

Charles Brockden  
Brown's Clara, an  
archetype of the  
classic eighteenth-  
century wo...



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Although Leslie A. Fiedler calls Charles Brockden Brown the “inventor of the American writer,” and sees the revolt of the European middle classes translating in America to “feminism and anti-intellectualism,” Brockden Brown seems to have a problem imbuing Clara, his narrator in *Wieland*, with these same qualities (145). From the one-line reference [in the Advertisement] to the book's narration by “the lady whose story it contains,” to the final explanation of that narrator's marriage to a man who placed her in an untenable (and life threatening) situation with his erroneous and unspeakable accusations, Charles Brockden Brown has created, in the character of Clara, an accurate representation of the predicament of the typical eighteenth-century American woman. Despite the fact that Clara is allowed (by her brother) to live alone in her own cottage, called Mettingen, because of her desire to “administer a fund and regulate a household” of her own, it is a superficial independence at best. She is independently wealthy, through the inheritance left by her father, who gained his riches from the toil of slaves. Her residence is a scant three-quarters of a mile from her brother's home and “the short distance allowed us to exchange visits as often as we pleased,” meaning her brother's assistance lay a short distance from her front door (Brown 20). Clara does have male company come and go in her residence, but the visitor is chiefly Pleyel, her brother's brother-in-law, and the man with whom she is secretly in love, (a woman of this era would never be the first to declare her feelings openly before receiving a similar declaration from the object of her affections!). Despite Clara's outward appearance as an intellectual woman with an interest in art, music and literature, she is nevertheless a sheltered, inexperienced woman, immured in a small corner of the world, surrounded by her brother, Theodore Wieland, <https://assignbuster.com/charles-brockden-browns-clara-an-archetype-of-the-classic-eighteenth-century-woman/>

his wife, Catherine, and Henry Pleyel. Other than the rare visit by an outsider that occasioned much excitement in the neighborhood, and an occasional visit by family acquaintances, Clara is isolated from the world-at large. This, then, makes the disaffection of Pleyel a much more earth-shattering experience when it occurs. Although readers of *Wieland* know about the deception that leads to Pleyel's antipathy toward Clara, she does not, and her reactions are that of a typically helpless eighteenth-century woman. She has no weapons to fight back with when Pleyel accuses her. "The matter—O Wretch!—thus exquisitely fashioned—on whom nature seemed to have exhausted all her graces; with charms so awful and so pure! How art thou fallen! From what height fallen! A ruin so complete—so unheard of" (Brown 95). After his hideous and shocking accusations, Pleyel leaves Clara standing in her home, confused and hurt by his perfidy. Where does she turn for comfort and assistance? She goes to her brother, Wieland, who assures her he believes in her integrity because she is his sister (Brown 101). When Wieland lets Clara know Pleyel had some sort of proof of her assignation with the enigmatic stranger, Carwin, she is distraught, because she has no way to prove her innocence. "What but my own assertion had I to throw in the balance against it? Would this be permitted to outweigh the testimony of his senses? I had no witnesses to prove my existence in another place" (Brown 102). Clara steps out of the role of the typical eighteenth-century woman when she determines to accost Pleyel in his own rooms to demand an explanation. A woman going to the room of a single man, unescorted, was a way to earn the reputation Pleyel had already attributed to her. But, alas, when she arrives and tries to reason an answer to the baffling question of what had so changed Pleyel's attitude toward her, she is at a loss for an

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explanation when Pleyel, ever the one to resist any explanation that included the supernatural, or defied his senses, cannot be swayed. He accuses her anew, packs his belongings and leaves her standing there. And like any other well-mannered eighteenth-century female—she faints. (Brown 109-110).

Clara's relationship with Pleyel is not the only one that demonstrates the weakness of her position. The desperate situation with her brother, the murderer of his own family, and the would-be murderer of Clara, is also beyond her control. She has no power to change his convictions that the voice of God instructed him to carry out his deadly misdeeds. And when Wieland finally comes for Clara, just after Carwin has given his limited explanation of what happened and his role in bringing it about, she is unable to take up the knife to defend herself against the male authority figure in her life. She is shattered when he uses her knife to accomplish the deed she had considered and rejected (Brown 111-112). Through much of the desperate time after her brother kills his family, Clara's uncle shoulders the role of authority figure, assuming Clara is too weak to withstand the truth, and urging her to move to Europe with him. Certain that her life is nearly at an end, Clara gives her consent "merely because he was entitled to my gratitude, and because my refusal gave him pain" (Brown 169). She does finally go to Europe, following the death of her brother, and her own failure to die from the oppressive burdens she carried. It is while she is in Europe that she reunites with Pleyel. But no, it is not Clara who convinces him of her integrity. It is Carwin, the mysterious perpetrator of their sorrows, who seeks out Pleyel and confesses his part in the deception. Faced with a realistic rather than supernatural explanation, Pleyel accepts the veracity of Clara's

innocence (Brown 218). This last chapter is a prime example of how women  
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of this era held no power. Clara's word, even though Pleyel claims to love her, is not good enough to convince him of her innocence. Her reputation must be restored by another man. Then, as though Pleyel had not nearly caused her death from the mental breakdown she suffered, Clara marries him. In the last chapter, even though she condemns her brother for not framing "juster notions of moral duty," she allows Carwin to go free, and Pleyel to remain uncensured for his treatment of her—typical of her new position as a married woman. She cannot publicly castigate the man she is married to (Brown 223-224). Charles Brockden Brown includes many elements of Romantic literature, the emphasis on the imagination, a predilection for the mysterious, the weird, the occult, the diseased, and even the Satanic, in the dark image of Carwin. He allows Clara, through his selected mode of storytelling, (epistolary) to examine the human personality, in search of spiritual and rational truths. Brown knew that "Romantic critics such as Schleiermacher called for readers' sympathetic identification with the author" (Leitch 12). He understood that "writing books that sold required entertaining as well as edifying their readers" (Lauter 1233). Brown was astute enough to realize that the developing changes in the country after the American Revolution, with the advent of factories to manufacture the goods formerly produced by women in the home, created an audience of educated, idle women (Lauter 1243). With the restrictions society placed on eighteenth-century women preventing them from seeking employment outside the home, owning property, or participating in the political decisions of the country, Brown realized the majority of novel readers in that era were female, and he would need a strong, identifiable female narrator. However, in trying to write a popular novel which would appeal to female readers, he

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had to put himself in a woman's shoes and try to bring out a more feminist perspective. Instead, Clara begins to sound like a woman writing like a man. In which case we have a "man, writing like a woman, writing like a man" (Aaij). Even though Brown does imbue his Gothic tale with the darker elements of evil, and manages to "connect a bygone time with the very present," and has "provided himself with a moral—the truth, namely, that the wrongdoing of one generation lives into the successive ones," as Hawthorne believed a good Romance must do (7-8), he doesn't succeed in connecting it to his supposed main character, Clara. Instead, the tortured past religious frenzy of her father and his strange death by spontaneous combustion is linked to the madness that envelops her brother Wieland. Throughout *Wieland*, readers are left asking just who is the main character? Is it the narrator, Clara, from whose viewpoint the story is told? Or is it Theodore Wieland, the title character to whom the subtitle *The Transformation* refers? Or is it Carwin, the evil persona who sets the entire sequence of evil events in motion with his strange vocal ability (Aaij)? Charles Brockden Brown's novel, *Wieland*, succeeds on the Gothic level, bursting with evil doings, mystical occurrences, tormented maidens, and the eventual triumph of love in the end. However, where he falls short of exemplifying the Romantic ideal is in the individualism, an important characteristic of Romantic fiction. Brown's characters are "passive matter in his hands. He troubles himself little if any to individualize" (Duyckinck 8). His failure to actually create a strong, identifiable female character in Clara is most likely the reason he was not a financial success. And to follow *Wieland* with *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* is just another way of putting Clara back in her eighteenth-century place. If Clara's narrative is hemmed in by a title page on which she has no

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place, and an Advertisement in which she is only a point of view, she is also enclosed on the other side, for Brown's intent is that she never have the last word; the end of the story is Carwin's, whose autobiographical account gives him the last word—if Brown's audience gives a favorable reception to Wieland (Aaij ). Perhaps Brown himself made a distinction between Romanticism, which “ designates a literary and philosophical theory that tends to see the individual at the center of all life” (Holman 416), and the romantic novel, which is “ marked by strong interest in action, with episodes often based on love, [Clara and Wieland, Clara and Pleyel, Wieland and Catherine, Carwin and Clara] adventure, [Clara's midnight rendezvous, her return to her home following the murders] and combat [Clara and Carwin's confrontations, Wieland's murders, his attempted murder of Clara, Clara and Pleyel's arguments, Clara and her uncle's disagreements]. . . a novel more concerned with action than with character” (Holman 416). If this is the case, then Charles Brockden Brown must be labeled a successful Romantic writer, albeit a less than technically skillful writer who fails to tie up loose ends [Louisa Conway]satisfactorily, and who fails at trying to speak from the heart and mind of a woman. WORKS CITED Aaij, Michael. “ Charles Brockden Brown and Wieland's Clara: A Man Writing Like a Woman Writing Like a Man.” 33rd Annual Comparative Literature Symposium “ Women in the Eighteenth Century.” Philadelphia. 27 Jan. 2000. Brown, Charles Brockden. *Wieland*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Duyckinck, Evert A. “ Charles Brockden Brown.” *Cyclopaedia of American Literature*. New York: C. Scribner, 1856. Fiedler, Leslie A. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997. Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *House of Seven Gables*. 1851. Holman, C. Hugh, and William Harmon. *A Handbook to Literature*. 6th ed. <https://assignbuster.com/charles-brockden-browns-clara-an-archetype-of-the-classic-eighteenth-century-woman/>

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