’s choice, not injustice; she cannot adequately explain to Magua why her father’s choice to punish him was the right one, but she has no doubts of its justness. Magua’s sense of his entrapment, disempowerment, and alienation in the inexplicable white military system of justice creates a powerful sense of injustice in him, and he reacts in the way dictated by his native system: revenge.

These effects are those of the classic revenge tragedy, as Hinds traces them for Edgar Huntly and as Girard sees them buried in ritual: external or abstract forces demand action by those trapped in their sway, and the victim lashes out against those who represent the enemy. More importantly, the conflict highlighted by Magua’s revenge, the question of justice, extends beyond his personal grievance into the realm of a larger
community, that of all Indians. This expansion is presented immediately in the speech Magua makes to his warriors after Cora refuses to become his wife:

Heyward fancied, by his pointing so frequently toward the direction of the great lakes, that he spoke of the land of their fathers, and of their distant tribe. [...] He now spoke of the long and painful route by which they had left those spacious grounds and happy villages, to come and battle against the enemies of their Canadian fathers. He enumerated the warriors of the party; their several merits; their frequent services to the nation; their wounds, and the number of the scalps they had taken. [...] He pointed toward the youthful military captive, and described the death of a favorite warrior, who had been precipitated into the deep ravine by his hand. [...] He now spoke of the wives and children of the slain; their destitution; their misery, both physical and moral; their distance; and, at last, of their unavenged wrongs. Then suddenly lifting his voice to a pitch of terrific energy, he concluded by demanding: “Are the Hurons dogs to bear this?”

(106-07)

Magua’s personal exile, when “The Hurons drove him from the graves of his fathers” (102) is echoed here as the plight of all Hurons in joining the French, another alien society whose rules of conduct are often beyond “the comprehension of an Indian”; “the long and painful route” these warriors have taken is the same one Magua followed as “he ran down the shores of the lake, and followed their outlet to the ‘city of cannon’” (102) and into the same servitude to a foreign master. Heyward momentarily becomes the
emblem of all enemies as Magua describes the struggles of his comrades against the white soldier and his party, and the quick movement from this single incident to the “unavenged wrongs” of the tribe leads to his vehement gesture toward communal outrage and required action: “Are the Hurons dogs to bear this? Who shall say to the wife of Menowgua that the fishes have his scalp, and that his nation have not taken revenge!” (107, emphasis added).

This same “national” sentiment is the first to be expressed by Magua when Montcalm stops him from firing at the unaware Munro after the treaty to surrender the fort. When Montcalm angrily reminds him of the treaty, Magua responds: “‘What can the Hurons do?’ returned the savage, speaking also, though imperfectly, in the French language. ‘Not a warrior has a scalp, and the pale faces make friends!’” (169). The remainder of the discussion shifts back and forth from Magua’s personal viewpoint to that of his tribal one, from the “many suns” marking his allegiance to the English to his renewed role with his own people: “‘Where is that sun!’ demanded the sullen savage. ‘Behind the hill; and it is dark and cold. But when he comes again, it will be bright and warm. Le Subtil is the sun of his tribe. There have been clouds, and many mountains between him and his nation; but now he shines and it is a clear sky!’” (169). Just as his banishment and exile among the British were conflated, the rising sun metaphor simultaneously combines Magua’s personal reconciliation with his tribe and the return of the tribe’s power; with the return of the sun comes the clear sky and a new day, both for Magua and for the rest of his people now that “he comes again.” The conversation closes along these same lines: Magua reveals his personal grievance to Montcalm, but his
gesture is toward communal reaction, not his individual revenge. “Go,” he tells Montcalm, “teach your young men, it is peace! le Renard Subtil knows how to speak to a Huron warrior!” (170). Each leader will set the tone for his community, and the differences are displayed in the ensuing Fort William Henry Massacre.

George Dekker speaks to this notion when he claims that Cooper’s “characters, regarded as representatives of different races, regions, and social classes, are engaged in an action that tests the possibility of racial and regional harmony in America” (25). This mirrors the uses of Jane McCrea’s death as a synecdoche for all the atrocities perpetrated by the British and their Indian allies in generating patriotic outrage among Americans; what is shown during the massacre is the essential character of each group, displayed through their “representatives.” It is notable that the Americans here are represented as victims only—the women, children, and noncombatant or unprepared soldiers are the focus, with the heroes like Natty Bumppo and the Mohicans conspicuously absent. Munro’s confusion and dejection becomes that of his retreating community, as “from the shock of this unexpected blow [Webb’s failure to support him] the haughty feelings of Munro never recovered; but from that moment there commenced a change in his determined character, which accompanied him to a speedy grave” (Cooper 165). The personal grave of Munro becomes the communal grave of those he protected at Fort William Henry; the revenge of Magua on him becomes a communal attack on the defeated company; the complacence of Montcalm becomes an indictment of the French soldiers for not interceding. The massacre, an event incomprehensible in its original history, is here made intelligible for Cooper’s readers by recasting larger groups through
the molds of their representatives, with the violence itself transformed through the
captivity-revenge cycle from individual revenge into community outrage. Magua is once
again a Huron, and all Hurons become Magua.

The reemergence of the American heroes after the massacre begins the parallel
process of individuals forming a new community on the “good” side, the retelling of the
elemental narrative of the first half over again, this time with the formation of a revenge
community for the favored American sons. The Old World bonds believed to unite and
protect—military support and honor, the codes of civilization, even the ties of
nationalism—have been proven false; General Webb has failed to support Munro,
Montcalm has failed to keep his word, and the treaty of civilized warfare is useless. The
failures of these systems open up the possibility of new systems, however: group
commitments not formed on the dead social codes of Old World allegiance but rather
based on individual alliance. A.N. Kaul points to this idea when he focuses on the place
of loyalty in the works of Cooper and his contemporaries: “It is significant that one of
their [the nineteenth-century novelists] common values should be the idea of loyalty, a
bond which involves a personal as well as a social commitment, and without whose
active presence no community life is possible” (78). The failed systems show that loyalty
is not an allegiance to form, which is how they are presented: Webb sends reinforcements
because he must, but he does not truly support Munro. Montcalm provides an exemplary
gesture of civility only to stand by while it is violated. Magua’s alliance with the British
is shown to be but words, superseded by his other commitments. Empty gestures and
obedience to form, Cooper’s novel seems to say, are what the failing systems produce, not true loyalty.

By contrast, states Kaul, “loyalty is a voluntary response and, unlike obedience, can never be coerced, it does not operate in socially enforced relationships. It requires by implication the creation of a community life to which the individuals concerned can owe free and spontaneous allegiance” (78). With the failures that precipitate the climax of the novel’s first half—failures of obedience to accepted social authorities, be they people or codes of conduct—the novel’s second half shows the genesis of community based on loyalty, culminating in another climactic battle and the assurance of Natty that Chingachgook, after the death of Uncas, is not alone:

“No, no,” cried Hawk-eye, who had been gazing with a yearning look at the rigid features of his friend, with something like his own self-command, but whose philosophy could endure no longer; “no, Sagamore, not alone. The gifts of our colours may be different, but God has so placed us as to journey in the same path. I have no kin, and I may also say, like you, no people. He was your son, and a red-skin by nature; and it may be, that your blood was nearer;—but if ever I forget the lad, who has so often fou't at my side in war, and slept at my side in peace, may He who made us all, whatever may be our colour or our gifts, forget me. The boy has left us for a time, but, Sagamore, you are not alone!” (Cooper 349).

Importantly, the bonds of loyalty as shown in the novel are those of actions, in opposition to the empty gestures and words of the old paradigms and the disloyal. Natty and
Chingachgook clasp hands and bow heads together over Uncas’s grave, while Montcalm and Munro never come into physical contact during the surrender of the fort (349, 165). Magua, the “victor” of the first half, is a speaker, a sophist whose power comes from words; he is most openly contrasted with Uncas, who rarely speaks and whose actions, not his words, show his allegiances and loyalties. Significantly, Uncas literally embodies his community in the tattoo of the tortoise, revealed by “a single effort” of another warrior in tearing off his shirt. Magua’s speech and even Cora’s words are of no effect, but the physical embodiment of loyalty—in tattoo or in action—has immense power, “as if a supernatural agency had interposed” (309).

This same theme of the forging of new communities through actions begins the novel’s second half, as the odd grouping of individuals comes together in the pursuit of recovery and revenge against their enemies. Speaking for all, Natty pronounces the judgment that ties these unlikely companions together: “Revenge is an Indian feeling, and all who know me, know that there is no cross in my veins; but this much will I say—here, in the face of heaven, and with the power of the Lord so manifest in this howling wilderness, that should these Frenchers ever trust themselves again within the range of a ragged bullet, there is one rifle which shall play its part so long as flint will fire, or powder burn!” (183). This new social unit, symbolically arising on “the third day from the capture of the fort,” signals a rebirth from the faulty systems of the past into the better systems forming in the American present and future (180). Where the Old World paradigms of birth and status—socially created attributes, like those of the Jeffersonian

73 Indeed, all of Montcalm’s gestures are just that: gestures, specifically coded as forms of civility or show. He bows, “dropping his spotless plume nearly to the earth, in courtesy,” and places “his hand impressively on his heart” as a show of faith (162, emphasis added).
vision of the natural aristocrat and his republican greatness—have ceased to function; the virtues manifested in action and performance become the new way. Munro’s faith in Montcalm because he is a “marquess, as indeed a marquess he should be” and Webb because of his rank are replaced by the activity of Natty and the Mohicans; the physical evidence of their loyalty—their pursuit of Magua—is a truer, more American system, a democratic system that finds virtue in action, as Andrew Jackson demonstrated his in his personal history. Uncas makes this notion clear when Tamenund rebukes him for accepting Natty as a friend: “‘La Longe Carabine!’ exclaimed Tamenund, opening his eyes, and regarding the scout sternly. ‘My son has not done well to call him friend!’ ‘I call him so who proves himself such,’ returned the young chief” (311).

As Dana Nelson says of the collection of differing characters typical of Cooper’s Leatherstocking novels, “groupings of male and female characters across the lines of class, habitude, and race provide readers a series of contrasts that foreground the problems of creating new identities that can support and sustain the democratic aims of the early United States” (124-25). While this is certainly true, there are also points where those contrasts are overcome and the lines of race, class, and habitude are democratically subsumed by a greater communal bond; in The Last of the Mohicans, we see that bond occurring through the basic social foundations created by the captivity-revenge cycle. The actions of the novel are all precipitated by forms of captivity and revenge; Natty Bumppo repeatedly declares that he will pursue the path of revenge despite it being an “Indian gift” and he “a man without a cross”; when Uncas is revealed to be the long-

74 Note that this mirrors the change from marriage exchange to revenge discussed in the previous section. Social statuses based on lineage or commodity exchange through marriage are replaced by statuses gain through action, specifically the act of revenge.
awaited Mohican chief come to renew the Delawares after their persistent feminization—the captivity of a whole tribe to the Hurons—the white men are integrated into a greater revenge community. The same metaphor that marked the rising of the Hurons again—Magua as “the sun of his people”—reemerges with the revelation of Uncas: Tamenund says the Delawares “have not seen a bright sun in many winters” and have been “hid in clouds” (308); when Uncas is revealed, he exclaims “Uncas, the child of Uncas, is found! Let the eyes of a dying eagle gaze on the rising sun” (310). Like the Hurons who rise in vengeance at the end of the novel’s first half, the Delawares now rise in vengeance at the end of the second to carry out the parallel task of a communal revenge.

The Delaware revenge, however, is based on action and loyalty, not the dissimulation and greed that mark the Huron atrocities at the William Henry Massacre. This new revenge community, taking on the character of its leaders, is democratic and based on the proven virtues and abilities of its members; here Natty is a leader and Heyward a follower, as befits their experiences. While it is true that Uncas is made a chief by his birth, he earns his distinction through his physical performances throughout the novel’s second half: he runs the gauntlet in the Huron village and enacts the dances and physical actions that “announce[e] that he had assumed the chief authority in the intended expedition” (320). The novel, then, tells the same story twice, the two halves enacting the captivity-revenge cycle and its uses in forming a united community; the

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75 Shirley Samuels notes that “Perhaps the culminating decision for this decade [the 1820s] of determinations about land and possession was in 1831 when, in Cherokee Nation vs. Georgia, the Supreme Court decided to use the term ‘domestic dependent nations.’ An announcement that a nation might be ‘dependent’ places the inhabitants of that nation in a feminized relation to the inhabitants of another nation,” an idea made plain by the repeated feminization of the Delawares throughout The Last of the Mohicans (“Women” 58).
triumph of the favored group in the second half becomes a triumph for the New World
democratic group, the group whose leaders and heroes prove themselves so through their
actions, in contrast to the first half’s faith in leadership through rank or station as proven
only through the words or empty gestures. America’s transition from Jefferson to Jackson
is reenacted in Cooper’s novel through the captivity-revenge cycle, and democratic men
of action—those following the model of Jackson in their pursuit of revenge—are the
novel’s favored sons.

4.5: The Gift That Keeps on Giving

“Remember,” Natty counsels Heyward as the soldier prepares to infiltrate the
Huron encampment in disguise, “that to outwit the knaves it is lawful to practice things,
that may not be naturally the gift of a white skin” (229). As has often so often throughout
the novel, Natty’s doctrine of racial “gifts” seems to be less bound up in the category of
race and more in circumstance; during this scene Natty once again reiterates his own
acceptance of the native gift of vengeance when he states that “if the Hurons should
master your scalp […] They shall pay for their victory with a life for every hair it holds!”
(229). His choice of words in advising Heyward—that it is “lawful” to step out of racial
character—draws attention to the laws of the wilderness, the laws specifically embraced
by the Indians: kill or be killed and, most importantly, an eye for an eye. The rules
governing the white race—the Old World codes of conduct proven to be such failures—
do not fit the circumstances of life in the wild; when faced with the New World and the
laws of the frontier, the white man is free to adopt the practices of the native culture.
When Heyward, Munro, and even the peaceful David Gamut all join in the Delaware attack on the Hurons, becoming part of an Indian war party that is, in fact led by the white Natty Bumppo, the reader witnesses the real truth behind Natty’s words to Duncan. Revenge is not simply an Indian gift, but a truly native gift; it is a gift available to everyone on the frontier when circumstances dictate.

As it was with Jane McCrea, the oppression of a foreign enemy, embodied here by the Hurons who serve as mercenaries for the French, becomes focused by the captivity of a single woman, Cora Munro. Like the colonists mobilized by McCrea’s murder, even noncombatants like Gamut become warriors who embrace justice—revenge transfigured by ceremony, such as Uncas’s war dance, into the will of the larger community—and strike back against their oppressors for the group captivity represented through the synecdoche of the female victim of violence. At the heart of *The Last of the Mohicans*, then, as it is in the legend of Jane McCrea, is the captivity-revenge cycle and its powerful organizational principles. Cooper demonstrates again one of the foundational aspects of American culture, and with it the transition from an older system of social organization that is failing to a new one that fits the present world—the “frontier” world made of the specifically American materials authors were encouraged to use in constructing a national literature—by giving his New World characters permission to “practice things, that may not be naturally [their] gift.” If the citizens of the new country are to be truly American, they must accept the Indian gifts that make life in the New World possible, as Natty Bumppo has done; they must accept the gift of revenge and make it not an Indian but an American gift.
CHAPTER 5:

HOPE LESLIE: PARALLEL HISTORIES AND THE CAPTIVITY-REVENGE CYCLE

OF “THE EARLY TIMES IN THE MASSACHUSETTS”

“One cannot exert violence without submitting to it: that is the law of reciprocity.”

-Rene Girard, Violence and the Sacred

As a strongly conventional genre, the frontier romances examined so far have
shared a significant number of characteristics; perhaps the one simultaneously most
visible and most easily elided is the gender of their authors. Cooper’s version of the
frontier romance, a descendant of Brown’s Edgar Huntly and the novels of Scott, inherits
the more masculine characteristics of wilderness adventure and a love plot based on male
heroism and female helplessness that would become the standard of the genre.76 But as
Leland Person points out, the genre did not start with such a gendered imbalance in its
authorship: despite Emory Elliott’s claims for the primacy of Edgar Huntly,77 Person
follows Henri Petter in saying that “The first two American novels to use Indians and
Indian captivity […] were both written by women: Ann Eliza Bleecker’s The History of
Maria Kittle (1793) and Susannah Rowson’s Reuben and Rachel (1798)” (“American
Eve” 670). Moreover, “1824 marks the inception of an admittedly short-lived female
alternative” to the masculine novels of Cooper, McHenry, and Paulding published in
1823: “Harriet V. Cheney’s A Peep at the Pilgrims, Lydia Maria Child’s Hobomok, and
Eliza Cushing’s Saratoga found competition only from John Brainard’s brief Fort

76 As Cheri Louise Ross summarizes the genre conventions presented by Barnett in The Ignoble Savage,
her list includes “(4) a passive, imperiled white heroine who is the object of white and Indian attempts to
possess her; and (5) a white hero who rescues the heroine from captivity” (322).
77 See Elliott’s statement quoted at the beginning of chapter two of this study.
While this output would indeed be short lived—Person notes that men wrote over forty frontier works in the 1830s and 40s, compared to one by a woman—women were initially strong contributors to the early days of the frontier romance.

One of the primary contributors to this strong early showing by women was Catharine Maria Sedgwick. “Sedgwick’s contemporaries ranked her as one of the foremost writers of US literature in the early nineteenth century,” says Maria Karafilis, “and cited her along with Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and William Cullen Bryant as the writers responsible for putting ‘American literature’ on the map” (327); Sedgwick’s most famous novel, *Hope Leslie*, would join the burgeoning frontier romance genre in 1827. Often seen as a response to Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, published just a year before, *Hope Leslie* served as both an answer to the call for a unique American literature and a rebuttal to the male-centered frontier adventure based on racial warfare. As Carolyn L. Karcher notes in her introduction to the novel, Sedgwick would “refocus the emergent national literature on the lives, domestic mores, and values of American women, as well as the foremothers’ roles in building the republic […] in striking contrast to the works of [her] male contemporaries” in *Hope Leslie* (xi). At the very beginning of the genre’s rise, then, one of America’s most honored novelists was already seeking to revise and expand its possibilities.

Sedgwick’s alterations to frontier romance’s conventions seem like an odd shift back toward the European tradition from which American authors were trying to break. Unlike the novels we have seen so far, Sedgwick’s text is mainly set in the settlements,
the “city” versus the “wilderness” held so quintessentially American; the frontier is ever present and implicated in the novel’s action, but it is rarely the main site of important events in the novel’s central plotline. Where the male-authored novels often present characters faced with a world lacking institutional authority, *Hope Leslie* is largely concerned with the struggle for morality in the face of institutions rather than in their absence. The romantic marriage plots in *Edgar Huntly*, *Nick of the Woods*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*, while prominent and, as I have argued, of great importance to each novel, are generally secondary to or subsumed by the primary narrative of captivity, revenge, and violence along community or racial lines. In *Hope Leslie*, these subplots are more prominent and available, while the fear of intracommunity violence becomes the secondary concern; as Ezra Tawil frames this difference, novels like *Hope Leslie* “concern themselves not only with Anglo-Indian warfare, but also with the question of how one conducts a courtship under such [frontier] conditions” (99). These changes in focus have been the reason some critics have chosen to differentiate a work like *Hope Leslie* or Child’s *Hobomok* by an additional generic modifier—“domestic.”

As Tawil aptly states, “According to the dominant literary critical tradition, the designation ‘domestic frontier romance’ presents a contradiction in terms. Most accounts of American literary history proceed on the assumption that the cultural impulse behind frontier romance opposes that responsible for domestic fiction” (99). This has certainly been the case for the male-authored novels, as we have seen from the disavowal of or open hostility toward domestic and romantic conventions in the scholarship; and, as Tawil notes, “much of the existing scholarship on [*Hobomok* and *Hope Leslie*] seems to
have reproduced the antithesis between domestic and frontier fiction,” emphasizing the
refocusing described above as a divergence from frontier romance convention rather than
an expansion of it (99-100).

Rather than continue this line of critical inquiry, where “Sedgwick imports
domestic conventions into Cooper’s wilderness” or “deploys frontier romance to
dismantle the limitations imposed on white womanhood by domestic literature” (Castiglia
*Bound* 165)—thus maintaining the antithesis between the domestic and frontier impulses
in the text—I instead read the work as another version of the same frontier story played
out in the other novels covered in this study: an exploration of the captivity-revenge trope
as a determining factor in sociopolitical formation. Sedgwick’s focus on “domestic”
concerns is not a departure from the narratives of captivity and revenge discussed so far,
but an extension of this structure beyond the pure frontier and into “civilization.” Where
we see the most basic levels of social organization around alienation and collective
retribution in the wilderness, in *Hope Leslie* we see its continuation in the processes
Girard describes—revenge’s reconstruction as institutional authority via concepts of
religion, law, and justice. In domesticating the frontier, then, Sedgwick’s novel
demonstrates the mechanisms by which personal retribution becomes state-sanctioned
punishment; even as her characters struggle against the frontier impulses of captivity and
revenge, Sedgwick reaffirms the centrality of the captivity-revenge cycle to the
conceptualization of American sociopolitical life.

In order to reaffirm this centrality of frontier tropes in the organized world of the
civilized settlements, Sedgwick creates what I call a “parallel history,” a retelling of the
cycle of violence from the point of view rarely available in the male-authored texts: that of the Indians. By “not merely changing sculptors to give the advantage to one or the other’s subjects; but [...] putting the chisel into the hands of truth, and giving it to whom it belonged” Sedgwick tells the complete story that makes the cyclical nature of frontier violence openly available; moreover, her parallel history provides the reader with a clear view of the reciprocal nature of frontier transactions, be they peaceful or violent (Sedgwick 55). This serves to destabilize the authority of the accepted historical narrative, opening up the pathway for new possibilities, new identities that are not tied to a traditional interpretation of the historical record. The reciprocity that powers the cyclical nature of Indian-settler relationships becomes a system that remains in place when the conflicts move out of the wilderness and into the settlements. Sedgwick’s presentation of the captivity-revenge cycle reveals the institutional demands of a legal society to be another version of the demands of the frontier; in breaking with the received form of history, Sedgwick gives her readers the chance to see their present as also open to reinterpretation, a world with new possibilities for groups like women and Indians beyond those dictated by accepted history.

Although *Hope Leslie* does much to revise the typical conventions of the frontier romance, it is still “an extraordinarily conventional book,” according to Michael Davitt Bell; part of what makes it such is the grafting of other genres—domestic fiction, seduction novel, historical novel, even picaresque adventure—onto the frontier romance structure (“History and Romance” 213-14). This makes for what Bell calls “the incredibly complicated plot of *Hope Leslie,*” where “we have Indians, pirates, a Catholic
villain, a witch trial, a love affair, all set in a scene that ranges from the upper valleys of the Housatonic to the inner reaches of Governor Winthrop’s domestic establishment” (215, 216). This, of course, leads to the common criticism of most frontier romances, that it has “obvious flaws in plotting and excessive reliance on the conventions of sentimental fiction” (Person “American Eve” 681); as we have seen with the other novels examined in this study, however, this denigration of the text’s construction often overlooks important underlying features, especially the central place of the captivity-revenge cycle in facilitating the other narrative aspects. Even in the complicated, seemingly divergent world of *Hope Leslie*, a system of reciprocal acts of violence and abduction form the basis of the novel’s main connecting plotlines.

The narrative begins with the history of William Fletcher, an English youth whose choice to become a Puritan alienates him from his uncle, ruins his chance at marriage to his first love, and sets him off into the New World. Fletcher eventually marries a fine Puritan woman, moves to the frontier settlement of Springfield, Massachusetts, and lives a relatively peaceful life. After several years, he receives word that his former lover, his cousin Alice, has died in making the voyage to the New World to be reunited with him after she has been widowed; Fletcher becomes the guardian of her two young daughters, renamed Hope and Faith in the Puritan style. Along with the two girls come two Pequod children, Magawisca and Oneco, the offspring of the famous Pequod chief, Mononotto and recent captives in the Puritan attack on the Pequods at Mystic, Connecticut. Fletcher goes to Boston to retrieve the new additions to his family, sending Faith, Magawisca, and Oneco back to Bethel, his home on the outskirts of Springfield. He remains in Boston.
with Hope for many months, while his stalwart wife organizes the little community at home.

On the day of Fletcher’s return, however, his home is attacked by Mononotto, partially as revenge for the English attack on his tribe and partly to free his children from captivity. Fletcher’s son, Everell, and Faith Leslie are taken captive; Everell is to be a sacrifice, and Faith eventually marries Oneco in one of the only successful interracial marriages in early American literature. As Mononotto is about to ritualistically decapitate Everell, Magawisca interferes, having her arm severed and allowing Everell to escape. This effectively ends the novel’s first act, with the second act, picking up seven years later, centered on Hope Leslie and the repercussions of the events depicted in this opening section.

Hope, despite her life in the strict Puritan world, is a free-spirited young woman who follows the dictates of her own heart over the accepted rules of Puritan propriety. When she interferes in the imprisonment of a local Indian woman, Nelema, after she saves Hope’s tutor from a snake bite, she is sent to Boston by the Puritan elders in hopes that living in the Winthrop household will provide her better examples to imitate in her own behavior. Everell returns from his education abroad in England, and a love triangle ensues between Hope, Everell, and Winthrop’s ideal Puritan niece, Esther Downing. Magawisca also reappears with the intent of setting up a meeting between Hope and her long-lost sister Faith, fulfilling a promise Nelema makes to Hope for saving her life from Puritan execution.
Magawisca is captured during this meeting when the novel’s villain, Sir Philip Gardiner, informs the Puritan authorities of the rendezvous. Gardiner, a Catholic in disguise, is the novel’s seducer, complete with fallen mistress Rosa, disguised as his page, in tow. Feeling that Puritan justice is again wrong in the case of an imprisoned Indian woman, Hope and Everell free Magawisca from jail. Gardiner attempts to abduct Hope, but his plan goes awry when the pirates he has hired for the task abduct the wrong woman, the busybody servant and source of much chagrin throughout the novel, Jennet. Rosa, in the madness of despair over her fallen state, manages to toss a lantern into a powder keg on board the pirate ship, blowing up all the novel’s villains in perhaps the most bizarre method of authorial execution in early American fiction. Gardiner’s treachery is revealed, Magawisca and her family disappear into the West, the love plot between Esther, Hope, and Everell is cleared up, and Everell and Hope marry. Esther becomes a model of Puritan domesticity and the public edification possible for an unmarried woman, and everyone lives happily ever after.

The critical history of *Hope Leslie* matches that of most female-authored popular literature from the nineteenth century: great acclaim followed by a fall into near obscurity, with recognition coming again in the movements for recovery of the 1970s. As mentioned above, Sedgwick was considered one of the “great founders of American literature” by her contemporaries, and *The North American Review*—“the most scholarly and learned journal in the country”—“consistently praised her novels” (Foster 20, 22). As Mary Kelley reports, “Boston’s *Athenaeum* ranked her with Irving and Cooper in a
survey of America’s literary achievements,” and Sedgwick maintained her ranking alongside Cooper, Bryant, and Irving up to the twentieth century (xi).

In the twentieth century, however, Sedgwick’s works suffered the same neglect that plagued other popular writers—particularly women—as “early twentieth-century critics virtually ignored her, writing her out of the literary history and deeming her historical romances overwrought and conventional” (Karafilis 327). Even as late as 1970, as reevaluation of the merits of long-neglected works began to take place, Sedgwick’s texts were held to be of limited interest: Bell, for instance, says that “although Hope Leslie is a better book than the few critics who mention it allow, it is no neglected masterpiece. Its interest, rather is historical” (“History” 213). A writer whose renown tempted one contemporary review to claim that a “hundred years hence, when other and gifted competitors have crowded into the field, our country will still be as proud of her name” (qtd. in Kelley x) had been reduced to little more than a historical artifact, her best-known novel “no neglected masterpiece.”

As Karafilis notes, “Since its republication in 1987, however, as one of the texts in the Rutgers University Press’s American Women Writers series,” Hope Leslie “has enjoyed a renaissance of sorts” (327). Since its rebirth into the scholarly eye in the 1980s, the vast majority of critical work on the novel has fallen into two main categories: the Indian-white relations analysis that is a mainstay of frontier romance criticism, and what may broadly but safely be called feminist readings of the novel’s depiction of women and their place in Jacksonian democracy. Miscegenation, one of the hotter topics of Cooper criticism, often serves as a nexus for critical approaches to Hope Leslie as well; with its
more positive depictions of the possibilities of Indian-white marriages and relations, it is
this aspect that serves as the basis for the understanding of the novel as a rejoinder to
what is seen as Cooper’s more vehement occlusion of such potential relationships.

The focus of this criticism on sociopolitical aspects of *Hope Leslie* makes much
of the work of use to the present study. Particularly useful is Christopher Castiglia’s “In
Praise of Extra-Vagant Women: *Hope Leslie* and the Captivity Romance,” later revised
into a chapter for his book, *Bound and Determined: Captivity, Culture-Crossing and
White Womanhood from Mary Rowlandson to Patty Hearst*. A wide-ranging study of the
development and continuation of captivity narratives throughout the history of women
writers in America, Castiglia’s book helpfully traces the role of hierarchical and
patriarchal structures as forms of captivity, similar to those I have traced for characters
submitted to domestic captivity in the previously discussed frontier romances. As
Castiglia says of the role of captivity literature,

> A literature of imprisonment implies, however, a potential compensatory
> mythology of jail break. Just such a tradition is established in the women-
> authored captivity romances, beginning with Susanna Rowson’s *Reuben
> and Rachel* in 1798 and reaching an apogee in 1827 with Catharine Maria
> Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie*. Rejecting the agency of men and overcoming the
> limitations imposed on women, [...] the captivity narrative becomes not a
tale of imprisonment primarily, but a tale of liberation, uniquely woman-
centered. (“In Praise” 3)
Exploring the resistance of Sedgwick’s strong female characters to the limits imposed on them by masculine authority, Castiglia sees in *Hope Leslie* a corrective to the “weak, infantilized women, isolated and in need of protection” that populate the frontier romances of Cooper, Bird, and other male-centered writers. Positing Sedgwick’s women as fighting against the two-pronged attack upon their liberty by domesticity and religion—the prescribed “duties” we have seen bind various male protagonists in Brown, Bird, and Cooper—she thus “creates a heroine who can dwell in the wilderness without becoming a ‘rugged’ (i.e., racist, misogynist, antisocial) individualist, but can also enjoy the best of nineteenth-century domesticity without becoming, in Barbara Welter’s words, a ‘hostage in the house’” (5).

Castiglia’s insights into this form of sociopolitical and cultural captivity go a long way toward explaining Sedgwick’s women; however, I would suggest that virtually all of her characters, regardless of gender, are trapped in some form of onerous duty that functions as captivity. The prominent role of imprisonment, especially for women and most powerfully illustrated in the dismembered and doubly bound figure of Magawisca, points up the centrality of normative authority in the Puritan society Sedgwick depicts. I would extend Castiglia’s vision of domestic captivity, as I have done in the previous chapters, to an even more omnipresent system of disempowerment that alienates not only

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78 This powerful authority is perhaps made most famous in American literature by Hawthorne’s first chapter in *The Scarlet Letter*: “The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison” (55). By combining these two seemingly inescapable limits upon a citizen into a single vision of the primary organization of all society, Hawthorne establishes the powerful presence of Puritan “justice” that will push his plot. Sedgwick’s novel operates under a similar principle, as the requirements placed on individuals throughout *Hope Leslie*, by both Indian and Puritan society, work in much the same manner as the mental, spiritual, and legal trials for characters in *The Scarlet Letter*. 
individuals from society but even from themselves. The heart of *Hope Leslie* is, after all, the struggle of individual morality in the face of its institutionally authorized counterparts, law and propriety; in watching characters work to rectify or deny the overlap of these areas, we see the same struggles with social and mental captivity that mark prominent characters in other frontier romances. Sedgwick’s innovation in the genre here, I believe, is the mirroring of the frontier experiences portrayed in male-authored texts in her vision of the civilized Puritan world, and with this the revelation of the inherent sameness, right down to disempowerment and the necessity of revenge, in both.

This same thematic battle against legalistic authority is the subject of Amy Dunham Strand’s “Interpositions: *Hope Leslie*, Women’s Petitions, and Historical Fiction in Jacksonian America.” Strand’s essay explores the many uses of interpositions in the novel as enactments of the power of legal petition; as members of a group that was denied many of the rights and freedoms of citizenship, the right to petition the government for both personal redress and on behalf of others provided women with one of their only means of access to legal representation. “As reflected in *Hope Leslie*,” Strand contends, “petitioning provided a relatively moderate form of interposing, appealing to women of Sedgwick’s day, one that drew on historical and religious precedents and attempted to work within the existing legal structures to change them” (133). Connecting the scenes of interposition by women with the historical growth of women’s petitions for themselves initially and then for other disenfranchised groups, Strand presents *Hope Leslie* as enacting the shifts toward more public roles for women
and the greater discussion about their proper place in republican society. “The centrality of the figure of petitioning in *Hope Leslie,*” says Strand, “thus derives from the novel’s reflection of and participation in the shifting contours of women’s political discourse and the cultural dimensions of their petitions as rhetorical interpositions, both spoken and written” (135).

Strand’s work is valuable to the present project not only for its recognition of the inherently political dimension of the actions undertaken by its female characters but for the recasting of the discussion of these actions as legalistic in nature—that is, that the potential “sacrifices” individually made by characters in *Hope Leslie* have ritualized components that are part of the novel’s greater display of the conversion of the individual into the institutional. As with the recasting of revenge into justice when the community sanctions it and applies the correct rituals, the many interpositions against institutional authority by women in the novel are converted, by presenting them in carefully encoded acts such as kneeling and praying, into acceptable acts of public demonstration. As a frontier romance, *Hope Leslie* is built on the same captivity-revenge structure that underpins the more masculine novels; its resistance to ritualized revenge as the appropriate response, then, must be carried out through equally ritualized acts. These are the acts of interposition traced by Strand, albeit for a different purpose in her essay.

A final work of importance to the present reading of *Hope Leslie* is Sandra A. Zagarell’s “Expanding ‘America’: Lydia Sigourney’s *Sketch of Connecticut,* Catharine Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie,*” a staple of Sedgwick criticism. Citing the common critical assumption that “women’s point of departure was the domestic sphere,” and that “women
wanted to reform the world by making it more like the home,” Zagarell holds that “not all [women’s] writing was as directly informed by domesticity as women’s fiction. In some cases, women turned a sharply analytic eye on public matters, and […] their writing was quite directly concerned with the foundations and organization of public life” (225). For Zagarell, *Hope Leslie*’s contribution here is a recognition of the way the historical narrative functions as a tool for shaping the public understanding of history; as the novel “negotiates within established narrative structures—Puritan histories, the frontier romance, historical romance” it “casts light on the collusion between established narrative structures and racist, patriarchal definitions of the nation” (233). In contesting the historical record by recasting events and bringing history into a fictive rewriting of the country’s Puritan foundations, Sedgwick’s text “challenges the ways in which several popular narrative modes repressed the fundamental connections between white settlement and conflicts with the Indians” (233).

The reading of *Hope Leslie* as not just historical fiction but a potentially revisionist *history* is a useful way for conceptualizing the novel’s view of historical material. In challenging the dominance of the accepted historical record, Sedgwick reveals the narrative structures on which history is often built, especially those coded as constituting progress. *Hope Leslie*’s adaptation of the frontier romance structure opens up its implicit historical claims to advancement—the scenes of the past have concluded and the march of progress to the present has become an inevitable rather than contestable truth, safely distanced from the readerly “now”—and complicates the acceptance of past events as self-legitimizing. In providing other voices and another history parallel to that
of her Puritan sources, Sedgwick disrupts the narrative of advancement those histories depict, instead positing her own history where Hope’s and Everell’s own internal moral compasses, rather than the codified laws, are the real foundations of the enlightened present.

My own reading of the novel pulls this parallel narrative even further: Sedgwick’s challenge to the historical advancement implied in the frontier romance actually serves to split the past into two parallel worlds, frontier/Indian and Puritan, that operate on terms of reciprocity. What is revealed in this split is the underlying structure of the captivity-revenge cycle, the overt organizing principle of the frontier world and the covert principle of the civilized Puritan world. Virtually all of Hope Leslie’s main characters are subjected to social and physical captivity in some form; the direct retribution of violent revenge depicted in other frontier romances appears in Hope Leslie’s frontier world but is recast as legal defiance in the settled world. The cyclical pattern of captivity and revenge is also more clearly escaped through acts of sacrifice, manifest mainly as potential or realized loss or punishment of women. These sacrifices display the mechanisms Girard presents as those facilitating the conversion of individual or personal revenge into institutional or state-sanctioned justice; in Hope Leslie, we see historical violence become the American national sacred, the language for telling and retelling foundational national history.

In pursuing this sanctification of the past, Sedgwick still fulfills the historical romance’s mission of projecting the present as enlightened and progressive; what she does differently, however, is create it as one in which women are capable of being influential in both the private and public realms and are bearers of the will to freedom as
much as men are. This is, of course, only a minor rewriting of the conventional outcome; the Indians still vanish into the West and the mists of time, as “Sedgwick can redefine key concepts—liberty, the founders’ politics—but she cannot change what has already occurred” (Zagarell 239). Still, Sedgwick’s resistance to history’s definition of the present serves as a rejoinder to the circulating sociopolitical feelings of transition that I have noted in the previous chapters. At the dawn of Jacksonian democracy, where the established order of the nation’s political structure was being subtly but powerfully rewritten, Sedgwick’s various nods to a revisionary history provide insights into the potential developments some citizens foresaw as emerging.

Sedgwick’s entry into the discussion of violence and social formation in the history of the United States fits well within a paradigm traced by Amy S. Gottfried for contemporary women’s literature dealing with central acts of violence: as Gottfried states in *Historical Nightmares and Imaginative Violence in American Women’s Writings*, “a significant number of novels written within the past twenty years explore how ignored or suppressed moments of violence catalyze the reclamation of national and personal histories. Additionally, because they are informed by postmodern impulse, they are also marked by a disruption of received histories and ways of knowing the world” (1). The Puritan histories Sedgwick takes for her sources are excellent examples of the act of “ignor[ing] or suppress[ing] moments of violence,” as they elide Puritan atrocity and recast the Indian-settler violence into different discursive forms like salvation narrative or social history. Sedgwick’s own questioning of these accepted histories through parallel narratives reveals an impulse similar to that which Gottfried terms postmodern, a desire
to challenge the present by reconstituting the past from new materials. In effect, Sedgwick is performing what might now be called an act of recovery, redemption of a past that has been obscured by a dominant narrative. Of this same act in the twentieth century Gottfried says that “the option to change and be changed by this new form of redemption—to create a new historical self through transforming one’s past—inverts the traditional American [...] quest towards re-creation through abandoning the past,” the path taken by Edgar Huntly and The Last of the Mohicans in the rejection of European discourses of benevolence, chivalry, etc. (7). As the new order of the Jacksonian era began to reshape social possibilities in the United States, Sedgwick’s novel likewise seeks to create a new version of history from which this emerging paradigm could draw its own roots.

As Strand notes, women were increasingly pushing the boundaries of their restricted political role through the power of domestic influence and the legal right of petition; Sedgwick’s obvious invocation of the Indian question only a few years before this much-debated issue becomes codified in the Indian Removal Act of 1830 also hints at the potential for the historical injustices so powerfully embedded in narratives of the past to find revision in the present. By challenging history, Sedgwick not only shows her readers a vision of their own present that implies an advancement of sociopolitical morality into their own time but also one that displays an alternative history that advances unrealized potential into the same present. Hope Leslie and Magawisca may have both vanished into history, Sedgwick implies, but their struggles had resurfaced in the turbulent, transitional 1820s, and perhaps this time the “new version of an old story” told
by “putting the chisel into the hands of truth, and giving it to whom it belonged” would become the accepted one (Sedgwick 55).

The desire to create such a corrective to the present—and with it a corrective of sorts to the frontier romance genre—may stem from aspects of Sedgwick’s own life. As the daughter of an elite family and a successful Congressman father “whom she admired, even adored,” Sedgwick would have been keenly aware of the proscribed boundaries of her ability to act in the public sphere (Fetterley 81).79 As Judith Fetterley notes, “in the autobiographical memoir Sedgwick began when she was in her sixties, she articulates […] the cost to women like her mother of her father’s definition of citizenship,” a definition that kept women firmly entrenched in the private sphere and incapable of much direct impact in the public realm (81). Sedgwick’s own disappointment in her inability to join in the world of her father is certainly one possible source for motivation to write a novel displaying the power of women to act publicly in positive ways, as well as revising the historical record to make such public acts—interpositions, in Strand’s terms—fit into a narrative of national development that pointed to wider inclusion of women in the present. Thus, Sedgwick depicts a world where “women readers of a nineteenth-century present might imagine a past replete with types that anticipate their own experiences and that forecast a full achievement of national belonging in the future” (Emerson 32). She does this by adapting the popular frontier romance genre, with its basis in captivity and reciprocal violence, generating a “domestic” frontier romance that depicts a parallel

79 Sedgwick’s father was Thomas Sedgwick, a highly successful politician who served as Speaker of the US House, a Senator, and was influential in abolishing slavery in Massachusetts in 1783. For more information, see Kelley’s introduction to Hope Leslie, xiv-xix and Karcher’s introduction, xiii.
national history. This parallel history opens up the received wisdom of the past—historical and social—to revision in the present.

5.1: Early Times, New Times

As with *The Last of the Mohicans*, much of the historical details of *Hope Leslie*’s era have been covered in previous chapters; as such, I will focus here primarily on the details that have not appeared earlier in this study, especially those relating to issues of the Woman question as it found voice in the 1820s. The general feelings of transition that mark the change from Jeffersonian to Jacksonian sociopolitical culture continue to be of importance here, notably in the growing availability of and desire for political and legal representation by those who were disempowered in the earlier regimes of American politics, such as women and minorities. *Hope Leslie*’s reflection of its contemporary history is bound up in the figure of Hope’s resistance to the entrenched Puritan worldview; her “natural” behaviors are the expression of Jacksonian democracy rebelling against the artificial limits of a more community-minded, Jeffersonian republicanism carefully cast in the guise of Calvinist theocracy.

The faithful servant Digby’s response to Hope’s comment that she “like[s] to have her own way” at once sums up the moral direction of the novel and the historical milieu it comes out of:

> Why, this having our own way, is what every body likes; it’s the privilege we came to this wilderness world for; and though the gentles up in town there, with the Governor at their head, hold a pretty tight rein, yet I can tell
them, that there are many who think what blunt Master Blackstone said,
‘that he came not away from the Lords-bishops, to put himself under the
Lord’s-brethren.’ No, no, Miss Hope, I watch the motion of the straws—I
know which way the wind blows. (Sedgwick 235-36)

Here is the tale of European experience in the American New World from beginning to
end, the story of developing liberty from the first settlements in “the wilderness world” to
Sedgwick’s present, where the Jacksonian notion of democracy of the common man was
emerging in contrast to the more aristocratic tradition of the Jeffersonian genteel yeoman
farmer, the “Lord’s-brethren” system that, while not the true aristocratic system of
Europe, still created a world where “betters” were the rulers. Hope’s clashes with her
betters, the Puritan elders, continually highlight the failures of this restrictive paradigm;
where the elders have a long-entrenched code of propriety on their side, Hope has right
on hers. As Digby says of her allegiance to nature over older doctrine, “it was a pure
mercy you always chose the right way, Miss Hope, for you always had yours” (235). The
narrative will ultimately side with Hope’s way, as will the Puritan elders, and, with the
election of Andrew Jackson, the greater narrative of history.

Wrapped up in this movement toward individual liberty and authority is Hope’s
place as a woman. The doctrine of separate spheres had a firm grasp by Sedgwick’s time,
and the alterations it had undergone in the New World had helped to provide women with
improved educational and social prospects. “Religious and secular ideology thus made
explicit what had been beneath the surface, for the most part,” says Nancy F. Cott: “that
women’s domestic influence and maternal duties composed a positive social role. This
was a social role that inherently justified certain greater opportunities for women—
notably in education [...]. Its configuration took shape as early as 1780 and was well
established by 1820” (200). Although this development meant women now had at least
some potential influence, the general atmosphere was still one of significant restriction
due to coverture laws and the belief that women’s domestic power meant they had no
need of public voices or direct public influence.

Amanda Emerson outlines this restrictive mode of thinking via “The True Rights
of Woman,” a later example from Godey’s Magazine and Lady’s Book. “[Godey’s editor]
Park Benjamin describes his subject [...] to be the negative rights to abstain from the
‘stern business of life,’” Emerson explains; “By her very detachment from such matters
as law and government, a woman fulfills her part in a social contract” (30). “[S]ociety is a
system of mutual concessions,” according to Benjamin’s article, and “Woman in society
gives up certain rights to man, and man repays the concession by the protection which his
superior strength enables him to extend to woman” (qtd. in Emerson 30). The rights
women give up in this system are those of civic participation and presence in the public
sphere, in return for ‘protection’ from the ‘stern business of life’ that takes place there; as
Emerson remarks, “women’s consent oddly grants women protection from civil society
and the laws of men, rather than the protection of civil society and the laws of men. (30)

The disempowering removal from the “necessity” of direct civic participation
outlined by Emerson here meant that most women were restricted to one of two methods
for obtaining a public voice: influence on their male relatives or, as Strand capably
displays, the use of the constitutionally guaranteed power of petition. In seeking methods
by which to be heard, women demonstrated a desire to have the place in public life
denied them by the social contract Benjamin espouses. As the massive increase in
women’s petitions to Congress from the late 1820s to the 1840s attests—from personal
requests to petitions regarding Indian Removal and the abolition of slavery, and in such
numbers that “Congress finally passed and renewed a gag rule at every congressional
session between 1836 and 1844”—women were increasingly interested in bringing their
own voices to bear on public life without any more intermediaries than necessary (Strand
153).

It is out of this world—one of increasing political power of the common man and
a desire for increased political power for women—that Sedgwick’s novel springs. The
clear connections between the novel’s dominant themes of individual morality and
conscience, personal liberty, and the benefits of including women in public life are “a
most radical perspective for the 1820s, when the complete separation of the domestic and
public spheres was seen as natural and good” (Zagarell 236). The interplay between
Sedgwick’s various characters and themes and their political possibilities is a commonly
covered aspect of scholarship on the novel; as Bell phrases it in discussing Hope, “In her,
above all, Catharine Sedgwick embodied her view of the essential movement of
American history. Hope’s desire for personal liberty—her wish to have her own way—is
precisely analogous to the political liberty Catharine Sedgwick saw as the essence of
American history” (221).
5.2: “When the hour of vengeance comes […] remember it was provoked”

As indicated by Castiglia’s choice to categorize *Hope Leslie* as a captivity romance, the trope of imprisonment—mental, social, legal, and physical—plays a powerful role in the novel. Some of these restrictions are obvious, such as the captivity of Everell Fletcher, the imprisonment of Magawisca, or the proscribed roles assigned to women that have become the focus of much of the scholarship on the novel. Beyond the obvious, however, lies the fact that virtually every major character is restricted in some way, forced into a compromise of his or her own individuality or private sentiments by external forces; rather than being the purely alien forces of abduction or terror from the Other that we see so powerfully displayed in other frontier romances, *Hope Leslie*’s forms of captivity are often those forcing an alienation from the self or one’s native society. In the words of Suzanne Gossett and Barbara Ann Bardes, “the dangerous tension occurs between the individual and the group,” not “the coexisting of differing peoples” (20). One of the primary examples of such an effect is the plotline following Mononotto, the Pequod chief whose culturally demanded revenge serves to tie together the novel’s various narrative strands. Indian revenge, among the most common forces in frontier romance, in *Hope Leslie* becomes itself a form of captivity, reemphasizing the cyclical tropes of disempowerment and retribution foundational to the genre.

As Sedgwick’s narrator tells us, Mononotto had been an agent of peace between the English and the Pequods; where his brother Sassacus “employed all his art and influence and authority, to unite the tribes for the extirpation of the invaders,” Mononotto was instead “averse to all hostility, and foreseeing no danger from them, was the
advocate of a hospitable reception, and pacific conduct” (Sedgwick 58). This aversion to hostility changes after the English massacre the Pequods in their village, however. As Magawisca notes and the narrator confirms, “From that moment my father was a changed man. He neither spoke nor looked at his wife, or children; but placing himself at the head of one band of the young men he shouted his war-cry, and then silently pursued the enemy” (52).

This conversion from peaceful man to revenger resembles the classical alteration of character found in the revenge tragedy tradition, where “the revenger gains an acquaintance with evil”—here, the duplicity and ruthlessness of the English that requires a reciprocal act—and “he will along the way rid himself of all that is good in him, thus becoming more and more like those malevolent forces that he decries against” (Hallett and Hallett 75). In essence, the externally required revenge, whether by a supernatural force or by societal precedent, alienates the revenger from himself, creating the revenge tragedy trope of madness and making him “a changed man.” Important to note here is the simultaneous redirection of his familial allegiances: he abandons his wife and children for his band of warriors, an act reiterated when the remaining Pequod men escape the swamp with the intent of surviving to carry out their revenge later. The change in Mononotto noted by Magawisca is the beginning of his alienation from himself and his own culture, as the peaceful man is forced onto the path of revenge; as she says at the novel’s end, “the law of vengeance is written on our hearts,” and he must deny his peaceful nature in order to comply with the requirements of his society (Sedgwick 349). Driven to these ends by the duplicity and (in Sedgwick’s version of events) unmerited
violence of the English, Mononotto becomes an agent of and a captive to his nation’s “law of vengeance.”

This captivity to duty that binds Mononotto is strongly reminiscent of that of both Duncan Heyward and Magua in *The Last of the Mohicans*; it is fittingly marked in the same way, through the gestures of women. “‘Obey him warriors,’ cried my mother” Magawisca tells Everell; “‘see,’ she said, pointing to the mist that was now wrapping itself around the wood like a thick curtain—‘see, our friends have come from the spirit-land to shelter you. Nay, look not on us— […] we can die before our enemies without a groan. Go forth and avenge us’” (54). As they were in Cooper’s novel, women are the gatekeepers and emblems of duty, the ones who dictate what is required of the men and the catalysts for revenging of losses; appropriately enough, it is Magawisca’s mother—Mononotto’s wife, Monoco—who is taken captive when the English manage to enter the forest.

Monoco’s gesture to vengeance is accompanied by powerful cultural inducements, brought into focus through the simultaneous death of old Cushmakin and the gathering of mists. Cushmakin, a powwow like Tamenund in *Mohicans*, is the voice of the collective Pequod past; “Stay not here,” he councils the chiefs after being mortally wounded himself; “look not on your wives and children, but burst your prison bound; sound through the nations the cry of revenge!” (54). The voice of tradition—the “law written on [their] hearts” and institutionalized through cultural descent, demands revenge, a demand here echoed by Monoco, as it has been demanded by the immediate threats to safety of the various women in other frontier tales. The swirling mists—“friends from the
spirit-land” are both the ancestors whose demands drive the tradition of revenge and the ghost whose appearance is part of the revenge tragedy’s machinery.\textsuperscript{80} The powerful voice of cultural duty, immediately present through the oracle’s channeling of the divine (“I speak the word of the Great Spirit—obey it!” says Cushmakin), the mists of the ancestors, and the suffering/impending loss of women, forms an imperative even the most peaceful man must obey: “‘When women put down their womanish thoughts and counsel like men, they should be obeyed,’ said [Mononotto]. ‘Follow me, warriors’” (54).

Magawisca’s recounting of this tale serves a double purpose in the novel: to begin the process of Sedgwick’s creation of alternative history, and to project the Pequod violence as the response, not the initial atrocity—a response deemed necessary but undesirable, even by the Pequod chief himself. Sedgwick carefully parallels the English violence against the Pequods with Mononotto’s reciprocal attack on Fletcher’s home at Bethel: the Indian village is a peaceful one, populated mostly by the women and children who become victims of unremitting English brutality; the Fletcher home, Bethel, is also mostly women and children at the time of the attack, due to the absence of Digby and other males save Everell. As Zagarell recognizes, Mononotto’s attack on Bethel “highlights the Indians’ view of the murders as political retribution” (235); the chief calls for an end to the assault when equilibrium has been reached, when “We have had blood enough” (Sedgwick 67). As Magawisca’s brother Samoset “was reserved to whet my father’s revenge to a still keener edge,” Everell is taken captive specifically as a sacrifice

\textsuperscript{80} See “The Ghost and Its Call to Excess” in Hallet and Hallett, 17-40. Hinds also points out that “within a half-waking, half-sleeping state, Edgar’s murdered friend Waldegrave appears to him, like the ghost of King Hamlet, evincing ‘inquietude and anger,’ Edgar believes,” sparking Edgar’s own violent revenge tragedy (“Revenge” 51). See Hinds, “Charles Brockden Brown’s Revenge Tragedy: \textit{Edgar Huntly} and the Uses of Property” for more information.
to vengeance, for “as Samoset died, that boy shall die” (77). Mononotto elaborates the parallel clearly: “My soul rejoiced when he [Everell] fought at his mother’s side, to see him thus make himself a worthy victim to offer to thy lion-hearted brother—even so fought Samoset” (77).

The doubling of Samoset and Everell also reveals the doubling of the cultural imperatives that can be seen as driving both massacres; as Magawisca reminds Everell during her recounting of the English assault on her village, “You English tell us, Everell, that the book of your law is better than that written on our hearts, for ye say it teaches mercy, compassion, forgiveness—if ye had such a law and believed it, would ye thus have treated a captive boy?” (52-53). The implication, of course, is that in failing to follow the supposed laws of their culture, the English attackers have proven that it is not “better than that written on [the Indian] hearts” but equal to it, as the attacks are equal. That law is the law of revenge, a law hidden in the performance of public “justice” but practiced in the reality of the frontier. Furthermore, the revenge strike Mononotto carries out—both a personal act of revenge for the atrocities committed against his family and a political act, as Zagarell notes—is meant to perform the same sociopolitical function traced throughout this study and embodied in the McCrea myth: the uniting of a fractured or disparate community. “Sassacus perished by treachery,” the narrator reminds the reader,

and Mononotto alone remained to endure this accumulated misery [of the Puritan attack]. In this extremity, he determined on the rescue of his children, and the infliction of some signal deed of vengeance, by which he
hoped to revive the spirit of the natives, and reinstate himself as the head of his broken and dispersed people: in his most sanguine moments, he meditated a unity and combination that should eventually expel the invaders. (59)

This theme of united tribes becomes the important sociopolitical force behind Magawisca’s imprisonment in the novel’s second half; the concern of the Puritan fathers over the rumblings of a conspiracy by the Indians is that Mononotto’s vision of a “unity and combination that should eventually expel the invaders” is coming true. As Mononotto is the key to uniting the tribes against the Puritans, Winthrop’s plan is to fracture the supposed unity by removing him and his family from their community: “the Governor hoped, by getting possession of the Pequod family, to obtain the key to Miantunnomoh’s [the Narragansett chief and former friend of the Puritans] real designs, and to crush the conspiracy before it was matured” (261). Mononotto’s personal tragedy and revenge is painted here as the symbolic answer to embodying the necessary retribution of all the natives for the “accumulated misery” brought to them by the English, a communal revenge so strong that it tempts even “the faithful friend and ally,” Miantunnomoh (263). Thus the captivities and battles of the frontier are pushed into the realm of civilization, refigured as legal imprisonment and the possibility of execution by Puritan law. In an ironic twist, it is the Indians, especially the captured Magawisca, who become the analogous figures to Jane McCrea in the generation of communal revenge.

As “the Last of the Pequods,” Mononotto and Magawisca become the representatives of the future for all tribes, as Uncas and Chingachgook become in The
"Last of the Mohicans; their sufferings, as much as Mononotto’s meditations of revenge, have the potential to bring the disparate forces of the scattered Indian communities together into a force dangerous to the Puritans. This is made clear in the narrator’s explanation of Miantunnomoh’s potential treachery: the Puritan elders “were aware that the Narragansetts, ever since they had witnessed the defeat and extinction of their ancient enemies the Pequods, had felt a secret dread and jealousy of the power and encroachments of the English, and they only waited an opportunity to manifest their hostility” (261). The power of the Puritans to both encroach upon Indian land and to exterminate entire tribes places all Indians—allies like the Narragansetts or enemies like the Pequods—into a subordinate position in the combined greater network of frontier society. This subordination is prominently displayed in the dinner scene where the Narragansetts are assigned to the side table while the Puritans are seated at the main. Feeling the sting of this inequality, Miantunnomoh reminds Winthrop that reciprocity—in acts of hospitality, as in acts of violence—is the expectation: “he expects such treatment from the English saggamore [sic],” the interpreter says, “as the English receive in the wigwam of the Narragansett chief. He says, that when the English stranger visits him, he sits on his mat, and eats from his dish” (152). A law of nature as it is a law of physics, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction; when the Puritans grow

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81 These are the same terms Magawisca uses during her retelling of the Puritan attack on her village: “they were guided to us by the traitor Wequash; he from whose bloody hand my mother had shielded the captive English maidens—he who had eaten from my father’s dish, and slept on his mat. They were flanked by the cowardly Narragansetts […]” (50). Winthrop’s failure of reciprocal hospitality is linked here with the political traitor and the bloody massacre, as are the Narragansetts who are themselves scheming to turn traitor to the Puritans. What we see is a recurrent, cyclical pattern of potential reciprocal violence marked by betrayals of social reciprocity.
in power and subordinate the Indian, the Indian will fight back to bring equilibrium to the frontier system, be it in peace or in warfare.

“When, through regulation and control, society isolates and contains an entire group of people,” Castiglia helpfully states, “the act of containment gives the group status as a group” (5). Mononotto’s symbolic place as the chief of a tribe brought to extinction by the English makes plain the ultimate end of the “control and containment” the Puritans bring to the frontier social space, pushing the disparate Indian tribes together within the subordinate, circumscribed place designated for them by the empowered Puritans in the overarching frontier sociopolitical system; as the Puritans continue to lump all natives together, the natives begin to see themselves as one group in opposition to them.

This is the same move seen in The Last of the Mohicans when the Delawares finally revolt against their collective captivity to the Hurons, as the disempowered Delawares—“contained” by their subordinate, passive position within the tribal hierarchy—rally behind the remnants of the extinct Mohican race; the singular struggle to retain their identity becomes the larger community’s struggle. “The constituted ‘body of knowledge’”—made manifest in Uncas’s literal embodiment of Mohican identity in his bloodline and tattooing—“is not a single but a collective soul, with definable boundaries and codes, rituals and characteristics” (“In Praise” 5). The Huron’s mechanisms of subordination do not divide the contained tribe but rather serve to unite them, as the subordination of all Indian tribes by the growing “power and encroachments of the English” sparks the threat of a united Indian conspiracy in Hope Leslie. “While serving as the machinery of repression, then, confinement”—most visible in the novel by the
repeated imprisonment/captivity of the female Pequods, Monoco, Nelema, and Magawisca—“also constitutes as recognizable community” (5).

If Mononotto is simultaneously the captive of his own tribal codes of vengeance and the key to a sense of collective identity for his larger community, the same role is filled by William Fletcher on the Puritan side. Fletcher is marked as a captive from the very beginning, first to machinations of his anti-Puritan uncle, then to the sociopolitical restrictions of his chosen Puritan society. William Fletcher’s English captivity is reminiscent of Clithero’s subjection in the aristocratic Ireland of Edgar Huntly; like Clithero’s dependence on Euphemia Lorimer for his livelihood and his dreams of marrying Clarice, Fletcher’s economic and reproductive controls are both wrapped up in a system of submission to a social “better.” As his uncle Sir William says, “no daughter or guinea of mine shall ever go to one who is infected with this spreading plague” of Puritanism (Sedgwick 7). Fletcher, like Clithero, is forced to renounce his allegiance to his preferred community in order to receive the benefits from those in stronger social positions.

The language of contagion employed by Sir William further serves to place Fletcher in the position of the infected, alien Other that also marked Clithero. Like the alienated Irishman, William Fletcher flees his native country for the New World, although his severance from his social/familial support system is brought about by ideological rather than physical violence. Once in the colonies, Fletcher moves to isolate himself even within his adopted community, as Clithero had also done: he moves from Boston to the frontier at Springfield, and then “fixed his residence a mile from the
village, deeming exposure to the incursions of the savages very slight, and the surveillance of an inquiring neighborhood a certain evil” (17). What had separated him from his native community in England, his beliefs, continues to distance him from even those he shares them with, as “Mr. Fletcher was disappointed at the slow operation of principles, which, however efficient and excellent in the abstract, were to be applied to various and discordant subjects” (14). Tellingly, Sedgwick chooses the same language of disempowerment we have previously seen applied to the captive men struggling through the foreign world of the frontier: “Such men” as Fletcher, idealists and visionaries as the narrator terms them a few lines later, “inexperienced in the business of life, are like children […]” (14).

Despite his attempts to avoid the “surveillance of an inquiring neighborhood,” Fletcher continues to be pressured with conformity to the collective Puritan will, a fact made most visible through the question of suitable marriages for Everell and Hope. Downing’s letter to Winthrop serves to recast the same captivity that plagued William Fletcher onto the next generation, by effectively assigning members of Fletcher’s own family to marriages of the elders’—not his and certainly not their own—choosing; once again, Fletcher’s control over his own reproduction is curtailed by an outside, hierarchical source. The unmistakable revolutionary parallels here serve to heighten the sense of injustice: a foreign leader feels he has control over the fundamental freedoms of those in the New World. As the uncle Sir William had done in England when he carefully arranged and promoted Fletcher’s love of his cousin Alice, brother Downing has “already
 taken the first step towards bringing about so desirable an end [the marriage of Esther and Everell]” (157).

The dispensation of both Hope and Everell without familial approbation recreates Mononotto’s suffering in the situation of William Fletcher. Winthrop presents these marriage arrangements as the requirements of the social order: “It is our known duty to direct them heavenward. In taking care for the spiritual growth of our young people, who are soon to stand in their father’s places, we do, as we are bound, most assuredly build up the interests of our Zion. I should ill deserve the honourable name my brethren have given me, if I were not zealous over our youth” (160). Like Cushmakin and Monoco, Winthrop invokes the line of ancestry in his demand for adherence to accepted conduct. Fletcher, however, is clearly at odds with this “known duty,” as “Every sentence of this letter stung Mr. Fletcher. He repeatedly threw it down, rose from his seat, […] and leaning over the table, covered his face with his hands. His emotions could not be hidden. The veins in his temples and forehead swelled almost to bursting, and his tears fell like rain-drops” (159). During this outburst of emotion, Fletcher’s words would be just as appropriate in the mouth of Mononotto at the English attack: “Is it that I have myself forged the fetters that bind me to the earth? […] that one after another of my earthly delights is taken from me? that I am thus stripped bare?” (159). Mononotto chooses peace with the English, and as a consequence has his tribe massacred and his wife and children taken captive; Fletcher chooses Puritanism, and in a similar chain of events his love Alice is imprisoned and his children’s liberties restricted by duties to tradition and propriety.
Unlike Mononotto, however, Fletcher does not perform an act of revenge for his disempowerment; rather, the need for such revenge is deferred by the “naturalness” of Hope Leslie, manifest through her continual defiance of Puritan standards of feminine behavior. Hope’s improper actions—she is devoid of “that passiveness, that, next to godliness, is a woman’s best virtue”—especially in defiance of the law, result in her domestic captivity when she is sent to Boston after her interference in Nelema’s imprisonment. As Winthrop plainly states the collective will of the Puritan elders, “I am impatient to put jesses on this wild bird” (162). Hope’s willingness to follow the dictates of her own conscience through action is what her guardian Fletcher lacks in his deference to the wisdom of the Puritan elders; as Strand’s excellent essay makes clear, it is Hope’s acts of interposition that also parallel her to Magawisca, likewise the carrier of her father’s best traits after he is alienated from himself by the greater community.

Magawisca, like Hope, is willing to disrupt the carrying out of justice—that is, institutionalized revenge—and both women run the risk of serious social and physical repercussions (although Hope’s dangers are never realized). The sacrifice of their own safety breaks the cyclical conflict that continues to keep their fathers locked in forms of sociopolitical captivity, fulfilling the roles necessary to ensure an end to the contagion of violence. Magawisca is capable of the acts of mercy her father cannot perform because of his duty to the Indian law of revenge; Hope is capable of the acts of conscientious objection her guardian cannot perform because of his duty to the Puritan laws of propriety and justice. As Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola concludes, “the white man’s and the red man’s retaliation and revenge cannot break the cycle; only charity and
kindness can, and this is best exemplified by many of the novel’s women characters from both cultures” (180). The two daughters, so often paralleled throughout the novel, ultimately serve the same function of sacrifice within the captivity-revenge cycle’s parallel instantiation in Hope Leslie. “Over and over,” Gossett and Bardes remark, “characters must choose whether to act according to their personal principles or those upheld by the community,” and it is the children, not the fathers, who rebel against this form of captivity (20).

5.3: “Death or liberty”

Among the most powerful scenes in Hope Leslie is Magawisca’s trial, by which Governor Winthrop hopes to gain information and some advantage over the impending Indian conspiracy threatening his colony. The climax of the trial is Magawisca’s complex invocation of both her own mother and Patrick Henry: “‘Thou didst promise,’ she said, addressing herself to Governor Winthrop, ‘to my dying mother, thou didst promise, kindness to her children. In her name, I demand of thee death or liberty’” (Sedgwick 309). This much-discussed reference is, in Jeffrey Insko’s words, “the self-conscious use of anachronism” and an “act of ventriloquy, throwing Patrick Henry’s iconic eighteenth-century voice simultaneously into the seventeenth-century world of the novel and the nineteenth-century world of Sedgwick’s readers” (179). Critics have often discussed the implications of Sedgwick’s choice to echo such a famous dictum as a way of aligning Magawisca with other American revolutionaries, as “the fervor of the Revolutionary fathers, their oratorical authority, suddenly appears autochthonous, as if somehow native


to the land itself, while the native Magawisca becomes a protonationalist, less an enemy
than a source of founding principles” (179). As with my discussion of the open
availability of revenge to all races in *The Last of the Mohicans*, this viewpoint paints
liberty as native “gift,” a function of occupying the America space rather than belonging
to a specific community. If, as the Boston Tea Party implies, dressing like an Indian
makes you a patriot, then Magawisca, “Her national pride […] manifest in the care with
which, after rejecting with disdain the Governor’s offer of an English dress, she had
attired herself in the peculiar costume of her people,” is clearly a patriot as well (297).

What has received little comment in this scene is Magawisca’s reminder to
Winthrop of his promise to her mother, another “patriot” of Magawisca’s fashion who
counseled resistance to the English. By invoking her mother here, Magawisca reminds
Winthrop that there is a lineage of reciprocity in which he is concerned as well, a history
of mercies including “the two English girls, who were captured at Wethersfield, and
protected and restored to their friends by the wife of Mononotto” that led to the promise
referred to here (58-59). Everell’s redemption through Magawisca’s interference in her
father’s ritualized revenge-execution, made apparent during her entreaty of Winthrop
when she “threw back her mantle” and “her mutilated person” is revealed, recreates her
request for liberty or death as the next link in the chain; the mutual and reciprocal cycle
of events demands that Winthrop make the next sacrifice to the equilibrium that maps the
greater sociopolitical world of the frontier; he may choose liberty (mercy) or death
(execution as revenge). Winthrop refuses, torn between his “solemn promise to [her]
dying mother” and his currently “undone higher duty” to dogmatic Puritan propriety; it is
instead left to Hope and Everell to intervene, as Magawisca had done for Everell, via extralegal measures (310).

Sedgwick’s consistent doubling of the Puritans and Pequods and insistence on reciprocity of both mercy and violence operates as a revising of history, in effect disrupting the linear model of historical cause and effect and instead recreating it as a cycle—the captivity-revenge cycle and its attendant escape device, sacrifice. It is, as Insko phrases it, a “critique of conventional history’s before-now-after sequence,” as “Hope Leslie provides an alternative conception of what history is” (180). My reading of Sedgwick’s alternate history follows a similar path, although I see Sedgwick’s project as one of refiguring historical incident not as a collection of differences but of similarities; the chain of linear actions destabilized by Sedgwick’s alteration of chronological history becomes instead cyclical, an endless tit-for-tat with no distinct beginning, just as Twain’s Grangerford-Shepherdson feud has always existed for the younger members of both clans. In this way, as with the implication of Magawisca’s patriotic invocation of Patrick Henry, the founding of the country comes from a communal past, a truly native past tied to place (America) rather than community (Indian, Puritan). In Amanda Emerson’s words, “Sedgwick’s historical romance […] presents fiction as a record of collective identity” (26).82

As Sedgwick admits in the novel’s preface, “a slight variation has been allowed in the chronology of the Pequod war” (3); as Insko points out in following scholars like

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82 Emerson’s essay focuses on Sedgwick’s project as one to include women in the founding of the nation, positing the novel as “a memory or citation of women’s participation with men in a national past” (26). The bringing together of Monoco and Patrick Henry in Magawisca’s request for Winthrop to fulfill his promise to her mother while echoing Henry is a perfect demonstration of just such a convergent, shared national founding.
Philip Gould, “The variation to which Sedgwick refers concerns the events surrounding the famous Puritan attack of the Pequot Indians at Mystic, Connecticut, in 1637,” the massacre that Magawisca describes (187). “Puritan historians (among them William Hubbard, Benjamin Trumbull, and John Winthrop)—important Puritan sources Sedgwick herself uses—‘claimed the attack was in retaliation for the murders of the traders John Stone, John Norton, and John Oldham’” Insko continues; significantly, “Sedgwick reverses the chronology,” recreating the Pequod attacks on settlers as retaliation for, not the initiation of, the chain of reprisals (187).

Sedgwick’s altered chronology, then, is presented alongside the “official” history, upsetting the accepted links of causality and “refus[ing] to see history as a matter of progress or regression” (Zagarell 236); instead, the two versions, given in parallel and serving to implicate each other in a cycle of violence, become entwined into a timeless, repeating pattern that “pays little attention to the movement of history at all” (236). Fittingly, the sign of impending renewal of conflict dropped by the Indian Nelema in the Fletcher home is “an arrow, and the rattle of a rattle-snake enveloped in a skin of the same reptile” (Sedgwick 38); the straight-flying arrow of time is accompanied by the seasonally shed skin of the self-renewing snake, the linearity of history wrapped up with the Ouroboros-like symbol of cyclicality.

The presentation of a cyclical, timeless, anachronistic past helps to counteract some of the problems inherent in the tracing of a national lineage that includes Indians. As Susan Scheckel remarks, “grounding America’s national history in its Indian heritage was problematic given the violence and coercion that characterized the history of Indian-
white relations. It would be difficult, without a deep sense of patricidal guilt, to claim as forebears those whom Americans were in the process of destroying” (Scheckel 126). The typical route for deferral of this guilt is the “vanishing American” trope: the Indians have vacated the land to the clearly superior whites, in the inevitable face of progress, and there is no need to feel guilt for the inevitable. Sedgwick too employs this trope at the end of her novel, banishing Magawisca and her family to “the far-western forests” and “deep, voiceless obscurity of those unknown regions” (Sedgwick 359). This banishment is due to Magawisca, however, not Hope, Everell, or by implication, Sedgwick’s enlightened readership that would naturally be cheering for the noble Indians to remain. Magawisca refuses because of her “deep invincible sense of the wrongs her injured race had sustained”; “the Indian and the white man can no more mingle, and become one,” she replies to the entreaties to stay, “than day and night” (349).

The clever reconciliation of this is that the Indian and the white have already proven to be capable of just this very mingling throughout the book through continual mirroring and reciprocity; in fact, with Oneco’s recovery of Faith Leslie, they prove that even the ultimate mingling is possible, a true union of the two races through marriage. The denial of reconciliation, then, is a fault (perhaps the only one) in Magawisca, but importantly not Hope: as the narrator states, “Hope took a more youthful, romantic, and, perhaps, natural view of the affair,” with “the conclusion that this was a case where ‘God had joined together, and man might not put asunder’” (359, emphasis added). Magawisca has failed to recognize both the natural and preordained unity of the two races, instead
opting for banishment; she could not envision a shared future, despite the shared past with the Fletcher family that has been continuously in front of her throughout the novel.

“If nation-states are widely conceded to be new and historical,” Benedict Anderson reminds us, “the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of the immemorial past and, still more importantly, glide into the limitless future” (11-12). Sedgwick’s complementary history, placed alongside the history of the Puritan scholars, destabilizes the linear flow, emphasizing the cyclical and reciprocal relations between the Indians and the Puritans; it converts history into “immemorial past.” This, Scheckel points out, is often the sticking point for authors trying to link Indians into the American lineage: “While Americans of the early nineteenth century, with their optimistic faith in progress, would have had little trouble imagining a ‘limitless future’ for the nation, where were they to ground a sense of continuity with the ‘immemorial past’?” (126). Sedgwick’s answer is in the repetition of cyclical relations—both violent and nonviolent—between the group mythologized as always already here and the group to which her readers would feel a natural affinity. By repeatedly paralleling the two, the Puritans become ahistorical, ever-present settlers and the Pequods become, like the Patrick Henry-channeling Magawisca, permanent resident patriots.

As several critics have noticed, the setup for the main actions of Sedgwick’s tale, those involving Hope, Everell, and Magawisca in Boston, are done through a careful separation of past from present. Carol J. Singley refers to the English massacre at the Pequod village as the novel’s “ghost chapter” which “haunt[s] the narrative, undermining dreams of harmony and unity” (116); Judith Fetterley calls the novel’s story up to the
eighth chapter—Hope’s letter to Everell—its “pre-text,” both in the sense of its preceding
the narrative proper and its role as the narrative’s reason for being in the first place (80).
As we have seen previously, most of the occurrences driving the revenge narratives in
frontier romance occur outside the actual events, working like Singley’s ghost chapter
and Fetterley’s pre-text. Sedgwick’s novel is no different in this respect, but her
construction of the events of this pre-text, the attack at Mystic and the retaliation at
Bethel, gives them a mythical, timeless feel that helps to push them into the distant past
in the mind rather than the historical record.

The first discussion of the Puritan attack at Mystic comes during Digby and
Everell’s conversation while on watch after Nelema’s token has raised suspicion.
Arguing for Magawisca’s innocence of any treachery, Everell’s defense of the individual
is met with Digby’s invocation of the historical collective: “The old proverb holds fast
with these savages, as well as with the rest of the world—‘hawks won’t pick out hawks’
eyes’” (Sedgwick 44). While it is the proverb that is old, its application to both human
nature and the natural world creates an ahistory, another “ghost chapter” of continual
examples that add the present example of Magawisca to the ocean of past ones,
effectively displacing her into the agelessness of a proverb proven eternally true.
Everell’s enthusiasm for Digby’s relation of his own service in the Pequod war is due to
his youth, “an age to listen with delight to tales of adventure, and danger”; Digby’s
telling is given the air of nostalgia, the tale of a veteran who “loved […] to fight his
battles o’er again” (44-45). These gestures toward a seemingly distant past are heightened
by the novelistic past tense of the narrator’s voice, further lending a feeling of historical
displacement; not only that, but the temporal displacement of the events themselves—a novel published in the nineteenth century recounting the conversation of characters in the seventeenth century, who are themselves recounting events earlier than their present actions—serves to make the historical seem almost mythical. Digby’s recollections of the Pequod war are “tales of adventure, and danger,” more fairytale than history, told to a young man as, given the hour, a bedtime story.

Magawisca’s recounting of the events is also given a feel of timelessness. “She paused for a few moments,” the narrator says, “sighed deeply, and then began the recital of the last acts in the tragedy of her people; the principle circumstances of which are detailed in the chronicles of the times” (48). The word choice here—“recital,” “tragedy,” “chronicles of the times”—work, like Digby’s proverbs and nostalgic tone and Everell’s boyish enthusiasm, to make the events seem distant and separated from the action of the present. Magawisca’s beginning to the tale, told with her mother’s prophesying via the “servants of the Great Spirit,” further lends an air of legend rather than history. This same feeling is repeated as the narrator concludes the chapter, saying that “This new version of an old story reminded [Everell] of the man and the lion in the fable” (55). The Pequod war has gone from a nostalgic recollection to a bedtime entertainment to a fable. While the narrator will properly position the events as the chapter concludes, the rhetorical resituating of the attack has already destabilized its historical placement.

Interestingly, Sedgwick’s choice to end this chapter with a gesture toward the recentness of the events described actually serves to widen the gap created by her more mythical language earlier. “This war, so fatal to the Pequods, had transpired the
preceding year,” we are reminded; “It was an important event to the infant colonies” (55). The reader is simultaneously presented with the closeness of the events with the timeframe of the narrative, setting up the subsequent revenge attack, and the distance all of these events have from the readerly present. This is one of the effects of what Insko calls Sedgwick’s anachronism, particularly her “narrator’s news from the present” (193). “What historical experience means in Hope Leslie, then,” he says, “is not just that one is able to imagine a past that, as nineteenth-century Americans were fond of saying, has been lost to oblivion, but that one can imagine history as an experience encompassing both past and present at once” (193).

This “loss to oblivion” is the chronological destabilizing of events, so that they are made timeless or ahistorical by their displacement into an ambiguously located, cyclical past of Indian-settler warfare; since the events are always “past,” they can be brought into simultaneity with the present without disrupting the reader’s understanding of their differences. “This is why the past in the novel is always filtered through the ambiguously situated narrator” who continually intrudes into the narrative to gesture toward the reader’s situation in the present or to point to some version of Anderson’s limitless future, “invit[ing] the reader continually to juxtapose ‘our’ day and colonial America” (193). The ultimate effect of this is to recreate the past as a cyclical world of archetypal, apparently timeless back-and-forth between the Puritans and Indians, with the truth of the matter “lost to oblivion”; what Sedgwick’s novel records, then, is the “Early Times in the Massachusetts” as indicated by the subtitle, not a specific historical period.
As the Preface claims, the text “illustrate[s] not the history, but the character of the
times” (3).

It is for this reason that Sedgwick’s narrative is constructed of archetypal,
conventional imagery, be it of Indian-settler conflict or acts of mercy. As Derounian-
Stodola points out, “Magawisca’s description of English attacks, cruelty, and conquest
[…] could not help but recall for readers an archetype of the Indian captivity narrative:
the sudden, brutal *Indian* attack” (180). The continual parallels of the two attacks are
mixed in with the conventional motifs of Indian atrocity—the nighttime attack, the firing
of homes, killing of women and children—to give the incidents are shared lineage; like
the patriotism manifested by Magawisca at her trial, a certain form of warfare is
indigenous to the New World, and it is employed by both the civilized and the savage. As
Cheri Louise Ross notes of Mononotto’s attack on Bethel, “Sedgwick depicts this
massacre in as much horrific detail as that of the English massacre of the Indians, thus
giving equal treatment to the atrocities perpetrated by both sides” (327). Unlike the bland
reassurances of acceptable war practices by the narrator of *Nick of the Woods* after the
attack on the Shawnees by the men of Bruce’s Station, Sedgwick’s narrator emphasizes
the shared brutality of Indian-settler conflicts. If violence directed at women and children
is motive enough for revenge, as other frontier romances indicate, that behavior is
available to all would-be revengers, of all races. Brutal revenge, an autochthonous feature
of the American frontier life, is an integral part of “the character of the times.”

Despite this mutual implication of all parties in an endless cycle of reciprocal
bloodletting, *Hope Leslie* manages a happy ending. This may seem like a cheap exit to
the complications Sedgwick has created with her portrayal of deadly frontier conflict and heavy-handed Puritan justice; as Carol Singley suggests, “Constrained by her own position in history, Sedgwick perhaps could not conceive of an ending that both subverts and rewrites the white patriarchal plot,” instead choosing a conventional denouement (121). There is another possibility, however, that is more fitting with a view of Hope Leslie as a frontier romance based on the captivity-revenge cycle. Following the pattern traced by Girard, the revenge-inspired cycle of killings on the frontier that mark the novel’s “pre-text” are converted in the second half into institutionalized, legal justice; the next link in the chain of violent reciprocity for the murders at the Fletcher home is Magawisca’s capture and the Puritans’ desire “to crush the conspiracy” of the remaining tribes (Sedgwick 261). That this is certainly another act in the same cycle of violence is clear enough as the narrator attempts to explain Winthrop’s indulgence of Hope’s second violation of Puritan justice: “It became, therefore, very important to avoid any act that might provoke the universal Indian sentiment against the English, and induce them to forego their civil quarrel, and combine against the common enemy. This would be the probable effect of the condemnation of the Pequod girl, whose cause had been espoused by several of the tribes” (362). Here is the captivity-revenge cycle in microcosm, as Magawisca’s captivity and possible execution may not only provoke a private response from those who support her directly but a possible widespread response of all Indians; like Jane McCrea, Magawisca would serve as a synecdoche for all Puritan atrocities, inciting a unified revenge response that would endanger “the safety of the English settlements” (362).
Magawisca’s escape effectively ends the cycle of revenge, and, as it is presented in Girard, this is accomplished through sacrifice. The sacrificial substitutes in this case are Everell and Hope, although their punishment is trivial when compared to the potential price of death—Hope “receive[s] a private admonition from the Governor, and a free pardon” and Everell “a public censure” (363). In keeping with the paralleling of groups throughout the novel, the symbolic revenge and sacrifices committed in the Puritan justice system mirror those undertaken in earnest during the novel’s first half: the potential real sacrifice of Everell and the interposition of Magawisca. As Shirley Samuels helpfully summarizes this connection,

In a further form of exchange, having lost his son to the revenge slaying carried out by Puritans, Magawisca’s father Mononotto wants to carry out a public ceremony of beheading Everell in a ritual sacrifice. At a natural altar high on a cliff resembling the precipitous spaces that appear at the end of *The Last of the Mohicans*, the young man lays his head upon a rock. Magawisca’s father raises his arm. Contriving to place her arm in the place of the neck outstretched […] Magawisca finds herself literally disarmed, […] and Magawisca urges Everell to run away, her arm having substituted for his life. (“Women, Blood, and Contract” 62)

This act of sacrifice breaks the frontier-based revenge cycle, the archetypal actions embedded in the semiotic system of Indian-settler reciprocal violence that provide the imagery for the frontier romance novels that restrict their narratives to the wilderness; Sedgwick’s unorthodox move of continuing her frontier romance seven years later in the
emerging metropolis brings forward the same archetypal actions in their new forms of institutionalized legal and social behaviors. Magawisca’s sacrificial substitution for Everell ends the smaller cycle of individual retribution in the novel’s distant first act; when the second act opens, the cycle is reinstated in its new form on the metropolitan “frontier” of the emerging American nation.

Because the structural trope is the same, Sedgwick is able to use mostly the same characters in different roles, with Hope—the new “native American” double of patriot Magawisca—as the new sacrificial substitution, the sympathetic woman whose internal, natural sense of morality is the precursor to the democratic, Romantic sense of superior individual morality ascendant in Sedgwick’s own time. Sedgwick’s conversion from the Calvinist faith of her upbringing to the Unitarianism gaining popularity at the time speaks to the same vision of a worldview grounded in the power of individual moral choices to influence wider sociopolitical ones. As Strand’s article capably demonstrates, the increasing presence of female petitions, first for the redress of wrongs directly relating to the petitioners and then for other voiceless or oppressed minorities,⁸³ presents a belief that the individual could alter the institutional with the application of her own hopes—perhaps becoming her own Hope—for a fairer future.

5.4: Déjà vu and the “Present” Day

*Hope Leslie*, then, provides a different sort of optimism for the future than that typically provided by the historical frontier romance. *Nick of the Woods* provides readers with a monumental or foundational narrative, tracing the lineage of the American

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⁸³ See Strand, especially 134-35.
communal character through the archetypal battles of the frontier; *The Last of the Mohicans* pushes back slightly further than this, addressing the very beginnings of group formation through the ties of loyalty and communal action. *Hope Leslie* operates in the interstitial space between these ideas: it is a foundational narrative intended to link its readers together through individual sympathy and loyalty, in essence to build a reader-based, rather than a character-based, community. As Gustavus Stadler sums up this notion via the ideas of Michael Warner, this is generated by a focus on individual, private experiences of fantasy and identification. In the early nineteenth century, [Warner writes], it became possible to “be a member of a nation, attributing its agency to yourself in imaginary identification, without […] exercising any agency in the public sphere.” In other words, one was a citizen just in the personal, interiorized act of reading, the basis of what Benedict Anderson has famously called an “imagined community.” (52-53).

While the male-authored frontier romances offer some of this nationalist fantasy to their readers, the sense of identification they provide is much more tangential; while the reader may be asked to hate the bad and love the good, rarely is he or she asked to emulate or identify with the characters as people. Their behaviors, like the Indians they are pitted against, are a relic of the past; the often-discussed side effect of this is the implicit or explicit acceptance of genocide against Native Americans as inevitable, necessary, or a form of progress.
Sedgwick’s novel, however, perhaps due to its domestic novel heritage, often asks for the reader to identify with its characters and overall moral direction. As Insko brilliantly displays, the narrator’s informational intrusions into the text to provide “news from the present” invite the reader to contrast the era depicted with the ambiguous readerly “present.” Citing various narrative asides, Insko traces patterns of irony that suggest what we are meant to judge is not the history presented, but the implied reader’s present and perhaps some future state. What the reader is made to feel is the text’s implicit critique—generally grounded in Hope’s resistances to propriety—of whatever “progress” may be said to have occurred between “then” and “now.” Hope, as the reader’s surrogate, is not a chronicler in the way Roland or Duncan has been, but an experiencer; she is not the anchor for the reader’s eye but his or her heart.

As Insko frames this odd convergence, “History, for […] Sedgwick, was incomplete; it was something more than knowledge of the past” (195). This is the Preface’s comment about “illustrating not the history, but the character of times” carried out, as the novel gives the reader a history that is “instead an experience, a palpable sensation, something approximating the paradoxical feeling of déjà vu—the memory of

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84 Insko provides several quotations from the novel to help make this point. For instance, he sees what appears to be a straightforward moralistic quote as marked by a narrative irony, suggesting a critique not of the past but of the present: “The character of man, and the institutions of society, are yet very far from their possible and destined perfection. Still, how far is the present age from that which hanged Quakers!—of that which condemned to death, as witches, innocent, unoffending old women!—But it is unnecessary to heighten the glory of our risen day by comparing it with the preceding twilight” (qtd. in Insko 191). Along those same lines, the narrator’s unspecified historical situation encourages the reader to continually compare his or her own age with the narrative history, Insko says, forging a connection not between the novel’s provenance and its text but “a different kind of linkage by juxtaposing not coeval events, but now and then, or more accurately, by making now a part of the present of then” (192). As an example, he provides the following quote: “Where there are now contiguous rows of shops, filled with the merchandise of the east, the manufactures of Europe, the rival fabrics of our own country, and the fruits of the tropics…were, at the early period of our history, a few log-houses, planted around a fort, defended by a slight embankment and palisade” (qtd. in Insko 192).
an experience one has not had, but a memory nonetheless real because felt” (Insko 195). Hope’s resistance to the restrictions of her time give the reader the déjà vu feeling that he or she too is resisting any of the holdovers that have survived to the present; as indicated by the large amount of scholarship, the two most obvious of these are those that form the Woman Question and Indian Question in the 1820s. Sedgwick’s clever displacement of events into a hazy or ambiguous alternate past allows the reader to identify with Hope’s feelings not in fantasy form, in adventures or romances he or she will never experience, but in reality, in the reader’s own experience of similar occurrences and similar feelings of conflict between duty and liberty. If, to borrow very loosely a formulation from Tawil, killing a man was the domain of male historical writers and marrying a man that of female historical writers, the fact that more people marry than murder means the common experience is more readily available from the female author.85 This is the case with Hope Leslie’s moral recapturing of the captivity-revenge cycle, where the frontier romance serves not only to build a communal history for the reader to join but a moral history as well.

85 Tawil 100
“In order for men to make discoveries about their own culture, codified rituals must give way to an agile mode of thinking that uses the same mechanisms as religion with a virtuosity that religion never approached. The cultural order itself must have begun to disintegrate, and the overflow of differences must have subsided—not so much, however, as to provoke a new outbreak of violence, which would in turn generate new differences. For reasons unknown to us, primitive societies never meet these conditions. When the cycle of violence begins, it also comes to an end with such rapidity that the opportunity for making major self-discoveries hardly exists.”

-Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*

When D.H. Lawrence rendered his famous verdict that “The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer,” he found his evidence in Cooper’s *The Deerslayer* (62). Yet Lawrence does not qualify his statement, does not limit it to Cooper’s novel only; it is the *American* soul, not Deerslayer’s soul. It is, as Lawrence says, “the myth of essential white America. All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play” (62). This is virtually the same judgment Engels and Goodale make of the Jane McCrea myth, in its multitude of forms: all the sensationalism and sentimentality, all the righteous indignation and patriotism, “is a sort of by-play.” The story is, as we are once again reminded, “first and foremost a revenge story” (94).

As we have seen throughout this study, the same can be said of the frontier romances of Brown, Bird, Cooper, and Sedgwick. No matter how convoluted the narrative becomes, or how heavily invested in the conventions of romance, the groundwork for all of it is laid on a foundation of necessary revenge. Even more than that, the “by-play” of romance and social arguments, implicit or explicit, becomes the primary contributors in signaling the centrality of revenge. This is the layering of
convention over the foundational structure of the captivity-revenge cycle, the rebuilding of events into a narrative widely intelligible to the culture at large because of the cultural fictions from which this process draws. In the U.S., the captivity narrative tradition—the first truly American genre—contributes a legacy that has had as powerful an impact as that of the jeremiad tradition Sacvan Bercovitch traces in *The American Jeremiad*. The accompanying history of violence, as the immigrants to the New World fought to create the garden they dreamed of from the wilderness they actually found, becomes justified by recasting it as retaliatory. Together, these two tropes form the captivity-revenge cycle; as we have seen, this structure of captivity and reprisal has become a central aspect of the American social mind as revealed through the works of literature in this study.

I would argue, following the Girard quote that serves as epigraph to this afterword, that what we find in the frontier romance is not just a record of the unrest of the times, a ritualization of the birth of a national mind or of Anderson’s imagined community; instead, we find “an agile mode of thinking that uses the same mechanisms as religion with a virtuosity that religion never approached” (237). This is the literary mode, a flexible way of recasting the individual experiences of one person or group into the shared experience of a larger community—or even a nation. When Mary Rowlandson endured captivity for eleven weeks in the late seventeenth century, she recreated her individual experiences through scriptural reference; the Bible became, for her, a lived experience while her experiences became a “text,” first in her own reading of them through a Biblical lens and then for those who vicariously lived them through published words. Central cultural fictions found in the Bible allowed Rowlandson’s captivity to
become intelligible for as greater audience. One hundred years later, the murder of Jane McCrea served the same purpose among the scattered colonists and settlers of the new United States.

The repackaging of McCrea’s death into a “text” of captivity and victimization, wherein others could read their own subjection to the same forces, prevented the rapidity of which Girard speaks from stalling “the opportunity for making major self-discoveries” about the culture (237). This is same role played by the frontier romances studied in this project: these novels allow the rapid alterations occurring in a burgeoning society to be captured, slowed down so that the community can examine its own beliefs and shared characteristics, can make discoveries about itself. These discoveries are the myriad sociopolitical messages scholars and readers have found in the texts, both the topical as well as the enduring concerns of the American citizens who felt themselves represented by this literature. The repeated gestures to American materials, American subjects, and American character found in the prefaces and forewords of these frontier romances—not to mention the gestures to “truth,” in the form of realism or romance—speaks to this notion of self-discovery, of the “agile mode” capable of acting, as religion does, as the source of a collection of symbols useful for rendering shared, communal experiences.

What do we discover when literature slows the cycle of violence down enough to get a good look? We find what Lawrence found: the basic American image is that of the killer. It is more complicated than that, however. The codification of this image through the captivity-revenge cycle shows that the American does not see him or herself as purely a killer, but as a justified, wronged party operating by the laws of the land; it is the
revenger, not the murderer, with which the American identifies. The characteristic
American love of the underdog reiterates this, and the heroes of frontier romance are, if
nothing else, always the underdogs. Against them is the power of a vast, uncontrolled
wilderness, and its avatars are bloodthirsty and unrelenting. The American is always at
the mercy of these forces, always a captive to the exigencies of the New World; when
cornered and disempowered—be it in a pit, dire financial straits, or the arms of the law—
the natural American response as indicated by the frontier romance is to fight back.
“Which he would naturally do, of course,” Twain’s Buck Grangerford reminds us;
“Anybody would” (118).

The notion that revenge is natural—that “Anybody would”—perhaps indicates
that the impulse to revenge is not an American trait but a human one. After all, the
revenge tragedy tradition is not an American invention, and the fact that many of the
instances of captivity traced in this study are domestic captivity rather than Indian,
“European” rather than “American,” places revenge much more in the realm of a shared
heritage than a culturally specific one. Still, there is no denying the powerful place of
revenge in American popular culture, be it in the literature of the nineteenth century or
the cinema of the twentieth and twenty-first. Ethan and Joel Cohen’s revenge tale True
Grit, less a remake of the 1969 film starring John Wayne and more a reworking of
Charles Portis’s 1968 novel, garnered ten Academy Award nominations, including one
for Best Picture. Even without such a marker of artistic achievement, the centrality of
the captivity-revenge cycle to pop culture works is undeniable. While the United States
did not invent the revenge tale, the continued importance of its place in the national

86 John Wayne won Best Actor for his role as Rooster Cogburn, his only Oscar.
mind—as demonstrated by the powerful impact Jane McCrea’s death supposedly had on the Revolution—is evident enough.

The willingness of the United States to engage in military actions abroad also highlights just how powerfully the unifying aspects of communal revenge work to yoke together the multitude of disparate factions that make up the U.S. sociopolitical landscape: “we see here the principle behind all ‘foreign’ wars,” Girard states; “aggressive tendencies that are potentially fatal to the cohesion of the group are redirected from within the community to outside it” (249). This is the mechanism that brings fractured groups together in violence against the Other; recalling Slotkin, it is the image of Indian warfare, the subsuming conflict of the frontier romance, that “proved to be the most acceptable metaphor for the American experience. To all the complexities of that experience, it offered the simplicity of dramatic contrast and direct confrontation of opposites. It became a literary means of dealing with all sorts of social tensions and controversies” (Regeneration 68). This is the “American material” authors like Brown, Bird, Cooper, and Sedgwick draw on to tell their tales; when the possibility of Indian warfare disappeared, the aggressive impulses were turned against new Others, from Asian immigrants to communists at home and abroad. All were threatening the “American way of life,” as the enemies of the United States—even before there was a United States—always have.

It is from the basic structure of the captivity-revenge cycle that all of these narratives of impending danger and necessary violence draw their form. In the frontier romance, we see this same tale told and retold, a story of disempowerment that leads to
revenge; in carrying out that revenge, the actors suddenly find themselves allied with other revengers to form a community, one that, according to the logic of the texts, leads to the stable societies of the readerly present. From the demands of inflicting death come the foundations of building national life, as “collective murder restores calm, in dramatic contrast to the hysterical paroxysms that preceded it” (Girard 235).

“In most societies,” claims Lynn White, Jr. “there are clear rubrics for execution, a tradition of propriety as to the forms of killing committed by the group, which the group feels deeply impelled to follow”; if this is true, then the repetition of these rubrics is itself an indicator of society, and the acceptance of carrying out this violence can indicate membership (199). The frontier romance, like the captivity narrative for the Puritan community, allows vicarious group membership through the reading of the narrative, vicarious “salvation.” If “To know the subliminal mind of a society,” White continues, “one must study the sources of its liturgies of inflicting death,” the frontier romances of Brown, Bird, Cooper, and Sedgwick are primary examples of such liturgies (199). Their shared structural source, the captivity-revenge cycle, allows a glimpse into the subliminal mind of the American national community; it is a community born of the necessity of revenge for atrocities against innocence and the expulsion of the infectious foreigner from the land, the message carried by the murder of Jane McCrea. “The processes of discrimination, exclusion, and conjunction”—the identification of a shared enemy and the formation of a community against that enemy—are the mechanics of the captivity-revenge cycle (Girard 236). They “are the products of the generative process” (236), the generation of a national mind and communal character that would allow D.H.
Lawrence to claim that “The essential American soul is [...] a killer” (62). The emblematic Natty Bumppo, identified by so many as the archetypal American hero, is, as Lawrence says, “the stoic American killer of the old great life. But”—and it is an important but—“he kills, as he says, only to live” (59).
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