

## **Reading *Hope Leslie* via Wollstonecraft: A Pedagogy for Sedgwick's Novel**

**by Rose M. Mills**

While Catherine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* has received its deserved attention in both classrooms and critical circles in recent years, most readers give scarcely more attention to one character, Bertha Grafton, than the fictional widow receives from the Puritan community within Sedgwick's novel. Much like Hope, Everell, or other characters in Sedgwick's reconstruction of Bethel and Boston, we readers tend to smile at the illogical, fashion-obsessed widow and relegate her to a place alongside the tutor Craddock, both silly figures in a work otherwise populated by earnest and "precise" Puritans, noble Native Americans, and of course a few thoroughly-evil hypocrites and murderers. In college classes over the last twelve years<sup>1</sup> when I've assigned *Hope Leslie*, including last spring in a first-year composition class, my students, perhaps conditioned by Hollywood, tend to ignore the older woman as they focus on the text's young, vibrant heroines, first Magawisca and then Hope. To dismiss Bertha Grafton too lightly, however, is to miss the full implication of Sedgwick's cautionary tale for young women, or even perhaps to misread the precise nature of Sedgwick's call for women's (and others') expanded role in society.

Bertha Grafton, although a source of comic relief, can be aptly described as one of those women described by Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* whose mind has been "enfeebled by false refinement" (7) so that she remains despite her opportunities for growth in the New World, an example of those "weak, artificial beings, raised above the common wants and affections of their race, in a premature unnatural manner" (9). In Grafton, Sedgwick has personified Wollstonecraft's example of those women from higher socio-economic levels whose educations have rendered them "more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been, and consequently, more useless members of society" (22). As an individual, as a colonist in the smaller community of Bethel and later at Boston, and as a beloved aunt who might have taken on a mother's role for her niece, Bertha Grafton reveals herself to be less than fit, though never a totally unsympathetic character. As Martha Fletcher pinpoints, Mrs. Grafton's sin is not one of evil but rather of ignorance—an ignorance, Wollstonecraft had argued, characteristic of women of her social class.

Sedgwick invites us to compare Grafton's miseducation and consequent shallowness with Martha Fletcher's competence and ability to function as a contributing member of society. In Book I of *Hope Leslie*, we read and can compare letters written by both

women, Martha's letter to her husband and Bertha's letter approximately seven years later to Everell during his years of study in England. Martha's letter reveals her love for her husband and her desire to tell him of her "poor endeavours to do well in [Fletcher's] absence" (31). Despite her self-deprecating remarks about her unworthy "stewardship" of the household, Martha displays an intelligence, insight, and compassion that stand in stark contrast to Bertha's self-centered interests. Martha's wisdom is evident in her refusal to censor her son's reading (forbidden books would be all the more dangerous, she reasons), her hopes for her son's continued education in England, her tolerance and acceptance of those like her brother Stretton outside the Puritan community, and her compassion for the motherless Magawisca. Significantly, Martha reports her intercession in a matter of justice, as she has "by a private letter" (34) saved young Darby from the sentence of "ten stripes" handed down by Mr. Pynchon. Although she stresses her desire to be an "obedient" wife, Martha's intercession for mercy in Darby's case links her to Magawisca's later "interposition" to save Everell's life as well as to Hope's efforts to secure justice for Nelema and Magawisca.

By contrast, Bertha's letter reveals precisely those gaps in women's education that Wollstonecraft had identified a quarter century earlier. In the *Vindication*, she describes how women are usually denied the opportunity for "serious scientific study" so that "if they have natural sagacity it is turned too soon on life and manners. They dwell on effects, and modifications, without tracing them back to causes" (23). In just this way, Bertha is preoccupied with medical treatments, and she encourages others, including Hope and Everell, to use various remedies or preventatives. Aware that the two young people have in the past mocked her "prescription" of pennyroyal tea as a cure for pleurisy, Bertha writes to Everell that she is currently enjoying good health: "at this present I am better than I have been for years, which is unaccountable to me, as, since in the hurry of our preparations for Boston, I have forgotten my pills at night, and my tonics in the morning" (116).<sup>2</sup> Unlike Hope and Everell whose education has prepared them to look for causal relationships, Bertha is flummoxed by clear evidence that her good health does not depend on her herbs and tonics. Comically for readers but sadly for Bertha, she fails to see the lack of agency. Her fault lies in the absence of any disciplined course of study so that she, as Wollstonecraft had carefully distinguished, relies on knowledge "acquired more by sheer observations on real life, than from comparing what has been individually observed with the results of experience generalized by speculation" (23). Sedgwick has created the character Wollstonecraft only described, a woman whose "follies and caprices" are the "natural effect of ignorance" (19).

What then has been the focus of Bertha Grafton's life? To borrow Wollstonecraft's terms, Bertha Grafton's "strength and usefulness [have been] sacrificed to beauty" (7). Even in age, when a growing sense of her own mortality might push Bertha to more meaningful inquiry (she does note, after all, in a letter to Everell that "most of my surviving contemporaries have died since I left England" [117]), Bertha's deepest concerns remain with superficial issues of beauty and fashion. When she claims to have put "business before pleasure" in the letter to Everell, her "business" consists of concerns about the color silk to be purchased for her latest dress, or praise for the blue fillet, "the prettiest of any colour [Bertha] ever saw" (117), which Everell had previously sent Hope. Indeed, from the moment the character of Bertha Grafton first appears in Sedgwick's novel, she is identified as a woman "far more intent on the forms of head-pieces, than modes of faith" and "far more ambitious of being the leader of fashion, than the leader of a sect" (28)—the latter description establishing Mrs. Grafton as a comic echo of Anne Hutchinson.

In every way, Bertha fits that description of the useless, wealthy woman from the *Vindication*. In the scenes at Bethel, she serves as a foil to Martha Fletcher. On one hand, her slavish attention to fashion allows her to cheat death at the Bethel massacre; she is off on a day trip to a nearby village to intercept and deliver a gift from Mr. Fletcher's luggage to Madame Holioko. However, the massacre at Bethel might have been averted, had John Digby been defending the Fletcher family on the morning of the fatal attack rather than escorting Bertha Grafton to the village and back. Digby, in fact, had wisely resisted leaving the Fletchers vulnerable in order to accompany Grafton on what he deemed an inane mission: "to get more furbelows for the old lady when with what she has already, she makes such a fool of herself" (59).

A survivor, Bertha forms part of the reconstituted Fletcher household. Able to observe but not fully grasp or evaluate her observations, she constantly labels attitudes and actions she cannot understand as "peculiar," a term she often applies to her niece's words and deeds. Bertha Grafton lives on to see Hope and Everell's eventual marriage and is cared for by them in her old age. At some point, she persuades them to visit "their mother country," where she dies and is buried in the Leslie family tomb (349). The narrator suggests that Bertha's funeral service, performed by the bishop of London, constitutes "poetic justice" (349). Indeed, it is significant, that this character, loyal to the Anglican Church and guided by a strong sense of family tradition, ends her life as she has lived it, relying on tradition and authority rather than on her own faculties of intellect, faith, or conscience.

While Bertha's shortcomings serve to highlight the extent to which Martha Fletcher was (in the narrator's words) an "example of all the most attractive virtues of woman," twenty-first century students in my experience fail to admire Mrs. Fletcher. My impressions come from class discussions and from written, required responses due at the start of classes during which we discuss the novel and which are later returned with non-evaluative feedback. (Occasionally I give a prompt, but usually students are free to respond to anything that interests them in that day's assigned reading.) Male students more often focus on the novel's issue of race, often citing some distant Native Americans in their own family tree as the reason for their particular interest in this aspect of the novel.

Female students, however, often distance themselves from Martha Fletcher or express sympathy for her—sympathy for the character both as her husband's second choice for a life partner (a "Leah," not a Rachel), as victim of the Indian massacre, but mostly for someone they view as an oppressed woman completely submissive to her husband's will. At the same time, they come to identify with and admire Hope Leslie. Hope Leslie seems "contemporary" to them, a young woman not unlike themselves. Consequently, they want to resist my efforts to complicate their reading of the novel by my suggesting that Martha Fletcher might be a pattern for Hope's future, and they are less persuaded than I am by the narrator's brief but ominous observation that young Hope's mouth had at seventeen "none of the seriousness and contemplation that events might afterwards have traced there" (122). Aware of Sedgwick's use of paired characters (Hope and Faith, Hope and Magawisca, etc.) by the time we finish reading Volume I of the novel, many students offer the pairing of Hope versus Martha Fletcher as proof of Sedgwick's endorsement of a strong, self-actualizing woman versus a weak, obedient doormat. One way to counter this anachronistic, simplistic reading is to assign excerpts from Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, using them to explore the function of Bertha Grafton in the novel and in particular how we as readers are guided by the narrator in our responses to this character.

Aunt Grafton serves as a foil in many respects to Martha Fletcher, but a comparison

of her with Hope Leslie reveals the ways in which Hope shares her aunt's "nature," differing only in her "habits" and "education."<sup>3</sup> In every way, Bertha represents Old World aristocracy, demonstrated by her pride in her massive silver dishes with "her family's armorial bearings" (97), her "decided taste for all the testimonials of her family grandeur" (97) or her convent education, with its stress on painting and similar skills necessary to a gentlewoman. Anticipating values that prevail in our modern consumer culture, Grafton prefers shopping and entertainment to the self-examined life. As she contemplates the purchase of some Indian moccasins, she explains how she "like[s] to look over everything that's going. It is a diversion to the mind" (184). Fashionable, beautiful clothes serve as a diversion from serious issues, and Bertha recalls how "beautiful new fashions . . . would have cured [her sister-in-law] Alice of moping if she would have given her mind to it" (268).<sup>4</sup> Consumer objects, for Bertha, then fall into two categories; some, like her heirloom silver dishes, give a woman status based on her family of origin. The second type of consumer object, fashionable dresses and headpieces that risk violating the Puritans' sumptuary laws, matter so much to Bertha because she sees them as essential to a woman's eventual status in marriage. She lectures Hope and Esther that "it is every woman's duty, upon all occasions, to look as well as she can" (141).

However, despite all her limitations, Aunt Grafton is never such an irritating character as, for example, the hypocritical servant, Jennet, who also survives the Bethel massacre and later accompanies the Fletcher family to the Winthrop's household in Boston. Although the audience is invited to laugh at Bertha Grafton, we are frequently reminded by the narrator of Grafton's essentially good qualities. She must love her nieces to have braved the treacherous crossing of the Atlantic to come with Alice and two young children to Boston; the narrator insists on this point: "to do her justice, she was kind-hearted and affectionate —susceptible of strong and controlling attachment, and the infant children of a brother on whom she had doated, outweighed her love of frivolous pleasures and personal indulgence" (28). Bertha's natural goodness shines through at times, despite the ways in which her miseducation has left her "apparently engrossed with the world, living on the foam and froth of life" (28). On one hand, Grafton appears superficial or even callous, when she suggests that Mary Fletcher could have countered the pain of a lost love by focusing on the latest fashions coming across the Channel to England, yet Grafton's devotion to her own late husband is touching and exceptional. Though she tells Sir Philip how she had coyly waited before giving "poor dear Mr. Grafton the first token of favor," memories of the man whom she describes as the "best of husbands" cause her to "pause to wipe away a genuine tear" (219). Despite her silly distractions, Dame Grafton reveals the depth and duration of her own "genuine" emotion for her spouse many years after his demise.

In fact, Hope and her aunt Grafton share this innate, natural goodness, although Hope's natural impulses have not been attenuated by a false education. Digby points out that, given Hope's determination to "have her own way . . . it was a pure mercy [she] chose the right way" (225), and Bertha loyally blurts out at one point that "it's what everybody knows, who knows Hope, that she never did a wrong thing" (177). Dame Grafton also shares Hope's intuition, the source of the younger woman's unstudied, natural moral choices. Consider both women's initial reactions to Sir Philip Gardner. Distracted by her planned meeting with Magawisca, Hope seems little impressed with Sir Philip's company, treating the knight with "provoking nonchalance" (193) and evading his efforts to woo her. Neglected by Hope, Sir Philip plans to curry favor with her aunt; interestingly, Dame Grafton's natural insight, as trustworthy as her niece's, allows her to see early on that Sir Philip "had nothing of the puritan but the outside"

(167). “Foolish” Dame Grafton intuitively senses the gap between Sir Philip’s inner self and outer façade, a duplicity which goes undetected by the Governor of the colony until the community has been jeopardized by the knight’s treacherous plans. However, because of the value system inculcated by Grafton’s miseducation, she mistakes Sir Philip’s cavalier tendencies for positive attributes and hopes that “if she must see [Hope] wedded to a puritan, she trusted it would be Sir Philip” (167).

What then is Sedgwick’s narrative argument in *Hope Leslie* about liberty and equality? As Judith Fetterley observes, that argument is problematic, since Sedgwick has chosen to create “a single text whose contradictions, compromises, and complicities she thrusts upon us, exposed and raw” (514). Most critics struggle to determine the extent to which Sedgwick advocates racial, class, or gender equality in *Hope Leslie*, a complexity which makes the novel a useful choice in pushing students to think critically about a narrative argument—its role in an entry-level writing class rather than in a literature survey. Our musings about Bertha Grafton as a poster child for the miseducated woman described by Wollstonecraft lead us, if not to better conclusions, at least to better questions about what seems to be Sedgwick’s larger argument in the novel. At least, on one level, she does call for gender equality, in that she extends a Miltonic notion of free will to women. Throughout the novel, it seems clear that women and men equally are called on to rely on their individual consciences and educations to choose wisely and therefore act wisely. In a world peopled with pirates, roués, hypocrites, and others eager to do evil, Sedgwick’s women and men are called to “interpose” themselves between evil and its victims, whatever the risks. Therefore, Sedgwick seems to widen the “priesthood of all believers” to include women.

To the extent that a woman is called to exercise her conscience and fulfill her moral duty, she first requires a proper education that fosters the inborn sense of right and wrong rather than enfeebling it, just as Wollstonecraft had argued. Yet nowhere in the text does Sedgwick argue for an *equal* education for men and women; in fact, the narrator praises Hope’s honest, emotional responses, contrasting the heroine’s less-intellectual, natural reactions with those “youthful Minervas” who in the “enlightened days” of 1827 “hide with an impenetrable shield of wisdom and dignity, the natural workings of [their] hearts” or (worse) “prattle of metaphysics” (212).

Second, a woman must have enough freedom to “interpose” herself in a moral situation, but Sedgwick’s heroines achieve such interpositions without full political equality. Magawisca manages to save Everell while simultaneously showing a daughter’s loyalty, deference and obedience to Mononotto; after her brief moment of defiance at the sacrifice rock, Magawisca returns to the role of dutiful daughter, perhaps taking on Mononotto’s agenda of revenge as her own.<sup>5</sup> As we’ve seen, Martha Fletcher secures the court’s mercy for a youthful offender without ever dreaming that she should have political equality to her husband. Hope’s defiant behavior to rescue Nelema is seen as a youthful excess by the Puritan elders, one that marriage will surely temper, if not cure. By contrast, Dame Grafton, as a childless, fairly wealthy widow of a certain age, enjoys more personal freedom than a wife and mother like Martha Fletcher, yet her limited moral vision prevents her from using that freedom to intervene positively in the lives of those around her.

Clearly, modern issues of self-fulfillment (whether through a career or other activities) do not enter into this freedom to serve others, so that the paths of Esther and Hope are less divergent in Sedgwick’s argument than they may at first appear to us (and to our students) today. According to Deborah Gussman, *Hope Leslie* “ends somewhat atypically,” as Sedgwick makes a point that she would return to in her final novel, *Married or Single?*—the assertion that “a single life can and should be

considered respectable for women” (252). While emphasizing Sedgwick’s conservatism on the issue of women’s rights, Gussman highlights Sedgwick’s contention that “the choice to marry or not to marry is a woman’s prerogative rather than a moral or social imperative” (264). In fact, within the world of *Hope Leslie*, women’s “moral imperative” is the same for wives, mothers, and spinsters: sacrifice for and devotion to others, although such devotion is necessarily “disinterested” (350) and more widely dispersed, according to the narrator, in the case of the unmarried woman. The ultimate goal is not self-actualization, but rather sacrifice for others, modeled best by those “two saints” Alice Leslie and Martha Fletcher, and (despite my students’ initial objections) by the future we should expect for the fictive Hope Leslie Fletcher who will spend her days serving others (husband, children, her tutor Craddock, etc.). For Miss Leslie, “having [her] own way” eventually turns into what will become the Victorian dictum of “fulfilling [her] duty.” Unlike Bertha Grafton whose life revolves around “diversion” (consumerism and entertainment), Miss Leslie will live for others—precisely the argument to be made later by feminists against traditional marriage and motherhood.

What then is the value of using an 1827 sentimental novel in an introductory-level course where most students have no plans for further studies in literature, American history, or the humanities? After all, as we began the novel last spring, a few of my composition students claimed that *Hope Leslie* was the first fiction they had read since some hated assigned reading in middle school. However, from this growing awareness of the slippery, elusive, and frustrating nature of Sedgwick’s text and the ambivalence of what many students had characterized in their early responses as a “feminist” stance by Sedgwick, we are then able to turn to issues of race and social class: the “problem” of characters like Magawisca or Jennet, or the intermarriage of Faith and Oneco. Despite my insistence that students “tell a story to make a point” in their own written arguments, we are led by the complexity of a novel like *Hope Leslie* to appreciate the multiple readings made possible by more open forms.

## Endnotes

1. I’ve assigned *Hope Leslie* in 300-level literature surveys and in one first-year composition course. Students who already have some coursework in Women and Gender Studies or in literature often bring a sense of the complexity and interconnection of issues of race, class, and gender. In a literature-by-women survey, for example, students are quick to connect Sedgwick’s Magawisca with Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*: idealized, royal characters.

2. Block and Madden argue: “On the surface Grafton’s approach to home remedies makes her presentation appear pejoratively, especially because readers see neither Everell’s healing nor his response to her advice.” They also note Grafton’s reliance on female traditions of healing, as she “like Nelema, relies on what might be called ‘superstition’—folkways and ‘truths’—handed down from generation to generation.” They conclude that the juxtaposition of Nelema’s and Grafton’s folk medicine “complicates any simplistic reading of Hope’s narration of Nelema’s scientific work.” However, I suggest that Grafton’s folk medicine is entirely ineffective, based on her description of her own and Hope’s health, and therefore a great contrast to Nelema’s ability to use folk remedies to pull Craddock back from the brink of death, eventually restoring him to good health.

3. The narrator of *Hope Leslie* uses these terms to describe the similarities and differences between Hope and Faith Leslie when they are reunited; although the sisters are alike by “nature,” differences in “habit” and “education” have led to the gulf that now divides them.

4. Quentin Miller has examined closely the role of both male and female fashions in *Hope Leslie*, noting that Grafton’s “artificial” tastes in clothing highlight the positive “natural” beauty

of Hope or Magawisca. The discussion of Grafton is part of his larger argument that Hope's "development with regard to her sister's attire represents Sedgwick's belief (or hope) that democracy, though flawed and occasionally tyrannical, is an ideal worth preserving" (136).

5. Could Magawisca be deserving of her place in a Puritan jail as an enemy agent? We know from the narrator that she had "imbibed [Mononotto's] melancholy, and become as obedient to the impulse of his spirit, as the most faithful are to the fancied intimations of the Divinity" and that she "had determined to sacrifice on the altar of national duty" her tender feelings for Everell and Martha Fletcher (194-95). Does she arrange the meeting between Faith and Hope Leslie to further her father's long-range goal to unite all the Indians of New England together against the English, a goal which he superstitiously feels can "never be accomplished till [Nelema's] promise to Hope Leslie had been redeemed" (195)?

### Works Cited

- 
- Block, Shelley R., and Etta M. Madden. "Science in Catherine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*." *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 20:1-2 (2003): 22-37. 4 March 2006. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/legacy/v020/20.1block.htm>>.
- Fetterley, Judith. "My Sister! My Sister!": The Rhetoric of Catharine Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*." *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 70 (1998): 491-516.
- Gussman, Deborah. "'Equal to Either Fortune': Sedgwick's *Married or Single?* and Feminism." *Catharine Maria Sedgwick: Critical Perspectives*. Eds. Lucinda Damon-Bach and Victoria Clements. Boston: Northeastern UP, 2003. 252-67.
- Miller, Quentin. "'A Tyrannically Democratic Force': The Symbolic and Cultural Function of Clothing in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*." *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 19.2 (2002): 121-36.
- Sedgwick, Catherine Maria. *Hope Leslie, Or, Early Times in the Massachusetts*. Ed. Mary Kelley. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1987.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Ed. Carol H. Poston. 2d ed. New York: Norton, 1988.