The female creation of law and order in hope leslie

In her novel Hope Leslie, Catharine Maria Sedgwick explores the influence laws arising from religion, nature, and society have on the development of a new nation. Specifically, her historical romance analyzes the culture created by seventeenth-century Puritans who left England behind to settle in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. As the Puritans abandoned England, they escaped the restrictions on their religion and were given the opportunity to write new laws for America's social order. The traditional laws of England did not apply to America, because the two countries faced completely different challenges. Sedgwick embodies the laws that must be reevaluated within the characters of Esther, Magawisca, and Hope. Esther, the pious female, represents the law of religion; Magawisca, the proud Indian, represents the law of nature; and Hope, the independent woman, represents the law of society. Sedgwick recognized that Puritans would be more willing to alter some laws than others, and signifies the different capacities for change in each female's relationship with Everell. Esther's weak emotional connection is contrasted with Magawisca's stronger union with Everell. Hope develops the closest relationship with Everell, however, suggesting that the law of society contains the most potential for modification. By analyzing each woman's ability to rewrite her law and the resulting relationship with Everell, it is evident Sedgwick asserts that survival in America requires society to accept the contributions of women and continuously create flexible legal codes that govern American culture. By choosing Esther, Magawisca, and Hope to symbolize evolving order, Sedgwick highlights how each law reinforces a patriarchal hierarchy that establishes women as inferior. Specifically, she challenges the traditional structure of social femininity constructed in Barbara Welter's essay " The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-

1860.” Welter explains that while America’s economy was constantly changing, “ a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found,” and that true women followed the “ four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (44). Welter reveals that the laws of religion (piety), nature (purity and submissiveness), and society (domesticity) each placed women in an inferior gender role. In the preface of the novel, however, Sedgwick’s audience learns that “ elements of virtue and intellect are not withheld from any branch of the human family” (Sedgwick 6). Additionally, in “ History, Memory, and the Echoes of Equivalence in Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s Hope Leslie,” Amanda Emerson remarks that Sedgwick’s novel establishes the “ equivalence of women’s and men’s intelligence and moral capacity” (25). Sedgwick encourages a progressive perception of women that denies their inferiority to men in the areas of religion, nature, and society. As Mrs. Grafton, Hope’s aunt, states, “’There is nothing but the wind so changeful as a woman’s mind’” (Sedgwick 218). Because Mrs. Grafton is referring to Hope’s strong character, the comment, which appears to point out the fickle behavior of women, actually alludes that female flexibility is a strength and not a weakness. Sedgwick symbolically presents the laws that need to be rewritten for life on the frontier, and uses women to emphasize the importance of each law changing with regards to gender roles. Although the three laws reinforce a common view of woman’s social roles, they each have different capacities for shaping a new national order. As Esther, Magawisca, and Hope each embody a distinct law, their potential relationships with Everell represent how altering their law will affect the Puritans’ success on the frontier. Everell Fletcher exemplifies the first generation born in America. His father, William Fletcher,

emigrated from England and still has blood ties to the laws of the old country. Because he is born on the frontier, however, Everell represents a clean slate for creating order, and his romantic relationships become the pivotal focus for the evolution of laws shaping America. Everell depicts the open-mindedness needed to create American order when he listens to Magawisca's account of the Pequod war and states, " I can honour noble deeds though done by our enemies, and see that cruelty is cruelty, though inflicted by our friends" (Sedgwick 46). Gustavus Stadler, author of " Magawisca's Body of Knowledge: Nation-Building in Hope Leslie," describes the transformative relationships between Everell the three female protagonists: " The adolescent spirit that characterized each character must now be made to make sense through the terms that dictate adult private life. Put directly, the issue of who is to marry whom must be resolved" (49). Essentially, Everell represents the new America, and as each woman makes greater progress in rewriting their individual laws, they develop deeper emotional relationships with Everell. Similarly, Emerson concludes that each woman represents the " intellectual, moral, and religious self-culture of women" to symbolize how each altered law " might be taken up again as a viable sign for American identity" (27). The three relationships compare the extent to which religious, natural, and societal laws can be changed to establish American order. Ultimately, the woman most successful in redefining her role is able to marry Everell, therefore emphasizing the law with the most potential for constructing America's new rules for behavior. Sedgwick chooses Esther to fully represent religious law, because " no one excelled her in the practical part of her religion" (135). In fact, throughout Esther's life, she had not strayed " beyond the narrow bound of domestic

duty and religious exercises” (Sedgwick 136). Sedgwick accentuates spiritual law’s narrow capacity for change by constructing an inflexible Puritan framework. Throughout the novel, she highlights the notion of puritanical rigidity in defining general roles of behavior. For example, when describing the religious Sabbath tradition, Sedgwick explains that individuals practice with “ an almost judaical (sic) severity” (157). The harsh diction suggests that members zealously allow religious law to dictate their lives and prevent them from seeing beyond a Puritan order. Although Sedgwick critiques the entire structure of puritan law, Esther Downing is used to “ further highlight Sedgwick’s rejection of the Puritan’s expectations for female behavior” (Kelly xxiv). Esther’s Puritan upbringing completely binds her actions, and she embodies all the attributes that were expected of women at the time. Emerson remarks that Esther illustrates the “ thoughts and emotions that start out circumscribed by both Puritan orthodoxy and the mandates of the nineteenth-century true womanhood” (29). Although Esther follows both religious law and the law of true womanhood, Sedgwick indicates that for Esther, religion signifies a higher authority for behavior. Specifically, Winthrop reinforces that “’passiveness, that, next to godliness, is a woman’s best virtue’” (Sedgwick 153). Esther’s faithfulness is seen as a superior virtue, therefore indicating that she is more influenced by Puritan law. Esther’s devotion to God frames her relationship with Everell and signifies the effect religious law has on creating new American order. For example, when Everell feels an emotional obligation to save Magawisca, he turns to Esther for assistance. Unfortunately, Esther refuses, instead implying that “ no earthly consideration could have tempted her to waver from the strictest letter of her religious duty” (Sedgwick 277). Esther’s strict piety keeps her

from being with the man she loves showing that she “ is governed by dictates outside herself” (Kelly xxv). It is that same Puritan devotion that keeps Everell from loving her, hinting at the difficulty in rewriting religious law. Sedgwick explains, “ To an ardent young man, there is something unlovely, if not revolting, in the sterner virtues” (278). Esther resists any impulse to create a more flexible spiritual order, therefore symbolizing its small capacity for organizing American rules of behavior. Although Esther’s unyielding Puritanism prevents her from developing a strong emotional relationship with Everell, she begins reassessing religion’s role in her life near the end of the novel. This late transformation of character indicates Sedgwick’s belief that laws must constantly be evaluated for revision. In her letter to Hope and Everell, Esther admits, “’My error hath been exceeding humbling to the pride of woman” (Sedgwick 346). Esther recognizes that she is too humble, or too submissive in her gender role, and actually perpetuates the inferiority of women in society. She slowly reinterprets her piety when she practices a life of celibacy. Sedgwick reveals that “ marriage is not essential to the contentment, the dignity, or the happiness of women” (350). She ends her novel with these worlds to emphasize that, although religious law shows the least potential for change in the seventeenth-century, she hopes it will become more flexible in the future. Emerson makes a similar observation about the function of spiritual order: “ Esther’s revelation for women might be generalized into a proposition about the non-essential nature not just of marriage, but of any of the narrowly defined roles deemed by mainstream nineteenth-century discourse as necessary to the ‘ contentment, the dignity, or the happiness of women’” (30). Sedgwick keeps Esther from marrying Everell because she recognizes that seventeenth-

century Puritans could not accept altering their religious structure. Furthermore, by keeping Esther from any marriage, Sedgwick alludes to the possibility of her nineteenth-century audience accepting a more liberal interpretation of the Puritan framework. Magawisca, on the other hand, depicts the law of nature and demonstrates Sedgwick belief that natural order has a larger possibility for influencing life on the frontier. While Esther's obtains purpose from the law of religion, written in the Bible, Magawisca, the proud Pequod Native Indian, receives direction from the law of nature, written on her heart. During her trial, Magawisca exclaims that she is bound by a different order when Sir Philip asserts that the Bible defines the rules of life. She responds, "'The Great Spirit hath written his laws on the hearts of his original children'" (Sedgwick 287). Magawisca is restrained by the laws of the Great Spirit, which is not a conventionally written law, but rather an understood law that stems from the natural man. Eliot, an apostle who pleads Magawisca's case at the trial, reinforces the Indian's devotion to natural order when he comments that the Natives were a people " who having no law, were a law unto themselves" (283). Traditional stereotypes painted Natives as inferior beings who succumbed to the primitive, natural state of man. Nevertheless, Eliot acknowledges that even though they did not have conventional law like the Puritans, they were bound by rules that created order in their Indian societies. Stadler clarifies that Magawica is " an important marker of the limits of the new white nation" (42). Magawisca is bound by the law of nature, but her continual interactions with the Puritan society imply that all puritans are affected by the natural state of man. The natural law binding Magawisca must be rewritten because it fosters an order built on vengeance. When Sir Philip Gardiner misleads the magistrates at

Magawisca's trial, it " roused her spirit, and stimulated that principle of retaliation, deeply planted in the nature of every human being, and rendered a virtue by savage education" (Sedgwick 289). Sedgwick not only emphasizes that Magawisca is confined by an internal law that values revenge, but that all men have the tendency to succumb to natural order. Stadler discusses the relationship between Magawisca's trial and national building when he states, " Her dramatic courtroom appearance in a sense instigates the system of privacy, of individuality that these fictional colonists will need in order to become a modern American nation" (52). Her case extends beyond the issue of individuality, however, and represents the need for more substantial changes within the evolving American society. Courts are traditionally associated with order, but it is the place that Magawisca yields to the law of nature binding her. Magawisca's inherent tendencies accentuate Sedgwick's impression that the law of nature must be rewritten before true order can be seen on the frontier. Sedgwick indicates that the law of nature shows greater capacity for change when Martha, writing about Magawisca, relates, "'It appeareth impossible to her to clip the wings of her soaring thoughts, and keep them down to household matters'" (32). The soaring thoughts communicate that Magawisca continually envisions herself beyond the bounds of natural law until she becomes divided between her duty to vengeance and her love for Everell. Sedgwick states, " Her mind was racked with apprehensions, and conflicting duties, the cruelest rack to an honourable mind" (55). Because she recognizes that her law is not perfect, Magawisca makes greater progress than Esther in creating new rules for behavior. Stadler agrees that Magawisca is at " the center of the making of the American nation" (43). Sedgwick recognizes that constantly reevaluating

the law of nature could have a significant impact on America’s new order, so she frequently hints at Magawisca’s potential to escape her structured law. For example, Magawisca saves Everell because she is a “ superior being, guided and upheld by supernatural power” (Sedgwick 93). Magawisca shifts outside the vengeful law, which arises from man’s state of nature, and acts according to a higher “ supernatural power” to protect the man representing new America. Magawisca’s deviation from revenge indicates that seventeenth-century Puritans would be more willing to reevaluate the law of nature to create the new American civilization. Although the potential exists, Magawisca does not reinterpret the natural law enough for a new society, so her emotional connection with Everell is kept from progressing. Magawisca understands the faults in her order, and becomes closer to creating a more flexible law of nature, but she continually chooses to be confined by the revengeful state of man. For example, at the cemetery when Hope gives Magawisca the chance to see Everell again, she reveals her allegiance and states, “’I have promised my father—I have repeated the vow here on my mother’s grave’” (Sedgwick 190). Magawisca’s duty to her father and his dedication to vengeance influences her decision to remove herself from Everell. Furthermore, when Hope and Everell ask Magawisca to stay with them after helping help the Indian escape, she denies the chance to drastically alter her law. Ultimately, Magawisca cannot fully free herself from her inherent bonds and responds that “’the law of vengeance is written on our hearts’” (330). Her heart yearns to be with Everell, a man who represents the new America, but she denies those cravings and instead chooses to return to her father, thus highlighting that natural law cannot be fully rewritten for a new social order. Sedgwick presets Hope as a strong,

independent character with “ want of self-command” to emphasize the American success that will come from a more flexible law of society (Sedgwick 106). Sedgwick drew from her experience as a nineteenth-century female to define the most severely binding rules affecting women. Specifically, Welter explains that society created order by narrowly defining separate spheres for men and women; men focused on politics and economics, and women upheld the values of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Unfortunately, Welter clarifies that this extremely rigid law of society was ubiquitous and perpetuated an inferior gender structure in America. She states, “ Women, in the cult of True Womanhood presented by the women’s magazines, gift annuals and religious literature of the nineteenth century was the hostage in the home” (Welter 41). Welter advocates that women were oppressed by the authority of men and held captive by the law of society. To challenge this constructed role for women, Sedgwick portrays Hope as a character who “ exhibits her sense of self-determining possibilities inherent in religious conversion and self-culture when she experiences a crisis in character that she either succeeds or fails to overcome through acts of self-transformation” (Emerson 29). The two other female protagonists were unable to fully transform her rigid laws, but Hope represents the woman that succeeds in reinterpreting her self-culture, or law of society. Hope does not display the qualities of the true woman, so her characteristics embody the social changes Sedgwick believes are necessary for new order in America. Additionally, Hope is the only female protagonist that verbally acknowledges her law must be different from the traditional English rules. When Aunt Grafton, a loyalist to the throne, remarks that Hope’s actions are “’very unladylike,’” Hope responds, “’Our new

country develops faculties that young ladies, in England, were unconscious of possessing’” (Sedgwick 98). Mrs. Grafton highlights the heroine’s deviance from true womanhood, but Hope attributes her transformation to the creation of civilization on the frontier. Her response indicates that the difficult life in America cultivates a new societal law, and Hope embraces the shift to a more flexible and equal role for women. Hope particularly reinterprets the influence religion and submissiveness has on the law of society. Hope’s religious upbringing is divided between her Puritan mother and Anglican Father, but Kelly explains that Hope “ transcends their sectarianism, however, embracing instead a religion based solely upon ‘ the law of virtue inscribed on her heart by the finger of God’” (xxxv). Furthermore, Sedgwick describes Hope as a character who is “ superior to some of the prejudices of the age” and “ permitted her mind to expand beyond the contracted boundaries of sectarian faith” (123). While Esther is bound by the law of religion and cannot escape her Puritan obligations, Hope is able to see past the restrictions of piety and begin rewriting the law of society for American order. Similarly, Hope redefines the effect compliance has in societal laws. Welter explains that “ submission was perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women” (50). Hope, however, rejects the notion of submission, and instead embraces the ability to modify societal expectations. For example, when Esther remarks that Hope has “‘ too much liberty of thought and word,’” Hope responds, “‘ I would not be a machine, to be moved at the pleasure of anybody that happened to be a little older than myself’” (Sedgwick 180). Hope understands that female deference perpetuates monotonous action and prevents women from recognizing their gender status as intellectual and moral equals. Magawisca recognizes the

error in her law, but Hope is the heroine that takes advantage of the evolving frontier and reevaluates societal law for a new communal order. Hope has the most success in modifying her law, and eventually marries Everell, the representative of new America. Sedgwick suggests that Puritans would be most willing to accept a new social order when developing a civilized frontier when Magawisca describes Hope's relationship with Everell. Before Magawisca parts from Hope and Everell to rejoin her tribe, she exclaims, "'Nelema told me your souls were mated—she said your affections mingled like streams from the same fountain. Oh! May the chains by which He, who sent you from the spirit land, bound you together, grow brighter and stronger'" (Sedgwick 331). Hope and Everell were always intended to marry, because Sedgwick recognized that the law of religion and the law of nature could not be completely rewritten. The law of society, however, had the largest capacity for change and altering the law would significantly influence America's success in civilizing the frontier. Esther, Magawisca, and Hope are presented as possible marriage companions for Everell, therefore demonstrating that Sedgwick believed the law of religion, nature, and society all needed to differ from English interpretation for America to successfully create order in a difficult new world. Each woman develops a deeper emotional connection with Everell, however, suggesting that the three laws did not have the same potential for modification. Esther is unable to break from her unyielding piety until the end of the novel, indicating that Puritans would not accept a new law of religion, but that Sedgwick anticipates a time when religion can be redefined. Magawisca recognizes the faults of the natural man and develops a stronger emotional connection with Everell, but she ultimately chooses to be bound by the law of nature,

therefore conveying a possibility for Puritans to adjust their habitual instincts on the frontier. In the end, Hope recognizes the rigidity of societal law and breaks from her expected role to create a new definition for true womanhood. Hope has the deepest emotional connection with Everell signifying that the law of society had the most potential for change. Women had the strength to break down the separation of spheres to create a new order in America. Sedgwick's marriage between Hope, a reinterpretation of female societal behavior, and Everell, a representative of the new America, asserts that both women and men are equally needed to survive on the frontier and create a thriving civilization. Works CitedEmerson, Amanda. " History, Memory, and the Echoes of Equivalence in Catharine MariaSedgwick's Hope Leslie." Legacy: A Journal Of American Women Writers 24. 1 (2007): 24-49. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 16 Feb. 2013. Kelly, Mary. Introduction. Hope Leslie. By Catharine Maria Sedgwick. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers UP. 1991. PrintSedgwick, Catharine Maria. Hope Leslie. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers UP. 1991. PrintStadler, Gustavus. " Magawisca's Body of Knowledge: Nation-Building in Hope Leslie." Yale Journal Of Criticism 12. 1 (1999): 41-54. Academic Search Premier. Web. 16 Feb. 2013. Welter, Barbara, and Mary Kelley. " The Cult Of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline. 43-70. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999.