America's Gothic Fiction

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In their fictional works, Catharine Maria Sedgwick and Edith Wharton, like Poe, Stowe, and Hawthorne, speak to contemporary anxiety regarding not the particularities of the received historical accounts, but to their larger, philosophical concerns about historiography and its implications for the individual citizen. In Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie* and Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* and several of her New England tales, we are introduced to men and women who struggle to create a full and accurate narrative of their community. As the plot and the structure of these fictions reveal, their histories are invariably stunted. Both authors recognize that the fullest story of any society is often to be had in the gaps between the multiple accounts of the factual details rather than in any one definitive narrative.

Sedgwick’s novel, *Hope Leslie*, is set in seventeenth-century New England and is populated with historical figures both prominent and obscure. Moreover, the characters in *Hope Leslie* tell and retell accounts of themselves and their community in their homes, courtrooms, and graveyards, and they do so in various modes—conversation, lecture, letters, and courtroom testimony. One might surmise that the author was attempting to work through the din of private and public tales to discover the truth that would allow her to write a singular historical narrative of colonial New England. To the contrary, Sedgwick asks the reader to hear the cacophony of all the voices because the nation’s history is noisy, frenzied, and conflicted. The author’s objective within her fiction is to replicate the din, which, to her, represents the new democracy.

1. The narrator of Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* recognizes that when one character speaks, there are “perceptible gaps between his facts,” and further determines that “the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps.” See Wharton’s *New England: Seven Stories and Ethan Frome* (Hanover and London: University Press of New Hampshire, 1995), 101. All references to Wharton’s fiction are from this edition.
Edith Wharton’s statement on historical narrative is quieter. In the aftermath of her fictional accounts of illicit love affairs, murder, and tragic marriages, there is still no story to be had. Try though they may, the historians in “Bewitched” and Ethan Frome are at odds to establish a stable narrative concerning events of great importance to themselves and their community. By the admission of Ethan Frome’s frustrated narrator, “the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps” (101). Despite competing and corroborating accounts and eyewitness testimony, a full, nuanced and authoritative historical narrative never emerges, and the supposed historian is silent. Contrary to Sedgwick’s historiographical statement that invests confidence in the multiplicity of historical tales, Wharton looks with some disappointment to the interstices between the tales.

**Sedgwick’s Historical Romance**

Catharine Maria Sedgwick was accustomed to hearing many voices on the history and mission of the nation. Much like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Sedgwick is a quintessential New England writer. The Sedgwick family, like the Hawthornes and Hathornes, has a recognized place in the history of the colonies and the new nation. In this way, the authors’ relationship to their national history is personal as well as professional, and both draw on their particular attachment to the tales of New England as they fashion their own fictional narratives. Descended on both sides from the renowned ministers in the Connecticut Valley known collectively as the “River Gods,” Catharine Maria Sedgwick is related to such notable figures as Jonathan Edwards and John Williams. She was raised in a privileged home, dominated by her father, Theodore Sedgwick, a prominent man who served first in the Massachusetts legislature and then in the United States House of Representatives and Senate. Her father’s staunch allegiance to Federalist principles in the political arena was matched by his adherence to orthodox Congregationalism in his religious life. An educated and independent woman, Sedgwick chose to support more democratic ideals in her public advocacy just as she rejected the Calvinist theology of her father.

Because she was raised in the conservative Congregational church, she

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was more than conversant in its Calvinist doctrines and practices, which figure in several of her historical novels. However, her relationship to her family’s religion was vexed. She describes the Calvinist faith bluntly as “unscriptural,” “unprofitable” and “demoralizing,” and determines it to be a “gross violation of the religion of the Redeemer.” Moreover, she was able to see that nineteenth-century America was witnessing a shift in the church. In her autobiography, Sedgwick contrasts the conservative, backward-looking Dr. Stephen West with the liberal minister Henry Ward Beecher, and observes that their personal styles “fitly denote the past and present clerical dynasties” (Power, 96). She would also recognize that their theologies, too, speak to past and present religious thought.

Likewise, Sedgwick was exceptionally knowledgeable of the early histories of the nation’s Puritan past. Her novel Hope Leslie; or, Early Times in the Massachusetts includes epigraphs and other direct quotations from William Bradford’s Of Plymouth Plantation, William Hubbard’s The Present State of New England, Edward Johnson’s Wonder-working Providence of Sions Savior in New England, Roger Williams’s A Key into the Language of America, and John Winthrop’s History of New England—as well as Cotton Mather’s Magnalia Christi Americana. Indeed, in her preface to the novel, Sedgwick acknowledges her scholarly interest in colonial history and asserts that “the only merit claimed by the present writer, is that of a patient investigation of all the materials that could be obtained” (5). Placing additional value on the study of history, she adds that she would be “fully gratified if, by this work, any of our young countrymen should be stimulated to investigate the early history of their native land” (6).

Sedgwick’s intellectual inquiry into the early history of her country is complemented by her personal attachment to figures in that history. Directly related to John Williams, a minister who was captured with several of his children during an Indian raid on Deerfield, Massachusetts, she was fascinated by the fate of his daughter—and her distant cousin—Eunice, who chose to remain with her captors. Eunice, a model for the character Faith Leslie, married a Roman Catholic Mohawk and lived out her life with her husband and children as a member of the Mohawk tribe.3

3. Life and Letters of Catharine M. Sedgwick, ed. Mary E. Dewey (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871), 119. As testimony to her intellectual flexibility, Sedgwick’s journal also reveals that she read the conservative, evangelical author Elizabeth Singer Rowe, whose work, she confesses, “had a strange charm for me” (Power, 83).


5. John Demos has brilliantly documented the life of Eunice Williams following her
Hope Leslie is a work of historical fiction, but according to the author, it is not “in any degree an historical narrative, or a relation of real events” (5). Yet, this does not imply that the novel makes no claims regarding the writing and reading of history. Indeed, its central theme directly addresses this issue, and the structure of the novel embodies Sedgwick’s argument on the production and reception of historical narrative.

Because the novel reprises and revises accounts of historical events in seventeenth-century New England, and in doing so places an idealistic English young woman and a fearless Indian young woman at the center of the text, Hope Leslie can be clearly understood as counterplotting the received historical narratives of “early times in the Massachusetts.” As Philip Gould has argued, “whether Hope Leslie contains, then, an invalidation of patriarchal history or an uncannily prescient exercise in historical dialogics, the line of continuity in these readings locates Catharine Sedgwick vis-à-vis seventeenth-century historiography.” Although critics attempt to situate Sedgwick in a stable position as a native American advocate, a proponent of feminist activism, or an heiress to republican virtue, Douglas Ford cautions the reader against a binary reading of her novel. Drawing on Foucault’s “Truth and Power,” Ford warns against “read[ing] the novel as subverting a single, monolithic ideology of a repressive mechanism, thus obstructing our view of the plurality of discourses which produce power.” Ford guides us instead to view how Hope Leslie represents individual discourses which produce conflicting versions of ‘truth,’ rather than a single over-arching ideology.

captivity in The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story From Early America (New York: Vintage, 1994). Weierman offers interesting details about Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s fascination with the story of Eunice Williams, including her attempt to meet Eleazar Williams, Eunice’s great-grandson (419–21). See also Sedgwick’s personal statement on the life of Eunice Williams in Life and Letters, 129–30.


Such a view reveals that the novel internalizes such conflict and engages in processes more problematic than the straightforward correction of injustices brought about by a monolithic form of power. (83–84)

Where Ford's observations on Sedgwick's representation of conflicting rhetorics in *Hope Leslie* lead him to an interesting analysis of the language of truth claims in the novel, his analysis also suggests ways to unravel the tangled structure of the novel. The plot of *Hope Leslie* may rightly be described as manic. With the exception of the tidy—if surprising—resolution of each major and minor plot, the action of the novel is as frenzied as that of Poe's *Pym*. The title character of the novel is a young woman who comes of age in seventeenth-century New England, befriends a young native American woman, Magawisca, falls in love with a suitable Puritan, Everell Fletcher, and tests herself and her society in the process. To this extent, it is a conventional marriage plot. However, many other threads vie for the reader's attention, and some of these are equally conventional captivity narratives and seduction plots. Others are simply wild. A closet Roman Catholic from England and his cross-dressing Spanish mistress figure in the novel, threatening to disrupt the marriage plot and forming a parallel seduction plot and captivity narrative of their own. The domestic situation of the Fletcher family could not be more unlikely. Their less-than-orderly Puritan family consists of William Fletcher and his wife and their children as well as Hope and Faith Leslie, the two orphaned daughters of his first love, Alice. In addition, the family includes two native American children who are captives and servants to the family, a variety of English servants, comic figures all, and the equally comic and frivolous Aunt Grafton from England. Outside of the Fletcher home, courtroom theatrics and jailhouse antics upset the purported order of the larger Puritan community. A simple attempt to cure a snakebite is construed as heresy, and unseemly midnight trysts are refashioned as sisterly reunions. Comedy is fused with history that is often represented as tragedy.

Michael Davitt Bell understands this “incredibly complicated plot” as testimony to the author’s ingenuity, but also recognizes it as a “shortcoming.” For Bell, it also expresses the development from history to romance, which he attaches to Northrop Frye’s paradigm of the romantic or comic marriage plot in which the union of the hero and heroine “become the primary agents of the new society, of historical progress.”8 Using Frye’s

approach to the resolution of a comic plot to understand Hope Leslie offers an interesting, but only partially satisfying, reading of the novel. From the perspective of an authorial resistance to early and contemporary historical writing, the manic plot signals another of Sedgwick's designs for her novel. Responding to the tidy plots of Mather's providence tales that lead to a singular, definitive conclusion, Hope Leslie's diffuse and often conflicting plots testify to the author's alternate understanding of the narratives that aspire to characterize a community.

Many scholars cite the novel's competing narratives of the 1637 Pequot War in chapter four as evidence of Sedgwick's revisionist history, and it is clear from this example that one of Sedgwick's goals for the text is to undermine the authority of colonial historical narrative. Young Everell Fletcher, who represents the future of the nation, is initiated into the foundational principles of America by way of its dramatic historical moments. The veteran Digby recounts his tale of the Pequot War, and the narrative both ennobles and terrifies Everell. Although we are not privy to Digby's account of his war experience, we infer that Digby strikes the conventional theme of the just cause, valor, and victory of the English soldiers. As Everell later claims, “as I have heard, our people had all the honour of the fight” (48). This is entirely consistent with the received histories of colonial New England that Sedgwick consulted for this novel. However, in the space of a few pages, when Magawisca offers her account of the same battles, the details of this war, the interpretation of those details, and the larger themes of the narrative are decidedly different and at times antithetical. In Sedgwick's vision of the future of the nation, the alternative history from the perspective of a native American woman is positioned as an important part of the education of the young white men who will become the leadership of the nation. From this point onward, the novel asks the reader to query every ostensibly official statement of any event, a move that the plot enacts by centering dominant voices.

Moreover, if the reader is asked to use the example of these competing narratives to inform a reading of the remainder of the text, there are other lessons to be learned. Much like Hawthorne, Sedgwick insists that interrogating the ethos of the historian is an essential part of evaluating a historical account. Digby's credibility does not fare well under scrutiny. He may claim the authority of a soldier and eyewitness to the battles, but Sedgwick undercuts his claims by identifying him as one of those veterans who loves to recount his war stories especially in light of his having “brief military

The story was in the gaps” and presumably limited exposure to the reality of war. Thus, in the hands of Digby, history is immediately reduced to one old man’s “tales of adventure, and danger” (43). Unfortunately, as Sedgwick reveals, Digby’s tales are consonant with those of Mather, Bradford, Johnson, and other colonial historians. Subsequently in the novel when Sedgwick invokes the “chronicles of the times,” “the history of the times,” and “our early annals,” the reader is asked to think of these documents as imaginative stories told among aging men of varying degrees of experience (47, 53, 56).

Like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Catharine Sedgwick challenges the white male historian by way of an undervalued woman. In *Hope Leslie*, Magawisca’s historical narrative shows both attention to factual detail and sensitivity to her themes. At times, her account also surprises the reader by its impartiality. That is, she laments vicious behavior and moral failings among her own people in addition to vilifying the English. Most importantly, she is able to convince Everell that what he knows as victory visits death and numerous other forms of tragedy on her people. Finally, Magawisca’s account inspires Everell with “sympathy and admiration of her heroic and suffering people” (54).

To argue that Sedgwick replaces the early providential histories authored by men with a native American history authored by a woman would deny the complexity of chapter four within the framework of the novel. Although the reader—like Everell—attends to Magawisca’s narrative with “sympathy and admiration,” we learn in the following chapter of *Hope Leslie* that our new historian is neither completely sympathetic nor admirable. That is, she is complicit in the murder of innocent people because she does not alert the Fletcher family to the impending raid on their home in Bethel. In this way, this complex character supports her father’s murderous revenge, yet she also throws her arms around Mrs. Fletcher in an unsuccessful attempt to protect her from a warrior’s knife. If the reader is looking for a binary vision of early American conflict or a clear signpost for the future, neither is to be found in the text. In Douglas Ford’s words, *Hope Leslie* illustrates the “individual discourses which produce conflicting versions of ‘truth,’ rather than a single over-arching ideology” (83). Moreover, the individual discourses are themselves frequently compromised, irrespective of their origin.

Chapter five of the novel complicates the binary narratives of warring peoples in the previous chapter by introducing a third account of warfare. The raid on Bethel gives evidence of the tragic consequences of being seduced by any single statement of historical fact in the previous chapter. Digby is so convinced of the accuracy of his knowledge of
the native American warriors that he ignores otherwise obvious signs of the impending attack. Likewise, Everell is so impressed with Magawisca’s claims regarding native American honor and oppression that he is blind to her treachery. Because of the inability of these men to think with greater complexity about competing discourses, innocent people are slaughtered.

Sedgwick’s account of the Indian raid on Bethel must also be read against the backdrop of both Magawisca’s account of the English raid on Mononotto and his tribe and the received colonial histories of the Pequot War. In truth, it bears cruel resemblance to both. Multiple elements of the Bethel raid have parallels in Magawisca’s earlier narrative, the most tragic of which is the death of women and children. Again, the victory of one people means the extermination of “defenceless families” of another people (54). In addition, the narrative of the Bethel raid offers an ironic, if comic, nod to the providential histories of New England. When Mr. Fletcher returns to his home, the site of Mononotto’s revenge, and finds “not one—not one spared!” he is in error, and is quickly corrected by the foolish servant, Jennet:

“Yes, one,” spoke a trembling whining voice, which proved to be Jennet’s, who had just emerged from her hiding-place covered with soot; “by the blessing of a kind Providence, I have been preserved for some wise end, but,” she continued panting, “the fright has taken my breath away, besides being squeezed as flat as a pancake in the bed-room chimney.” (66–67)

Self-absorbed to an extreme, Jennet is no help to Mr. Fletcher in understanding the events, discovering who might have survived, and recovering those living members of his family. “She was mainly occupied with her own remarkable preservation, not doubting that Providence has specially interposed to save the only life utterly insignificant in any eyes but her own” (68). The reader has already been schooled in the ills of preoccupation with one’s own account of one’s history. Moreover, in Sedgwick’s novel, providential history itself is dealt a fatal blow. It is linked to self-interest and self-aggrandizement rather than any special disposition of God.

Chapters four and five clearly expose Sedgwick’s argument regarding alternative histories, and identify the abusive way in which cultures use historical narrative to retain and wield power. However, it would be a mistake to find that these chapters bear the weight of Sedgwick’s entire argument for alternative histories. Nonetheless, the triad of war tales reveals the architecture of the novel that embodies the author’s argument. Sedgwick structures her novel such that many of the plot elements and
motifs as well as characters have multiple analogues that complicate or otherwise contend with those elements, motifs, and characters.

To offer a relatively simple example, when Nelema extracts herbs from her deerskin pouch to concoct a medicinal liquor to cure Cradock's snakebite, she is indicted for witchcraft. At the close of the same chapter, Sedgwick includes Aunt Grafton's recommendation to Everell of an herbal cure for colds, one that she is proud to have received from a Lady Penyvere. The author juxtaposes these scenes for ironic purpose because Aunt Grafton would never recognize the similarity between her culture's herbal pharmacopoeia and native American medicine. Neither would she be charged with sorcery for brewing herbal tea. Once again, however, the novel does not slip into a facile binary comparison of these cultural conventions. Aunt Grafton acknowledges that Hope threw her pennyroyal tea out of the window and nonetheless recovered from her illness, and likewise predicts that Everell will reject her medical advice. Conflicting positions on a single issue such as herbal medicine are simultaneously cross-cultural, transatlantic, interdenominational, and cross-generational.

In related scenes that take place outside of domestic life, representations of legal proceedings are similarly cross-cultural, interdenominational, cross-generational, and gendered. When the native Americans put Everell Fletcher on trial, they fail to recognize him as one of their staunchest advocates in the Puritan community. This trial, which "they believed to be the execution of exact and necessary justice," is disclosed as Mononotto's attempt to avenge the murder of his son and repair his reputation as a stern leader within his tribe (91). The charge, trial, and sentence are further called into question when Mononotto's daughter, Magawisca, attempts to protect Everell from the executioner's hatchet and sacrifices her arm. In a second court case, Nelema is charged with sorcery, or, in Hope's words, "the crime of curing Cradock." When brought to trial, evidence against Nelema is produced by "Jennett and some of her gossips" (108). Thus, the crime, the process, and the sentence are challenged within the novel. In a third trial, that of Magawisca on the charge of spying for her people, the process is immediately undercut by Sedgwick's ironic observation that the magistrate speaks from a position of "soi-disant infallibility" (284).

As in Everell's trial, the Puritan community does not recognize

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9. I am grateful to T. Gregory Garvey who drew my attention to Sedgwick's sequencing of legal trials. His study focuses on Nelema's and Magawisca's court appearances, which, according to Garvey, illustrate masculine authorities' failure to manage crisis within their communities and dramatize women's productive intervention in the legal process. See "Risking Reprisal: Catharine Sedgwick's Hope Leslie," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 8.4 (1994), 287–98.
Magawisca as their ally. In addition, Sir Philip Gardiner, as the fraudulent principal witness, compromises the process because he, like Mononotto, uses the trial to secure his civic standing. In the case of Gardiner, he needs to conceal his identity as a Roman Catholic and that of his page, who is actually his young Spanish mistress. With each legal trial, the novel asserts that the community must continually examine itself and the processes it installs to assert its authority. As with the historical narratives that societies perpetuate to codify their identity, the reader is asked to distrust all other public narratives that societies create to legitimize their understanding of themselves.

A triad of war stories followed by a triad of court scenes suggests the architecture and argument of Hope Leslie. Indeed, examples of the text's structural argument are found throughout the novel and concern topics from race and religious orthodoxy to the performance of gender and the dictates of fashion. In each case, Hope Leslie embodies its advocacy of the plurality of voices by virtue of its narrative construction that is otherwise perceived as manic. Although Sedgwick's novel contains many forceful and undeniably feminist statements, it avoids oversimplification in this respect as well. Thus, it would be a mistake to understand the title character exclusively as a woman who foils masculine abuse of power and redresses social wrong throughout the novel, and to view her as the exclusive heroine of the novel. Like Magawisca, who is both heroic and treacherous, Hope is remarkably open-minded and limited, selfless and willful. She loves and admires her native American friend, but her resentment of her sister's marriage to Oneco is unsettling. She is relentless in pursuing her vision of what is right and good, but at times falls into dangerous error about what is worth pursuing and the means to accomplish her ends. While the modern reader may wish to find a proto-feminist heroine in the character of Hope Leslie, Sedgwick makes this difficult. Judith Fetterley has expressed her desire to study this novel in a way that balances the competing critical urges for hagiography of early women writers and criticism that they too are complicit in the ill-doing of the men of their age. Thus, she insists, "what is admirable about Hope Leslie cannot be separated from what is problematic."11 Speaking to the construction of female identity in Hope


Leslie, Fetterley concludes that Hope’s questionable stance on race and her misspent independence provide examples of the rhetorical complexity of the novel and evidence of Sedgwick’s “hopelessly” realistic vision of America.

Yet, from the perspective of the author’s argument concerning historiography, this novel puts forth a decidedly nuanced understanding of humanity, which is neither definitively hopeful nor hopeless. Unlike the saints and sinners in Mather’s providence tales who either enjoy magnalia Dei or suffer terribilia Dei but never both, Sedgwick’s characters are capable of greatness in their public and private lives, but invariably, these same individuals are also at times weak and limited. Moreover, the qualities that we most admire in her characters are frequently those that compromise them, such as Hope’s willingness to act, and Everell’s unbiased view of his fellow men and women. Thus, at the level of characterization, Hope Leslie departs from the formula of the providence tale—whether in the form of the captivity narrative or the marriage plot—to underscore the author’s commitment to a fuller expression of humanity and historical reality.

Rather than expressing a “hopelessly” realistic nation, the novel asserts its optimism from the earliest pages where Sedgwick casts the colonial past as the “preceding twilight” that she contrasts with the “glory of our risen day” (16). In the terms of this novel, the distinction between the twilight of the past and the current daylight is a liberal understanding of self and society, informed by a plurality of historical accounts. That Everell Fletcher is educated by Digby, Magawisca, and the English schoolmasters and becomes the father of “many generations” in America indicates the breadth of intellectual and social experience required by republican leadership (349).

Sedgwick’s argument regarding historiography is similarly nuanced. While the novel critiques the definitive nature of early histories, any move to put forth a singular counternarrative would be a move to commit the same error. Interestingly, Sedgwick’s representation of providential history is analytic, but not cynical or even dismissive. Although she undermines its exclusive claim to truth, especially in the example of Digby’s retelling of the Pequot War, she gives credence to the rhetoric of divine providence when invoked in the service of humanity. In the trial of Magawisca, Reverend Eliot is invited to open the proceedings and does so by acknowledging that the wonder-working providence of God “mak[es] their enemies to be at peace with them” and demands that Christian people “show their light” to

(Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 79.
the native Americans, arguments that call for mercy for the accused. Once again, the novel eschews a binary understanding of history by acknowledging the value of the very historiographical theories that it critiques. As Hawthorne has argued, historiography is always contested ground. Thus, society demands a plurality of historical statements that it looks to for affirmation and definition. Much like the structure of Hawthorne’s “David Swan,” *Hope Leslie* gives voice to a wide range of histories with the understanding that a plurality of statements on medicine, law, womanhood, virtue, and the national identity is welcome, necessary, valuable, and, finally, inevitable. Similarly, *Hope Leslie* refuses an orderly representation of historical events because such is the product of the imagination, and a limited imagination at that. As Hayden White has shown, neatly plotted representations of reality, like those of providential historians, are fictions that artfully establish coherence from a collection of disparate, conflicting, and ambiguous events. These narratives work to mitigate the terrifying experience of the chaos of life, and instead create a plot that contrives wholeness and meaning out of disorder and uncertainty (*Content*, 21). Unlike Poe’s *Pym*, which unmasks historical tracts to reveal their terrifying chaos, *Hope Leslie*’s use of the cultural and gendered construction of history is enlightening and empowering, and heralds the “glory of our risen day” (16).

Another testament to Sedgwick’s historiographical argument is the dizzying array of source materials that resembles Mather’s compendium of early and contemporary materials for *Magnalia*. *Hope Leslie* defies this comparison only in the range of materials that Sedgwick draws from. To speak exclusively of the chapter epigraphs, she hallmarks the words of Puritan minister Cotton Mather and Anglican minister William Morrell as well as the dissenter Roger Williams. Quotations from their work stand alongside those from the poetry of Americans Felicia Hemans and William Cullen Bryant, and Europeans Shakespeare, Milton, Gray, Burns, LaRochfoucauld, and Metastasio. The novel does not locate truth in any one sect, generation, nationality, language, gender, or genre. All must be heard. In this respect, the novel also resembles Hawthorne’s *The Whole History of the Grandfather’s Chair* in which individuals of divergent

12. Suzanne Gossett and Barbara Ann Bardes make a related claim in their essay, “Women and Political Power in the Republic: Two Early American Novels,” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 2.2 (1985), 20, in which they characterize *Hope Leslie* as “cosmopolitan.” In comparison to contemporary novels, including those by Sedgwick herself, the landscape of *Hope Leslie* is populated with Europeans of different origins as well as native Americans. As part of her education, Hope is instructed in multiple foreign languages.
perspectives have an equal opportunity to hold forth from the distinguished chair.

Nonetheless, Sedgwick's structural emphasis on multiple conflicting perspectives on virtually every account should not be understood as advocating a valueless approach to truth or human motivation. *Hope Leslie* is a highly charged moralistic novel that clearly rewards virtuous behavior and does not hesitate to denigrate the actions of abusive men as well as those of the heroes and heroines, when necessary. As Maria Karafilis has recognized, the novel does not “elide difference and valorize a homogeneous society.” Its disposition of characters suggests the opposite. Those individuals who are rigidly ethnocentric or sectarian—such as Jennet or Mrs. Fletcher—die violently in the text, and those who shift allegiance from one culture to another—such as Magawisca and Faith—are maimed or infantilized. Sedgwick's model citizen attends to heterogeneity, negotiates difference, and acts for the common good on conflicted responsibilities to self and society. From the disparate, coherent historical fictions that compete for her attention, Hope Leslie, of all the novel's characters, has learned to decode the disparate, incoherent current events that demand her response. Similarly, from the manic, diffuse plot of *Hope Leslie*, the reader is asked to hear multiple, divergent narratives simultaneously as a lesson in how to construct a narrative of a democratic nation.

**Wharton's Gothic History**

Edith Wharton is not often associated with the themes and tropes of early American Calvinist literature. Indeed, her reputation rests largely on her insights into the high society of early twentieth-century New York rather than the struggling Puritan townships of seventeenth-century New England. Nonetheless, Wharton reminds the reader in *A Backward Glance* that she descends from Massachusetts colonial stock that relocated to New York because, she posits, they were “more interested in making money and acquiring property than in Predestination and witch-burning.” Moreover, in several short stories and in longer works such as *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, Wharton returns to Massachusetts to interrogate her nation's


New England Puritan origins, and expresses her interest in election, predestination, and even witch-hunting. More important to this study, in a number of these texts, she examines the selection and education of the community's historian.

Edith Wharton's 1925 short story, “Bewitched,” is constructed much like Cotton Mather's narratives that investigate the satanic possession of a woman in the community. Wharton, like Mather, meticulously sets out the protocol for documenting this remarkable occurrence and identifies something of a tribunal that has been summoned to the investigation. This group is naturally composed of the principals in this dilemma—Saul Rutledge, who has regular assignations with a dead woman, Ora Brand; his wife, who seeks an end to her husband's alleged affair; and Sylvester Brand, father of the deceased Ora. In the tradition of Mather's invocation of the disinterested, authoritative members of society who witness his remarkables, Wharton includes two additional members of the investigative party—Deacon Hibben, and a young farmer and town selectman named Orrin Bosworth—representing the religious and civil order of the community.

Mrs. Rutledge, the aggrieved wife, begins laying out the case in a definitive manner that sets the assertive tone for the remainder of her narrative: “We're in trouble here, and that's the fact” (211). Both she and her husband have witnessed the peculiar events that she divulges to her audience, but she alone claims the authority to speak the purported fact of her husband's being “bewitched.” As Mrs. Rutledge puts forth the details of the case, she allows no debate or equivocation on her testimony. When queried about her facts, her response is blunt: “I don't think—I know” (214); “I seen 'em” (214); and again “Don't I tell you I seen 'em?” (215). To her mind, that she is an eyewitness to her husband's assignations is both necessary and sufficient authority to understand and narrate these events. However, situating fact as the exclusive purview of this querulous and relentlessly domineering woman calls into question the very nature of her truth. As Wharton writes in another story, “The Triumph of Night,” “Oh, facts—what are facts? Just the way a thing happens to look at a given minute . . .” (193).

As one might anticipate, the woman with the facts claims the right to propose the resolution to the case. Mrs. Rutledge determines that the men put an end to her and her husband's difficulty by driving a stake through the dead woman's breast. She is as definitive in her method to resolve the situation as she is in her narration of the events. “A stake through the breast! That's the old way; and it's the only way!” she insists (219). Again
in the tradition of Mather, she invokes both scripture and history to secure her argument. Mrs. Rutledge quotes the proscription from Exodus that “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,” and cites the historical precedent from within their very community, that is, a similar occurrence in which Lefforts Nash was cured of his spell when “they” put a stake through Hannah Corey’s heart. In short order, Mrs. Rutledge is able to make her case and marshal support for the next step in the inquiry when the men would attempt to sight Ora Brand and Saul Rutledge at their next encounter. Thus, in controlling the story of the occurrence and in selecting her audience for the story, Mrs. Rutledge is able to determine the outcome of her tale.

Like many accomplished storytellers, in the process of constructing her narrative, Mrs. Rutledge trains her audience in the way she wishes them to “read.” In this case, she first predisposes them to see what she wants them to see; then, as eyewitneses to the events, they would issue reports that are consonant with hers. Moreover, this woman knows her audience well—with one exception. Clearly experienced in speaking to her husband, she also has insight into orchestrating an appeal to the deacon and Sylvester Brand, both long-standing members of the community. However, Orrin Bosworth is less well known. He was raised in neighboring Lonetop and is now a member of North Ashmore’s town council, so we are led to believe that he has a certain prominence in the community. At the same time, he represents the next generation, and, as Wharton puts it, “had had more contact with the modern world” (220). Much of the drama of “Bewitched” circles around Mrs. Rutledge’s selecting Bosworth as a member of her “audience” and her subsequent training of this man to serve her goals.

The ostensible primary plot of “Bewitched,” of course, concerns the resolution of Saul Rutledge’s purported relationship with the dead Ora Brand. This is only one of the ways in which we can understand the tale as gothic. The development of the character of Bosworth is also at the center of the story’s argument, this aspect contributing to the gothic mode of this tale. Initially Bosworth “follows” the rest, doesn’t understand why they have been called, and fails to appreciate Mrs. Rutledge’s hand in the gathering. “Queer, our all meeting here this way,” he says (209). Contemplating his position among the four people around the table, he can think only of the ways in which he is distinct from the others. He is young, advanced, successful, and, in fact, he and his friends laugh at the superstitious nonsense—such as this—they hear in the village.

However, in the setting of the Rutledge’s parlor, Bosworth performs the duties of an official of the township. He attempts to establish a reasonable
protocol for the investigation and even takes a deposition of sorts. He questions the “witnesses,” requests independent statements, and asks for “proof.” He does so although he has not been called upon for his independence, reason, and impartiality. To the contrary, he has been enlisted because he is naïve and compromised, and for these reasons, he may be trained to speak on behalf of the equally compromised community.

Wharton tells us that Bosworth “listened with a sense of suffocation; he felt as if he were wrestling with long-armed horrors in a dream (213).” This statement anticipates the embedded narrative that reveals Bosworth’s relationship to the community and the grotesque occurrences that bind him to the people of North Ashmore. Bosworth’s “long-armed horrors” include his insane Aunt Cressy, the story of whom he was advised to suppress lest “the shame of it would kill” his family (221). Yet, at this moment, the past has never seemed so present in his life, and he likewise recalls the related history of the others in the room. Deacon Hibben is a descendant of Mistress Hibben, one of the witches who were convicted in Salem in 1692.15 Sylvester Brand has a similar family disgrace in the death of his wife who is also his first cousin. They share in superstition and shame.

The Hibbens, Brands, and Bosworths, we learn, have resided in Hemlock County “ever since the white men had come here” (221). Orrin, whose name means “white man,” takes his place in the community as the next generation of white, male historians. Further, as he remembers his personal history, he allies himself more fully with his fellow men. More specifically, he takes on the responsibilities that are required by men in Hemlock County. When Mrs. Rutledge insists that they kill the witch, Ora Brand, she forces her point by tying the task to the performance of their masculinity. “Ain’t any of you folks got the grit—?,” she asks (222). Sylvester Brand ultimately kills his living daughter Venny at the scene of the assignation, and Bosworth participates by accompanying the party and taking Brand’s gun after he fires his shot. His role is to witness and remember. Ironically, when Mrs. Rutledge attaches masculinity to the mandate to murder, she effectively emasculates those whom she has called to do her bidding. If Bosworth’s primary role as a historian is to witness and remember, he does so because he has first submitted to the will of a woman.

The nature and function of history are complex and remain illusive in “Bewitched.” The tale of rumored incest, adultery, and murder is never

15. Gerard M. Sweeney has identified “pathology” in Deacon Hibben himself and argues that the description of his face as “queerly blotched and moldy looking” is consistent with the symptoms presented by syphilitic patients. See “Wharton’s ‘Bewitched,’” *Explicator* 56.4 (1998): 198–201.
fully disclosed. The new historian himself “was never quite sure in which order the events that succeeded took place,” and his vision was compromised by extremes of both light and darkness (226). Ultimately the history that he witnesses remains unspoken. When Bosworth’s sister asks him if he had heard the news of Venny Brand, he tersely asks, “What news?” (227). The role that binds him to the men of the community alienates him from his own sister who now seems “miles away” although they inhabit the same kitchen (227). By the close of the story, he literally and metaphorically carries his societal load, the funeral bier. He shoulders the responsibility for the community’s identity, which is both moribund and inextricably bound to the past. Because the past is never fully investigated and understood, there is no future in North Ashmore. In the absence of an honest narrative of the community—which may demand atonement and reform—there can be no future. Life in this New England community is relegated to replicating the past if only because its citizens intimidate subsequent generations, forcing them to reprise the behaviors of the past. To paraphrase the dictum of the dominant Mrs. Rutledge, “The old way is the only way!” (219).

Early in her novella *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton signals that this narrative is related to “Bewitched.” She identifies *Ethan Frome*’s setting in Starkfield as lying just to the south of the short story’s setting in North Ashmore. The two works being both geographically and thematically related, it is productive to read Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* from the historiographic perspective found in “Bewitched” and center the narrative on the emerging voice of the narrator, the new member of the community.

Unlike Orrin Bosworth, who initially doesn’t know that he has been tapped to witness extraordinary events, the narrator of *Ethan Frome* begins his tale with an assertive voice. In the opening four words of the novella, he claims, “I had the story” (99). He immediately checks his assertion with a statement of his two methods of acquiring and evaluating the story. The narrator first learns “bits” of his information from a variety of individuals whom he calls “informants” (99). He later becomes an eyewitness to current events that bear on his story, further solidifying his claim on the narrative.

A responsible historiographic protocol in place, the narrator nonetheless reveals as much about himself as he does about his subject matter. Like Orrin in “Bewitched,” this narrator counts himself an outsider in Starkfield,

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16. There are two bleak references to Starkfield in “Bewitched.” First, Orrin Bosworth’s mother threatens him to silence concerning his Aunt Cressie’s condition under penalty of having her sent to the Starkfield asylum. Second, Ora Brand attends a Starkfield school to learn bookkeeping. She never practices her trade, but “when Ora came back she sickened and died” (221).
Massachusetts, unlike the other men in the town. Gradually he learns that this is not entirely true. Primarily, he discloses—again in “bits”—the many ways in which he resembles Ethan Frome, the man whose story he tells. As Cynthia Griffin Wolfe has pointed out, the narrator discovers “disconcerting and unexpected similarities”: both are interested in technology, both have spent time in Florida. Describing Frome as “stiffened and grizzled” by his harsh and confined life in Starkfield, the narrator admits that he, too, is becoming habituated to his sorely limited life in the town. He recounts, “I chafed at first, and then, under the hypnotizing effect of routine, gradually began to find a grim satisfaction in the life” (101). Dulled by routine and content with a grim disposition, the narrator begins to understand more fully the condition of Ethan Frome.

By the close of the novella, when Wharton returns to the frame, it is unsettling to realize that the narrator is not making plans to leave Starkfield. Harmon Gow claimed early in the tale that “Most of the smart ones get away,” causing the narrator to wonder why Frome has not extricated himself from the town (100). However, he, too, is not going anywhere. He is “anchored” in Starkfield because of his work, but temporarily without work because of a labor strike (101). Moreover, like Frome, he has been domesticated. Both men live with two women, Frome with Zeena and Mattie, and the narrator with Mrs. Ned Hale and her mother, Mrs. Varnum. Ruth Hale laments that Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie are “all shut up there’n that one kitchen,” but fails to see that the narrator, her daughter, and she herself are sitting “in the austere seclusion of the horsehair parlor,” the only difference being that of Hale’s relative affluence (180, 179). Similarly, her claims of being pained by Ethan’s suffering might be matched by the narrator’s horror of her tale.

Most importantly, because of his stasis and domestication, he has lost control of the story of Ethan Frome and has relinquished his authority to Ruth Hale. He opens the novella with his claim of owning the story—“I had the story”—but cannot close the tale. Despite the substantial information that he has acquired throughout the novella, the narrator is reduced

18. Jennifer Travis has pointed out the interesting relationship between the male characters and work, and speaks to the labor crisis in Massachusetts townships in 1910 as the context for Wharton’s concern about the many psychological and social adversities caused by rural poverty. See “Pain and Recompense: The Trouble with Ethan Frome,” Arizona Quarterly 53.3 (1997): 37–64. I would add that the want of work and the rewards of work contribute to the emasculation of both Ethan Frome and the narrator and their consequent inability to speak in the presence of assertive women.
to silence and can only ask a few limited questions. In this he resembles Orrin Bosworth of “Bewitched,” who is depicted initially as “the youngest and most communicative” of men, but later speaks tersely and evasively. Likewise, much like Mrs. Rutledge’s control in constructing the narrative of her husband and Ora Brand, Ruth Hale dominates the telling of her community’s tale and has the final words on Ethan Frome and in *Ethan Frome*. His voice has been drowned out by the woman’s tongue.

The narrator has the makings of a fine historian. He is young, analytical, disinterested, and evinces a natural curiosity about life. However, the trajectory of the novella suggests that these qualities are insufficient. Full historical narrative is not created by a dispassionate outsider, but is a volatile composite of the personal and public, engaged and disinterested. It is unclear that Ruth Hale’s personal, longstanding relationship with the Fromes affords her greater truth about Ethan Frome than the narrator holds. It is equally uncertain that the narrator approaches the truth with greater clarity because he has no prior relationship with these individuals and can claim greater objectivity. Indeed, Wharton argues that the narrator may gather all the requisite facts to construct his account, but will never succeed in filling in the gaps. The lacunae in his tale result not from a lack of knowledge about the individuals and events, but from a lack of understanding about his relationship with these individuals, their past, and his present. The objective, authoritative historian is a flawed historian.

There are many ironies in Wharton’s novella, most of which center on the suffering in the Frome household. However, another central irony concerns the development of the narrator. While he may command certain facts about the life of Ethan Frome, he cannot fill in the gaps by interpreting those facts. Much like Poe’s narrators, Wharton’s young historian finds that his attempt to understand and chronicle the community leads to fragmentary knowledge devoid of conclusion.19 Only when he gets close to the Starkfield community can he possibly understand their history and the story of the Fromes. However, at the point that he becomes a member of their community, he will also resemble the men of Starkfield in their

19. In her introduction to *Ethan Frome* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911), Wharton writes “Each of my chroniclers contributes to the narrative just so much as he or she is capable of understanding of what, to them, is a complicated and mysterious case; and only the narrator of the tale has scope enough to see it all, to resolve it back into simplicity, and to put it in its rightful place among his larger categories” (ix). I disagree with the author’s perception of her work because the text closes without answering many questions about the individuals who form the Frome household and the narrator himself. I am also compelled by the final scene in which the narrator relates the emotional testimony of Ruth Hale, but lacks the resources to weave her statements into his own account. He has no full narrative, and he himself is silent.
incoherent understanding of themselves, their faltering language, and their personal stasis. He will be silenced by the voice of women.

Unlike Stowe and Hawthorne, Wharton does not set her fiction in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New English colonies. A twentieth-century writer, she fashions these fictive accounts as contemporary to her readers, and does this for many reasons, one of which is that her reader will not lose sight of his or her relationship to the argument of Wharton’s fiction. At the same time, “Bewitched” and Ethan Frome are stories of rural New England whose landscape is populated by characters with solidly New English names who consistently invoke their individual, familial, and community history in rural New England. The backward gaze of these characters is not incidental, but fully central to Wharton’s fiction. This narrative feature implies a continuity of human character and communal experience from the Puritan past to the American present. Likewise, Wharton’s prefatory description of her characters in Ethan Frome as “granite outcroppings” signals their endurance in the nature of American men and women. This depiction suggests more than stability and resilience, for these outcroppings are “half-emerged from the soil, and scarcely more articulate” (“Introduction,” vi). Both Ethan Frome and “Bewitched” enact the ways in which men and women struggle to repress or reckon with their personal and communal narratives and meet with little success. Wharton’s fiction demands that the reader wrestle with the ways in which the past informs the present and shapes the identity of the nation and the private and public identities of its citizens.

Although Edith Wharton’s fiction offers no directive as to the specific themes of historical narrative, her work offers a consistent argument concerning the role of the historian. She insists that the historian is never disinterested in his role as narrator of public events. Even when Orrin Bosworth of “Bewitched” and the narrator of Ethan Frome believe themselves to be removed from their community and their subject matter, they learn that they are intimately related to the tales that they are called upon to recount or repress. Their history informs their narration of the community’s history, and conversely their accounts of the community are telling of their self-understanding.

Authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Catharine Maria Sedgwick would concur that the invention of history is wedded to the ethos of the historian. This principle is at the center of their discussion of historical narration within their fiction. Moreover, in their construction of the historian, they take issue with the authority of the historian as established by earlier authors, in particular
Cotton Mather, who speaks at length about his belief in the sacred role of the historian. Indeed he opens book six of *Magnalia Christi Americana* with a statement to this effect:

To *regard* the illustrious displays of that providence wherewith our Lord Christ governs the world, is a work, than which there is none more *needful* or *useful* for a Christian: to *record* them is a work, than which, none more proper for a minister. (2:341)

While Cotton Mather insists that his ministerial standing constitutes authority for his role as historian, he also emphasizes the importance of witnessing historical events as playing a significant part in legitimizing his role. For this reason, he informs the readers when he himself experienced or observed the “remarkable occurrences” that he recounts. In instances where he cannot make this assertion, he is careful to document the identity of the eyewitness. “One of my honest neighbours, whose name is Christopher Monk, brought me this account of what had befallen himself,” he writes (2:352). And, “our venerable old Mr. Wilson saw one man to be extremely perverse above the rest” (2:397). At the close of a tale of sea deliverance, Mather insists that “[t]hence they came to Barbadoes, and there they made oath to the truth of this narrative” (2:467). Most frequently, the eyewitnesses are themselves ministers. In each case, actual observation of an event cannot be overestimated in establishing the credibility of the account.  

Mather’s insistence upon observation of an event should not be confused with experience of that event. The historian *cum* minister remains disengaged from the actual experience, and, further, does not seek to understand the saint or sinner and thus sympathize with them. His role is first to document historical events and then, in his ministerial interpretation of those events, determine them to be either *magnalia Dei* or *terribilia Dei*, and, in this way, issue God’s judgment of the actions of man. In this way, Mather aligns himself more closely with God than with man.

Wharton’s “Bewitched” and *Ethan Frome* expose the limitations of the eyewitness account, and identify its weakness in the character and disposition of the witness as well as in the limited relationship of the historian to his subject. These texts also expose the weakness of a sympathetic relationship to the historical subject. Damaging to the ethos of the

20. In the absence of personal experience or knowledge of eyewitnesses, at times Mather offers scholarly evidence of the authenticity of the tale. For example, he prefaces “The Wonderful Story of Major Gibbons” with the note that “no less than three several writers have published that wherein Major Edward Gibbons of Boston in New-England was concerned” (2:345).
eyewitness historian is Orrin Bosworth’s candid confession that although he was present at critical events, he cannot be sure of what he saw or heard. From a different perspective altogether, the historiographic fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, such as “The Black Cat,” “William Wilson,” and The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, push Mather’s insistence upon eyewitness knowledge of the recounted events to its extreme conclusion in that his narrator has experienced the events more fully and intensely than any other individual because he recounts his own story. In “The Black Cat” and “William Wilson,” the narrative is given over to the criminal’s own voice. Likewise, Pym tells his own story. In this way, Poe purports to subscribe to Mather’s historiographic principles, but inverts them to reveal the very voice that is suppressed in Mather’s accounts. Poe will not allow the minister’s statement—or the statement of any other authority—to supplant the statement of the individuals who are truly at the center of Poe’s remarkable occurrences. In this way, his narrators claim sole authority for their understanding of the self and their world. They also acknowledge the absolute individuality of such understanding. In addition to negating the religious platform of the narratives of remarkable occurrences, Poe’s gothic fiction undermines Cotton Mather’s commitment to shared experience and principles.

David S. Reynolds notes that Poe is similar to Charles Brockden Brown in severing the ties between fantastic plots and religious didacticism, and instead “places it in an extracreedal realm of terror,” thus “connect[ing] reverie and supernatural visitation with psychology rather than with doctrinal commentary or religious comfort.” Poe’s objective is neither to evaluate the actions of man nor even to understand them, but to offer the reader an opportunity to participate in the experience of those actions. Moreover, through narrative fissures, lacunae, and rejection of resolution, Poe’s fiction denies Cotton Mather’s commitment to represent the world as coherent and ordered. In place of divine providence, Poe asks the reader to face the contingency of this world and acknowledge the self as other.

Harriet Beecher Stowe shares Cotton Mather’s commitment to the belief that the one who is charged with interpreting the important and mundane events of life must above all be mindful of the spiritual significance of those events. However, she is unwilling to suggest that this individual be a dispassionate observer. Stowe’s historians—Roxy and Candace, among others—are characters who wield the authority of both spirituality

and sentimental attachment to her fellow men and women. It is not coincidental that this is the same as Stowe’s authorial ethos. In the construction of her fiction, Stowe frequently speaks directly to her readers, queries them, and invites them to participate in a conversation of sorts with the text.\(^{22}\) She is in sympathetic relation to her reader just as her characters, when they serve as textual narrators, are in sympathetic relation to their subjects and their textual audience. Further, Stowe taps characters to serve as textual narrators only when they are allied to their textual audience. Equally important, Stowe does not invest this authority exclusively in the minister, and more frequently, elects a wide range of characters for this role and specifically excludes the minister from this calling.

David S. Reynolds speaks to the blurred boundaries between religious tracts and fiction in the mid-nineteenth century, noting that Stowe was aware of the religious appeals that issue from fiction, a popular phenomenon that went far beyond her individual contributions (\textit{Faith in Fiction}, 208–11). The fusion of religious tract and historical narrative is, of course, evident in \textit{Magnalia Christi Americana}, which employs the forms and devices of fiction to realize its objectives. While Stowe surely recognized the religious and historical value of Mather’s accounts, she also identified them as “wonderful stories” (11:122). In her own century, she recognized that novels and short stories authored by the lay writer that promulgated religious ideals and interpretation were found in ministers’ libraries, in sectarian magazines, and in Sunday school classrooms as well as in the home. In this way, contemporary writing and publishing practices mirrored and supported her commitment to the shared, communal authority for religious interpretation and indoctrination.\(^{23}\) Likewise, in terms of historical narrative, in \textit{The Minister’s Wooing} a young, sensitive woman offers the fullest account of the life of Aaron Burr, and in \textit{The Pearl of Orr’s Island} the spinster seamstress has the most acute understanding of the history of Orr’s Island.

Like Stowe, Nathaniel Hawthorne invests authority in the historian on the basis of his or her humanity. As a corollary to this notion, his fiction rests on the author’s suspicion of every claim of objectivity and any

\(^{22}\) See Dorothy Z. Baker, “Harriet Beecher Stowe’s ‘Conversation’ with the \textit{Atlantic Monthly}: The Construction of \textit{The Minister’s Wooing},” \textit{Studies in American Fiction} 28.1 (2000): 27, which argues that the novel is constructed as a dialogue with both the reader and the other writers in the \textit{Atlantic Monthly}, the magazine in which the novel was serialized.

\(^{23}\) Reynolds also reveals that Stowe recognized the influence of fiction on homiletic style and made a humorous statement that clergymen would soon feel obliged to include a serial story in the weekly sermon (\textit{Faith in Fiction}, 209).
suggestion of a definitive historical record. As “David Swan” illustrates, the fluidity and subjectivity of historical narrative do not compromise its validity for Hawthorne. To the contrary, it asserts the humanity of the enterprise and attests to its vital importance. The showman in “Main-street” stages a carnival sideshow of American history because he is aware of our desire to know who we are. Further, the audience dispute his presentation and interpretation of history because they, too, are emotionally invested in determining the national identity. In this tale as in Grandfather’s Chair, Hawthorne makes clear that the individual desires to know what the nation represents because—for better or ill—the individual is intricately bound to the communal.

In addition to the ethos of the narrator, another structural feature of these texts must figure in a discussion of fictional responses to Cotton Mather’s historical narrative, that of the embedded narrative. In many of the texts examined in this book, the gothic element is contained in or centrally related to embedded narratives. Stowe’s Aunt Roxy speaks of the otherworld in the stories that issue from her long life on Orr’s Island, and Candace reveals her vivid dreams of other places and other times that are accurate to the letter. In the dead of night, Sedgwick’s characters recount grim tales of Indian raids that appear to interrupt the central plot, and revelations of herbal sorcery and witchcraft trials are recounted in transatlantic epistles. Orrin Bosworth of Wharton’s “Bewitched” recalls the grotesque behavior of his Aunt Cressy only in the periphery of his experience of equally grotesque dealings in Hemlock County. The literary manuscripts of Holgrave in The House of the Seven Gables and the narrator in “Alice Doane’s Appeal” are read to a fictional audience within the frame of the larger work, while the series of otherwise random stories spun by the passersby in “David Swan” overtakes the limited central plot. In general, the embedded narrative mirrors or otherwise reflects on the central plot, yet in these works the implications of this structural device on the literature are pointedly subversive. In several instances, the embedded narrative derails the received literary form of the fiction. Roxy’s account of her vision of Mara Lincoln in a funereal white dress defies the marriage plot of this novel just as Candace’s dream of James Marvyn’s deliverance spells the end to the minister’s wooing. This is to say that the seemingly ancillary anecdotes overtake the dominant form and argument, which is precisely Stowe’s objective. Likewise, the sequence of embedded captivity narratives and tales of Indian raids in Hope Leslie destabilize this formulaic fiction and render all such later accounts in the novel suspect. Holgrave’s magazine story is given equal footing with Salem history in The House of
The story was in the gaps of the Seven Gables, and thus confounds readerly confidence in historical narrative. An extreme example, Hawthorne’s “David Swan” is composed almost entirely of embedded narratives, none of which is definitive. The value is in the structure itself that argues for the insecurity of all narrative, especially the dominant, framing account that is the real fiction.

Once again, the use of the embedded narratives as a central device comments on the literary form as Cotton Mather employed them. Puritan ministers regularly used homely anecdotes—providence tales among them—in their sermons to secure the larger, spiritual message. Likewise, the providence tales in book six of Magnalia Christi Americana are, in a sense, all embedded narratives in that they do not contribute to a larger plot, but serve individually as examples of Mather’s argument that God intervenes in the lives of His people to demonstrate His will. There is an explicit consonance between the framing argument and the embedded narratives in this text. However, in the fiction studied in this book, the embedded narratives do not support, but actually undermine, what might be understood as the dominant fiction form of the text. They trump the formulaic plots and received structures of providence literature and rupture confidence in design—providential or otherwise. The gothic structure of these texts is built on the fissures between the purported argument of the fiction and that of its interpolated stories, and speaks once again to authorial distrust of the philosophical underpinning of the providence tale.

It would be gross exaggeration to claim that the emphasis on historical fiction in nineteenth-century America results exclusively from a crisis in American religious practice or historiography. There is a complex constellation of reasons why authors choose to write fiction in a historical mode as do Poe and Hawthorne, and fictional accounts of historical events as do Sedgwick, Stowe, and Hawthorne. Moreover, these authors—as well as many twentieth-century writers—are among many who explore our nation’s history within imaginative literature. These individuals take the dramatic step of contesting the dominant voices on the American past, Cotton Mather and the nineteenth-century historians who reprise and romanticize his accounts. By challenging Mather’s historical accounts, Poe, Stowe, Hawthorne, Sedgwick, and Wharton also reveal their distrust of the nature of historical narrative as he conceives it, and invite the reader to consider such accounts as tentative, plastic, and fictive. Their work suggests, as Hayden White observes, that in the stories of our past reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience. Insofar as historical stories
can be completed, can be given narrative closure, can be shown to have had a plot all along, they give to reality the odor of the ideal. This is why the plot of a historical narrative is always an embarrassment and has to be presented as “found” in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques. (Content, 21)

Because fiction has no essential claim to truth, the authority of the text rests on the authority of its narrator (Content, 19). Similarly, the argument of fiction—inherent in its emplotment—reveals the vision of its author. When later authors train their eyes on the mission and responsibilities of the individual historian and narrator, they do so with an awareness of the process by which history is shaped, proffered, and consumed. If Magnalia Christi Americana lends “the odor of the ideal” to the American past, Poe, Stowe, Hawthorne, Sedgwick, and Wharton reject Mather’s vision of the ideal. Instead, they put forth an alternate vision that occasionally expresses their ideal and more frequently confesses their notion of what is merely imperfect, human, and true.