The voice that emerges in Apess’ other writings, however, that of an impassioned advocate for the rights of Native Americans, is equally remarkable for its historical significance and its stunningly effective prose style. In “An Indian’s Looking-Glass for the White Man,” for example, Apess presages the Native American activists of the 1970s when he stridently but cleverly asks the following rhetorical questions:

“How have you the folly to think that the white man, being one in fifteen or sixteen, is the only beloved image of God? Assemble all nations together in your imaginations and then let the whites be seated among them, and then let us look for the whites, and I doubt not it would be hard finding them; for to the rest of the nations, they are still a handful. Now suppose these skins were put together, and each skin had its national crimes written upon it—which skins do you think would have the greatest? I will ask one question more. Can you charge the Indians with robbing a nation almost of their whole continent, and murdering their women and children and then depriving the remainder of their lawful rights that nature and God require them to have?”

The contrast between Apess’ point of view and that of Mary Rowlandson, apparent in the above passage, is even more striking in one of the Pequot’s most famous speeches, “Eulogy on King Philip, as Pronounced at the Odeon, in Federal Street, Boston.” Apess’ last public utterance, this oration, delivered in 1836, sought to reclaim a proud place in history for the Wampanoag leader Metacom, or King Philip, whose warriors captured Mary Rowlandson. Apess tells a very different story of the Metacom War, meticulously articulating both the Puritans’ offenses against the Indians and the humane behavior of Philip’s troops. Here he comments directly on the Rowlandson incident:

“It appears that Philip treated his prisoners with a great deal more Christian-like spirit than the Pilgrims did; even Mrs. Rowlandson, although speaking with bitterness sometimes of the Indians, yet in her journal she speaks not a word against him. Philip even hires her to work for him, and pays her for her work, and then invites her to dine with him and smoke with him. And we have many testimonies that he was kind to his prisoners; and when the English wanted to redeem Philip’s prisoners, they had the privilege.”

Apess was born a century or so too soon to have read D. H. Lawrence, but he knew all about trusting the tale, not the teller.

Discussion questions
1. Captivity narratives are common today in romance fiction, a genre of writing far different from Rowlandson’s account. Typically, in the genre, a white woman is captured by a “savage” of color. Although appalled by the uncivilized nature of her captor, the woman is inevitably drawn to him sexually, ultimately falling in love and often returning with her lover to the “real world.” How is this scenario similar to what happens in The Sovereignty and Goodness of God?

2. John Ford’s classic western film The Searchers, one of many cinematic captivity narratives, represents the other side of the coin from genre romance. In the film, John Wayne and Jeffrey Hunter spend years searching for Natalie Wood, who, like Rowlandson, has been captured by a band of renegade Indians. The tension in the movie comes mainly from the concern of the heroes over whether Wood, in the course of her time with the Indians, will have “become a squaw.” This terror of sexual violation shields an even more basic fear: that the captive will herself “go native” and become the other. Rowlandson discounts such concerns out of hand, but are they present nevertheless? Discuss how Rowlandson, without ever naming the issues, strives to make it clear that she was never violated or in danger of going native.

3. Discuss the ways Apess uses his Christian beliefs to advance his case for the rights of Native Americans.

Further reading
Mary Rowlandson, born in 1637, arrived in Salem, Massachusetts, with her parents, John and Joan White, in 1639. The Whites, devout Puritans, came to America from England as part of the “Great Migration” and quickly established themselves in their new home. John White concentrated on acquiring land, while Joan became a prominent figure in the Puritan church. White’s desire to expand his holdings eventually took the family to Lancaster, Massachusetts, deep in what was called the “Anglo-Indian frontier.” In Lancaster in 1656, Mary met and married the newly recruited minister, Joseph Rowlandson.

Relations between the Puritan settlers and the Native American tribes of the region had always been friendly, but changes in the fur trade and the settlers’ constant need for more land contributed to growing hostilities. The trial and execution of three Christian Indians, believed to be in league with the Wampanoag leader, Metacom, called King Philip by the English, led to open warfare. Metacom’s War began in 1675 and lasted a little over a year. During that time, Mary Rowlandson’s home in Lancaster was attacked, and Mary, along with her three children, was taken captive. The youngest of the children died in the first week of capture, but Mary and her other two children were eventually released less than a year later. Her story of her experiences was published in 1682. It was the first American “captivity narrative,” a genre that continues to thrive today, both in fiction and nonfiction.

In her account, Rowlandson uses her experience in captivity as a way of reaffirming her belief in God and in the Puritan ethic. The Sovereignty and Goodness of God stresses the fundamental Puritan belief that the fate of human beings rests solely in the hands of God. This Calvinistic doctrine differs fundamentally from the Catholic belief in “good works” and the Lutheran emphasis on faith, both of which suggest that the individual can help determine his or her destiny. It was important to leading Puritan theologians, including Increase Mather, who is believed to have written the preface to Rowlandson’s book, that captivity narratives be a tool with which to teach the powerlessness of men and the grace of God.

So it is in The Sovereignty and Goodness of God. Like a contemporary politician dogmatically staying “on message” no matter the question, Rowlandson refuses to be budged from her position no matter what happens to her. Instances of kindness by her captors are regarded not as reflections of the Indians’ character but purely as manifestations of God’s grace—as if the notion of a “savage” behaving in a humane manner was so unthinkable it could only be explained by divine intervention. Likewise, the deprivation that Rowlandson and her children endured is viewed as God’s work, a reminder to the Puritans that they, too, must stay on message and not be swayed by the growing material comforts available in the new world.

In his ever-provocative Studies in Classic American Literature, D. H. Lawrence notes that “the world fears a new experience more than it fears anything. . . . The world doesn’t fear a new idea. It can pigeon-hole any idea. But it can’t pigeon-hole a real new experience. It can only dodge. The world is a great dodger, and the Americans the greatest. Because they dodge their own very selves.” Certainly, being taken captive by so-called savages, by the “other,” represents the newest of experiences, and that it is why it still inspires fear in us today (witness the sensationalized coverage of the capture of Private Jessica Lynch by the Iraqis). But most captivity narratives, whether Mary Rowlandson’s or Jessica Lynch’s, are classic Lawrentian dodges. They tantalize us, even terrorize us, with fear of the other, but then they reassure us that everything is back to normal. Our pigeon-holed ideas about ourselves, about sexuality, and about God, needn’t be disturbed after all. But wasn’t it exciting to think they might be, if only momentarily?

Lawrence goes on to say, after the passage quoted above, that “the artist usually sets out to point a moral or adorn a tale. The tale, however, points the other way, as a rule. Two blankly opposing morals, the artist’s and the tale’s. Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of the critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it.”

He is speaking of nineteenth-century American writers, but he might just as well be talking about captivity tales in general and Rowlandson’s in particular. If we step back from Rowlandson’s message to focus, instead, on the tale she tells, a very different picture emerges. The account of the attack that led to her capture, for example, seems almost to revel in the gory aspects: “Indians gaping before us with their Guns, Spears, and Hatchets to devour us”; men with their “bowels split open.” This is the language of tabloids, much less write—than it is for its content, which sounds too much like similar testimony to be heard in the world of contemporary evangelism.