

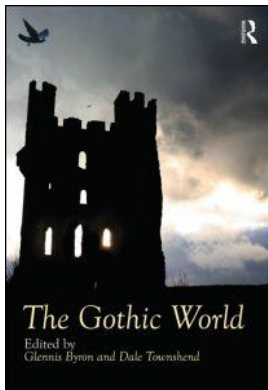
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## **The Gothic World**

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### **Gothic and the New American Republic, 1770–1800**

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## CHAPTER THREE

GOTHIC AND THE NEW AMERICAN  
REPUBLIC, 1770–1800

*Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock*

The American Gothic literary tradition arguably begins at the cusp of the nineteenth century, with the publication by Philadelphia native Charles Brockden Brown of his four Gothic novels, *Wieland; Or, The Transformation. An American Tale* (1798); *Ormond; Or, The Secret Witness* (1799); *Arthur Mervyn; Or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* (1799 and 1800); and *Edgar Huntly; Or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (1799). In each of these works, Brown adapted to his post-Revolutionary American setting the conventions of the European Gothic novel associated with Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, Friedrich von Schiller and others. The birth of the American Gothic, therefore, must be considered as Brown's artistic transmogrification of a confluence of cultural forces in light of available literary templates. This chapter accordingly will first survey the gothicized conditions of daily life during the colonial and early American republic periods, with attention paid in particular to the "raw materials" for the Gothic offered by the looming presence of the wilderness and the associated confrontation with the racial Other, the legacy of New England Puritanism, the pervasiveness of disease, and the overheated political contest between Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans with its attendant conspiracy paranoia. The literary templates available to Brown, including the importation of Gothic novels into America, will then be noted briefly before offering a more detailed consideration of Brown's appropriation of Gothic forms and native materials in North America's first Gothic novels.

## RAW MATERIALS

Any consideration of the origins of the American Gothic tradition and Charles Brockden Brown's contributions to it must necessarily be situated within the broader framework of Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary America – a period that, as Linda Kerber asserts, was one of the most intellectually traumatic in American history (Kerber 1970: viii). In the 1790s, when Brown completed the bulk of his writing, the United States was a gigantic experiment and, as Jane Tompkins asserts, it was not clear at any given moment that it would even still exist at all the next year or the following (Tompkins 1985: 47). Brown's Gothic fictions clearly reflect the

upheavals of his era and the circumstances of daily life as he insistently meditates upon the external forces that constrain and dictate the course of human events, as well as both the promise and perils of new systems of governance and thought. Gothic elements of everyday eighteenth-century life found expression in literary form through Brown's pen, and the subsequent repetition and elaboration of these elements established archetypes of the American literary Gothic.

An inescapable feature of the eighteenth-century American experience was the landscape itself, and David Mogen, Scott P. Sanders, and Joanne B. Karpinski assert in their introduction to *Frontier Gothic* that the most fundamental conflict shaping the "American experience" was "the battle between civilization and nature, between the mental landscape of European consciousness and the physical and psychical landscape of the New World" (Mogen, Sanders and Karpinski 1993: 15). For inhabitants of North America during the eighteenth century, the wilderness was simply a fact of life. This was a world in which most people seldom ventured more than a few miles from home due to terrible or non-existent roads, and, although urban areas such as Brown's Philadelphia were rapidly expanding, roads outside of town centers quickly degenerated into unlit dirt paths. Walking north or west outside of Philadelphia, for example, one could speedily leave behind urban life and enter unsettled wilderness areas still frequented by predatory animals in which getting lost or injured were legitimate concerns.

American literature, from its very beginnings, takes up and magnifies these anxieties related to the landscape, installing within the haunted heart of the American Gothic tradition the wilderness and the frontier as spaces of danger, savagery, and violence – and as uncanny contact zones with racialized and exoticized Others. In the writings of the earliest American colonizers, including John Smith, John Winthrop and William Bradford, the struggle for survival is a contest with nature and with the "savage and brutish men" (Bradford 1953: 25), the Indians, who inhabit the forest. Cotton Mather famously figures the American wildness as the "devil's territories" (Mather 1998: 421) in *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693), reinforcing the correlation made between Native Americans and the devil repeatedly emphasized in Native American captivity narratives such as Mary Rowlandson's popular *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs Mary Rowlandson* (1682) published eleven years before. Indeed, the Indian in many early American narratives is represented as a type of supernatural agent, as a figurative or literal demonic entity obstructing and actively threatening immigrant agendas in the New World. Of interest to Brown also would have been J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur's *An American Farmer* (1782), a work that depicts the "great woods" (de Crèvecoeur 1904: 58) as a place where men "appear to be no better than carnivorous animals of a superior rank, living on the flesh of wild animals" (1904: 59). By virtue of living in or near the woods, even "civilized" men are rendered "ferocious, gloomy, and unsociable" (1904: 67), and all too easily transform into animals.

As a bulwark against the dark woods and the "heathenish" dark-skinned indigenous inhabitants residing there – as well as against Enlightenment-influenced reformulations or rejections of traditional organized religion being imported from Europe – conservative Old Light Calvinists (based in New England) and New Light evangelicals (issuing forth from the mid-Atlantic seaboard) attempted to illuminate

the world with the word of God. Puritan religious discourse and the evangelical rhetoric of the eighteenth-century Great Awakening, however, often contained a pronounced Gothic element that stressed the inscrutability of the deity and helplessness of “unsaved” or “natural men” against his wrath. The apocalypticism of Puritan minister Michael Wigglesworth’s 1662 *The Day of Doom*, with its fierce denunciation of sinners and horrific images of damnation, sets the tone for this tradition, one then notably taken up later by Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards in his dramatic 1741 sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Indeed, Edwards’s representation of an omnipotent and wrathful God who holds ultimate power over life and death, and dangles sinners over the flames of perdition much as one would hold a spider or some other “loathsome insect over the fire” (Edwards 2007), seems directly to presage post-humanist Lovecraftian “cosmic horror,” in which the continued existence of the human race depends upon the whims of monstrously powerful extraterrestrial “Elder Gods.”

Much of the force of such religious discourse derived from the commonplace facticity of death during the colonial period, a factor that persisted well into the nineteenth century. The average life expectancy in North America in the eighteenth century was in the mid-30s (Haines 2008) and infant mortality was common in the colonial and early republic periods, as testified to both by the available ethnographic data and by numerous elegies for lost children. Edwards, in fact, repeatedly emphasizes in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* that the “unseen, unthought-of ways and means of persons going suddenly out of the world are innumerable and inconceivable” (Edwards 2007). Youth and good health are no guarantors of longevity, as God can withdraw his support at any moment.

Of course, that the “arrows of death fly unseen at noon-day” (Edwards 2007) was by no means unique to the New World. What did distinguish the New World from the Old, however, was a particular species of pestilence common to tropical and sub-tropical regions: yellow fever, a disease that routinely ravaged East coast and southern American cities into the early part of the twentieth century, and which Brown made central both to *Ormond* and to *Arthur Mervyn* in lurid passages describing a decimated city. As I will detail in more depth below, 1793 (the year in which both *Ormond* and *Arthur Mervyn* are set) was an especially bad plague year. In Philadelphia, some 2,500 people died over the course of a six-week period, and over 5,000 died before the plague subsided: more than a tenth of the city’s population of 45,000 (Nash 2002: 127; see also Weigley 1982: 188).

While literal disease periodically ravaged East coast North American cities, many more Americans were swept up in panics over the figurative pestilence of radical ideology. Revolutions abroad in the second half of the eighteenth century and the importation of radical doctrines at home, most specifically those of British radical democrats William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft and their followers, combined with internal debates over slavery and Indian policy and dramatic shifts in financial policy and industrial production, resulting in a United States fraught with political tension and extreme factionalism in the 1790s. Vigorous political debates pivoted around issues of how much power the federal government should possess, whether the United States should ally itself with Great Britain or France, and, in keeping with Godwinian meditations, whether human beings in general possessed the capacity for

self-governance. The ideological debate over the power that the government should possess, which indeed shaped the American Constitution, was sharpened in the 1790s by a series of events linking the domestic and international spheres, events that further factionalized the United States almost to the point of civil war.

Not surprisingly, during this feverish period of political jockeying, which culminated in 1798 with the Alien and Sedition Acts and the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, conspiracy theories were rife. Both Federalists and Republicans accused their opponents of subterfuge and devious dealing. Perhaps the most visible manifestation of conspiratorial rhetoric was the Illuminati panic of 1798–99, an event that clearly informs both Brown's *Ormond* and his *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* (1803–5; see Brown 1977), each of which features individuals who are members of Illuminati-like secret societies. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, two European books written independently of each other, Abbé de Barruel's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme* (1797–98) and John Robison's *Proofs of a conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, carried on in the secret meetings of the Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* (1797), purported to trace all the revolutionary upheavals of the current age to the clandestine machinations of this secret society “dedicated to the general destruction of government and religion, and that now operated through its covert agents in all the nations of Europe and in the United States” (Kafer 2004: 142). By mid-1798, as Richard Buel observes, “Illuminati became a household word in America” (quoted in Levine 1989: 22), and in Brown's home city of Philadelphia, a major destination in the 1790s for political refugees of all stripes, “the end result of the repeated declarations of French, Illuminati, Federalist-aristocratic, and even Irish conspiracy was a near panic situation” (Levine 1989: 23).

My argument here is that these gothicized elements of American life in the latter part of the eighteenth century – the looming presence of the frontier and the wilderness, the encounter with the exoticized and demonized Other, grimly apocalyptic religious rhetoric, the commonplace confrontation with pestilence and mortality, conspiracy paranoia, and general anxieties related to the potential disintegration of a newly formed nation – supplied Brown with an overabundance of dark themes from which to choose in fashioning his literary experiments, and indeed help to support Leslie Fiedler's famous pronouncement that the American literary tradition (which arguably started with Brown) is essentially a Gothic one (Fiedler 1992: 142). Before turning to Brown, however, one last piece of the puzzle must be supplied, and that is some background on the literary templates available to Brown in the late eighteenth century.

While traces are apparent in Brown's work of many different literary forms, reflecting his wide-ranging intellectual tastes and investigations, Brown arguably drew upon, blended and innovated most heavily upon three popular eighteenth-century categories of literature: sentimental romances, Gothic romances and “novels of purpose.” As Russel B. Nye explains, the most popular variety of fiction available to Brown as a model was the sentimental romance associated with such British authors as Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne. In novels along the lines of Richardson's *Pamela, or virtue rewarded* (1740), virtue is pitted against vice as innocence is attacked in scenes staged to evoke emotional responses from readers of fine sensibility. The influence of the sentimental novel is readily apparent

throughout Brown's body of work, but most especially in *Ormond*, in which his female characters all seem derived from this tradition, as well as in his two final epistolary works, *Jane Talbot* (1801) and *Clara Howard* (1801).

The second major literary form clearly influencing Brown, and from which he undoubtedly drew inspiration, was the literary craze of the 1790s, the Gothic novel, as epitomized in the works of Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis. Popular magazines in the 1790s "overflowed with stories crammed with haunted castles, secret passages, ghosts, damp tombs, mysterious chests, [and] unearthly shrieks" (Nye 1982: 314), sources which Brown, who particularly esteemed Radcliffe, adapted into his tales of murder, insanity, confinement, sleepwalking, pestilence, attempted rape and other lurid subjects. Connected to Brown's appropriation and manipulation of Gothic themes and tropes is also the influx of sensationalist German romances that began to filter across the Atlantic in the 1790s. Like their British Gothic counterparts, these tales of murder, torture and rape were often criticized for their perceived immorality, even as they were widely distributed and eagerly consumed. Warfel has noted Brown's familiarity with, and the possible influence of, German "terror novels" – including Friedrich von Schiller's unfinished *Der Geisterseher* (*The Ghost-Seer*; published in periodical form, 1787–89) and Cajetan Tschink's *The Victim of Magical Delusion* (1795) – on his fiction (Warfel 1974: 11).

Less lurid but equally engaging were writings by the Enlightenment-influenced French *philosophes* and British "novelists of purpose." Popular during the 1790s and after, these were productions by socially conscious writers in England who believed that the novel could be used as a medium through which to debate contemporary issues, as well as an instrument of social protest and change (Nye 1982: 316). Foremost among the novels of purpose was William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794). Brown at various times in his journals and letters mentions French authors Montesquieu, Helvétius, d'Holbach, Diderot, d'Alembert, Fenelon, La Bruyère, Voltaire and La Rochefoucauld (Nye 1982: 317–18), and it is clear that Brown was heavily influenced by Rousseau.

The novels that Brown produced were conscious attempts to combine elements from these various traditions into something new, something intrinsically American: an "American novel, built around native scenery, native incidents, blended into the form and style of his European models" (Nye 1982: 321). His awareness of pioneering a new literary form in a new country seeking to define itself is made most explicit in his "To the Public" note at the start of *Edgar Huntly*, where he proposes that the American Indian and American wilderness will substitute in his novel for "Gothic castles and chimeras" (Brown 2006a: 4). Taking Gothic elements of the American experience and discourse as inspiration and raw material, Brown overlaid the available literary templates, stretching and reshaping them as needed, to produce the first American Gothic novels.

### CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN AND THE INVENTION OF THE AMERICAN GOTHIC

In my study of Charles Brockden Brown (Weinstock 2012), I assert that, beyond publishing the first American Gothic novel with *Wieland*, Brown must be recognized as an important innovator within four subcategories of the Gothic: the psychological,

the frontier, the urban, and the female. In brief, starting with the psychological Gothic, although Edgar Allan Poe is generally regarded as the Gothic author who shifted the focus of fear away from external threats and emphasized instead the irrationality of the human mind (see, for example, Bloom 2007 and Fisher 2002), what stands out most clearly about Brown's novels is their critique of Enlightenment rationality and Lockean sensationalist psychology that presumes the mind to be able to draw accurate inferences based on sensory perception. Well before Poe and Sigmund Freud, Brown presents to the reader a model of human cognition that emphasizes the uncertainty of assumptions based on sensory impressions and the unsettling power of the human unconscious. In Brown's fiction, it is the mind, rather than the external world, that is a haunted space. This psychological Gothic drama, while evident in all of Brown's novels, is most obvious in his first, *Wieland*, and his last, *Edgar Huntly*.

Deriving inspiration from the case of James Yates, a man who in 1781 heard voices and murdered his wife and three children in upstate New York, *Wieland* recounts the horrible events that befall the narrator Clara Wieland, her brother Theodore, and a close circle of family and friends who are at the center of a series of baffling events. First, Wieland, Sr. bizarrely dies from what seems to be spontaneous human combustion. A number of years later, mysterious voices are heard making prophecies, offering warnings and plotting to kill Clara. These events culminate in Theodore's belief that he has been commanded by God to sacrifice his family: he murders his wife and four children and unsuccessfully pursues Clara to complete his bloody business.

The central question at the heart of *Wieland* is what to make of the mysterious voices. Most of the strange happenings can be attributed to the machinations of a stranger named Carwin, a "biloquist" or ventriloquist who confesses to misleading the Wielands and Clara's suitor, Henry Pleyel. Carwin, however, steadfastly maintains that the voice commanding Theodore to render up his family to God was not his, thus allowing for three explanations: Carwin may be lying and Theodore's actions were precipitated by human intervention; Wieland is mad and the voices in his head compelling him to kill were his own; or, like Abraham in the Bible, commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac, Theodore truly did hear the voice of God. While the novel does not conclusively answer this question, the text does insistently thematize the precariousness of conclusions drawn from sensory data and the irrationality of human cognition. As both Looby (1996) and Hagenbüchle (1988) maintain, Brown in *Wieland* essentially calls into question the human ability to access truth and to be certain of anything at all. In the process, the novel also offers a rationalist critique of the kind of religious zealotry embodied by figures such as Jonathan Edwards, and exemplified in the text by Wieland, Sr.

These themes of the precariousness of human assumptions and the irrationality of human impulses are developed most fully in Brown's fourth novel, *Edgar Huntly*. *Edgar Huntly* is ostensibly a murder mystery, as the eponymous protagonist attempts to track down the killer of his friend Waldegrave. Disconnections between intention and action and evidence and inference, however, are evident almost immediately as Edgar happens across an unexpected sight: a man digging in the middle of the night in the woods by the scene of Waldegrave's murder. Stranger still, Edgar concludes that the man, identified later as Clithero Edny, is asleep. This, in a nutshell, is the

fundamental premise informing all of *Edgar Huntly*: human beings are not always or even mostly in control of themselves. Unconscious impulses and repressed desires and anxieties move individuals in ways of which we are not aware.

As the novel progresses, stranger and stranger things continue to happen to Edgar. Not only has Waldegrave been murdered, but also a packet of his letters entrusted to Edgar by Waldegrave disappears. Most dramatically, Edgar wakes up in the dark in a pit. The letters, he presumes, must have been stolen, although why anyone would want them or how anyone could find them is a mystery. As for ending up in the pit, Edgar is baffled, but concludes when he finds Indians in possession of his musket that he must have been knocked over the head, kidnapped and deposited there. The truth that the reader discovers at the end is that Edgar himself is the thief in the night who removed Waldegrave's letters, and that Edgar is responsible for his own interment in the pit: Edgar, mirroring Clithero, is also a sleepwalker. Well before Poe and Freud, what Brown presents in *Edgar Huntly* is a picture of a world in which the individual cannot be certain of anything, and in which to be haunted is the fundamental human condition. The realization at the heart of Brown's psychological Gothic is that the psyche is essentially a haunted space.

While Brown consistently paints a picture of human beings as strangers to themselves, he also quite consciously made use of the American wilderness as an essential component of his Gothic writing, thus pioneering the American frontier Gothic. He indicates this intention, as noted above, in a note to the public prefacing *Edgar Huntly*, in which he explains that it is the purpose of his work to "exhibit a series of adventures, growing out of the condition of our country" (Brown 2006a: 3). In place of the established conventions of the European Gothic, he will substitute devices which he feels are more appropriate to the American situation: "incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness" (Brown 2006a: 3-4). In keeping with this expressed intention, much of *Edgar Huntly* involves his protagonist's sojourns through the wild and rude wilderness of Norwalk, Pennsylvania. Along the way, he kills and eats a panther, rescues a captive woman from Indians, seemingly rises from the dead, and jumps from a cliff into a river. In *Edgar Huntly*, his short story "Somnambulism" (1805) and to a lesser extent *Wieland*, Brown arguably was the first American author to realize the potential of the American wilderness for constructing an intrinsically American Gothic romance. In so doing, Brown, as Seelye observes, established the borders of a distinctly American fiction (Seelye 1988: 184).

In addition to making use of the raw material of the American wilderness for constructing his American Gothic, Brown also exploited the fundamental uncanniness of urban existence, most notably in *Ormond* and *Arthur Mervyn*, his two novels set in Philadelphia during the deadly 1793 yellow fever outbreak that ravaged the city. Although the urban Gothic subgenre is usually considered by critics to have developed later in the nineteenth century (see, for example, Mighall 1999 and Spencer 1992), Brown in these two novels clearly constructs his urban environment as a labyrinthine space concealing vice and deceit. The essence of Brown's urban Gothic in *Ormond* and *Arthur Mervyn* is to turn Philadelphia into a city of the dying and the dead, a city of ghouls that prey upon the downtrodden.

*Ormond* tells the story of the virtuous Constantia Dudley, who attempts to care for herself and her impoverished father in the midst of plague, surrounded by



heartlessness and deception. Indeed, the related themes of disguise and forgery are insistently foregrounded in *Ormond*. The villainous Thomas Craig initially presents himself as frank, modest and forthright, and is welcomed into Mr Dudley home and business where he proceeds to embezzle funds and ruin the Dudley name and fortune. Although actuated by the love of liberty rather than the desire for personal gain, Martinette de Beauvais, a cross-dressing freedom fighter masquerading as Ursula Monrose, presents an equally false front to the world. And the true master of disguise and obfuscation is revealed to be none other than Ormond himself, the eponymous antagonist – and secret society member – of the novel. Ormond, like his sister Martinette and Craig, presents himself as the opposite of what he really is. The face that he shows to the world is one governed solely by dispassionate reason. In the end, though, he is revealed to be an egomaniacal criminal, governed by lust and the desire for power.

In *Arthur Mervyn*, Brown again presents an image of a Philadelphia devastated by plague and rife with corruption. In *Arthur Mervyn*, however, the question of the reliability of perceptions thematized in *Ormond* becomes all encompassing. The accuracy of assumptions made about everything and everyone in *Arthur Mervyn*, including those made by the reader about the eponymous protagonist himself, are repeatedly called into question and, as in *Ormond*, this epistemological uncertainty is echoed and magnified by the psychological distortions and confusion of the urban environment that, as Grabo asserts, “itself takes on nearly the aspect of a character whose conditions generate the actions of most of the other characters, and whose contagions infect all” (Grabo 1980: 450). Well ahead of later nineteenth-century literary trends, Brown in *Ormond* and *Arthur Mervyn* creates a picture of the fundamental strangeness of urban existence in which one lives in close proximity to multitudes one does not know: apartments and houses conceal vice and crime, streets that seem straight curve and lead in unexpected directions, and all assumptions based on appearances are suspect.

In addition to the psychological, frontier and urban Gothics, Brown was instrumental in developing one other subgenre of the Gothic: the female Gothic that dramatizes women’s disempowerment, the mode that highlights the forces of explicit and implicit violence used against women to coerce their submission and critiques female oppression. These are themes that Brown explicitly considered in his dialogue on women’s rights, *Alcuin* (parts I and II, 1798; complete text posthumously published in 1815). He subsequently dramatized them in his fiction, most notably in *Wieland* and *Ormond*.

*Wieland* is a Gothic tale of victimization and murder, and Clara, as Christophersen notes, is a heroine clearly indebted to Radcliffe and the Gothic tradition (Christophersen 1993: 127). In the midst of a story replete with seemingly supernatural phenomena, Brown repeatedly places Clara in situations in which, first, her virtue, and subsequently, her life, are in danger. Far from being a conventional Gothic heroine, however, Clara has her own house, her own thoughts and her own identity. She has received an unconventional education for a young woman of the time: seemingly in keeping with Wollstonecraft’s recommendations in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Clara appears to have been educated together with her brother and participates in the intellectual life of her small community. With admirable Enlightenment clarity, Clara investigates unusual circumstances to the

best of her ability, and inclines toward rejecting groundless conjecture or supernatural explanations.

The dilemma that Clara faces, however, is that no amount of level-headed investigation or rational cogitation can penetrate or undo the irrational restrictions on female autonomy and potential in Clara's rigidly patriarchal culture. What Brown's novel ultimately reveals is that Clara's real problem is not Carwin or Pleyel, or even her brother Wieland, but rather the all-encompassing and smothering patriarchal system their combination represents. Carwin's role here is clearest: he is a sort of watered-down Gothic villain who sports with Clara because she is vulnerable. What he brings to the fore through his actions is the threat of sexual violence against women, the violence underlying and energizing both the conventional Gothic and sentimental romance plots.

Brown's Wollstonecraftian feminism, clearly on display in *Wieland*, arguably finds its fullest expression in *Ormond*, a text which fuses the explicit meditation on women's rights initiated in *Alcuin* with the female Gothic plot derived from Radcliffe and others. The problem for Constantia is that it is hard to be a self-aware independent woman in a world that preys on weakness and presumes women to be less competent and weaker than men. Constantia's is a world in which a woman goes from living in her father's household to her husband's – and by default shares the fortunes of both – and in which a woman without a male protector is a target. Brown's original spin on the female Gothic plot is to make his protagonist Constantia in *Ormond* an atypical and self-aware Gothic heroine who consciously considers the ways in which both law and custom conspire to disempower her sex.

Charles Brockden Brown, North America's first Gothic novelist, should thus also be considered a central figure in the development of four subgenres of the Gothic: the psychological, the frontier, the urban and the female. In *Wieland*, *Ormond*, *Arthur Mervyn*, and *Edgar Huntly*, as well as to a lesser extent in his dialogue on women's rights, *Alcuin*, his sentimental novels, *Clara Howard* and *Jane Talbot*, and his other writings, Brown consciously appropriated elements of the existing Gothic novel tradition and rescripted them better to reflect his own insights and experiences in a newly-established country anxiously attempting to chart its path forward on the cusp of the nineteenth century. In his novels, Brown presents the dark underside to Enlightenment optimism as he repeatedly questions the extent to which human beings can draw accurate inferences from sensory data and foresee the outcome of their actions. In advance of Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper and Ambrose Bierce, he depicts the American frontier as a liminal zone fraught with danger. Looking forward to Charles Dickens, George Lippard and even twentieth-century film noir, Brown establishes the city as itself a sort of labyrinthine wildness populated by insidious confidence men. Setting the stage for Edgar Allan Poe's fiction and, later, Sigmund Freud's psychology, Brown powerfully represents the mind as inherently haunted as the unconscious compels irrational and "perverse" behavior. And well before Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton and such contemporary authors as Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter, Brown in his female Gothic narratives vividly demonstrates the forms of violence and victimization to which women in patriarchal culture are exposed.

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