Only Brunettes Date Indians: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Historical Novels

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Abstract:

Many contended over the formation of "the American identity" after the American Revolution. Independence and breaking ties from Europe left questions about peoples' proper places and roles open for debate. The dialogue over appropriate roles extended to gender. Historians have put forward various models of gender role development after the Revolution, including the republican mother and the separate spheres paradigm. Popular literature, most importantly historical fiction, in its attempt to reflect and solidify the unique American character, and its evaluation lends much to the discussion of gender ideals in the early republic. This project includes the analysis of three novels from the historical fiction genre: Hobomok, by Lydia Maria Child, The Last of the Mohicans, by James Fenimore Cooper, and Nick of the Woods, by Robert Montgomery Bird. The novels female characters and their treatment by the authors reflect the debate of larger society over appropriate gender roles. Hobomok, The Last of the Mohicans, and Nick of the Woods reflect this contemporary concern as well as the ascendency of the ideology of separate spheres. Whereas Child contends that women should have a larger role in white society, Cooper refutes this in The Last of the Mohicans, and by the time that Bird writes, female instrumentality has become a moot point. The title "Only Brunettes Date Indians" is adapted from rhetorical devices used in two of the novels in which a highly socialized Fair lady, the paradigm of civilized morality, is contrasted with a socially alienated Dark lady, symbolic of wanton sexuality and forbidden knowledge. This comparison highlights gender role ambiguity and allows authors to depict two very different behaviors in women and the consequences for each.
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"Be content, my poor maid. You have little save imaginary evils to afflict you. You are happier here than you can be among strangers."

Telie clasped her hands in despair: ‘I shall never be happy here, nor anywhere. But take me,’ she added eagerly, ‘take me for your own sake; – for it will be good for you to have me with you in the woods, it will, indeed it will."¹

The preceding passage, from Robert Montgomery Bird’s Nick of the Woods (1837), illustrates just a small part of the dilemma fictional women faced in novels of the early republic. Female characters that did not fit the gender ideals for women at the time wavered on the margin, so to speak, of their fictional world. Unfit for life as a maid, Telie can find no happiness within her community. Sadly, she has no better luck in the woods.

Telie belongs to the genre of historical fiction that began as a part of the intense nationalist sentiment that followed the War of 1812. Authors strove to create and critics and literary scholars searched for a uniquely American literature. Historical fiction, first Americanized from the forms of Sir Walter Scott by James Fenimore Cooper, satisfied this end. Authors such as Bird, Cooper, and Lydia Maria Child wrote novels that both reflected and shaped the early republic. Their attempts to portray a uniquely American national character reveals much about gender ideals. From at least the 1790s, questions about women’s role in the

new nation manifested themselves in print, including in fictional literature. The American
Revolution fostered a reassessment of all European forms, including gender roles. According to
historian Linda Kerber, American women and men embraced the ideal of the “republican
mother,” as suitably desexualized yet respectably influential. More recent historians of the early
republic have contested the pervasive acceptance of the role of republican mother and chosen to
emphasize the contested debate over appropriate roles for women, but all agree that American
independence opened the question for public debate. This debate continues in the historical
novels of the 1820's, and the essay that follows evaluates the ways that the portrayals of women
in historical novels by Child, Cooper, and Bird contributed to the debate.2

Before the emergence of historical fiction, most popular novels in America fell into the
sentimental category. The sentimental fiction of the era contributed to the emergence of the
separate spheres paradigm that characterized gender roles into the Victorian Era. Most
sentimental novels followed the seduction formula, portraying naive young women falling prey
to dastardly and careless men. Glorification of female virtue, especially when compared to
men's sexual depravity, created a sphere of domesticity around the woman that both shielded her
from and made her unfit for the public realm. Virtue and morality were left at home, safely away
from politics. The novels urged women to make cautious decisions with regard to husbands and
suitors. Separate spheres denote this dichotomization of the feminine domestic and the

masculine public. When most novels dealt with the home, as in sentimental fiction, women were easily portrayed. By reaffirming the importance of the domestic and the family, sentimental fiction validated the woman.

By the 1820s, adventure stories that dealt closely with nationhood rivaled seduction tales, and a deep ambivalence about the nature of female characters arose. Yet the larger questions of what role women should play in the nation still persisted. Should women involve themselves in politics and the administration of the country or would they better serve the public in a separate private sphere? The cult of domesticity, while endowing women with great importance, limited their options. The change in literary setting, like the change in politics, reflected the larger society’s ambiguities about the role of females. These concerns fostered a dialogue between female and male writers, as reflected in their literary works. The debate that played out in the historical fiction of Child, Cooper, and Bird reflects a larger debate about appropriate roles for women in American society.³

Many historians have examined the relationship between fiction and gender in the early republic. Cathy Davidson testifies to the importance of sentimental fiction in American women's lives, while John McWilliams's commentary on *The Last of the Mohicans* contends that Cooper's female characterizations stem from the contemporary male psyche. Nina Baym's illustration of the difference between female and male writers in the portrayal of Native Americans, and especially interracial relationships, in *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Hobomok* lends a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between society and its cultural products. But the relationship between the emergence of American historical novels in the 1820s with their goal of creating an "American" national story and the portrayal of gender in them has largely been neglected. While Baym elucidates the ideological debate over gender roles in the novels, the wider question of nationhood is not addressed. What became of the debate as the nineteenth century progressed? The gender debate culminates in the frontier fiction of the 1820's, between Child and Cooper. The denouement is apparent in the work of Robert Montgomery Bird and the debate has ended with Child on the losing side.

Lydia Maria Child's novel *Hobomok*, published in 1824; James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826); and Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1837), reveal much about the ambivalence surrounding female gender roles in the 1820s and 1830s. The position of these novels in this larger philosophical dialogue is clearly evident when analyzing their portrayals of female characters chronologically -- a continuum of fictional female social influence can be discerned. Child endows her main female character with much more instrumentality than does Bird, who barely gives A thought to his female personalities. Cooper creates an intelligent, instrumental woman and then deliberately kills her off, implying that there
is little room for a woman like this in society. Despite their differences in depicting male and female characters, however, these novels do have much in common. They share a similar setting, the frontier, a place where Native American and Anglo-American cultures come together, although they vary in period and in location. All three appeared during the explosion of frontier fiction that occurred in the early 1820's as a result of the nation's search for a uniquely American epic. Critics deemed "the Native American and the decline of his race" worthy subjects of this epic, and they served as the central topic for many of the novels that were published in years to come, including these three. *Hobomok, The Last of the Mohicans, and Nick of the Woods* reflect this contemporary concern as well as the ascendancy of the ideology of separate spheres. Whereas Child contends that women should have a larger role in white society, Cooper refutes this in *The Last of the Mohicans*, and by the time that Bird writes, female instrumentality has become a moot point.\(^4\)

The debate over the role of women is evident in each author's female characterizations. By endowing, or not endowing, female characters with varying amounts of intelligence, instrumentality and social validity, authors' advertently or inadvertently make clear their personal positions, as well as prevailing social perceptions, about female gender roles. Child, for example, makes a powerful argument for the dispersal of more social power in female hands. In *Hobomok* she presents a young woman who is alienated from her community by the stifling patriarchy and rigidity that surrounds her. In all three novels social alienation seems a

prerequisite for women who have mental capabilities that exceed those expected of their sex. These women express a great deal of disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the limited socially acceptable roles for them when their abilities enable them to do so much more. While every author acknowledges this alienation and isolation, not all are as sympathetic as Child. Instead of proposing less restrictive social guidelines for women, Cooper contends that these discontented women have absolutely no role in American civilization. For Cooper, women serve only to elicit heroism from men. Bird, writing ten years later, paints stereotypical females who do little more than wring their hands. While the sentimental novel that preceded the historical literature that emerged in the 1820's subtly urged female education and perspicacity in the domestic realm, the new heroic frontier literature attempted to write them out all together.

Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* (1824) is a remarkable and radical work. Published the year after the big explosion in border tales, this social novel questions patriarchy more openly than the sentimental novel had and proposes an American system centered around traditionally more feminine values as a cultural reality. Child's novel, by its very existence, offers evidence that opening public realms to women was a real possibility at this time.5

*Hobomok* cannot easily be labeled as historical fiction because of its individuality and importance. However, it is clearly a product of post-sentimental thought. Sentimental fiction never disappeared, for it still exists in modern versions, but the term post-sentimental signifies a decided change in values that were upheld throughout sentimental fiction. These changes are

evident as popular American literature made the shift from sentimental to historical. Child departs from sentimental thinking and writes a novel that is all her own. The story she pens betrays none of the self-consciousness, subtlety, or tired morality seen in sentimental fiction. Her heroine, as opposed to falling victim to limited social options, creates her own. As opposed to being the long-suffering dutiful daughter, so common in sentimental fiction, Child’s creation chooses cultural abandonment as escape from patriarchy and reforms the society around her.

_Hobomok’s_ main character is Mary Conant, a young woman who grew up in England and comes to Salem, Massachusetts, to take care of her ailing mother in 1623. Child’s choice of a Puritan setting is perhaps a strong social commentary on contemporary social norms and mores. While Mary is unhappy in her new restrictive environment, controlled by men who are in turn controlled by their dogma, Child creates a network of female social support upon which she can rely. This in itself is radical for the 1820’s. The events in the novel chip away at this network a little bit at a time, eliminating one member and another, until Mary is left alone with her overbearing father. When Mary learns that her lover, banished from the colonies for being Episcopalian, has been shipwrecked, she offers marriage to the local friendly Indian, Hobomok. Her alienation from Puritan society is complete. Their marriage is successful. They produce a son, and live comfortably on the edge of white society. When Mary’s lover returns, not dead after all, and meets Hobomok, the Indian nobly performs a tribal divorce and departs forever, knowing the wishes of his wife. Mary remarries, and because Anglican is “better than” Indian,
the couple is easily reintegrated into Puritan society. Child does not punish her heroine in any way, rewarding Mary with two happy marriages and a son for violating multiple social norms.\(^6\)

It is no surprise that Child wrote *Hobomok* as a reaction to the injustice of patriarchy. Child’s father, when he discovered her love of novels and learning, sent her to an isolated frontier town. Her brother, formerly her intellectual companion, was sent to Harvard. The inequity of this situation fostered the birth of Child as novelist. A radical advocate against slavery and the removal of Native Americans from their lands, as well as a proponent of female rights, Child was not the typical lady of the nineteenth century.\(^7\)

Child’s heroine, also, is by no means typical of Puritan Salem. From the beginning of the novel, when the reader sees Mary performing a rite of benign witchcraft, asking who her husband will eventually be, Child establishes Mary as different from those around her. The witchcraft is performed late at night in the woods, closely tying Mary to the landscape and the evil forces inherent. It characterizes her as strong willed, bold, and perhaps a little impetuous. The ritual that she performs symbolizes her refusal to wait for a man’s proposal. The novel foreshadows Mary’s marriage to Hobomok at this point. Mary acts out a ritual and draws a circle in the dirt, “when ... a young Indian [sprang] forward into the centre.”\(^8\) Child’s inclusion of this incident, as well as others, alludes to the strength of fate in this novel. Mary’s fate is obviously closely tied


\(^8\)Child, p.13
to two aliens in Puritan society. She is in love with a man of alien religion, Charles Brown. The fact that her father will not sanction the marriage and eventually has him exiled is the reason that Mary flees to the arms of Hobomok, an obvious alien in white society. Mary, herself, being "covetous of mental riches" and female is alien in patriarchal Puritan society.9

Child's portrayal of cultural abandonment and interracial marriage is radical for her era. Delivering a message to readers that flies in the face of patriarchy, Child seems to be saying that being overly strict and denying the wishes of an intelligent young woman will only bring grief. The novel empowers women to promote social change. In changing the views of the men in her community, Mary changes her community. Her absence from the village and the regret, which she engenders, leads to development of a more tolerant society.

Child tempers Mary's proposal to the Indian by describing her perturbed mental state, "a broken and confused mass followed [in her mind]; in which a sudden sense of bereavement, deep and bitter reproaches against her father, and a blind belief in fatality were alone conspicuous."10 Despite her confusion, however, Mary and Hobomok maintain a successful and happy marriage. Mary's actions liberate her from the overwhelming patriarchy she faces in white society. Child presents the reader with a man from a supposedly uncivilized culture that can take Mary seriously when the white men she is surrounded by will not. As Nina Baym, a specialist on nineteenth-century literature contends, "the novel implies that to implement women's values and woman-centered values would be to create a less intolerant, less literal-minded, more gracious civil state

9Child, p. 79

10Child, p. 121
than the one instituted in America by the Puritan men." Mary is obviously dismayed and dissatisfied by the strict guidelines within which she is designated to live as a woman. The novel is not so much about Native American men and white women as it is about white men and women and the dialectics of power. Mary's ties to her native society weaken as her refusal to accept her place in it culminates in abandonment. Child questions society's limited feminine gender roles. She asks whether or not women, being just as capable, if not more so than men, cannot play a larger role in the maintenance of civilization.

In *The Last of the Mohicans*, James Fenimore Cooper answers her question in a manner she probably did not appreciate. He tackles many of the same issues as does Child: interracial love, women's capabilities, and appropriate gender roles. Cooper also presents a woman whose ties to white society are weak, but Cooper accomplishes his goals in a different way. His instrumental female character is Cora. Instead of being unhappy in patriarchal society, however, Cora's bonds are loosened by her racial heritage. She is part African-American and in Cooper's novel she plays the part of cultural broker, almost as well as does the male hero and subject of the *Leatherstocking Tales*, Hawk-eye. Cora, as opposed to Mary, however, pays dearly for her contemplation of interracial love, and her instrumental role.

The novel takes place during the French and Indian War, in 1757. The story follows two daughters of an English colonel, Cora and Alice Munro. The women must travel through the

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woods to their father’s fort. Their guide, Magua, has proved an enemy of their father’s and lusts after Cora. They also travel with Major Heyward, a young officer who is enamored with Alice. Luckily, they meet Chingachgook, Uncas, and Hawkeye. Hawkeye, though white, knows much about the ways of the woods and along with his Native American counterparts they succeed in keeping Cora and Alice safe. Cooper barely alludes to a growing connection between Cora and Uncas, but romantic implications are strong. Colonel Munro meets his daughters happily, but must surrender the fort. The Native Americans fighting on the French side become uncontrollable and massacre the soldiers and citizens of the fort. Magua kidnaps Cora. Uncas’s attempt to save her fails and both are killed. The story ends bleakly. Alice and Duncan, fleeing deep into the depths of civilization, remain the only hope for the future.

Cooper’s treatment of female characters varies greatly from Child’s. Neither Cora, nor Alice, plays the main role in the novel. They are certainly central characters, but Cooper never reveals their inner monologues, as Child does with Mary. Another difference between Cora Munro and Mary Conant is the way that other females affect them and their roles in the novels. Mary Conant’s female support network is composed of individuals, realistically different on numerous dimensions. They are not portrayed as polarized opposites as are Cora and Alice Munro, who represent opposite sides on many continua. Therefore, the contrast between the two characters is highlighted as a stylistic device by the author. In keeping with Cooper’s close reliance on Sir Walter Scott, he, like Scott, uses the paradigms of the Dark Lady and Fair Lady.12

Cora, unlike Mary, is not outwardly dissatisfied with white society. She functions well in

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it. However, she manages much better in the wilderness than does her sister, Alice. According to Cooper, her racial heritage seemingly better qualifies her to deal with Native Americans. She is certainly more tolerant. Her seriousness, strength of logic, and instrumentality render her much less vulnerable to the landscape. Therefore, she is more successful in the frontier venue than in white society where the feminine virtues extolled by Alice are more useful.

Cora is a more complex character than is Alice. When Alice displays a singular reaction: one of fear, happiness, or sadness; Cora tends to exhibit a multiplicity of emotions. An example of this is their attitudes toward Native Americans. When Alice shrieks in terror at the sight of them, Cora counters “Should we distrust the man because his manners are not our manners, and that his skin is dark!” This indicates that she is much more capable of abstract thought and logic than is her sister. In fact, this intelligence makes her the heroine of the story. She repeatedly comes up with schemes that save the lives of men. When Magua has cornered the band, she saves the lives of Uncas, Hawkeye, and Chinachgook by forcing their escape, leaving Cora and Alice to fend for themselves. She is even endowed with masculine traits, such as that of being able to control her emotions and logically evaluate situations to present a solution.

Alice plays a very important role in the novel. She is the force of socialized female. Her prevalence enunciates Cora’s violation of the ideal female role, even though it is much more subtle than is Mary Conant’s. Cora outwardly challenges nothing, she just does not fit the standard presented by Alice. Alice’s submissiveness, constant emotional outbursts, and passivity

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make her useless in times of peril, but she is still the chosen bride of the manly officer Duncan Heyward. This is definitely indicative of cultural norms at this period. Through the worst dangers, Cora’s mind is calm and her appearance cool, even while Alice’s emotional state is in shambles, “nearly insensible.”\(^\text{14}\)

While the contrast between Alice and Cora is accentuated throughout the novel, Cooper extends it to their appearances. Again, the intelligent woman is characterized as “dark” and the ideal female is “light.” Cooper first introduces the reader to Alice and Cora in the subsequent passages:

One, and she was the most juvenile in her appearance, though both were young, permitted glances of her dazzling complexion, fair golden hair, and bright blue eyes, to be caught.... The flush which still lingered above the pines in the western sky, was not more bright no delicate than the bloom on her cheek; nor was the opening day more cheering than the animated smile which she bestowed on the youth.... \(^\text{15}\)

The tresses of this lady were shining and black, like the plumage of the raven. Her complexion was not brown, but it rather appeared charged with the colour of rich blood, that seemed ready to burst its bounds. And there was neither

\(^\text{14}\) Cooper, p.92
\(^\text{15}\) Cooper, p.23
coarseness, nor want of shadowing, in a countenance that was exquisitely regular and dignified, and surpassingly beautiful.\textsuperscript{16}

Alice is described as being animated, young, and vibrant. Cora, on the other hand, is exotic and "dignified," the epitome of the Dark and Fair ladies. Whether Cooper's use of dark features for Cora is an indication of his struggle to make her on the cultural edge, so to speak, or a device to better reveal her character is unknown. It is interesting, however, to note how every aspect of Alice serves as the polar opposite to every attribute of Cora. When one thinks about this in relation to the end of the story and how each woman is rewarded or punished for their actions it is fairly disturbing. Not just the fact that intelligence and instrumentality are factors that lead to female death, but the fact that Alice, with her constant emotionalism and utter uselessness, gets to live. The Fair woman represents the values of civil society, innocence, and passivity. The Dark woman represents social rebellion and forbidden knowledge.\textsuperscript{17}

Cooper's writing is certainly a helpful measure of contemporary social norms. As John McWilliams, author of \textit{The Last of the Mohicans: Civil Savagery and Savage Civility} (1995), writes of the separate spheres paradigm, "such extreme and growing separation of gender roles made it difficult for the male writers to see in their women characters anything beyond projections of their own desires and fears."\textsuperscript{18} McWilliams further describes the juxtaposition of the Dark and Fair ladies as an ambivalence about women. Contrary needs conflict in paradigms

\textsuperscript{16}Cooper, p.24

\textsuperscript{17}McWilliams, p. 68.

\textsuperscript{18}\textit{Ibid.}  p. 67.
as mistress versus wife, soul mate versus helpmeet, freedom versus respectability, aesthetics versus assets. He suggests that the sacrifice of the Dark lady signifies, "not a happy ending, but a surrender of the self’s true and long-denied vitality."19

While Cora’s presence of mind and calmness pervade the story, she is, in the end, punished for her violation of social norms. While her relationship with Uncas never comes to fruition, and is certainly never consummated, both die at the end. This is perhaps Cooper’s way of eluding the issue. He barely hints at it throughout the novel, makes it more acceptable through Cora’s bloodline, and creates a woman who is unsuccessful at playing the role of weak female; but interracial love is still taboo. Cora’s “bravery, firmness, intelligence, self-possession, and eloquence” are ultimately “of no use at all.”20 Cooper’s argument is “white women best serve the white nation by sacrificing their dangerous dreams of independent selfhood, reining in their wandering sexual fantasies, and recognizing that they are most useful to civilization as protected possessions of white men”21 writes Nina Baym. The role of Alice to elicit Heyward’s heroism is the ideal role for women. Cora’s independence is deviant. This ideal reflects contemporary views about love. Man’s paternalism and woman’s passivity serve as the prototypical relationship. Cooper reaffirms racial and cultural boundaries by killing off their ambiguities in the character of Cora.

19Ibid. p.69
20Baym, p.72.
21Ibid. p.73
In his “Introduction” Cooper directly refers to the dangerous romanticizing of the Indian in novels written by women. This is perhaps a direct shot at Child’s *Hobomok*. Cooper infers that women’s naivety about the realism of manly issues like war and cultural conflict prevent them treating the subject maturely. Therefore, in Cooper’s mind, they are obviously unfit for the larger social role they desire and argue for in their writings. He produces Cora, an intelligent woman with egalitarian values and a penchant for romanticizing Indians and kills her. This is certainly a passive aggressive statement, to say the least. Cooper’s hypothesis about gender roles and their limits, however, ultimately triumphs over Child.

Published ten years later (1837) during the decline of the border tales, *Nick of the Woods* has the fewest female characters and the most ubiquitous elements of a true Western. In fact, females disappear for chapters at a time while the men fight and create action. By the time that Bird writes, the discussion about gender roles in which Child and Cooper participated, appears to have ended. For Bird there is no debate as to whether an intelligent, instrumental female can be integrated into society. None exist. Neither female character in this novel, aristocratic Edith or the servant Telie is given many positive attributes, other than their physical characteristics. Edith is the cousin of the hero, and both have been wrongfully cheated out of their inheritance. In fact, the executor of their uncle’s will has devised an incredibly unlikely and elaborate scheme to snatch Edith off of the Kentucky frontier with his band of Indians, marry her and kill the hero. This villain is a rich lawyer who persecutes the innocent patriots. This is characteristic of early American fiction, which still struggles to profess its staunchly democratic values.

Democracy, however, never extends to the portrayal of both sexes. Edith’s most valued virtue is her beauty. She lends little else to the plot. Like Alice, she elicits great acts from the
men around her. The story takes place in 1782, during the settlement of Kentucky. Telie is a local Kentuckian whom the cousins have met at the first fort they encountered. She is the servant to the Colonel and his family. She has been allotted this position because her father has gone Native and is widely considered a scoundrel. She therefore occupies a low social status. When Edith and Roland, the cousins, come to the station, Telie begs Edith to let her come along and serve her. This is later revealed to the reader as an attempt to save Edith from her father, who has joined the dastardly Indian effort to kidnap Edith and kill Roland.

Edith, throughout the novel, plays helpless victim. Telie is a social outcast and is unsuccessful at all of her pitiful attempts to help. When Roland and Edith become lost in the woods while Native Americans are about, Telie tries to persuade them to follow her to a safer place. As she attempts to lead them to safety, her only really instrumental action, she gets lost. Robert Montgomery Bird makes it clear in the novel that he is not for promoting the social status of women, Native Americans, or African Americans. This he does well by making characters in all three categories appear weak, savage, or buffoonish. The contrast between Telie and Edith is again likened to dark and light. Telie, however, unlike Cora and Mary is not described as beautiful. Bird introduces her with the following:

At such times of excitement, there was something in her appearance both striking and singular, — Indian-like, one might almost have said. Such an epithet might have been borne out of the wildness of her looks, the darkness of her eyes, the simple arrangement of her coal-black hair, ...and
by the smallness of her stature; though the lightness and European tinge of her complexion must have instantly disproved the idea. It would seem that the instrumental dark character versus light passive character does not hold up here. Telie’s attempt to defy her father, however, does make her the moral, intelligent, and alienated female character. She is not successful. Late in the novel her father makes a proposition to Roland that he marry Telie. Edith will be freed and the inheritance theirs. However, Roland refuses to marry Telie without giving a reason. Seemingly she is unfit for the role.

Telie is an interesting contrast to Cora and Mary in that she has little real effect on the novel’s events. She takes little action but is still punished for being an outsider, merely by association with her father. She is not accepted at the fort, where the reader first encounters her. After the action has ceased however, she is better integrated into Kentucky station life, eventually marrying one of the Colonel’s sons. Edith is taken back to Virginia, and supposedly lives happily ever after. The complete lack of characterization in this novel is a strong testament to how the debate over gender roles ended. Instrumental women have no place in a man’s story, nor a man’s public sphere. They serve as the person who must be protected and the person who should not be trusted to lead, no matter how acquainted with the woods they are.

Indeed, in the ideal new nation the woman would not need to encounter the woods at all. Creating a pleasant household and raising children that would actively participate in the growing democracy was deemed the ultimate role for women. The family was an institution that mirrored

22Bird, p.53.
the larger nation. If individual family units were governed properly, then the nation would run smoothly. Women's main objective was to ensure the success of the inner domestic sphere. The outside world was left to men. These social guidelines pervade the novels. Child encourages social change. Mary refuses to create a typical Puritan household, choosing instead to further the Native American race. In this action she opens the community's eyes to their overbearing rigidity. Cora functions well outside of her designated sphere and also contemplates abandonment of her ideal role. Cooper, unlike Child, is not so forgiving. Cora's deviance results in her death. Edith and Alice, those paradigms of domesticity crumble on the frontier, as they rightfully should, being naturally suited to the home. Telie, being outside of a nuclear Republican family, has little influence in her social sphere. She is not quite useful enough to Roland, neither as a guide in the woods, nor as a wife in the home.

Females apart from their sphere violate gender norms. The consequences they face are a telling testament to their treatment by society. Indeed because some writers choose to kill off their female characters who violate the rules, some reward them, and some do not create them at all, in a relatively short time span, one can see the reflection of social conflict.

In each novel, breaking social patterns alienates the female. These factors that alienate them from society also give them much more freedom to act and to break out of passivity. Perhaps it is necessary in this time period for women to be shunned from society to be liberated. Being outside of expected norms does give one freedom in any situation. It is interesting that these novels all show women who are standing outside of the domestic realm and acting in ways that they couldn't have had they been successfully socialized. This parallels the fact that these novels take place on the frontier, somewhere outside of social reach. Therefore, lines are very
much blurred. Whether these are gender lines, moral lines, racial lines, or social lines make no
difference. These women are punished for the ability to live outside their sphere, with the
exception of Mary.

Female instrumentality must occur in neutral territory, the territory of ambiguity. Even
when women are forced to instrumental action by the very reality of their being caught on the
frontier, they can still very well be punished for it. American society’s deep ambivalence about
women and their gender roles are clearly reflected in each of these novels. Representations of
women in novels are alienated if they show the slightest bit of intelligence or yearning to be
something more than an Alice or an Edith. If one turns to Cooper to find out what should happen
to these women, the outlook is bleak. Child, however, reintegrates her character easily back into
a society that has changed for the better due to her actions.

These novels are indeed highly symbolic of the fate of the American women. As the
Victorian era arose, it furthered the separate spheres paradigm. Women ideally were to stay in
the home until the New Woman of the early twentieth-century emerged. The debate over
womanhood that occurred in a new nation and the dissatisfied portrayal that intelligent women
received in novels pinpoints the earliest roots of the Women’s Rights Movement in America.
One hundred years before suffrage, women were struggling to overcome stifling stereotypes.
From the writings of sentimental fiction that urged female education to historical fiction, women
used the novel as a means of important communication with one another and with men. The men
evidently listened, for the attempts to write women out became twice as fervent. These three
novels reflect clearly the evolution of the debate, in just ten years. Though separate spheres won
out, novels served as an outlet and a forum for dialogue.
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