

Consider the source



As the narrator of Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, Clara is unreliable. The fantastic events she recounts are unbelievable and unexplained, leading readers to question the validity of her tale. For example, she introduces the theory of empiricism, which claims that all humans are born with a blank slate, completely dependent upon their senses for the knowledge they attain. However, Clara reveals the altered state of her own senses, leading readers to doubt her credibility as a narrator. Through this theory, Clara is exposed as an untrustworthy source for the novel, indicating that the events that she narrates are false. Clara introduces the theory of empiricism early in the story. She states, "the will is the tool of the understanding, which must fashion its conclusions on the notices of sense" (39). Thus, human beings are born with a blank slate, and all knowledge attained since birth is gained through their senses. However, she admits that "if the senses be depraved, it is impossible to calculate the evils that may flow from the consequent deductions of the understanding" (39). Through this theory we can infer that, if Clara's senses have been impaired through her emotional trauma, then her understanding of her surroundings have been impaired as a result. However, what if one's senses have been depraved by madness? Clara's own senses have been altered due to her emotional trauma, impairing her mental status. Therefore, her ability to understand the events occurring around her have been impaired, and she, as a narrator, is proven unreliable. Clara's state of mind has been impaired by her emotional trauma and condition, making her an unreliable witness to the events she describes. She admits that nothing "but ambiguities, abruptnesses, and dark transitions can be expected from the historian who is, at the same time, the sufferer of these disasters" (167). Clara acknowledges that in her present state of mind, she is not to be fully

trusted, and her account of the past events is prone to mistakes and uncertainty. She claims that, as one who has endured and suffered through tragic events, her ability to relate all of these tragic events may not be completely accurate. Meanwhile, she is struggling to complete her letter of the events that had transpired, but declares that she “ will persist to the end”, at least living long enough to finish telling her story (167). However, as she rushes to complete recounting her narrative, she says that, in her hurried state, the history she has recorded may be at risk of mistakes. Her tone in this passage is frantic and harried-the voice of desperation. She fears that she may be killed at any moment. This desperation exposes her present mental status, belying her credibility as a narrator, as she herself admits to the “ inaccuracy and confusion” that litter her entire narrative (167). Due to the mental trauma and emotional turmoil that has impaired Clara’s rationality, her narrative is filled with numerous faults, leading readers to doubt the legitimacy of the rest of her account. When giving the “ imperfect account” of her father’s death, she concludes it as “ the sum of the information which [he] chose to give”, implying that there is yet information concerning his death that is unspoken or unknown (20). When reflecting upon the same incident, she offers two explanations as to the cause of her father’s demise-divine interference or a medical irregularity of the heart (21). However, she leaves the conclusion open-ended, indicating that she is unsure of the cause as well. Upon her account of Carwin’s introduction, she states that her “ fancy had conjured up a very different image” from his true appearance (60). When only hearing his voice, Clara imagines a far different vision of Carwin, expecting someone “ worthy to accompany such elocution” (60). The vast difference in the image she had drawn from her expectation

and the truth suggests that the rest of her narrative may be subject to her “fancy” as well. She later comments that “ideas exist in our minds that can be accounted for by no established laws” (100), signifying that her “ideas” and “fancies” are not subject to rationality or reason, but rather to her senses and mental status. Those being impaired further establishes that her narrative is untrue. Clara’s emotional and mental state is erratic and confirms her as an untrustworthy source for the events that occurred in Wieland. Due to the trauma she has suffered as well as her emotional state when writing this piece, her understanding of reality at the time was tenuous, at best, and so her narrative is not to be fully trusted. She declares that the senses control one’s perception and understanding. Yet in her admittance of not being of sound mind and sense, Clara invalidates her ability to perceive the events around her, making her an unreliable source as narrator. Of course, if her account is not to be trusted, one can doubt the validity of the entire narrative.