

The burden of inheritance: an analysis of generational sin in the castle of otran...



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The Castle of Otranto by Horace Walpole is hailed as the first novel of the Gothic genre. Accordingly, the novel contains many tropes found in gothic literature, such as the pious princess and the evil prince. In the novel, male characters do appear to have a more odious disposition than female characters do, but by observing the character development of Theodore and Isabella, we discover that male characters are in fact victims of the corruptive effects of inheriting power, which affect both male and female characters and reflect the repetitive nature of generational sin.

In the novel, female characters mostly display positive qualities, such as sympathy, piety, and obedience. For example, Isabella, “treated by Hippolita like a daughter,” gratefully returns her “tenderness with equal duty and affection” (17). Further, even after Manfred fatally wounds Matilda, not only does she readily forgive him, she also urges her mother to do the same: “Forgive him, dearest mother—forgive him my death—it was an error” (107). Throughout the novel, the visible ease with which female characters seem to forgive offenses, endure suffering, and obey commands establishes their superior moral character.

While mothers and daughters seem equally virtuous, fathers, on the other hand, are excluded from this innocence, and instead they seem equally corrupt. Manfred intends to divorce Hippolita and marry Isabella to further his lineage, which requires him to perjure himself about why he wants his marriage annulled, concealing his true motive, which is “founded on lust or policy” (48). Regardless of his purposes, Manfred’s actions are immoral: his marriage to Isabella is incest, because she is betrothed to Conrad, making her Manfred’s future daughter-in-law. Moreover, Isabella’s father, Frederic, at <https://assignbuster.com/the-burden-of-inheritance-an-analysis-of-generational-sin-in-the-castle-of-ottranto/>

first charged with rescuing his daughter, lusts for Matilda and quickly gives his daughter away in exchange for marrying Matilda; and he only resumes his original objective after the hermit's ghost reminds him that he is not "delivered from bondage... to pursue carnal delights" (102). Jerome, another father figure, in both biological and religious terms, initially appears as righteous when he condemns Manfred's attempt to divorce Hippolita and as loving when he pleads for Theodore, his son. However, as the story progresses, even Jerome becomes a vengeful character, driven by his hatred for Manfred, which he disguises with his position as a servant of God. His malignity extends not only towards Manfred, but also towards his innocent children, "whom heaven has doomed to destruction. A tyrant's race must be swept from the earth to the third and fourth generation" (91). Jerome poses his own selfish desires as "sacred vengeance" and fails to live out the virtue of mercy (91). Fathers, unlike mothers, are spurred by lust and vengeance; and this repetition of fathers fulfilling their own egotistical ambitions at the expense of the children of others, or even at the expense of their own children, indicates that they tend to act evilly more than female characters do.

But a son is not his father: Theodore, Jerome's son, seems an exception as the one good male character. Both physically and spiritually, Theodore resembles Alfonso, who exemplifies goodness in the novel. Tangibly, Theodore is in the physical likeness of Alfonso: "with large black eyes, a smooth white forehead, and manly curling locks like jet... resembling the picture of the good Alfonso" (38). More intangibly, Theodore is similar to Alfonso, because according to Matilda, Alfonso is a "virtuous prince" (39),

and Theodore is also “ virtuous and frank” (41). His intrinsic nobility and relation to Alfonso seem to give him an innate authority: “ His person was noble, handsome, and commanding” (52). Theodore further exhibits courage and righteousness when he facilitates Isabella’s escape from the castle, saying that he “ will die in (her) defence” (27), and offers to protect her in the caverns. Before Theodore comes into power, his virtuous qualities abound and demonstrate his resemblance to Alfonso the Good.

However, though Theodore assumes Alfonso’s virtue, he also parallels Manfred’s sin: after Theodore becomes prince, he marries Isabella, the same bride Manfred seeks for himself. Because Frederic is related to Alfonso, Theodore, directly descending from Alfonso, is related to Isabella how Manfred is related to Hippolita; and Hippolita is betrothed to another before Manfred how Isabella is betrothed to Conrad before Theodore. Under these circumstances, the marriage of Theodore and Isabella replicates the marriage of Manfred and Hippolita. What is more, Theodore is not Alfonso’s lawful grandson, because “ deeming this amour incongruous with the holy vow of arms by which [Alfonso] was bound, he was determined to conceal their nuptials until his return” (110), so Theodore’s grandmother, Victoria, is never acknowledged as Alfonso’s lawful wife, because Alfonso never returns from the Crusade. Later, “ The daughter of which Victoria was delivered, was at her maturity bestowed in marriage on [Jerome]” (110). Therefore, Theodore is related to Alfonso through an illegitimate maternal line, which violates the proper rules of succession, disputing Theodore’s claim on the principality of Otranto. Theodore’s incestuous marriage and questionable legitimacy render him almost identical to Manfred: both engage in sin to

maintain power, and Theodore repeats Manfred's course of action. By examining Theodore's character development, we see that he imitates Alfonso, who symbolizes virtue in the novel; but, corrupted by power, he also mirrors Manfred, who personifies evil.

As demonstrated, sons are also susceptible to the fathers' vices, but what about daughters? Although daughters seem to merely assume the role of victims in the novel, there is one exception among female characters: Isabella, whom Walpole presents as the innocent damsel in distress, threatened by an incestuous and non-consensual marriage. Yet, there are subtle distinctions between the characters of Isabella and Matilda, another daughter in the novel. Compared to Matilda, who "thought of nothing but assisting and comforting her afflicted parent" after her brother's death (17), Isabella is much more concerned for her own wellbeing, which "could not help finding its place in her thoughts" (18). The disparity between the two points out that while Isabella is aware of the suffering of others, she lacks Matilda's empathy, because she "was not sorry" for Conrad's death (18). Even though Hippolita mothers Isabella in every way but biological, Isabella fixates on her own welfare, unaffected by Hippolita's pain from her son's gruesome death.

Notably, Matilda is detached from the world, whereas Walpole describes Isabella as worldlier. Matilda "was born to be a saint... [she] will end in a convent at last" (39), and she is unconcerned about men, except to pray at Alfonso's tomb. On the other hand, talking of "young men" entertains Isabella (39), and "she wished... Conrad resembled" "a handsome cavalier" (39). Isabella's vanity is unseen in Matilda, who "would rather take the veil"  
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than marry “ a handsome young prince” (38), further magnifying their differences. So predictably, when Isabella falls in love with Theodore, she “ resented Theodore’s warmth, which she perceived was dictated by his sentiments for Matilda” and calls Theodore “ a peasant” (79), exposing the jealous facets of her character.

Though Matilda and Isabella soon reconcile, the fact is they have conflicting predilections, despite their similar age, upbringing, and “ friendship” (18). This is due to Isabella’s status as her father’s successor. Because the house of Vicenza carries a legitimacy which others can only access through Isabella, her position associates her with an implicit power over the male characters who wish to marry her for power. In this way, Isabella possesses the power from inheritance; unlike Matilda, who values religion over marriage and retreats from the world, thereby distancing herself from all forms of power. Since inheritance is materialistic by nature, unsurprisingly, the receivers of inheritance are also more materialistic. However, Isabella is an anomaly among female characters, who are generally denied inheritance, since fathers often view daughters as secondary to sons. Even after Conrad dies, Manfred yells at Matilda “ I do not want a daughter” (21), but for the women in the novel, their perceived inferiority to men actually frees them from the corruptive effects of power. Isabella’s example emphasizes that inheriting power is the source of corruption and that female characters are not inherently immune to corruption; rather, they enjoy the luxury of being spared from inheritance.

Conversely, male characters enjoy no such luxury, and inheritance corrupts them more than it does female characters, because ruling requires them to

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perpetrate atrocities to hold onto their power. For instance, Manfred commits bribery to contract Isabella to Conrad in marriage, because he “proposed to unite the claims of the two houses,” strengthening his house with Vicenza’s legitimacy (59). However, “this motive, on Conrad’s death, had co-operated to make him so suddenly resolve on espousing her himself” (59). Only by committing incest, may Manfred further his lineage and ensure his family’s position; and marrying Isabella, however abominable, is undoubtedly a rational method that accomplishes his original purpose and gives him a male heir; just as Theodore’s rational decision to marry Isabella stabilizes his own rule.

Since Theodore loves Matilda and his “grief was too fresh to admit the thought of another love” (110), his apparently easy replacement of Matilda horrifies the reader, but in reality, his marriage with Isabella is prompted by practicality rather than out of Theodore’s own volition. It is true that Theodore never wants to marry Isabella, and only accepts to “forever indulge in the melancholy that had taken possession of his soul” (110). Yet, inspected from a practical point of view, the marriage is a logical option that prevents conflict with Frederic’s house, making Isabella Theodore’s best choice for a wife: she already loves him and can give him the necessary heir for his lineage to remain in power. Indeed, Theodore surpasses Manfred when he achieves what Manfred has only planned: marrying Isabella.

Arguably, power seems to motivate Theodore less than it motivates Manfred, since Theodore is given power when Alfonso pronounces Theodore as his rightful heir, whereas Manfred appears to grasp onto power by force.

However, in truth, both characters’ power comes from inheritance. Manfred  
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says, “ I enjoy the principality of Otranto from my father, Don Manuel, as he received it from his father, Don Ricardo” (64). Just as Theodore is “ the true heir of Alfonso” (108), Manfred is the true heir of Ricardo and Manuel, so they both inherit power, and both willingly sin to maintain that power. Male characters must receive inheritance, which subjects them to its corruptive effects. Although Theodore seems innocent at first, he inherits such corruption, thus he is not exempt from the impure inclinations shown by other male characters in the novel.

By the nature of inheritance, this corruptive process repeats for each and every generation, until eventually, the ramifications of the fathers’ immorality fall upon their children. Manfred inherits the repercussions of Ricardo poisoning Alfonso, but it is Conrad’s death that pays for this crime: the death of an heir ends Manfred’s grasp on power the same way Alfonso’s death ends his reign. Nevertheless, instead of accepting his fate, Manfred plots to elude retribution by producing another heir with Isabella.

In Manfred’s case, generational sin is not only repetitive, but also cyclical, in that the death of Conrad, which is punishment for Alfonso’s murder, compels Manfred to perform more sinful actions of his own to escape that punishment, which culminates to Matilda’s murder and extinguishes his own bloodline definitively. Matilda’s death also literalizes her ultimate distance from the world and from power, and she remains incorrupt forever. At the end of the novel, Manfred laments that “ nor male nor female, except myself, remains of all his wretched race!” (109), and Ricardo’s and Manfred’s endeavours to gain and maintain power prove futile. Ironically, ancestors act wickedly, intending to preserve their family through holding onto power, <https://assignbuster.com/the-burden-of-inheritance-an-analysis-of-generational-sin-in-the-castle-of-otranto/>



which essentially diminishes the succeeding generations' prospects, as they suffer for their ancestors' transgressions, leading to the inevitable downfall of their entire house.

Throughout the novel, though male characters may victimize others with their power, they, in turn, are victimized by generational sin and inheriting that power. Ultimately, the fault lies with the brokenness of the entire system of inheritance, and the corruptive effects of power result in generational sin. However, by the end of the novel, the characters seem to forget the consequences of the preceding events, with Theodore echoing Manfred's behavior. Even Walpole, under the guise of translator William Marshal, comments that generational sin is an insignificant moral, but I read this as verbal irony, which contrasts the translator's opinion with the novel's grim ending, admonishing the reader to heed the moral of the story. By revealing the severity of generational sin, Walpole exhorts the reader to acquit themselves with consideration to how the consequences of their actions may affect their own future generations.

## **Works Cited**

Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto*. Oxford University Press, 1964.