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Catharine Maria Sedgwick's Contributions to Transcendentalism

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Transcendentalist guru Ralph Waldo Emerson begins his definitive essay “Nature,” written in 1836, with the dictum that Americans must “demand our own works and laws and worship.”¹ The idea of creating a new faith and way of thinking for a new world was pervasive throughout transcendentalist philosophy. However, despite their progressive ideas, the male transcendentalists were still products of their time, and they often espoused misogynistic beliefs. As a result, women’s contributions to the movement were either overlooked or minimized. Emerson and his compatriots, including Henry David Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne, were adamant; it was their job to create a new American way of thinking. Due in part to the sexism of the times, it was easy for critics, and the transcendentalists themselves, to overlook the fact that female writers like Catharine Maria Sedgwick had already begun the process of forging a uniquely American identity and spirituality years before. In two of her early novels, *A New-England Tale* (1822) and *Hope Leslie* (1827), both of which predated Emerson’s writings by nearly a decade, Sedgwick addressed many of the concepts that the transcendentalists would later come to consider essential elements of their philosophy.

In fact, Sedgwick prefaces her first novel, *A New-England Tale*, with the statement, “The writer of this tale has made an humble effort to add something to the scanty stock of native American literature.”² With those words, she illustrates the “Emersonian” desire to create something distinctively American. Sedgwick believed that those who “left the land of the birth—of their homes—of their father’s sepulchers” built the New World.³ Emerson, in words that echo those used by Sedgwick years earlier, expressed the need to practice a religion not reliant on the “sepulchers of the fathers.”⁴ Furthermore, within *A New-England Tale* and *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick initiates discussion on many of the issues covered in the most well-known and canonized works of the transcendentalists. Most significantly, she addressed the idea of maintaining one’s inner knowledge of that which is right despite social and familial pressures as key to becoming a good American citizen—an issue Emerson tackles in his 1841 essay “Self-Reliance.” Sedgwick also anticipates much of Emerson’s religious doctrine as presented in his essay “Nature.” In *A New-England Tale* and *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick writes about the connection between God and nature and the idea that man should derive his laws from the natural world. Each of her novels has a character, Magawisca (*HL*) and Crazy Bet (*NET*), who acts as a model of one who possesses a transcendental connection to nature.

Given the conceptions of female writers within the intellectual elite class at the time the transcendentalist movement was gaining steam, it is easy to understand why Sedgwick’s contributions have been ignored or, at best, overlooked. Many of the problems with the inclusion of female writers in the transcendentalist canon stem from the conflicting views on women that prominent transcendentalists held, including Emerson and Hawthorne. Many believed (including Sedgwick herself) that “the assertion of an author-izing Self demanded, on some level, a radical departure from the role of the True Woman for the female writer of fiction.”⁵ In other words, for a female to become a truly great author she must bare herself in a way that is only considered appropriate for men, or, as Hawthorne puts it, “when [women] throw

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman (New York: New American Library, 1965), 187.

² Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *A New-England Tale*, ed. Victoria Clements (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7.

³ Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 75.

⁴ Emerson, “Nature,” 186.

⁵ Victoria Clements, introduction to *A New-England Tale*, by Catharine Maria Sedgwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), xxii.

off the restraints of decency, and come before the public stark naked, as it were—then their books are sure to possess character and value.”⁶ This type of brazen behavior conflicted with the modesty stereotypically essential to womanhood, and thus it became impossible for male authors to view female authors as their creative equals.

Presenting yet another obstacle for female authors is the probability that canonized male writers like Emerson did not give due credit to female writers for strictly personal reasons. Emerson’s own problems with women may, as David Leverenz argues, stem from his mother’s ineffectuality at contesting his father’s unrealistic ambitions for their sons.⁷ Therefore, Emerson associated femininity with weakness. The fact that he called the most influential female in his life, his Aunt Mary, “Father Mum” only further illustrates the likelihood of Emerson’s personal beliefs influencing his social prejudices.⁸

On a semantic level, one reason the transcendentalists may have overlooked Sedgwick is that the bulk of transcendentalist writing deals with what it means to be an American man. Women, who most commonly wrote novels about sentimental emotions and domestic affairs, did not delve into this territory. According to Leverenz, “Emerson calls for men like himself and his brothers to abandon their father’s patrician conformity and create a new elite ... As one crucial consequence, the women’s world of relations and feelings becomes irrelevant.”⁹ Women can, of course, write about what it means to be independent or self-reliant (as Sedgwick did), but “man-making words” was left to the men.

Even critics today have not given Sedgwick proper credit for her contributions to early American literature. James Wallace discusses how attitudes of the past have carried over into the present: “In recent years, Hawthorne has come to exemplify the masculinist biases of those authors, publishers, and critics who combined to create the canon of ‘American literature’ and to exclude the far more popular and influential women writers they envied.”¹⁰ Ironically, the extreme popularity of the female writers from the 1820s through the 1870s often warranted their exclusion from the canon, critics snobbishly dismissing popular novels in favor of that which they deemed “literature.”¹¹

However, despite the numerous reasons Sedgwick was not considered a predecessor to the transcendentalist movement, the fact remains that she was an extremely popular writer in her day. According to Lucinda Damon-Bach and Victoria Clements, Sedgwick’s popularity and readership at least equaled, if not exceeded, that of James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe, making her current canonical exclusion particularly significant and revealing.¹² She was not only popular in America, but also worldwide. Her books were published in seven different languages, and she was granted admission into the *National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans* in 1834, along with thirty-five others,

⁶ James D. Wallace, “Hawthorne and the Scribbling Women Reconsidered,” *American Literature* 62, no. 2 (June 1990): 205, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-9831%28199006%3A2%3C201%3AHATSWR%3E2.0.CO%3B2-W> (accessed November 9, 2005).

⁷ David Leverenz, “The Politics of Emerson’s Man-Making Words,” *PMLA* 101, no. 1 (January 1986): 44, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0030-8129%28198601%29101%3A1%3C38%3ATPOEMW%3E2.0.CO%3B2-I> (accessed November 9, 2005).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰ Wallace, “Hawthorne,” 204.

¹¹ Clements, Introduction, xvi.

¹² Victoria Clements and Lucinda Damon-Bach, introduction to *Catharine Maria Sedgwick: Critical Perspectives*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), xxix.

including George Washington and Daniel Webster. She was one of only two females (the other was Martha Washington) and one of four writers (the others were Joel Barlow, Irving, and Cooper).¹³

Social, political, personal, and cultural reasons aside, the fact remains that her writing anticipates many of the issues about which the transcendentalists wrote. She even considered herself, like Emerson, to be a teacher and spokesperson for the American people. According to Sarah Robbins, she used her writing as a means of teaching, if not preaching, and many of her publications were “aimed at inspiring Christian virtue and nurturing ideals of citizenship through literature.”¹⁴ Even *A New-England Tale* originated as a religious tract that she later turned, “accidentally,” into a novel.¹⁵ It is impossible to view Sedgwick’s novels as anything other than a vehicle for social and religious reform.

Though many similarities exist between Sedgwick and the transcendentalists, her approach to dealing with social issues is rooted in the creation of values that stem from the family rather than just the individual man; her writing is far more inclusive than that of Emerson. Women’s fiction of the period more commonly focuses on social reform, economic problems, and community issues. This stands in contrast to the fiction of males with its primary focus on the individual.¹⁶ Mary Kelley suggests that Sedgwick thinks progressively about equality: “Erasing her initial suspicion that political economy was most properly a masculine enterprise, Sedgwick made its practitioner the embodiment of femininity. . . . She complicated the common premise that men alone were lords of creation, a popular phrase that signaled gender conventions limiting participation in the construction of culture.”¹⁷ Unlike Emerson, who repeatedly writes of self-reliance as essential to true manhood, Sedgwick writes of it as essential to good personhood. Emerson draws the connection between a man’s private morality and his public life, whereas Sedgwick emphasizes the morality in one’s family life as the point of origin for good citizenship.

Both Sedgwick and the transcendentalists believe in the self as central to social and spiritual development, and both write extensively on the nature of staying true to oneself and becoming a responsible citizen. Perhaps, the most important idea in transcendentalism, as presented in Emerson’s essay, “Self-Reliance,” is to “Trust thyself.”¹⁸ Emerson writes, “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. . . . Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”¹⁹ Men, for Emerson, can do no better than to act on what they know to be true and right. However, as Emerson writes, living in accordance with one’s true self takes courage.²⁰

Such ideas, for Sedgwick, transcend gender, so Sedgwick created several female characters who peremptorily embody Emerson’s ideas of self-reliance. Hope Leslie (*Hope Leslie*) and Jane Elton (*A New-England Tale*) are two instances. Sedgwick’s description of Hope provides a relevant example of a self-reliant female:

¹³. Ibid., xxiii.

¹⁴. Sarah Robbins, “Periodizing Authorship, Characterizing Genre: Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s Benevolent Literary Narratives,” *American Literature: A Journal of American Literary History, Criticism and Bibliography* 76 (2004): 2-3.

¹⁵. Clements, Introduction, xviii.

¹⁶. Ibid., xvii.

¹⁷. Mary Kelley, introduction to *The Power of Her Sympathy: The Autobiography and Journals of Catharine Maria Sedgwick*, by Catharine Maria Sedgwick (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 35.

¹⁸. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman (New York: New American Library, 1965), 258.

¹⁹. Ibid., 260.

²⁰. Ibid., 259.

It may appear improbable that a girl of seventeen, educated among the strictest sect of the Puritans, should have had the open, fearless, and gay character of Hope Leslie; but it must be remembered that she lived in an atmosphere of favour and indulgence, which permits the natural qualities to shoot forth in unrepressed luxuriance—an atmosphere of love, that like a tropical climate, brings forth the richest flowers and most flavorful fruits. . . . Like the bird that spreads his wings and soars above the limits by which each man fences in his own narrow domain, she enjoyed the capacities of her nature, and permitted her mind to expand beyond the contracted boundaries of sectarian faith.²¹

In short, Hope allows both her circumstances and her innate nature to shape her character. This passage is particularly telling when compared to a passage in which Emerson describes the best possible conditions for self-realization. He writes, “The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature.”²² Hope is certainly the model for a self-reliant citizen, seeing as she was raised under the exact conditions Emerson deems ideal to best cultivate a “healthy attitude.”

Hope embodies a non-conformist spirit within the Puritan society in which she lives. She shows multiple times throughout the text her rebellious nature, as when she speaks out against the wrongful imprisonment of the Native American healer Nelema and performs an act of civil disobedience to free the aging priestess. As Hope’s friend and family servant Digby claims, “It was a pure mercy you [Hope] chose the right way, for you always had yours.”²³ She uses her religious teachings as stepping-stone, as Emerson suggests one should, to transcend society and act with only the motivation of truthfulness to her inner genius, or, as in the words of Judith Fetterly, Hope, “insists on intellectual freedom as well, having learned from the arguments of those around her to doubt all dogma and let her mind expand.”²⁴ Her behavior constitutes an enactment of the Emersonian ideal that “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think.”²⁵

Jane Elton, protagonist of *A New-England Tale*, is another character who shares Hope’s independence of spirit. Though Jane’s mother’s death upturned her life, and she had no choice but to live with her hypocritical, dogmatic, and cruel Aunt Wilson, Jane, like Hope, lives only according to her inner voice, or, what Sedgwick refers to as her “unfailing habit of regulating her daily life by the sacred rules of our blessed Lord.”²⁶ Circumstances aside, Jane manages to live according to her own principles, and this devotion to natural instinct develops her character to be kind and loving. She is the type of “man” Emerson imagined when he writes, “If we live truly, we shall see truly. . . . When a man lives with God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn.”²⁷ For this reason, other characters in the novel constantly refer to Jane’s benevolent nature and call her “a saint.”²⁸

²¹ Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*, 128.

²² Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 259.

²³ Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*, 235.

²⁴ Judith Fetterly, “‘My Sister! My Sister!’: The Rhetoric of Catharine Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie*,” *American Literature: A Journal of American Literary History, Criticism and Bibliography* 70 (1998): 499.

²⁵ Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 261.

²⁶ Sedgwick, *New-England Tale*, 40.

²⁷ Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 269.

²⁸ Sedgwick, *New-England Tale*, 102

On the other hand, Jane's aunt's religion, a hypocritical form of Calvinism teaching the appearance of faith over true faith, never reaches Jane's heart, and Jane remains true to her own religious feelings. Despite the multiple attempts of her cousins to pull her into their nefarious schemes, and despite her aunt's attempts to break her spirit, Jane rises above and stays true to her nature. Emerson asks, "Why should we assume the faults of our friend, or wife, or father, or child, because they sit around our hearth, or are said to have the same blood? ... But your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation."²⁹ One example of Jane's "elevation" occurs when her cousin David asks her to help him conceal his theft of his mother's money. Jane promises not to reveal his theft, and when she faces the accusations of Mrs. Wilson, rather than revealing the culprit, she merely proclaims that she is innocent and righteous.³⁰

One particularly appropriate application of Emersonian thinking in Jane's life occurs when she ends her engagement with Edward Erksine because she feels that they are spiritually incompatible. Emerson says, "If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own."³¹ Jane shares the exact same sentiments with Edward when she breaks off her relationship with him, saying "Examine your heart as I have examined mine, and you will find the tie is dissolved that bound us; there can be no enduring love without sympathy; our feelings, our pursuits, our plans, our inclinations, are all diverse."³² Edward's lack of spirituality creates too much of a rift between the two for Jane to traverse, and consequently she turns her back, though not unkindly, on what was then her only hope of escape from her aunt's house.

Sedgwick also addresses the issue of hypocritical religious dogmatism. The Wilson family exemplifies the negative effects of dogmatic and hypocritical religion. A complete opposite in character to Jane, her aunt, Mrs. Wilson, foretells the embodiment of what Emerson means when he famously says, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."³³ Mrs. Wilson constantly uses religion to justify her mistreatment of her children and Jane and her inaction in saving her son's life when he is sentenced to death. She also uses it to justify the destructive behavior of her children and herself. Mrs. Wilson presents a diametrically opposite viewpoint of Jane, Sedgwick, and Emerson, saying "The natural man can do nothing towards his own salvation. Every act he performs, every prayer he offers, but provokes more and more wrath of the Almighty."³⁴ In other words, Mrs. Wilson believes that since Salvation is predetermined, acting kindly or charitably towards others is futile. Sedgwick describes Mrs. Wilson's hypocrisy in no uncertain terms:

We fear there are many who think there is merit in believing certain doctrines; who, mistaking the true import of that text, "by grace are ye saved," quiet themselves with having once in their lives passed through what they deemed conviction and conversion, and from thence believe their salvation is secure. ... Unless they are brought to true repentance, to showing their "faith by their works," we fear they will experience its just fate.³⁵

²⁹ Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 270-71.

³⁰ Sedgwick, *New-England Tale*, 100.

³¹ Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 271.

³² Sedgwick, *New-England Tale*, 129.

³³ Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 263.

³⁴ Sedgwick, *New-England Tale*, 129.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

It seems as though Emerson had Mrs. Wilson in mind as he writes, “If, therefore, a man claims to know and speak of God, and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old moldered nation in country, in another world, believe him not.”³⁶ Or, as Sedgwick writes, “Mrs. W’s tongue was familiar with many texts, that had never entered her understanding, or influenced her heart.”³⁷

Jane, however, remains completely unconcerned with religious dogma and instead remains faithful only to the idea of a loving God. Like Jane, Emerson believes, “The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure, that it is profane to seek to interpose helps. . . . Whenever a mind is simple, and receives a divine wisdom old things pass away.”³⁸ For example, at the end of the novel, Jane marries someone of another religion, a Quaker, with no qualms. Sedgwick asserts that Jane’s conversion “was the result of the purity and simplicity of her character, the preference she always gave to the spirit over the letter, to the practice over the profession.”³⁹ Only values matter to Jane, not the name under which they are categorized.

True self-reliance extends beyond simply having an understanding God in one’s private life to actually applying private virtue to public life. In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson writes, “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all man,—that is genius.”⁴⁰ He goes on to remind us, “As great a stake depends on your private act today, as followed their public and renowned steps. When private men shall act with original views the luster will be transferred from the actions of kings to those of gentlemen.”⁴¹ Thus, the separation of government and morality cannot work. To allow something one knows privately to be wrong to occur for the sake of satisfying public demands is morally unacceptable.

Sedgwick tackles the same issue in *Hope Leslie* and *A New-England Tale*, but, as previously mentioned, she believes private morality stems from one’s home life rather than Emersonian independence. Sedgwick “had argued that there can be no meaningful understanding of public good separate from a recognition of its ‘private’ cost.”⁴² It is for this reason that in *Hope Leslie* characters like Hope and her companion Everell continuously triumph (the escapes of Nelema and Magawisca for example) over the Puritan fathers who hold beliefs like that of the character Sir William Fletcher who writes, “Liberty, what is it! Daughter of disloyalty and mother of all misrule—who, from the hour that she tempted our first parents to forfeit paradise, hath ever worked mischief to our race.”⁴³ Consequently, as Fetterly writes, “The construction of America falls to the decidedly antiromantic Hope Leslie and to her ‘brother’ Everell, whose understanding of citizenship makes no distinction between the public and private.”⁴⁴

Hope turns out to be an ideal Emersonian citizen, who “is a lover of self and a challenger of arbitrary authority who, while insisting on her physical and intellectual freedom, is willing to take extreme risks for what she believes. She is a remarkably ‘American’ figure, yet one whom we will not see again in American fiction for a long time.”⁴⁵ For example, concerning Hope’s

³⁶ Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 268.

³⁷ Sedgwick, *New-England Tale*, 15.

³⁸ Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 268.

³⁹ Sedgwick, *New-England Tale*, 162.

⁴⁰ Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 257.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴² Fetterly, “My Sister! My Sister!,” 495.

⁴³ Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*, 6.

⁴⁴ Fetterly, “My Sister! My Sister!,” 495.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 501.

release of Nelema, Sedgwick writes, “This was a bold, dangerous, and unlawful interposition; but Hope Leslie took counsel only from her own heart, and that told her that the rights of innocence were paramount to all other rights, and as to danger to herself, she did not weigh it—she did not think of it.”⁴⁶ Hope practices her own forms of “civil disobedience,” relying on her instinct, rather than governmental authority to determine right and wrong. She cannot allow acts she knows to be unjust occur when she has the power to stop them, thereby indicating the correlation between her private beliefs and public actions.

In *A New-England Tale*, Sedgwick uses the Wilson family to show readers the other side of the spectrum of good-citizenship. This family illustrates how moral hypocrisy and selfish values lead to poor citizenship. Sedgwick, through her narration, criticizes the family harshly: “If Mrs. Wilson had not been blinded by self-love, she might have learnt an invaluable lesson from the melancholy results of her own mal-government. But she preferred incurring every evil, to the relinquishment of one of the prerogatives of power. Her children, denied the appropriate pleasures of youth, were driven to sins of a much deeper die.”⁴⁷ Eldest son David provides readers with the harshest indictment of Mrs. Wilson’s mothering. In a letter written to her, David says, “You, it was, that taught me . . . that there was no difference between doing right and doing wrong, in the sight of the God you worship; you taught me, that I could do nothing acceptable to him. If you taught me truly, I have only acted out the nature totally depraved . . . that He gave to me.”⁴⁸ Consequently, Mrs. Wilson remains in a constant state of misery and anxiety, since, as Emerson says, “Discontent is the want of Self-Reliance: it is infirmity of will.”⁴⁹

Sedgwick shows the connection between the infliction of dogmatic beliefs and hypocrisy on the Wilson children and their inability to become self-reliant, morally just American citizens. Emily Van Dette believes that “Sedgwick paints the results of the parent’s tyranny in no uncertain terms: her children grow up to be disloyal, dishonest, and disreputable—bad children and bad citizens. . . . The Wilson children . . . left to the irrational leadership of their mother, learn to deceive and cheat, and grow up to be non-functional members of the American republic.”⁵⁰ Thus, as Emerson later says, dogma results in hypocrisy and hypocrisy results in lack of knowledge of moral righteousness and God. Without knowledge of God in one’s private life, it is impossible for one to act as a good citizen in the public life.

Sedgwick, like Emerson, writes not only about issues of citizenship and spiritual independence, but also issues of God and His relationship to the natural world. As Emerson would later argue, Sedgwick thought that any religion practiced in America must be compatible with America’s status as a new, largely unsettled nation. Because America consisted mostly of wilderness, it was logical that Sedgwick, a lover of nature, would see the importance of the connection between God and the natural world and writes so in her autobiography.⁵¹ She believes “nature is wisdom when it is evolved from the human heart and from life.”⁵²

In both *Hope Leslie* and *A New-England Tale*, Sedgwick creates characters, Magawisca and Crazy Bet respectively, who exemplify the relationship between God and nature.

⁴⁶ Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*, 124.

⁴⁷ Sedgwick, *New-England Tale*, 47.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴⁹ Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 274.

⁵⁰ Emily Van Dette, “‘It Should Be a Family Thing’: Family, Nation, and Republicanism in Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *A New-England Tale* and *The Lindwoods*,” *ATQ* 19 (2005): 53.

⁵¹ Sedgwick, *Power of Her Sympathy*, 73.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 104.

Essentially, her characters live what Emerson means when he later writes, “The greatest delight which the fields and the woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged.”⁵³ Nature, to Emerson, constantly reminds humankind that it does not exist alone in the universe, but is fully integrated into the plans of a Universal Being, or God in the Christian worldview. People are, therefore, never alone, as all they need to do is to view nature to see God’s plan in action. In his words, “If a man would be alone, let him look at the stars.”⁵⁴

Magawisca finds the same peace in the stars as Emerson. In response to Hope’s entreaties that she will be lonely living in the wilderness, Magawisca says:

Hope Leslie, there is no solitude in me; the Great Spirit, and his ministers, are everywhere present and visible to the eye of the soul that loves him; nature is but his interpreter; her forms are but bodies for his spirit. I hear him in the rushing winds—in the summer breeze—in the gushing fountains—in the softly running streams. I see him in the bursting life of spring—in the ripening maize—in the falling leaf. Those beautiful lights . . . that shine alike on your stately domes and our forest homes, speak to me of his love to all.⁵⁵

In fact, her sentiments echo Emerson’s precisely. The world is the Great Spirit’s gift to her people, designed for their sustenance—another point which Emerson echoes when he says, “All the parts [of nature] incessantly work into each other’s hands for the profit of man.”⁵⁶ Nature must be respected, since it provides the means for all human survival.

Crazy Bet is also an exceedingly transcendental character, who, according to Clements, “prefigures the ‘majority of one’ glorified by Emerson and Thoreau some fifteen and twenty years later, thereby bringing into relief the restraints of religious orthodoxy.”⁵⁷ Bet, like Magawisca and Emerson, constantly sees the works of God in nature. For example, with regard to a leaf, Bet says, “Every leaf of them has had a prayer said over it. There is a charm in every one of them.”⁵⁸ Bet illustrates the union between the natural and God. The union is made even clearer when placed in opposition to the views of Mrs. Wilson, who thinks, “The kingdom of grace is very different from the kingdom of nature.”⁵⁹

Another commonality between Sedgwick and Emerson is the connection they see between the laws of nature and the laws of God. Emerson considers nature to be “a discipline.”⁶⁰ He writes, “All things are moral; and in their boundless changes have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature. . . . Therefore nature is ever the ally of Religion.”⁶¹ It follows that men should implicitly understand law due to their experience in the natural world, since, “the moral law lies at the center of nature and radiates to the circumference.”⁶² Again, Sedgwick’s character

⁵³ Emerson, “Nature,” 189-90.

⁵⁴ Emerson, “Nature,” 188.

⁵⁵ Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*, 351-52.

⁵⁶ Emerson, “Nature,” 191.

⁵⁷ Victoria Clements, “‘A Powerful and Thrilling Voice’: The Significance of Crazy Bet,” in *Catharine Maria Sedgwick: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Victoria Clements and Lucinda Damon-Bach (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 47.

⁵⁸ Sedgwick, *New-England Tale*, 84.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁶⁰ Emerson, “Nature,” 202.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁶² Emerson, “Nature,” 205.

Magawisca illustrates this same principle. She considers the law she obeys to have been “written on her heart” by the Great Spirit, and she is cynical of people, like the English, who must write their laws on paper.⁶³

A direct correlate of the idea that God exists in nature is the idea that God should be worshipped outside, not just in church. Sedgwick, again, uses the character of Bet to represent the natural world itself as a place of worship. Bet helps Jane to resolve a conflict with Jane’s family by bringing Jane into the woods to worship. Bet says, “Who are the worshippers that meet in this temple? The spirits that were ‘sometime disobedient,’ but since *He* went and preached to them, they come out from their prison house, and worship in the open air, and under the light of the blessed heavens.” Jane replies, “It is a beautiful spot. . . . I should think all obedient spirits would worship in this sanctuary of nature.”⁶⁴

Additionally, both Emerson and Sedgwick agree that separation from nature is harmful to the soul. Emerson writes, “The Supreme Being does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us . . . [Man] is nourished by unending fountains, and draws, at his need, inexhaustible power.”⁶⁵ He goes on to contend, “The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited with himself.”⁶⁶ One example of disunity of which Emerson speaks is that of the Wilson family, taught to deny the presence of God in nature. Moral disunity leads to social dysfunction as Emerson asserts and Sedgwick so clearly illustrates.

Both of Sedgwick’s transcendental female characters, Bet and Magawisca, demonstrate how harmful separation from nature is to the human spirit. They feel imprisoned when indoors and suffer from lack of exposure to the wilderness. Bet, for instance, who is very ill, refuses to die in a bed, saying, “I cannot stay here. The spirits of heaven are keeping a festival by the light of the blessed moon.”⁶⁷ She is later found dead outside. Like Bet, *Hope Leslie*’s Magawisca considers separation from nature worse than death. During her trial she says, “If ye send me back to that dungeon—the grave of the living, feeling, thinking soul, where the sun never shineth, where the stars never rise nor set, where the free breath of heaven never enters, where all is darkness without and within. . . . ye will even now condemn me to death, but death more slow and terrible than your most suffering captive ever endured from Indian fires and knives.”⁶⁸ The disunity from nature that Emerson claims causes humans to self-destruct instills in Magawisca a fear so great that she would rather die than experience it through imprisonment.

Sedgwick wrote novels with the purpose of educating the public both morally and socially. She also wrote with a consciousness of the fact that she was spearheading a whole new literary movement, one that sought to give America its own place on the cultural map. She was interested in the role of women and families in the new American republic. She was also interested in practicing a religion that fostered compassion and incorporated the idea of the prevalence of God in the natural world. She did not know that the transcendentalists would bring up these very same issues more than a decade after the publication of her novels *Hope Leslie* and *A New-England Tale*. Unfortunately, for cultural reasons and the fact that all women’s writing was forced into the “sentimental” genre and consequently was and still remains largely disrespected, readers and transcendentalist founders alike have overlooked her works as

⁶³ Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*, 52.

⁶⁴ Sedgwick, *New-England Tale*, 85.

⁶⁵ Emerson, “Nature,” 216-17.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁶⁷ Sedgwick, *New-England Tale*, 165.

⁶⁸ Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*, 309.

predecessors to the transcendentalist movement. However, given the similarities of the doctrines preached in her novels and in Emerson's essays, "Self-Reliance" and "Nature," and the fact that she was so widely read by her contemporaries, it becomes nearly impossible to deny that there is a connection between her work and the later work of the transcendentalists.

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