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## American Gothicism in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* or Transformation and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*

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### Abstract

This paper looks into the ways two Nineteen century American Writers, Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne tried to appropriate the European gothic traditions and come up with new elements of horror specific to the American experience. The study surveys the characteristics of transatlantic gothic, and then, tries to demarcate American gothic traditions in terms of settings, characters, and style. [For demonstration, the paper attempts to show how both Charles Brockden Brown in *Wieland* or Transformation and Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The House of the Seven Gables* tried to come up with gothic traditions peculiar to the American experience. The study shows how the two novelists created a sense of horror, mystery, and uncertainty in a way that departs from the European gothic traditions. The two American writers were keen on developing gothic traditions that fit within the specificity of the American experience and the nationalistic aspirations of maintain literary independence parallel to the political independence in the last quarter of the Eighteen Century.

### Keywords:

Gothic Literature, American gothic traditions, Charles Broken Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne, New Sources of Horror.

## النقد الأمريكي القوطي في رواية تشارلز بروكدن براون "ويلاند" أو "التحول" ورواية ناثانيال هوثورن المنزل ذو الجملونات السبع

تناول البحث بالدارسة النقدية الأسلوب الذي اتبعه الكتابان الأمريكيان تشارلز بروكدن براون وناثانيال هوثورن من أجل إيجاد تراث قوطي ذا صبغة أمريكية في القرن التاسع عشر. ومن أجل ذلك قامت الدراسة بعرض مفصل عن طبيعة ومكونات الأدب القوطي، ومن ثم تحديد خصائص الأدب الأمريكي القوطي. وبعد ذلك تم تطبيق هذه الخصائص على رواية ويلاند أو التحول للكاتب الأمريكي تشارلز بروكدن براون، والمنزل ذو الجملونات السبع للكاتب الأمريكي ناثانيال هوثورن. وُجد أن هذان الكاتبان قد عمدا على إيجاد أدب قوطي أمريكي يتلاءم مع رغبة الكاتب الأمريكي في إيجاد تراث قوطي له علاقة بخصوصية الهوية والثقافة الأمريكية.

ركز البحث على ثلاث عناصر رئيسية تميز الكاتب الأمريكي عن نظائره الأوربيين في كتابة الأدب القوطي وهي المكان والشخصيات واللغة وذلك من أجل خلق جو من الرعب والخوف والغموض. وقد خلص البحث إلى أن هذان الكتابان كانا روادا في إيجاد أدب قوطي يتناسب مع الثقافة والتراث الأمريكيين.

### كلمات مفتاحية:

الأدب القوطي، التقاليد الأمريكية القوطية، تشارلز بروكدن براون، ناثانيال هوثورن، مصادر جديدة للرعب.

## Introduction:

The antebellum America was a period of social and economic turmoil. The newly burgeoning nation slouched its way towards achieving nationhood parallel to political independence from Britain. Accelerating urbanization brought about many changes in the social texture. Poverty deepened class division; crime increased; drug addiction prevailed, and women were often abused. The problem of slavery divided the nation. In the absence of any social welfare scheme, the writers of that period, both genteel and subversive were trying to address those problems in what is recognized as moral reform literature. This moral reform literature, however, was according to Reynolds (2011) "paradoxically enough immoral and ambiguous" (55). This type of literature preached morality through subversive literary forms full of mystery and crime.

The writers of this type of literature tried to unmask the hideous dark aspect of the human psyche in order to have a remedial outlet for the suffocating latent evil forces. Therefore, Gothicism, originally European traditions, found its way to American literature, yet it assumed American signature. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to shed light on the way whereby some American writers appropriated certain gothic elements to make them fit within the American context. My assumption is that the American writers of the antebellum period did not blindly transmit the European traditions, but they tried to create American gothic tradition relevant to the specificity of the American experience and environment. Thus, the main focus of this paper is to trace the development of three gothic elements: the setting, the style and characters in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* or *the Transformation*, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables*. To set up the scene for such discussion, it is indispensable if not imperative to give a general idea about transatlantic gothic traditions and how the above mentioned American writers tried to appropriate those traditions and make them peculiar to the American experience.

Gothicism has to do with elements of horror in a given fiction. Writers of gothic fiction always employed uncanny elements which create a sense of horror and mystery. Those writers used elements such haunted castles, ghosts, witchcrafts and spooky characters in order create gothic atmosphere. Originally, the word gothic referred to a certain type of medieval architecture; a style of architecture which is usually archaic, ugly, and barbarous. It was often used to describe the shabby and undisciplined barbarous features of medieval architecture and old buildings such as monasteries, churches that had cryptic vaults and mysterious subterranean passages. According to Varma (1966), the term gothic is "usually associated with frost-cramped strength, the shaggy covering and dusky plumage of the northern tribes, and the gothic idea wrought in gloomy castles and somber cathedrals appeared dark and barbarous to the renaissance mind". (p. 10)

At the end of the dark ages, the term gothic shrank into a term of contempt and sneering. However, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, gothic fiction started to flourish in Europe. In England, the *Castle of Otranto* (1764) was written by Horace Walpole; it was the first novel which started the gothic traditions in the eighteenth century. Writers such as Sir Walter Scott, Ann Radcliffe and Mathew Lewis were famous writers of horror fiction; they wrote gothic fiction and became the most prominent writers of such a genre.

Gothic fiction can always be classified as a type of fiction containing the following elements: first, the setting which is usually portrayed as remote castles, gloomy houses, haunted palaces, and ruins. Second, the characters typical to gothic fiction are persecuted heroines, tyrannical parents, and vampire like apparitions, vicious monks, or frightening ghosts. Third, the plot of gothic fiction is about dreams, mysterious portents, animated portraits, magic mirrors and statues. Fourth, gothic fiction has a narrative technique that draws on horrifying descriptions, broken manuscripts and diaries. Fifth, the language is often of seduction, betrayal and captivity. (Marshall 2013). In fact, gothic fiction has didactic and

moralistic purposes besides appealing to senses and romantic imagination. Speaking of the theories of Gothicism, Bloom (2012) asserts:

Theories of gothic and horror literature tend to be of two philosophical types. The first sees such fiction as disturbing but conservative restoring things to the status quo and dedicated to the ultimate normalcy. The second sees fiction in the opposite light as disturbing in order to change ... conservative but subversive. (p.13)

Gothic fiction is meant to cause social disturbance in order to put to question certain social and scientific values as is the case in Horace Walpole's novels. It also aims at raising issues such as class relation, race, gender, and the relationship between the natural and the supernatural. Usually, at the end of this type of fiction, order is restored and things return to a normal state. The focus in such fiction is always on the prosperity of the society as a whole, not on separate individuals. Generally, gothic literature reflects an atmosphere of ambiguity, anxiety, and skepticism. As Howells (2014) posits "Gothic is a literature of full curiosity, doubt and anxiety, and in time we can see working through it the same subversive forces that produced the French Revolution" (p.6).

Given the fact that Gothic traditions are originally European, it would be unfair to subsume American gothic traditions in a broad context of Gothicism. It is essential to demarcate American gothic traditions in the light of their newly revolutionary spirit of the Nineteen century America. Martin and Savoy (1998) stress the need for particularizing American Gothic Traditions:

In the American Scene, it may be that broad generalization about the gothic- overshadowed as they are by the genealogical tracing of British and continental influences- have reached a limit of conceptual or explanatory usefulness and further particularization is urgently required." (p.5)

It should be observed that Americans do not have traditions of ghosts and witchcrafts, but they have the frontier experience with all its elements of fascination, horror and mystery. The Americans have the massive and mystic wilderness and the horror resulting in the encounter of the other. In *Redefining the American Gothic*, Gross (1989) has a point when he defined the American gothic as an attempt to grasp its "common thread" as "the singularity and the monstrosity of the other: what the dominant culture cannot incorporate" (p.90). Indeed American gothic distinguished itself by its unique seriousness rather than the too much metaphysical reality which was a trait of transatlantic gothic traditions. Talking of American Gothic novels, Waples (2015) affirms that "the seriousness of the American novel, in Fiedler's estimation, hinges on its supposed mobilization of American materials, eschewing the reiteration of the British models and relocating the genre from a supernatural realm to a more immediate sociopolitical context" (p.15)

Giving such a general account of Gothicism, it time to turn to the above-mentioned American novelists and look into how they drew on such traditions in a way relevant to the American context and also to show how some of them try to create gothic traditions peculiar to the American culture. The elements under question in this paper are only the setting, the characters, and style.

In *the Gothic Flame*, Varma( 1966) asserts that Brown is widely acknowledged to be a writer of gothic fiction:

Brown is the first gothic novelist of America penned stories of sleepwalkers and ventriloquists and shows an unmistakable resemblance to Mrs. Radcliff and her technique. Brown has a deep interest in morbid psychology and his novels illustrate the workings of the human brain under emotional stress. Psychological interest produces a hypnotic effect, and creates in the readers a mood of awestruck horror. (p. 203)

In the light of the above assertion, one entertains no doubt that Brown (1997) is a pioneer American writer of gothic fiction. Regardless of the unmistakable resemblance to Mrs. Radcliff, Brown thinks that the European model of Gothicism is not valid for the American culture, which has the individual as the main focus rather than the whole society.

At this juncture, it is worth looking at his novel, *Wieland or the Transformation*, from a gothic perspective to find out how he tries to appropriate some of the European traditions and make them acquire American nature.

Pertaining the setting, it is no longer a haunted castle of aristocrats as is the case in the European traditions, but it is a house built within the American landscape by a middle-class person, who was poor in Europe and became rich in America. The summerhouse, the temple, is not fashioned in accordance with any European model of gothic architecture, but it is purely modeled according to the plan of its American owner. The heroine of the novel, Clara Wieland says: "my father furnished the dimensions and outlines, but allowed the artist whom he employed to complete the structure on his own plan." (p.17). This temple is the most enigmatic place in the novel since it witnessed the death of Wieland, the father, and throughout the incidents of the narrative, it becomes the source of horror and the strange voices of the ventriloquist. These voices make lunatics of most of the characters. The habitation of Clara is typically an American setting and is made so by its simplicity and privacy. Clara describes it as

A wooden edifice consisting of two stories. In each story were two rooms separated by an entry or middle passage....There was no window in the lower and in the upper a small aperture which communicated light and air but scarcely admit the body. (p.59)

Given this, it seems that this house is not like the usual settings of European gothic fiction. The house does not have underground passages or cryptic design; it is merely a dwelling for a woman who decides to live by herself. This house is supposed to provide her with a sense of security and allow her to privacy. Yet, as we see in the novel, the house becomes a source of horror when Carwin intrudes it and transforms the house into a real gothic setting. Most of the suffocating experiences, the terrible dreams and scenes of somnambulism take place in this house, a place which has lost its privacy.

As for the characters, they are purely American characters that are torn by a great deal of skepticism, a feature that is exclusive to the Americans. They are very relentless in their pursuit of the truth and in doing so they acquire the role of the detective, a feature that is also exclusive to American Gothicism. Clara's brother, Theodore Wieland, who is uncertain of his faith, wants to make sure of his faith, but unfortunately, he is easily intrigued by the voices and is made to murder of his wife and children in the pursuit of illusive faith. His extremist religious dogma has made him so vulnerable that he was easily swayed by the voice of Carwin taking it for the voice of God. He is the victim of his sensational feelings; this is seen clearly when he recounts his vision to his sister

I opened my eyes and found all about me luminous and glowing. It was the element of Heaven that flowed around. Nothing but a fiery stream was at first visible, but anon, a shrill voice from behind called upon me to attend. (p.160).

Clara, the heroine, describes a situation where she is gulled by her senses; whatever she sees or hears leads her to nowhere. Like most of the Americans in the nineteenth century, Clara depends on her sensational experience, and, as a result; she is left helpless and desperate. She continues her pursuit to verify all the strange incidents, but unfortunately her senses lead her nowhere. It is only towards the end of the narrative that she realizes how she has been deceived by her senses, "I cannot but congratulate myself on the change though perhaps it merely argues a fickleness of temper and a defect of sensibility" (p. 227).

Playel is another character, who believes in the senses, and similarly, he is easily taken in by the voices of Carwin. In the course of events, he leaves Clara to suffer of her loneliness. However, Carwin, the villainous ventriloquist, is a European mode where a spirit used haunt buildings and trees and give horrifying voices to fill a certain vista with horror. Yet, it should be noted that Brown's ability to manipulate a human into a ghost figure is a precedent in gothic fiction; Brown is shifting the source of horror from the external to the internal and from community to an individual. The characters are American individualists who are transformed into elements of horror by their internal dark side not by the external forces as is the case in European fiction.

As far as style is concerned, it seems that Brown is unable to dispose of the formal style of the European gothic fiction. He was not totally able to do away with European gothic style of creating mystery and horror. Like European writers, Brown used stock romantic scenes; yet he imbued them with American touches. Reynolds (2011) describes Brown's style as follows: "Nevertheless Brown's rather formal Latinate prose suggests that his Gothicism was under the influence of Godwin and other British novelists" (p199). However, it should be acknowledged that Brown's style makes us really feel the horror brought about by nervous tension. Mattiessen admits this ability by saying:

Brown's turbulence was the product of passionate imagination that changed the mechanical horror into something really felt ... this ability to take the stock trapping of romanticism and endow them with the genuine horror of tortured Nerves has been peculiarly American combination, from Philip Freneau's ... and William Faulkner. (P. 201/2)

This focus on the internal of the character, particularly the neurotic aspect is a real departure from the European traditions where the focus was on the external forces of evil rather than the internal. We, as readers, feel that we are immured inside Clara, the heroine. Our senses are always on alert in the same way Clara's nerves and senses are in a state of vigilance. This is effected through the language and the sensual images manipulated by Brown. The fact that much of the horror comes through the senses is an American aspect of Gothicism. This is a point of departure from the European gothic traditions. Ringe (1982) acknowledges that Brown made an important shift from one sense to another. Ringe asserts: "Brown lays heavy stress on the sense of hearing rather than of sight. This was an important shift in emphasis from the typical gothic Romance, where most apparitions are visual" (p.48). Brown has used this new sensation strategy as stated by Luciano (2004), "to produce unease and fear in its readers" (p.318). Indeed the readers' feeling of unease and fear is produced by the voice Clara hears when *Wieland* records a horrible experience he goes through:



I opened my eyes and found all about me luminous and glowing. It was the element of heaven that flowed around. Nothing but a fiery stream was at first visible; but anon, a shrill voice from behind called upon me to attend. (p.26)

Even though some critics describe Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* as the most realistic of his tales; it is really another text which has some elements of Gothicism, mainly the setting, the characters, and the style. There is no argument about the house as being the source of mystery, fear and horror. This house, which is the setting of the novel, seems to be a perfect American gothic element. The bleak house is always haunted by the curse and the ghost of Matthew Maules who invoked God while dying by praying, "God will give him blood to drink" (p.9)

It is clear from that description above that the source of horror is caused by the idea of the crushed other, Maules who is a Native American descendant and the house itself. The outside and the inside of the house are reminiscent of the haunted castles and palaces of the aristocracy in the European gothic fiction. However, much of the horror in the house is brought about by its surrounding. Much of the dusky twilight of the house is caused by its association with the gigantic elm tree, and other shrubs. This gigantic elm tree with its frightening shade may be considered as a representative element of the American wilderness, which is an alternative source of horror specific to American gothic traditions. Furthermore, this house is not only enigmatic because of the incurred curse or the visitation of the dead spirits, but also by its inhabitants. Hepziba and Pyncheon are human beings, but actually they function as ghosts; they are becoming ghost-like by separating themselves from their surroundings. Therefore, one can argue that the setting of *The House of the Seven Gables* is not a replica of transatlantic gothic settings, but it is made uniquely American by its history and surrounding. The house has also become a source of horror because of the people's outlook. In the eyes of people, the House of the Seven Gables is a sign of shame. When Hepziba opens the shop, people are reluctant to go and buy; the narrator makes this clear when he comments:

Customers came in, as the afternoon advanced, but rather slowly; in some cases, too, it must be owned, with little satisfaction either to themselves or Miss Hepziba; nor on the whole, with aggregate of very rich emolument to the till (p.47).

This combination between the internal and the external is a new variation in gothic traditions. The internal of the house, represented by its inhabitants and the external represented by the perception of the people are making the house a special gothic American setting. The external of the house fills the readers with much fear and mystery. The third person narrator describes the house of the seven gables in a very scary manner:

It would be an omission, trifling, indeed, but unpardonable, were we to forget the green moss that had long since gathered over the projections of the window, and on the slopes of the roof; nor must we fail to direct the reader's eye to a crop, not of weeds, but flower-shrubs, which were growing aloft in the air not a great way from the chimney, in the nook between two of the gables. (p26)

As far as the characters are concerned, *the House of the Seven Gables* has a wide spectrum of characters essential to gothic fiction. Hawthorne is not interested in modeling his characters according to European criteria of Gothicism. Hepziba and Clifton, who are semi-lunatic, are ghosts not by external

forces, but rather by their dark inside when they refuse to get rid of their illusive past. The fact that they strongly cling themselves to the cursed past has made them forlorn. They are overcome by a sense of morbid melancholy because they live in the past. In fact, this is a real shift from the object, the outside represented by supernatural elements to the subject, which is the internal, or the psyche of the characters. This psychological dimension is of great significance. The concentration on the individual as a source of horror because the evil sources dormant in the psyche must be admitted as American development of gothic traditions. The villain, Judge Pyncheon is also an example of an individual, who is transformed into a diabolic person by his evil purposes and intentions; he is blinded by amassing money regardless of any morality. Hawthorne comments on the transformation of Judge Pyncheon by saying: "Then the Judge's face had lost the ruddy English hue that showed its warmth through all the duskiness of the Colonel's weather beaten cheeks, and had taken a shallow shade, the established complexion of his countrymen" (p.105).

Another type of character that arouses horror and fear by his mesmerism is Holgrave, the daguerreotypist. In fact, he is introduced in the narrative as the supernatural counterpart of the witches in European gothic fiction. This might be a noticeable American gothic feature. The Americans do not have a culture of witchcraft and fairy tales; they instead have the Native Americans and the African Americans. American gothic writers often introduce these human elements as a source of horror. Phoebe is portrayed as a fairy creature; she is like Pearl in the *Scarlet Letter*, an elf with chaotic nature that requires discipline by experience. All these characters are new variation of gothic traditions. The fact that these characters function as supernatural natural creatures is a radical shift from European gothic tradition to a neo American Gothicism.

The style in *The House of the Seven Gables* can be considered as distinctive American gothic feature; it is a style which is different from that of traditional gothic writers. Hawthorne does not create horror scenes by direct reference to terror. The horror in Hawthorne's fiction is usually created by the complexity and the ambiguity of the narrative. Comparing between Hawthorne and English gothic writers, Haggerty (1989) argues:

Converting the binary oppositions between objective and subjective states, so paramount in the English Gothic novel, into a fictional construct that refuses to give value to such distinction... Hawthorne uses form itself as a gothic element in his tales. (p. 108)

Hawthorne's style is distinguished for its uncanny descriptions which is most of the time engulfed with much ambiguity. Accordingly, we as readers are trapped in the narrative by our inability to have a fixed interpretation for different incidents and sources of ambiguities. For instance, we do not know how old Pyncheon died; who killed him and how he was killed. The death of Alice Pyncheon involves some mystery. We do not know for certain whether she died because of the effect of mesmerism or because of the horror she saw when she was hypnotized. The House of the Seven Gables itself is the most enigmatic signs in the narrative. It can be considered as an allegory for either the American reality or the American dream. The closure of the narrative does not guide us to any single hint about the life of Hepziba and her brother Clifton outside the old house. Similarly, we are invited to speculate about the future relationship between Phoebe and Holgrave. By this technique of suppressing the narrative closure, the reader is no longer an outsider as in the case of English Gothicism but rather an involved gothic character. Another stylistic feature, which also has to do with the sense of ambiguity, is the interplay between images of light and darkness. The darkness of the House of the Seven Gables and the dark psyche of its inhabitants are always contrasted with the light of the sunshine and the light spirit of Phoebe. This interplay is shown

when the narrator describes Phoebe in her bedroom in the dark house; "the morning light, however, soon stole into the aperture at foot of the bed betwixt these faded curtains" (p.183) the novel is full of such an interplay between images of shade and light. It is a new technique manipulated by Hawthorne to intensify the ambiguity of his narrative thus making the style a new gothic element.

In conclusion, one can easily affirm that Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne are genuine American writers who refuse to transform the European gothic traditions, but rather sought to create traditions that are peculiar to the American culture. They are highly interested in showing how Americans are different. Both writers realized the national need for literary independence; therefore, they tried to come up with distinctive gothic traditions that fit in with the culture of a nation that already got its political independence almost a century ago. Those writers were aware that American culture was not deeply rooted in terms its ghost and witchcraft heritage, and haunted castles and palaces; hence, they found alternative sources of horror represented by unique settings, style, and choice of characters. As the focus of this paper was limited to demarcating the boundaries between what is American and what is non-American in terms of elements of Gothicism, it was difficult to convey the discussion beyond this demarcation. Therefore, this discussion might be much more illuminating if the gothic features are accounted for in terms of the encoded meaning and additional overtones.

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