



Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810)

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Novelist; Story-writer; Humanist; Journalist; Literary Critic/ Historian; Man/ Woman of Letters.
Active 1798-1809 in United States

Charles Brockden Brown was one of the first U.S.-born American authors to attempt a career as a writer of fiction. Having come of intellectual age in the 1790s, amidst the atmosphere of European revolutions and radical campaigns for social liberation, Brown's fiction uses the gothic themes of madness, murder, sexual violence, and disease epidemics as metaphors for the social illnesses that prevent the emergence of a democratic society based on rationality, enlightenment skepticism, and equal rights for women and non-whites. Growing up with a Quaker background, Brown supported the Society of Friends' call for the abolition of slavery, in a time long before this anti-racist position achieved anything close to mainstream approval in the northern United States. A student of the proto-anarchist, anti-religious, and anti-marriage writings of English political philosopher and novelists [William Godwin](#) and [Mary Wollstonecraft](#), Brown followed their practice of using fiction as a medium for conveying politically and socially progressive thought. Brown was one of the first American literary theorists to explore the ways in which narrative techniques could encourage the reader to move beyond an Aristotelian emotional reflex and achieve a critical perspective on the plot's events. Though his longer fictions are called novels today, he himself considered them to be romances. the distinction (as he saw it) being that novels were written for the purposes of entertainment alone, while a romance sought to help the reader understand how society is formed and corrupted by power interests.

Though Brown did not personally travel beyond a narrow compass of Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, and Philadelphia, he constantly sought information about European events and schools of thought. A voracious and swift reader, he would later support himself by writing reviews and summaries of fictional and discursive writing in the United States and Europe. His fictional work frequently depicts foreign characters and interests, but he did not generally think of the United States as being in any way culturally inferior to or "behind" European ideas, believing rather in an international culture and spirit of human betterment. Later in his life, Brown's position seems to have shifted slightly, as evidenced by a set of political pamphlets, but even the narrative voice's support for American empire building can be read ironically. The trajectory of his politics after 1800 is difficult to ascertain, since even as Brown was publishing these pamphlets, he also translated a work by the French radical Volney, at a time when this would have been seen as politically suspect by a newly emerging consensus in favor of entrepreneurial capitalism, evangelical faith, and American belligerence.

A close friend to the founders of the first magazine for medical professionals in the United States, Brown was fascinated by current theories on mental illness and other psychic anomalies, which frequently appear in his writing. Brown's characters demonstrate their emotional and psychic complexity in ways markedly different

from those of his contemporaries, which were often rather flat. His work foreshadows different strands of politically engaged Romantic-era writing, a gothic, sensational fiction of psychological states – rather than haunted houses – and the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of interior development.

Charles Brockden Brown was born on January 17, 1771 into a family on the lower rungs of the Philadelphia Quaker elites. It was a background conducive to nonconformist doctrinal and social thought. Brown's father, Armitt, was interned in a Virginian prisoner-of-war camp during the American War for Independence, along with various influential members of the Quaker community. Because Quakers refused to take oaths of any kind, these men were imprisoned for refusing to pledge allegiance to the new nation. While Brown's father was unsuccessful in his business ventures, Brown himself seems to have been protected from want as both the adored youngest child of the family and the special favorite of his wealthy grandmother. Brown was educated at one of the leading Quaker-run private schools, and rather than sending him to university (since Quakers did not send their children to non-Quaker-run academic institutions) Brown's parents then paid for him to undertake a legal apprenticeship under the attorney for the city of Philadelphia. Brown abandoned his apprenticeship because of his disgust at how the law was used to obscure truth and justice rather than establish it. For several years in the 1790s, Brown's movements are relatively unknown. He seems to have spent most of the time either alone or visiting friends in the northeastern states. There is no clear record of his having any employment during this time. In the early 1790s, Brown befriended Elihu Hubbard Smith, the Connecticut-born and Congregationalist-raised Yale graduate. A poet and playwright who went on to become the editor of the first anthology of American poetry, Smith encouraged Brown to write fiction and later paid for the publication of Brown's first non-fiction text, *Alcuin: A Dialogue*, a prose-sketch about a utopian "paradise of women" where unequal gender roles are abolished. During this time, Brown became a devoted reader of the English radicals William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Thomas Paine, as well as of the political novels of Robert Bage. In the mid-1790s, Brown lived in New York, where he associated with painter/playwright William Dunlap and the various other merchants and writers who made up a group of other bourgeois dissident young men who were busy setting up social welfare projects that were not under the control of the traditional centers of higher education or religious groups. During a time when the different Christian denominations still led remarkably separate social lives, Brown's willingness to move to New York and live in a non-Quaker environment represents an early instance in America of the literary *milieu* as a place that sets personal or ethnic identities aside.

In the late 1790s, Brown began what is one of the more prolific episodes in the history of American writing. Between 1798 and 1801, Brown wrote seven complete novels, at least two incomplete ones, several short stories, and edited a literary magazine. His first piece of work, *Alcuin: A Dialogue* (1798) was the first work of feminist fiction by an American male. Heavily influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist critiques, *Alcuin* criticizes the limited roles that women are allowed to play in public politics and their restrictions within marriage. The complete text ends with a rejection of marriage in favor of informal relationships between the sexes, but while the first half was published in 1798, the second half, with this conclusion, was considered too radical and was not published until after Brown's death.

Brown's next work, *Wieland, or the Transformation* (1798) narrates the story of a religious fanatic who murders his wife and children in the belief that the killings have been divinely ordained. It transpires that his fantasy may have been caused by the intervention of a homeless ventriloquist.

Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793 (1799) depicts a poor farm lad who travels to Philadelphia, where he is the victim of a series of frauds and confidence schemes amidst the onset of the yellow fever plague.

Edgar Huntly, or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker (1799) involves the story of two sleepwalkers, one of whom is accused of murder. The other seeks to find the first, who has run away, in order to prevent him from committing suicide, but both get caught up in a border fight between the Delaware Indians and the frontier

settlers.

Ormond, or the Secret Witness (1799) concerns the trials of a woman trying to support her blind, impoverished father during the yellow fever plague. Amidst this health crisis, she encounters a cross-dressing female French émigré and a radical who belongs to an international secret society dedicated to the overthrow of current governments.

When the yellow fever came to New York in 1798, Brown did not leave the city, believing that a vegetarian diet and rest would preserve him from the disease. After Dr. Elihu Hubbard Smith, his roommate at the time, died from the fever, Brown left New York and returned to live in Philadelphia. There he wrote two more novels, *Clara Howard* (1801) and *Jane Talbot* (1801), which have never been granted the same critical interest as his others, since these tales seem to be more conventional narratives of sentimental love. After 1801, Brown never wrote another novel. His literary activity was mainly taken up by editing two more magazines, writing political pamphlets, translating a geographical work by Volney, writing his own geography primer (of which no copy exists) and a long historical romance that remains in fragments. He also composed five volumes of commentary on current politics and culture, *The American Register, or General Repository of History, Politics, and Science*, between 1807 and 1809. In February 1810, he died of tuberculosis.

Shortly after his death, his family contracted Paul Allen to write a biography with the hopes of stirring interest in the re-publication of Brown's novels, but Allen failed to complete the biography, the manuscript of which was then given to William Dunlap, Brown's close friend. Dunlap added previously unpublished material, personal letters from Brown, and scrambled the order of Allen's text in order to present a version of Brown as less radical and more suitable to the conservative tastes of the 1810s. While Brown's *Wieland* and *Ormond* were the first American novels to be translated into French, scholars have not yet been able to determine their effect on French letters. Brown's writings failed to excite a popular readership, but had a greater influence among Anglophone writers. In England, Brown's novels were often passed among the circles of Romantic-era writers and poets. In the 1810s, Shelley and his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, read all of Brown's novels that they could acquire. Shortly thereafter William Godwin dedicated the *Wieland*-inspired novel *Mandeville* (1817) to Brown, [Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley](#) wrote *Frankenstein* (1818), which may have been inspired by several of Brown's characters, and [Hazlitt](#) insisted that [Keats](#) read Brown. [Charles Dickens](#) and [Wilkie Collins](#) may have also been influenced by Brown, given the similarities of the plot and character of [Bleak House](#) (1852) to *Wieland* and of *The Woman in White* (1860) to *Ormond*. In America, Margaret Fuller bemoaned the lack of recognition given to Brown, and [Hawthorne](#) canonized him in the short story "The Hall of Fantasy". George Lippard dedicated *The Monks of Monk Hall* to Brown, indicating a lineage of gothic writing, and Brown was most likely a literary influence on Edgar Allan Poe.

In the earlier half of the twentieth century, American Studies scholars remembered Brown, but considered him a lesser, "failed" writer who merely prefigures the rise of later authors like [Emerson](#), [Melville](#), [Hawthorne](#), and [Whitman](#). Despite this verdict, he was often incorrectly called the "father of the American Novel", and nearly always warranted a mention in American literary histories. In the post-war period, interest in Brown declined as critics focused on authors who seemed to embody a mythic "American-ness". Because Brown's fictions were difficult to place within nationalist criticism and so perverse in their topics, his works were often marginalized by critics eager to construct a tradition of "great authors". However, Brown began to be recovered in the last quarter of the twentieth century by critics who were now fascinated by the darker themes in his writing. During this period, most criticism involved psychoanalytic readings of his work and critics often assumed that the words of his characters were unvarnished representations of his own opinions.

From the 1980s onwards, Brown's reputation has undergone a considerable transformation. As part of an increased scholarly attention to the intellectual environment of the late eighteenth century, Brown's work has been more precisely located in his contemporary cultural context. He is now seen as one of the more significant

American writers before the 1840s, and his writing is seen as a veritable encyclopedia of the concerns and interests of the metropolitan middle-class in the 1790s, in particular with gender and sexuality. Brown is also increasingly seen as more than a fiction writer. In his journalism, he comments on literary theory, questions of writing history, and social behavior, and his later compendia of American domestic politics and foreign affairs are increasingly studied as an archive of contemporary attitudes. Critical interest in Brown continues to grow, and his work is now considered to be key to the understanding of the early American Republic as well as the initial phase of politically motivated American writing.

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