

ANALYSIS

Wieland (1798)

Charles Brockden Brown

(1771-1810)

Wieland (1798) was based on a true case reported in the *New York Weekly Magazine* (July 20 & 28, 1796): "A farmer living near Tomhannock, New York--a gentle and pious man--thought he heard God speak to him one Sunday afternoon, commanding him to kill his wife and four children. He did so, shocking the public." The case raised metaphysical and psychological questions that Brown explores in his novel. Like other American novelists at the time, defending his book against attacks being made on novels by Christian ministers, Brown introduces his story by emphasizing that it is not fanciful but true, and that it serves a moral purpose in being a cautionary tale, in particular a warning to young ladies--in the tradition of Samuel Richardson in *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747).

Wieland was published the same year as *The Lyrical Ballads* by the British poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a book usually seen as introducing the Romantic Movement in western literature. In *Wieland*, Brown is Neoclassical in criticizing the inflated romantic villain, a ventriloquist named Carwin who misuses his power and precipitates Wieland's murder of his family. Brown is empirical in presenting evidence when the older Wieland (Wayland), a Calvinist representing the old order, blows up by spontaneous combustion while praying. He sounds like a rationalist himself, but he ridicules the conventional rationalist Pleyel for his smug rigidity. Repeatedly throughout the novel, Brown dramatizes deceptions of the "senses," refuting the psychology of John Locke then prevailing in the Age of Reason. He uses the artifice of the Romantic ventriloquist to prove the limitations and inadequacy of Lockean psychology, thereby undermining Neoclassicism. The metaphor of ventriloquism is powerful and resonant, prefiguring modern problems of mass communication and interpretation of information from unseen sources.

The novel becomes an allegory of intellectual history: The truth that her brother intends to kill her is revealed to the narrator Clara in a dream, intuitive knowledge that contradicts and transcends the data of her senses, agreeing with Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), which became the philosophical foundation of the Romantic Movement. Ironically, Brown's Romantic inclination to peer into the depths of human nature turned him back toward Calvinism. By the end of *Wieland* the vision of Clara is Gothic. Gothic fiction in Europe was entertainment for the most part, a popular reaction against the prevailing optimism of upper class rationalists who believed in Progress, whereas the Americans Brown and Poe were serious in their Gothic visions.

Michael Hollister (2015)

"Despite his seemingly monstrous crimes, Carwin is defended. He is 'an unfortunate man,' a thing to be pitied, a victim in the hands of an unscrupulous master [backstory] who attempts to make him his cat's-paw, and he is also, like [Caleb] Williams, the victim of an uncontrollable curiosity.... The book is to be classed with the seduction novels so popular at the close of the eighteenth century--a book of the *Clarissa Harlowe* type.... The heroine is of the Richardson type...: 'The gulf that separates man from insects is not wider than that which severs the polluted from the chaste among women.' There is another Richardsonian element: The heroine is constantly analyzing her own emotions.... The third strand is the Radcliffe element. *Wieland* is a tale of terror not unlike *The Mysteries of Udolpho*....

The final strand, the real soul of the romance, however, was of Brown's own creation. Despite the fact that Clara and Carwin dominate the first half of the book to the almost total exclusion of the title character, *Wieland* is the central figure, and his 'transformation' is the central *motif*. The work is a tragedy, Grecian in its intensities of horror. The dominating note is struck at the very beginning: the ghastly death of the elder *Wieland* because he believed he had deliberately disobeyed a divine command--by inference the

sacrifice of his family.... The book is a study in dementia: all four of the main characters are touched by it....

Wieland did not kill his family because he mistook Carwin's counterfeit for the voice of God. The device of ventriloquism belongs to the strand of seduction. Carwin used his strange power only seven times in all, and in every case but two he used it either to extract himself or Clara from awkward predicaments. Once he tested the courage of Clara with the device and once he used it to confound his rival, Pleyel. The voices which Wieland heard commanding him to kill came not from Carwin but from his own imagination deluded by years of brooding on the ancestral tragedy. The mystery of the voices of Carwin undoubtedly precipitated the final action, but they did not cause it. The careful reader awakes at last to the fact that the deed was caused by dementia and that he has been watching the cumulative growth of the insidious obsession from the earliest chapters....Clara and Carwin too have been in the grip of diabolic forces and, innocent of intended crime, have been punished like felons. The book is pure tragedy....

The style is over-ornate and inflated, grotesque with circumlocutions. Instead of *the wind blew* we have 'the elemental music was remarkably sonorous'; *he fell in love* becomes 'he had not escaped the amorous contagion.' Everywhere may be heard the Johnsonian ring and Latinized diction: 'His elocution was less sweet than sonorous, and, therefore, better adapted than the mellifluousness of his friend to the outrageous vehemence of this drama.' But we must not forget that the book was written at the time when all American prose was rhetorical, nor must we forget when laughing at its other absurdities that the book was created in the eighteenth century.

Other flaws in Brown's style are far more serious; his gaspingly short sentence unit--whole paragraphs with sentences like firecrackers; his wordiness; his faulty diction and even faulty grammar. Headlong rapidity of composition accounts partly for these defects. Brown never revised; he never reread his works; slovenliness was inevitable. The most serious structural defect in *Wieland* came from this very source.... There is no reason for Louisa Conway's presence in Wieland's family. The attempt at the close of the book to explain the Conway incident by means of the new character Maxwell and a new subplot is ludicrous."

Fred Lewis Pattee
Introduction *Wieland*
(Hafner 1967) ix-xii

"It may be assumed that ventriloquism did not seem a pinchbeck solution in 1798, when it was a trick little known or practiced; and Brown, too much an artist to make his ventriloquist a mere instigator to murder, made him out a hero-villain whose tragedy it is that he has to sin, not as the old morality had it, because of mere wickedness, but because of the driving power of the spirit of evil which no man can resist and from which only the weak are immune. Yet though Carwin by his irresponsible acts of ventriloquism... actually sets going in Theodore Wieland's mind the train of thought which terminates in the crimes, he does no more than to arouse from unsuspected depths a frenzy already sleeping in Wieland's nature."

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel: 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-1968) 13

"Clara's neurotic tendencies are exhibited well before her brother's come to a head, and well before Carwin's intrigues... Singularly, it was she who first found herself unaccountably attracted to him, instead of--as in the sentimental formula--his initially having designs on her, which on being frustrated inspire schemes of seduction.... When Clara rushes to the door on Carwin's leaving, the figure she beholds is anything but the predictable type of the Richardsonian gentleman-scoundrel..."

The complexities of Clara's character are really a rather original contribution on Brown's part to both examples of genre-females. For Pamela and Clarissa, no less than Walpole's Isabella, Lewis's Antonia, or Radcliffe's Emily, are uniformly and tiresomely known for being passive, put-upon, pursued and patronized personages, with very little in the way of individuality or initiative, and acting mostly by reaction. What eighteenth-century heroine--those prototypes of sensibility--would register intellectual

confusion, instead of being dissolved in fright, on learning of disembodied voices?... Clara Wieland, to her time, was probably one of the strongest--if not *the* strongest--female character in the history of romantic fiction.”

Sydney J. Krause & S. W. Reid
Introduction, *Wieland*
(Kent State 1977,78) xxi-xxiii

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