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The Harpe’s Head: A Legend of Kentucky: James Hall’s Passionate Innovation

Eric Atherton

James Fenimore Cooper’s first three Leatherstocking Tales, all published before 1828, have received varied critical reception through the years, but undoubtedly set the standard against which all American frontier romances were and presently are measured. As Richard Slotkin states, Cooper’s “vision of the mythic hero became a figure in the popular imagination, to which all subsequent versions of the hero had perforce to refer, whether in emulation or denigration.”

Leatherstocking, as he appears in these early tales, remains the best literary interpretation and expression of the Daniel Boone myth, in which the noble frontiersman assists others, often unintentionally, in their conquest of the frontier. The frontier romance of the 1830s, though arguably the most popular literary form of the decade and written largely in imitation of Cooper, has not enjoyed similar success against the ravages of time. Novelists such as James Kirke Paulding, whom Alexander Cowie declares “little short of first rate,” and Catharine Maria Sedgwick, who “wisely forebore direct competition with Cooper” as she wrote romances directed to feminine readers “for whom the too steady contemplation of bloody adventure on sea and in forest proved wearisome,” as well as William Gilmore Simms, who was “destined to be remembered as Cooper’s most distinguished competitor in romance” and “was largely responsible for the revivification of the genre in the 1830s,” were tremendously popular at various points in their literary careers, but their names are conspicuously absent from most “canons” of nineteenth-century American literature. Instead, their and countless other largely forgotten romances of this decade reflect a transitional period in American literature, in which writers mimicked the Leatherstocking tales and Sir Walter Scott’s Waverley novels, often including that staple of early American fiction, the captivity narrative, while simultaneously seeking release from these constricting traditions. One of these writers was James Hall.
This study proposes to analyze the cultural and literary climates of the 1830s, demonstrating the fact that, to an unusual degree, such climates determined what would-be romancers such as Hall could and could not attempt in fiction. The blood-lust of the vulgar masses and the traditional, progressivist views of the upper classes, together with the conflicting demands of the literary reviewing press, created an atmosphere in which creative, original fiction could not easily flourish. James Hall recognized and attempted to cater to these various reading audiences, but could not integrate the required elements into a unified whole, and quit after one attempt at frontier romance, *The Harp's Head* (1833). This awkward work in some ways typifies the shoddy frontier romances of the 1830s; however, it is also innovative. In *The Harp's Head* Hall reintroduces to the novel an idea Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* had raised thirty-four years earlier; namely, that in the wilderness, for good or for bad, mankind's repressed passions and blood-lust could find complete, uninhibited expression. Hall demonstrates this possibility through a variety of characters, some thoroughly vulgar, others near-gentlemen, and ultimately ponders the role of morality and restraint in a region ruled by passion, not law. In so doing, Hall bucked the literary tide, moved the traditional, aristocratic "British" characters off center-stage, and focused instead on the metamorphosis Americans experienced while civilizing the wilderness, a wilderness which both symbolically represented and drew forth the darkest, most primal passions which lurked within the American psyche.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, America abounded with legends of the frontiersman, as well as the genuine article. Such characters provided excellent material for novelists like Cooper, but by 1833, when Hall published *The Harp's Head*, the eastern frontier was largely closed, and the frontiersman was a dead or certainly dying breed on this side of the Mississippi. Boone had lost his claims to Kentucky land in 1798, a victim of legal chicanery and his own ignorance, and had died in 1820 at St. Charles, on the Mississippi. Most of the other frontiersmen who unwittingly "broke trail" for the Eden-crazed masses and land-hungry speculators and aristocrats experienced similar fates. The Boone-type, so useful in taming the frontier, had no place in what he helped to create, and inevitably, often unhappily, moved westward.

In the absence of such actual people, a reading public developed which yearned to experience through literature all of the
blood-letting violence of frontier life. There was a fascination with rough-hewn characters who grasped wild domains with tooth and claw, and though, as Arthur Moore states, the romance writer technically could have "little use for a character who by word and deed set law at nought and threatened to shatter the social and political foundations of the state," cheap, violent fiction flourished, as "countless newspapers and magazines catered to the 'blood and thunder' tastes of the public." The infamous ring-tailed roarsers and alligator-horses of the frontier were especially popular and notorious, and descriptions of their brutal, eye-gouging, nose-biting brawls frequently cropped up in the letters and sketches of Easterners traveling west. Much the same was true of the violent, rollicking raftsmen of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, whose actual heyday ended as early as 1811 with the introduction of the steamboat to the Mississippi Valley, but who continued to appear in literature as late as 1884, in Twain's *Huckleberry Finn.*

Such legends, however, could not be the primary subject matter of the novelist, because the aristocratic readership, firmly accustomed to proper British romances, had little tolerance for commonplace characters playing important roles in fiction. Such creations would not only violate literary norms, but the privileging of commoners and the depiction of frontier vulgarity and excesses would constitute an indirect assault on the notion that America was Christianizing the frontier. Since popular literature at this time was "scarcely the vehicle for scrutinizing the myth of progress," few were inclined to attempt a work which "would have been to shock tender sensibilities in the East and to disturb the rosy optimism which sustained the march to the Pacific." Although some did successfully challenge such sensibilities, as Cooper does in *The Prairie,* many others wrote what can only be called progressivist manifestoes, such as Charles D. Kirk’s *Wooing and Warring in the Wilderness* (1860). Writing two full decades after the 1830s, and nearly fifty years after the eastern frontier was basically closed, Kirk still parrots the officially accepted, progressivist view of the settlement process: "Their destiny is one of peace, to conquer nature with the arms and arts of husbandry, to soften the wild features of the wide west, to plant flowers and reap harvests, and create home and happiness.... It was the tramp, tramp, steady and slow, but sure, of the advancing hosts of civilization and Christianity." Such fictions contained "almost nothing of the truth of the expansion," were "uninspired and prudential," but pleased
the "self-righteous, class conscious, prudish and sentimental" aristocratic readership. Bit-off noses and gouged-out eyes, so common in western magazines and popular with lower-class readers, had little place in such fictions.

Further complicating matters was the literary press, which chastened those who went beyond established critical boundaries, criticized common, vulgar literature, yet simultaneously demanded originality. An anonymous review essay which appeared in The American Quarterly in 1835 states: "Still new aspirants appear, who display an equal contempt for the rules of art and the canons of criticism. They shall have their rebuke in due season." The critic continues, stating that "while we would by no means be thought desirous to dictate to genius, which knows best its powers, we must be permitted to indulge our own private preference for the chivalric and the romantic when it is in competent hands. We love to have our imagination elevated by great deeds of noble characters . . . [and] are sated . . . with the commonplace events and characters of our own time, and with the commonplace literature, which is their transcript." Edgar Allan Poe, on the other hand, in an 1835 review of Robert Montgomery Bird's politically, culturally and literarily correct frontier romance The Hawks of Hawk Hollow, chastens Bird for his lack of "originality of manner, or of style," and concludes that the book has "very few pretensions to originality of matter. It is, in many respects, a bad imitation of Sir Walter Scott." The literary community thus demanded originality, but only within the boundaries of traditional romance, while common, vulgar characters in no way could displace the novelistic staple of noble people acting nobly.

The demands of these disparate reading audiences, that is, the vulgar, the aristocratic, and the critical, had several effects on the 1830s frontier romance. Frontier characters were necessary, to appeal to the lower-class readership, but they were always cast in supporting roles, behind the conventional, cardboard aristocratic hero and heroine, who represented civilization and proper values. These values, as well as, presumably, impeccable blood-lines, ascertained that the displaced Easterner always emerged unscathed from a completely foreign climate of violence, local color and general blood-letting, having achieved both love and financial success. They succeed despite total ineptitude in the wilderness, ineptitude which causes most modern readers to conclude that their "much-enduring guides" should "profanely leave them to the
fate they apparently court and richly deserve,"\textsuperscript{13} and that they "deserve to lose their hair."\textsuperscript{14} The frontier characters, on the other hand, though they were interesting, lively, and believable, and certainly of much more use on the frontier than their Eastern counterparts, were expendable. Despite their familiarity with the wilderness, they were usually damaged, destroyed, or sent westward at the novel's conclusion.

Writing such a novel was a daunting task at best, and, as noted above, was rendered more difficult if one hoped to achieve originality. The market was flooded with the shoddy works of countless aspiring novelists, who vainly attempted to reconcile the various demands of a diverse readership. Among these aspirants was James Hall. Born in Philadelphia in 1793, Hall was an upper-class jack-of-all-trades, whose career included stints as editor of the \textit{Illinois Monthly Magazine} and the \textit{Western Monthly Magazine}. He was also at various times a banker, a circuit court judge, and a historian. His career as a western writer began in the form of travel letters published in periodicals, and in 1828 his book-length volume, \textit{Letters from the West; Containing Sketches of Scenery, Manners, and Customs; and Anecdotes Connected with the First Settlements of the Western Sections of the United States}, was published in London. In twenty-two letters, Hall describes Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, the falls of the Ohio, boatmen, the manners of the people, and the Missouri trapper. In letter XVIII, Hall relates the true story of Micajah and Wiley Harpe, notorious outlaw brothers of West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. He calls their history "wonderful, as well from the number and variety, as the incredible atrocity of their adventures."\textsuperscript{15} In 1833, Hall turned from letters and short fiction to the novel, and returned to the Harpe brothers, expanding his earlier eighteen-page letter into a lengthy romance entitled \textit{The Harpe's Head: A Tale of Kentucky}.

\textit{The Harpe's Head} exemplifies the difficulties an 1830s romancer faced, in that it clearly targets the previously discussed reading audiences, but cannot integrate the traditional, Scott-like hero and heroine into a frontier setting. The novel opens in Virginia, where the first two characters introduced are the romantic hero, a "young and handsome bachelor" named Lyttleton Fennimore, and Major Heyward, whose dress "was that of a country gentleman," and who appeared "mounted upon a fine highly-bred horse" (I, 5-6). No further description of these men occurs at any point in the tale, and none is needed; they are conventional, aristocratic characters.
whose names immediately establish Hall as writing in the Cooper tradition. The initial descriptions of Virginia, Heyward's niece and the heroine of the tale, are more detailed and interesting. She is introduced on horseback, as "a lovely girl of eighteen, richly and tastefully habited," while her horse "had the fine limbs, the delicate form, and the bright eye of the deer, with a gentleness that seemed to savour more of reason than of instinct; his hair was smooth and glossy as silk, his harness elegant and neatly fitted . . . as the fair rider sat gracefully erect in her saddle, the proud animal arched his back" (I, 9). Later, Fennimore stares as Virginia, riding whip in hand, perches atop a horse which is "panting, with swollen veins, smoking with heat" (I, 30). Hall then describes Virginia in terms reminiscent of the way the horse had earlier been described, as "rendered more graceful by an elegant riding dress, closely fitted to her person . . . her bonnet was pushed back from her fine forehead, her eye lighted up with pleasure, her cheeks flushed and dimpled, her lips unclosed" (I, 30).

Virginia, likened to a high-bred, blooded horse, here appears in sexually dominant, vibrant tones. These scenes occur in that state which bears her name, and while Virginia stays in familiar, settled territory, she remains vivacious, lively, and believable: a strong, likeable female character. She flirts, and is the main attraction at a "somewhat aristocratic" barbecue, whose participants had "much of the sturdiness and simplicity of an agricultural people" (I, 33-34). At the barbecue Hall introduces Mr. George Lee, a self-proclaimed gentleman and the cousin and life-long admirer of Virginia Pendleton; unfortunately, he is a dolt, much her inferior in intelligence, and therefore is obviously not of truly noble blood. Hall spends all of chapter four relating Lee's history, a Cooper-like digression which draws a realistic picture of one who was "too feeble of intellect to lay any plan beyond the enjoyment of the present moment" (I, 76). Lee immediately becomes jealous of Fennimore, whose admiration for Virginia is readily apparent.

Having laid the traditional romantic foundations of the tale, Hall must shift the scene to the frontier. He does so conventionally: Heyward dies when his mansion mysteriously burns to the ground, and when his will is lost, the penniless Virginia seeks refuge with relatives in Kentucky. Fennimore heads west as well, and with this remove all interest in the hero and heroine disappears, though more than three-fourths of the novel remains. Virginia, on those few occasions when she is present, has lost her vivaciousness, and
is instead the stereotypical shrieking female. Fennimore repeatedly rescues her, fulfilling his only purpose in the novel, and inevitably the two fall in love. Their adventures and eventual romance, however, take up very few pages, as Hall was well aware: “Some of our readers are perhaps disposed to throw this volume aside, in disappointment at not finding in it any of those touching love-scenes, which constitute the charm of most novels. It will be said that the hero is the most insignificant character in the book, and the heroine not half so interesting as some of the other personages . . . We see no reason . . . that the young gentleman . . . should, as a matter of course, be intruded upon the reader at every turning, or that all the writer’s best powers should be exhausted in embellishing Fennimore, and spoke better than he knew when he used the word “intrude.” Once the setting moves to the frontier, the hero and heroine’s very presence in the novel is intrusive, as well as dull and unnecessary, because the reader already knows how their adventures will end. Fennimore recovers the lost will, restores Virginia’s fortune, and marries her. Despite their adventures, neither undergoes any change; their complete escape from the dangers of the wilderness makes their story traditional and conservative, both critically and culturally. Such safety also renders their story thoroughly forgettable.

Fortunately, as Hall himself indirectly admitted, the uninteresting hero and heroine are not of primary importance. Instead, Hall focuses on the “other personages” which dot the novel, from whom the frontier brings out primal, murderous passions. These other men range from vulgar, dirty animals to near-gentlemen, and their violent, passionate actions take precedence over the noble but predictable deeds of the hero, in the eyes of both writer and reader. Such characters and actions, described as “wild luxuriance” by one reviewer, are obviously directed towards the bloodthirsty, vulgar readership, the audience Hall was accustomed to write for. These men and their actions, however, constitute much more than exciting local-color filler. As the novel meanders through various legends of outlaws and Kentucky backwoodsmen, and meander it does, a thematic pattern emerges which echoes Hall’s most famous short story, “The Indian Hater” (1828). The suggestion that the wilderness, in the form of animals, Indians, or dark solitude and loneliness, can evoke ungovernable passion or hatred in man, dominates the
non-aristocratic characters in *The Harpe's Head*. This theme, though not entirely original (see Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799)), was an innovative introduction to romance, especially since Hall gave it precedence over the traditional characters and plot. Today, this theme constitutes the work's primary, perhaps its only literary value, and appears through four characters: Micajah Harpe, Hark Short the snakekiller, the aforementioned George Lee, and Colonel Hendrickson, a Boone-like Kentuckian. These men represent every station in society except true aristocracy, and, from Micajah through Hendrickson, there is a progression from an inhuman, unthinking murderous animal who gives no thought to the consequences of his actions, to a conscience-smitten Christian and the struggle he faced on the lawless frontier.

In Micajah Harpe, his title character, Hall faced a dilemma unlike any he had faced before. Forced to introduce Micajah, an actual historical character, into a fictional romance, Hall responds in typical romance fashion, by making Micajah the culprit who burns down the Heyward mansion and steals the will. He suggests no motive for this act, which comes off for what it was; a lame attempt to integrate the outlaw into a romantic fiction. Hall has more success with his graphic descriptions of Harpe, which certainly caught the attention of the blood-thirsty reader, as well as authors such as Robert Montgomery Bird and William Gilmore Simms:

> The face was larger than common, and to her [Virginia's] excited imagination, seemed of superhuman dimensions. The complexion was sanguine, and its redness heightened by the glare of the fire; the features were dark and savage; a beard of several week's growth covered the lower part of the face, while the uncovered head displayed an immense mass of tangled coarse red hair. The malignant eye that scowled upon her was full of savage ferocity; and a demonic laugh, which distended the mouth of this human monster, conveyed to the affrighted girl a sensation of horror, such as she had never before experienced (I, 91).

Such a countenance is as much a shock to the reader as it is to Virginia, contrasting sharply with the mild aristocratic faces which dot the novel's opening chapters. At Harpe's next appearance, in a valley on the trail to Kentucky, Hall gives a more extensive
description of his title character, vividly depicting a deranged, semi-human frontier barbarian:

In size he towered above the ordinary stature; his frame was bony and muscular—his breast broad—his limbs gigantic—his clothing uncouth and shabby—his exterior weather-beaten and dirty...pointing out this singular person as one who dwelt far from the habitations of Man, and who mingled not in the courtesies of civilized life. But that which attracted the gaze of all the company into which he had intruded, was the bold and ferocious countenance of the new-comer, and its strongly-marked expression of villainy. His face, which was larger than ordinary, exhibited the lines of ungovernable passion; but the complexion announced that the ordinary feelings of the human breast were extinguished, and instead of the healthy fire which indicates the social emotions, there was a livid, unnatural redness, resembling that of a dried and lifeless skin. The eye was fearless and steady, but it was also artful and audacious, glaring upon the beholder with an unpleasant fixedness and brilliancy, like that of a ravenous animal gloating upon its prey, and concentrating all its malignity into one fearful glance...He seemed some desperate outlaw, an unnatural enemy of his species, destitute of the nobler sympathies of nature (I, 150-52).

Hall’s earlier letter on the Harpes contains no physical description whatsoever, so this description, which surpasses even that of Magua in Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans, must have been largely the fruit of Hall’s imagination. When this inspired descriptive fit passed, however, Hall apparently decided that the above description was too malignant, so he recants, with an almost comic effect, stating that “there was in his appearance nothing to excite alarm” (I, 152). Those who see Micajah, however, seldom fail to shudder in horror.

Hall offers only vague generalizations in explanation for Micajah’s mysterious enmity to mankind, stating that “From Nimrod, the mighty hunter, down to Black Hawk, the Sac Warrior, the magnates of the earth have ever taken great delight in killing animals, and cutting the throats of their fellow-men” (I, 193). Later, he posits that Micajah was possessed by “a native thirst for blood, or a desire of vengeance for some real or imaginary injury, [which]
seemed to urge [him] in [his] horrible warfare against [his] species” (II, 73). Whatever its cause, Micajah’s untempered hatred renders him completely mindless, vicious, and inhuman, which is precisely the way Hall had intended him.

In the letter of 1828, supposedly composed entirely of “prominent facts,” Hall includes a point-of-death confession in which Harpe expresses regret at having killed one of his own children: “It cried, and I killed it: I had always told the women, I would have no crying about me.” No such confession appears in *The Harpe’s Head*, despite the fact that, where possible, Hall stubbornly maintained the facts regarding the capture and decapitation of Micajah Harpe. This desire for historical accuracy is obvious, because most of the 1828 version of this event is transcribed word-for-word in chapter twenty-four of the novel, as are many of Harpe’s murderous deeds. Such accuracy hurts the novel, because it prevents Fennimore and all other significant characters in Hall’s romance from playing any role in what could have been the final, conclusive execution scene of the tale. Instead, as actually happened, and as is told in the earlier letter, Harpe dies at the hands of a man named Leiper, a total newcomer to the novel. Hall, however, does omit one significant detail from the death scene: Micajah’s remorse. Even in death, Micajah remains murderously consistent, totally dominated by violent passions for which he offers neither explanation nor apology. He thus represents Hall’s barbaric extreme of frontier passion, the animal in human form. Indeed, Harpe’s death is less the justified execution of a criminal than simply the extermination of a troublesome predator, for whom a bounty is paid and the head displayed as a trophy.

Next on Hall’s progression of passionate frontier characters is Hark Short, Micajah’s son. Culturally and socially a small step above his father, Hark is certainly the most interesting character in the tale, though reviewers objected to him as “unnatural and overdrawn.” Born and raised in the swamps of North Carolina, Hark eked out a meager living in the mud and slime, eating possums, frogs, and stolen hogs. Hall good-naturedly jabs at the aristocracy through this grimy character, stating that “Hark had been raised a gentleman; that is to say, he had never been taught to work” (I, 190); and “like many great men, he seemed to have discovered that ingenuity is a nobler quality than brute force, and that discretion is the better part of valor”; which is to say, Hark
knew when to make himself scarce (I, 191). Despite a preference for solitude, Hark is a humanitarian at heart. When his mother dies, he expresses genuine, albeit primitive grief. He then moves to Kentucky, where he shelters and feeds weary travellers in his filthy hovel, and takes obvious pleasure in doing so. Additionally, in a novel burdened with captivities, Hark rescues prisoners indiscriminately, unfortunately showing little regard for the technical legalities of his actions or the prisoners’ supposed crimes.

Hark does, however, have one trait in common with his father, namely, a burning passion; “He entertained a special antipathy for snakes, and, like Hannibal, vowed eternal enmity against the whole race” (I, 194). He not only kills every snake which crosses his path, but revels in its destruction, stomping it to death with his bare feet, and then mutilating the poisonous corpse: “At length he dropped on his hands and knees, and fixing his teeth in the back of the creature’s neck, shook it violently, as a terrier dog worries a rat; and finally taking the head in his hand, he rose and lashed the trees with the long flexible body of his victim, until he dashed it to pieces, exhibiting a degree of spite and fury altogether foreign from his ordinary indolence of manner” (II, 62). When the usually stupid and slow-witted Hark sees a snake, his features become “animated with hatred and triumph” (II, 36). George Lee, who has gone west to continue fruitlessly courting Virginia, twice witnesses Hark’s transformation from placidity to passion, and is much amused. Seeing Hark’s metamorphosis, however, foreshadows a similar transformation in Lee, whose eventual victims are not snakes but Indians, and the killer not a filthy, indolent swamp-dweller, but a witless “gentleman.”

Prior to leaving Virginia, a creature more good-natured and totally harmless than George Lee can scarcely be imagined. He was “too good-humored to make an enemy, too generous to envy others,” and “had no desires which extended farther than the next meal, or any anxieties which a bumper of madeira could not dispel” (I, 75-76). His mind was unfit for “any serious pursuit, or any solid excellence,” so his mother concluded that since her son was “deficient in intellect, it was the more necessary that he should have a highly-gifted wife, who could manage his affairs” (I, 77). George, however, was not a true gentleman, and was therefore not worthy of the talented Virginia’s affections, a fact which Hall makes perfectly plain. When Virginia falls in love with Fennimore, Hall indicates an aristocrat’s approval, and simultaneously implies
that George’s mule-headed affections are unworthy of the noble prize: “We cannot think it strange that an intelligent and susceptible woman should readily draw a distinction between the commonplace civilities of ordinary men, or the silly gallantries of mere witless beaux, and the enlightened preference of a gentleman” (I, 162-63).

Despite Virginia’s countless refusals, George’s misplaced sense of gallantry sends him westward in single-minded pursuit. In Kentucky, however, his experiences change him. He narrowly escapes death at the hands of Micajah Harpe, and finds himself without food, lost in a foreign land, and pursued by murderers. While fleeing, he is captured by Indians. Conveniently, Virginia, Hark Short, and Colonel Hendrickson have been captured by the same band. George attempts to purchase Virginia’s freedom, but his efforts on her behalf fail; after he has offered all that he has, including slaves, horses, and even himself as a servant in exchange for her release, the Indian calmly declares that he will keep Virginia for himself, at which point George “flew into a rage” for the first time in the novel (II, 127).

When Fennimore rescues the white captives, he sparks a heated battle with the Indians, during which a greater rage infects Lee. He demonstrates a passion similar to that which had driven the animal-like Micajah to unspeakable atrocities, and the placid Hark to mutilation of snakes: “animated with a newly-awakened fury, smeared with blood, and shouting like a madman, he rushed forward among the foremost, beating down the stoutest warriors with his war-club, and taking full satisfaction for all the fright, the sufferings, and the hunger he had endured . . . The ground was strewed with the dead and dying; wherever he turned his eye, it fell on distorted features and gaping wounds . . . Blood gurgled under his footsteps” (II, 139-40). With Lee, this passion, like all others, is relatively short-lived, and wanes when victory is assured. After an initial frenzied rush, he calms himself, realizes that the battle has become a full-scale slaughter of the Indians, and aptly declares, “Bless me! What a bloody business! They are all alike—the Indians and Kentuckians—a blood-thirsty set” (II, 140). Like Micajah and Hark, George feels no guilt about his bloody deeds. All three of these men lack both intellect and religion, the precursors of guilt, so no questions of morality apply, nor do they ponder the inner sources of this violent passion. When the murderous fit has passed, they are unremorseful, almost oblivious to the bloody deeds they have committed.
The same cannot be said for Colonel Hendrickson, a violent frontier character who was nevertheless appreciated by reviewers because he was "true to nature." Continuing Hall's progression, Hendrickson is intelligent, much more of a gentleman than Lee, and holds a large Kentucky estate. As Lee stated above, however, Kentuckians were as bloodthirsty as Indians, and Hall's initial description of Hendrickson demonstrates that though this Kentucky "gentleman" certainly has strong qualities, he is in no way genteel: "an elderly man, of plain but peculiarly imposing exterior . . . spare and muscular . . . his features, sunburnt and nearly as dark as those of the Indian" (II, 75). A frontier judge, Hendrickson is a merciless terror to all wrong-doers who cross his path. He is also a Christian, with a Christian's conscience, a fact which distinguishes him from Micajah, Hark, and George Lee; however, instead of making him immune to the passion which infected these characters, Hendrickson's Christian conscience merely allows his hatred and passion to build and build, until an inevitable explosion occurs, followed immediately by the only genuine remorse in the tale.

Because of his successes in Indian wars, the Indians have special hatred for Colonel Hendrickson; therefore, when captured he is doomed to death by fire. He is a calm prisoner, offers no retort to Indian taunts, and calmly prepares himself to meet his God. When Fennimore's bullet saves him from flames, however, such pious thoughts vanish as Hendrickson undergoes a metamorphosis more complete and detailed than any previously seen:

Colonel Hendrickson seemed a new man; he shouted until the woods resounded with his battle cry . . . [he] cried aloud and spared not . . . the veteran seemed to be animated with a supernatural strength and activity, and to be actuated by an inhuman ferocity. Wherever his blow fell, it crushed; but his fury was unabated. Blood seemed to whet his appetite for blood. As he struck down the last enemy within his reach, he halted, and his eye seemed to gloat upon the victims of his revenge. His cheek was flushed, his nostrils distended, and his muscles full of action, like those of a pawing war-horse" (II, 141).

Again, we see a human character reduced to the level of an animal by a mysterious passion. In the previous three instances, regrets are
nonexistent, and the underlying cause of this blood-lust is not revealed. Colonel Hendrickson breaks this pattern, declaring, after the fit has left him, “God forgive my soul the sin of blood-guiltiness!” (II, 141). He then explains the bloody change he had undergone:

‘when I became a Christian, and felt the obligation to love all men, and forgive my enemies, I determined to fight no more, except in defense of my home or country. I even prayed that I might have strength to forgive an injury which had rankled in my bosom for years ... my boy was butchered in my presence by this very tribe. Dearly did I avenge his death, and devoutly did I pray afterwards that I might forgive it. For years have I disciplined my feelings so severely, that I had thought the last spark of hatred was extinguished, and that my last days would glide away in charity with men—in peace with God. When I stood a prisoner, bound to the stake, and expecting a miserable death, I endeavoured to subdue every vindictive feeling. I prayed that I might die the death of the righteous, and felt that peace which the world cannot give nor take away. When it pleased God to cut my bands asunder, it was my right and my duty to defend the life which He spared, and the friends who were dear to me. But no sooner did I raise my armed hand, than all my former feelings of vengeance against the race who had slain my child were kindled up. Hatred, long smothered, broke forth with implacable fury, and I tasted the sweets of revenge. It is a dreadful—an unholy passion’ (II, 142-43).

Hendrickson has the intellect, morals, and even the legal authority to pass judgment on what he has done, and does so, admitting that his best efforts were not sufficient to quell a vengeful passion against the wilderness. Exemplifying the frontier struggle, Hendrickson unconsciously takes on the characteristics of that which was to be conquered; namely, the Indians and the wilderness of which they are a part. This assumption of animality makes him succeed in the battle, striking a blow for settlement against the heathen vermin, but the remorseful speech indicates Hendrickson’s awareness that in so doing, he had violated the very codes of civilization and religion which he and all other settlers were supposedly in Kentucky to establish.
Hendrickson’s speech serves as the exclamation point of Hall’s progression of passionate, violent, and original frontier characters, because this Boone-like “noble frontiersman” was as close as Hall dared come to degrading and bloodying a gentleman. Fennimore, a true gentleman, never bloodies his hands, because Hall refuses to denigrate his aristocratic hero with the same base passions which lurk within vulgar, earthy characters, as well as those with false pretensions to nobility. When George Lee, Hendrickson, and indeed all other white men are metamorphosized by battle, Fennimore merely protects Virginia, spirits her out of danger, and maintains his rationality at all times. Hall, in a culturally correct move, maintains Eastern immunity to the barbarizing effects of the frontier.

Hall’s progression of frontier characters, ranging from Micajah to Hendrickson, base animal to avenging Christian, was an original notion, and, had he handled it in a skillful, straightforward manner, The Harpe’s Head might have been a benchmark frontier romance. Instead, it is burdened with digressions, repeatedly interrupted by the addresses of an admittedly inexperienced novelist to an increasingly confused and impatient reader, and constitutes less a novel than a miscellany, a seam-laced patchwork of Hall’s earlier sketches. At the time it merely added to a growing pile of shoddy frontier romances, and the reviewing press treated it accordingly. Timothy Flint scathed Hall in The Knickerbocker, indicating a growing weariness of frontier narratives: “In good sooth, there has been so much of this west country twaddle, that we are heartily tired of it . . . the washy twaddle of this and half a dozen similar books full of long and wonderful details about nothing, without any pathos, any deep feeling, any moral, any aim, or end, [are] as dull as last year’s almanacs.” Hall soon concluded that his talents were more suited to brief sketches and letters, and never attempted another novel.

Today, as then, both The Harpe’s Head and the entire decade of the 1830s are undervalued, their small but significant places in American literary history overlooked. The influence of The Harpe’s Head is obvious, however, both on the 1830s romance and American romance as a whole. William Gilmore Simms used Hark Short as a model for Chub Williams in Guy Rivers (1834) and for Dick Stillyards in Border Beagles (1840); Micajah Harpe strongly resembles Chorly in Simm’s The Yemasee (1835); and Robert Montgomery Bird integrates Micajah Harpe, Hark Short, and
Colonel Hendrickson in Nathan Slaughter, whose transformation from passivist to predator constitutes the main subject matter of *Nick of the Woods* (1837), which some consider the best frontier novel, Cooper excepted, and certainly the best Kentucky romance. Such writers owe a significant debt to Hall, whose clumsy yet innovative *The Harpe's Head* began to break free from the cultural and literary restrictions which had plagued novelists for thirty years, and reintroduced genuine, dark, uncontrollable inner passion to American romance. In a broader scope, the romantic deluge of the 1840s and 50s owes a similar debt to that seemingly lost period of American letters, the 1830s: the latter onslaught of romance could occur only after the passionate, original, American characters in *The Harpe's Head* and other similar works of the 1830s had stretched the limits of traditional European romance to the breaking point.

NOTES


3The first edition was entitled *The Harpe's Head: A Legend of Kentucky*, and was published in one volume in 1833 by Key & Biddle, in Philadelphia. I refer to the second edition, entitled *Kentucky: A Tale* (London: A.K. Newman, 1845, 2 volumes). All page references are included parenthetically in the text, and I use Hall's original title throughout.


6Dorothy Anne Dondore, *The Prairie and the Making of Middle America: Four Centuries of Description* (Cedar Rapids, IA: Torch Press, 1926), 229.

7Moore, 182.

8Quoted in Moore, 140.

9Moore, 161, 182.


11Ibid, 445.


13Dondore, 227.

14Moore, 170.

"Blind Tom" Wiggins was a virtuoso pianist and composer, known for his prodigious talent and unique style. His music, which often featured improvisation and intricate improvisations, was highly regarded during his lifetime and has continued to influence pianists to this day.

During the early 20th century, the Great Depression led to economic hardship and widespread unemployment. This period was characterized by high levels of poverty, joblessness, and homelessness, which devastated many communities. The government responded with relief efforts, such as the construction of public works, social welfare programs, and the expansion of the welfare system. These initiatives offered some relief to the struggling population.

Rev. Dr. James Hall, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, played a significant role in the development of African American religious institutions in the United States. He established numerous churches and schools, and his work laid the foundation for the growth of black religious institutions. Hall's contributions helped to strengthen the African American community and provided a place of spiritual and social support for generations of black members.

The Harpe's Head: A Legend of Kentucky, by James Hall, was well-received in its time. Reviewers praised the novel's storytelling and historical accuracy. The book was particularly lauded for its portrayal of Kentucky's frontier history and the characters that inhabit its pages.

Randolph Randall's James Hall: Spokesman of the New West provides a comprehensive look at Hall's life and work, offering insights into his role as a cultural and political leader during a transformative period in American history.

References:

16 Hall, 265, 277.
17 Review of The Harpe's Head: A Legend of Kentucky, by James Hall, American Monthly 2 (1834): 188.
18 Timothy Flint, review of The Harpe's Head: A Legend of Kentucky, by James Hall, The Knickerbocker 5 (January 1835): 73.
19 See Randolph Randall's James Hall: Spokesman of the New West (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1964), 229.