

5-1-2005

Beatrice Cenci: Hawthorne, Melville and Her Atlantic-Rim Contexts

Diane Hoeveler

Marquette University, diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu

érudit

Promouvoir et diffuser la **recherche** et la **création**

[Français](#)[English](#)[Español](#)

[Vos notices](#)[RSS](#)

[Revue](#)s

[Livres](#)
[et actes](#)

[Thèses](#)

[Documents](#)
[et données](#)

>

[Recherche détaillée](#)

[À propos de cette revue](#)[Numéros disponibles](#)[Index des auteurs](#)[Numéros thématiques](#)[Recherche dans cette revue](#)

Romanticism on the Net

Année

Volume

Numéro

Page

≥

[Sommaire du numéro](#)

[Texte intégral](#)[Résumé](#)[Bibliographie](#)

Romanticism on the Net

Numéro 38-39, mai 2005

Transatlantic Romanticism

Sous la direction de Joel Pace, Lance Newman et Chris Koenig-Woodyard

Direction : Michael Eberle-Sinatra (directeur)

Éditeur : Université de Montréal

ISSN : 1467-1255 (numérique)

DOI : 10.7202/011670ar



[< Précédent](#) [Suivant >](#)

Article

Beatrice Cenci in Hawthorne, Melville and her Atlantic-Rim Contexts

Diane Long Hoeveler

Marquette University

Abstract

The figure of Beatrice Cenci was, according to Melville, the embodiment of those "two most horrible crimes possible to civilized humanity--incest and parricide." Nevertheless, she enjoyed a curious popularity as a subject in late eighteenth and nineteenth-century Atlantic-rim literary culture. Indeed, the renewed fascination with her story indicates several important psychological as well as social themes that authors as diverse as Walpole, Shelley, Swinburne, Hawthorne, Melville, Dickens, and Wharton all attempted to delineate. Although critics have analyzed the Cenci figure in *Pierre* and *The Marble Faun* before, comparing the use of this motif in relation to the earlier British works allows us a different perspective on an obvious though neglected theme in the two novels. In addition, the focus on the Cenci narrative in Atlantic-rim culture allows us to examine how a representation crosses cultures, nationalities, and ideologies in order to articulate common concerns and anxieties.

In British gothic works the representation of Beatrice speaks to the horrific and corrupt power of the mother and father, both as brutal governmental force, an insane ruler, and a despotic and sadistic mater or pater familias, the head of the corrupted and polluted family. Further, the spectre of incest (sibling and parental) that stalks British gothic and romantic texts speaks to an ideologically conflicted posture. In works by Byron and Shelley, sibling incest is sometimes idealized (i.e., *Manfred* or *Laon and Cythna*), while in Shelley's *The Cenci* incestuous rape by the father of his daughter (with broad suggestions of sodomy as well) is the most pernicious and evil act that can be committed. Clearly, the British romantics were of a divided mind about incest as a literary trope for the reunion of self and other.

By the time the Cenci legend transmutes and reappears in America, however, Melville and Hawthorne are placing even heavier weight on the representation and its associations. Both of their works ask the questions: What is the nature of human history? What power does the past hold over the present and the future? Can Americans overthrow their European heritage and establish a new Garden in America, or is that promise blasted and futile? Both *Pierre* and *The Marble Faun*, although different from each other in their treatments of human nature and society, are particularly American works in criticizing the notion that a new order can replace the corrupt and rejected world of the fathers. Whereas Shelley's play ultimately condemns Beatrice for revenge on her father, neither Melville nor Hawthorne's works do, although both see her as an omen predicting the failure of America to achieve its original promise.

even I

Since Beatrice unveiled me to myself,

And made me shrink from what I cannot shun,

Show a poor figure to my own esteem,

To which I grow half reconciled.

Orsino in Shelley's *The Cenci* (II, ii)

The landsman who has neither read Walpole's *Mysterious Mother*, nor Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus*, nor the Roman story of Count Cenci, dramatized by Shelley, let that landsman guardedly remain in his ignorance of even worse horrors than these.

Melville, *White-Jacket* (Ch. lxxxix)

I.

1

The figure of Beatrice Cenci was, according to Melville, the embodiment of those "two most horrible crimes possible to civilized humanity—incest and parricide"(351).[1] Nevertheless, she enjoyed a curious popularity as a subject in late eighteenth and nineteenth-century Atlantic-rim literary culture. Indeed, the renewed fascination with her story indicates several important psychological as well as social themes that authors as diverse as Walpole, Shelley, Swinburne, Hawthorne, Melville, Dickens, and Wharton all attempted to delineate. Although critics have analyzed the Cenci figure in *Pierre* and *The Marble Faun* before,[2] comparing the use of this motif in relation to the earlier British works allows us a different perspective on an obvious though neglected theme in the two novels. In addition, the focus on the Cenci narrative in Atlantic-rim culture allows us to examine how a representation crosses cultures, nationalities, and ideologies in order to articulate common concerns and anxieties.

2

In British gothic works the representation of Beatrice speaks to the horrific and corrupt power of the mother and father, both as brutal governmental force, an insane ruler, and a despotic and sadistic mater or pater familias, the head of the corrupted and polluted family. Further, the spectre of incest (sibling and parental) that stalks British gothic and romantic texts speaks to an ideologically conflicted posture. In Walpole's *The Mysterious Mother* the incest is odd to say the least. In this work, a mother, just widowed that very day, purposely tricks her son into her bed, then reveals the awful truth when that son, sixteen years later, attempts to marry the product of their incestuous union, his mother's young "ward" and his own daughter as well as sister. There is also an evil monk in *The Mysterious Mother* who knows the mother's secret sin and uses it to gain power over her, much as the mysterious model in Hawthorne's *Marble Faun* haunts the life of Miriam. In works by Byron and Shelley, however, sibling incest is sometimes idealized (i.e., *Manfred* or *Laon and Cythna*), while in Shelley's *The Cenci* incestuous rape by the father of his daughter (with broad suggestions of sodomy as well) is the most pernicious and evil act that can be committed. Clearly, the British romantics were of a divided mind about incest as a literary trope for the reunion of self and other.

3

By the time the Cenci legend transmutes and reappears in America, however, Melville and Hawthorne are placing even heavier weight on the representation and its associations. Both of their works ask the questions: What is the nature of human history? What power does the past hold over the present and the future? Can Americans overthrow their European heritage and establish a new Garden in America, or is that promise blasted and futile? Both *Pierre* and *The Marble Faun*, although different from each other in their treatments of human nature and society, are particularly American works in criticizing the notion that a new order can replace the corrupt and rejected world of the fathers. Whereas Shelley's play ultimately condemns Beatrice for revenge on her father, neither Melville nor Hawthorne's works do, although both see her as an omen predicting the failure of America to achieve its original promise.

II.

4

The initial readers of Melville's *Pierre* were puzzled and outraged by the novel, for readers in 1851 were not ready for the book's attacks on conventionally accepted human relationships. *Pierre* was then and is even by today's standards a stinging assault on the ideals of family, marriage with the blonde virgin, and fraternal friendship. Its method of attacking these institutions is the motif of incest, which in itself and in the person of Beatrice Cenci puts the lie to the comfortable belief in a society presided over by wise and loving fathers or chaste and loving mothers.

5

Melville begins this assault by depicting Pierre's peculiar attitudes toward Lucy and his mother in the first two scenes of the book. The writing is deliberately stilted and heavy-handed, not because Melville had lost his ability to write realistic dialogue, but because he wanted to make it clear that, although in harmony with society at this point in the book, Pierre is the victim of psychological and sexual disorders that the nineteenth century considered virtues--virgin and Queen Mother worship. Both of these forms of woman-worship, as Melville reveals in the first two scenes, are intrinsically the same phenomenon, that is, narcissism. According to recent psychological theorists, narcissism is a form of incest between two elements of the self--the actual and the ideal personalities.[3] In fact, Pierre, Mrs. Glendenning, Lucy, and Isabel are all victims of narcissism, for they love projections of themselves as magnified and embodied in the eyes of the beloved. Appropriately, then, the novel begins with Lucy and Pierre "ardently eying each other, beholding mutual reflections of a boundless admiration and love" (4). Further, Mrs. Glendenning reveals her narcissism when the narrator tells us that she is extremely proud of Pierre because she "saw her own graces strangely translated into the opposite sex" (5). Allusions to mirrors and pools function throughout the first part of the novel to make the Narcissus associations even more explicit. At one point the narrator informs us that literature, like life, is a narcissistic artifice: "all the great books in the world are but the mutilated shadowings-forth of invisible and eternally unembodied images in the soul; so that they are but the mirrors, distortedly reflecting

to us our own things" (284).

6

In his love for Lucy, Pierre is also a victim of that nineteenth-century "cult of true womanhood" that believed in the sanctity of woman, who, as virgin, was untouchable and forever above the reaches of common mortality. His early attitude toward Lucy is a worship of her spotless white and blue purity. At the thought of his impending marriage to "this heavenly fleece" he shudders: "It can not be; I am of heavy earth, and she of airy light. By heaven, but marriage is an impious thing" (58). Melville, however, weaves a number of ambiguities into a text that to a large degree conforms, albeit perversely, to romantic and sentimental conventions; [4] Lucy the virgin turns out to be the death-delivering sterile ideal that American culture foists on its reluctant young Adams. This is made clear in the final scenes of the novel, when Lucy's arrival coincides with Pierre's temporary blindness. Her secret artistic project, which Pierre glimpses before rushing to his duel with Glen Stanly, consists of "his own portrait, in the skeleton" (357), etched with pieces of their hard-won bread. In his final words to her, Pierre curses her sterility: "'Dead embers of departed fires lie by thee, thou pale girl; with dead embers thou seekest to relume the flame of all extinguished love'. Waste not so that bread; eat it--in bitterness'" (358).

7

A similar disillusionment blasts Pierre's relationship with his first and more powerful love, his mother. Their early relationship, which both seem highly pleased with, takes the form of barely covert incestuous passion. Pierre threatens to eliminate "from the earth" any man who would be so impious as to propose marriage to his mother, while the two occupy themselves by dallying over Mrs. Glendenning's nightgown ribbons as they playfully address each other as brother and sister (5). Later, when Pierre chooses to play the role of Isabel's protector, his rejection of and by his mother is total.

8

Although seemingly contented with his "fictitious" relationships with both his mother and Lucy, Pierre still longs for someone else, ironically, another sister, another object who will reflect the "darker," masochistic aspects of himself. In heavy-handed irony and foreshadowing, Pierre exclaims:

"Oh, had my father but had a daughter! ...
some one whom I might love, and protect, and
fight for, if need be. It must be a glorious
thing to engage in a mortal quarrel on a sweet
sister's behalf! Now, of all things, would to
heaven, I had a sister'."

7

"[H]eaven," of course, quickly fulfills these requests, although the roles of wife and sister are exchanged with remarkable symmetry so that Pierre does engage in a "mortal quarrel," but over Lucy rather than Isabel.

9

As if an embodiment of Pierre's wish-fulfillment, Isabel appears as Pierre's sister, although he had earlier seen her face and become infatuated with its features, which were "imploring, and beauteous, impassioned." Isabel's face is like an "ideal Madonna's [which] haunts the morbidly longing and enthusiastic, but ever-baffled artist" (48). The reference to the artist is significant, for Pierre is the supreme artist of his own life throughout this novel. [5] In his attitudes towards his mother and Lucy, he has created out of the needs within his own splintered mind the array of characters who move in and out of intimate, "incestuous" psychic relationships with him.

10

With the appearance of Isabel, Pierre is forced, not particularly against his will, to reevaluate his attitude toward his father. Throughout his childhood he had

obeyed his mother's injunction to "'always think of your dear perfect father'" (19). Indeed, Pierre worshiped his father as a temple of "perfect marble ... ; without blemish, unclouded, snow-white, and serene; Pierre's fond personification of perfect human goodness and virtue" (68). But upon learning of the existence of an illegitimate half-sister, Pierre recognizes his father's duplicity, the disparity between the official portrait commissioned by his mother to depict the father as a god, and the chair portrait, which reveals the father as an ordinary and fallible man. Pierre, in his own narcissistic need to embrace, through Isabel, the dark, masochistic, self-destructive elements within himself, also needs to reject his earthly father and become, to a certain extent, the father of himself. He vows, "'I will no more have a father'" (87), while at the same time he casts himself into the role of Christ-like redeemer for the sins of fallen man. The child has become the father of the man when Pierre convinces Isabel that they will atone for their parents' sins: "'I stand the sweet penance in my father's stead, thou, in thy mother's. By our earthly acts we shall redeemingly bless both their eternal lots; we will love with the pure and perfect love of angel to an angel'" (154).

11

Pierre professes to love Isabel as an "angel" loves, but we can see that Pierre instead succumbs to what Freud calls the "family romance." Love for the sister or a woman addressed as a sister was a common romantic device employed by Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, and Goethe. Melville's hero also attempts to transcend egoism by embracing another, but that other is as much like him as possible, a narcissistic reflection. Pierre's attraction to Isabel stems, then, from the fact that she is, he thinks, of the same family, the same blood. He muses: "The conjectured past of Isabel took mysterious hold of his father; therefore, the idea of his father tyrannized over his imagination." Later, when thinking of Isabel, "these considerations brought his mother with blazing prominence before him" (104). We can conclude, then, that Isabel is inextricably bound up with Pierre's sense of his own relationships with his father and mother and that an "incestuous" relation with Isabel is perceived both as a means of replacing the father, (who is the embodiment of the social order), as well as standing in the place of the father with his own mother. Loving Isabel, in other words, becomes a way of incestuously loving his mother. Marrying Isabel becomes a way of marrying his mother by proxy, so to speak.

12

Whether or not the relationship between Pierre and Isabel was physically incestuous is less important than that Melville went to some lengths to suggest that it might be. A number of quotations reveal Melville's sardonic sense of humor in mocking the disparity between the real and the ideal, for while espousing sexless adoration of a supposedly untouchable woman, Pierre finds himself sinking into that "most horrible crime"—incest. For instance, Pierre has so idealized Isabel that she "wholly soared out of the realms of mortalness, and for him became transfigured in the highest heaven of uncorrupted Love" (142). But when Pierre describes his mock marital arrangement to Isabel as a "glorious ideal," she responds by

lean[ing] closer to him, with an inexpressible
strangeness of an intense love, new and
inexplicable. Over the face of Pierre there
shot a terrible self-revelation; he imprinted
repeated burning kisses upon her; pressed hard
her hand; would not let go her sweet and awful
passiveness.
Then they changed; they coiled
together and entangledly stood mute.

192

Very soon, however, we are given the impression that brother and sister have exchanged one rationalization for another. Pierre tells Isabel that he is "a nothing. It is all a dream--we dream that we dreamed we dream." When Isabel agrees, Pierre uses the occasion to assert, "From nothing proceeds nothing, Isabel'. How can one sin in a dream?" (274). Their "embrace" quickly follows this quasi-gnostic rationalization.

13

Even if, as some critics assert, there is no actual physical incest between Pierre and Isabel, there is a good deal of what D. H. Lawrence called "sex in the head." Indeed, the relationship between Isabel and Pierre can best be described as psychological incest, a love affair between the ideal light and the actual or masochistic dark elements in Pierre's mind. And when the novelty of this begins to wear thin, Lucy, the rejected virgin, announces that she will live with Pierre and Isabel as a "nun-like cousin" (310). In her letter to Pierre, Lucy very perceptively recognizes his dread of sexual relations with her: "Ah! thou too noble and angelical Pierre, now I feel that a being like thee, can possibly have no love as other men love; but thou lovest as angels do" (309). Her efforts to gain Pierre's love pathetically attempt to imitate her rival's. She desperately searches for some sort of familial relationship between them and finally declares, "I have heard my mother sometimes trace such a thing out, —some indirect cousinship" (311).

14

After Lucy's arrival, Pierre begins his descent into an internal hell peopled by emblems of his real or desired sin. In a dream he sees the armless Titan Enceladus, with Pierre's own features. Pierre identifies fully with the legend of Enceladus's descent, although he does "not willfully wrest some final comfort from the fable" (346). He knows that Enceladus was the son of

incestuous Coelus and Terra, the son of incestuous
Heaven and Earth. And Titan married his mother
Terra, another and accumulatively incestuous
match. And thereof Enceladus was one issue. So
Enceladus was both the son and grandson of an
incest; and even thus, there had been born from
the organic blended heavenliness and earthliness
of Pierre, another mixed, uncertain, heaven
aspiring, but still not wholly earth-emancipated
mood.

347

In similar fashion, Pierre's own fate has spanned two generations of incestuous relations. First, he sought to replace his father in loving his mother as a "sister," and second, he embraced his sister as his wife. It is as if he has lived out all of the horrible crimes of Walpole's *Mysterious Mother*, and clearly Melville had read the drama in one of the four published versions of the play that existed by 1811 (Frank, 48).

15

The second representation that Pierre encounters during his psychic descent is a copy of Guido Reni's supposed portrait of Beatrice Cenci, which the narrator describes as that "sweetest, most touching, but most awful of all feminine heads" (351).^[6] While Lucy stands "motionless" before the portrait, Isabel and Pierre stand before the portrait of "A stranger's head, by an unknown hand." They both marvel at its likeness to Isabel, and Pierre suddenly realizes that the evidence for his blood relationship to Isabel is extremely conjectural, and is in fact based solely on his limited ability to interpret portraits, that is, artifices or facsimiles. Lucy, meanwhile, has been contemplating the Cenci:

so sweetly and seraphically blonde a being,
being double-hooded, as it were, by the black

crape of the two most horrible crimes (of one

of which she is the object, and of the other

the agent) possible to civilized humanity--

incest and parricide.

351

16

Significantly, the two portraits are hung across from each other, "so that in secret they seemed pantomimically talking over and across the heads of the living spectators below" (351). This reference reminds us of the earlier description of the chair portrait, which seemed "as if slyly winking to some other picture" (80). This brief phrase becomes very important in light of the scene at the gallery, for it makes clear the ambiguous smile in the chair portrait. Pierre's father, like the Stranger's Head, is "slyly winking" at Beatrice Cenci, as if he knows and condones the fate his son and daughter are later to share. In this representation Melville captures the pessimism one experiences when it becomes clear that the father, all-powerful embodiment of the social order, can never be escaped or successfully overthrown because the son is his father (in waiting) and is compelled to repeat his father's sins. One thinks here of Shelley's Cenci, but also of his Prometheus Unbound. Whereas the former ends in defeat for Beatrice, who replicates the father's crimes in her quest for revenge, the latter work ends on a triumphant note of apocalyptic forgiveness. Pierre's self-righteous rebellion began as an attempt to erase his father's crimes. His real motive, however, was to undermine all authority figures, not understanding that he is unwittingly undermining his own inheritance, his own status as rightful heir to a corrupt and self-perpetuating system. Fittingly, Pierre's self-deception throughout the novel culminates in his self-destruction.

17

In his prison cell Pierre comes to the realization that his pattern of repression, rationalization, and idealization has led him to the madness that derives from an adherence to nineteenth-century attitudes. Young American Adams are not gods in a new garden; women are not angels; the father cannot be replaced by a better order. The portrait of Beatrice Cenci stands as a warning in Melville's novel that the sins of the human condition can never be escaped in a dream of optimism.

III.

18

Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* was begun in 1859 while Hawthorne was in Italy visiting art galleries and musing on the symbolic meaning of visual art. Chief among Hawthorne's fascinations was one of the tourist haunts, Guido Reni's supposed portrait of Beatrice Cenci, the subject of numerous notations in his Notebooks.^[7] The Cenci portrait, however, figures much more consistently in Hawthorne's novel than it does in Melville's, although the motifs of incest and parricide are less blatant in Hawthorne. In fact, the portrait exists in a much more crucial relation to the action of the novel, for it is expected to elucidate so many of the themes of the book.

19

Hawthorne's thematic concerns are essentially identical to Melville's, but his pessimism is not so final. His characters, however, reveal similarities to Melville's. Hilda and Miriam correspond to Lucy and Isabel, although this is perhaps owing to the light and dark heroine device that was so popular in sentimental discourse during the nineteenth century. The Pierre figure is split in Hawthorne between Donatello, who embodies Pierre's early innocence, and Kenyon, the artist, who is similar to the later, disillusioned Pierre. The mother-figure so prominent in *Pierre* is noticeably absent in *The Marble Faun*, although some critics have interpreted Miriam in that role.^[8] Instead, the parental figures that were literally present in *Pierre* and a bit ridiculous for their blatant attempts to deceive and "seduce" Pierre are now psychologically present in the characters of *The Marble Faun*. That is, all four of the main characters are oppressed in different ways by the "weight of the Past," the authority of church and state, and all four project this resentment of the father-image onto that mysterious embodiment of both church and state, the model who haunts Miriam.

20

The model is, of course, an actual character and not a mass delusion, but the significance of his mysterious appearance and haunting of Miriam is lost if we do not recognize that all four main characters are to a greater and lesser degree obsessed with him. All four engage in the speculation surrounding his identity and conjecture that he may be "a political offender, or an assassin" (35). All four characters see a resemblance between the model and the demon that Guido's Archangel destroys. The latter painting, found in the Church of the Capuchins, home of the model, is visited the morning after the model has been hurled off Traitor's Leap, an ancient execution spot for political enemies. In these few references, Hawthorne neatly weaves together both political and religious associations in order to identify the model as a representative of the paternal—both political and religious—order.

21

The fact that the model haunts Miriam indicates that Hawthorne entrusted a large measure of the overthrow and reestablishment of society to the hands of a woman, as is also suggested in *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as in Shelley's *Cenci*. Miriam, particularly, is filled with loathing for the political tyranny that father-figures have had over society, and she expresses her dream of vengeance in the violent paintings that fill her gallery. Jael drives a nail through Sisera's head, while Judith displays the head of Holofernes and Salome delivers the head of John the Baptist to her step father. The narrator notes that each portrait embodied "the idea of woman, acting the part of a revengeful mischief towards man," while Miriam tells Donatello, "'they are ugly phantoms that stole out of my mind; not things that I created, but things that haunt me'" (45). At the end of the novel we learn that Miriam has been literally haunted as a victim of political and religious tyranny. When the narrator takes Hilda and Kenyon to the top of St. Peter's, we learn that Miriam was never free in Rome, that "her every movement was watched and investigated far more thoroughly by the priestly rulers than by her dearest friends" (465).

22

As Spencer Hall has pointed out, the crucial relationship in the novel is between Hilda and Miriam, who are both closely identified with Beatrice Cenci because of their sisterhood in sin and suffering.^[9] But, more specifically, both heroines embody the two most important facets of Beatrice's story; they are, as Beatrice was, simultaneously victims and avengers. This bifurcated identity is reflected in their actions and their detailed reactions to Hilda's copy of the *Cenci* portrait. In their responses they reveal their past, present, and future situations and, as such, the portrait and both women, more than Kenyon or even Donatello, embody Hawthorne's belief in the cyclical and repetitious nature of human history.

23

As the two women stare at the portrait, Beatrice is described in a classically sentimental posture:

The eyes were large and brown, and met those of the spectator, but evidently with a strange, ineffectual effort to escape. There was a little redness about the eyelids, very slightly indicated, so that you would question whether or no the girl had been weeping...it was the very saddest picture ever painted or conceived; it involved an unfathomable depth of sorrow, the sense of which came to the observer by a sort of intuition.

64

After praising the skill in Hilda's copy, Miriam wonders what gives the picture its "mysterious force? For my part, though deeply sensible of its influence, I cannot seize it" (65). Hilda attempts an interpretation by seeing Beatrice as a sort of Christ-figure who has taken on all sorrow "both for the world's sake and

her own ... She is a fallen angel, fallen, and yet sinless; and it is only this depth of sorrow, with its weight and darkness, that keeps her down upon earth" (65-66). Sorrow, of course, is to be Hilda's fate after she witnesses the murder of the model. Miriam, in contrast, muses on her past connection with a mysterious sin, a sin which Hawthorne hints contained an incestuous element, and asks, "'You deem her sinless? ... Beatrice's own conscience does not acquit her of something evil, and never to be forgiven'" (66).

24

When Miriam reminds Hilda of the events surrounding Beatrice's death, Hilda immediately alters her opinion and remarks, "'[I]t was terrible guilt, an inexpiable crime ... Her doom is just'" (66). Again, thinking of her own situation, Miriam replies: "Oh, Hilda, your innocence is like a sharp steel sword ... Your judgments are often terribly severe, though you seem all made up of gentleness and mercy. Beatrice's sin may not have been so great; perhaps it was no sin at all, but the best virtue possible in the circumstances" (66). While saying this, Miriam's face becomes transformed and assumes the expression of Beatrice's face. Hilda is frightened and warns Miriam, "'Leave Beatrice to me, in future.'" Miriam responds by giving Hilda a packet of papers to be delivered to the Palazzo Cenci four months from that day (67).

25

The "sisterhood" to which Miriam, Hilda, and Beatrice belong is a microcosmic community of women who find themselves victimized by the sins of their elders and who, out of desperation, seek retribution and finally vengeance. Hawthorne is strangely sympathetic to the sins of Beatrice—incest and parricide—and this can only be explained by interpreting Beatrice as a figure who represents an admirable and necessary human quality: the desire to destroy evil and replace it with a new order. Even if, as both Melville and Hawthorne recognize, this impulse is ultimately futile, both novelists believe it is essential in maintaining the necessary dialectic between old and new, evil and good.

26

Miriam's struggle with the forces of evil, embodied in the model, encompasses the first half of the novel. Although the model is eliminated, Donatello is doomed at the same time. The one person who could have begun a renewed life with Miriam is forever tainted by his sin against the father-figure, as Miriam herself is tainted by her earlier association with incest and parricide. When Miriam tells Kenyon her real identity at the end of the novel, Kenyon replies, "'I shudder at the fatality that seems to haunt your footsteps, and throws a shadow of crime about your path, you being guiltless'" (430). As if he were relating the plot of Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* or *Mysterious Mother*, the narrator informs us that Miriam rejected a suitor forced upon her by her family because he had traits "so evil ... as could only be accounted for by the insanity which often develops itself in old, close-kept breeds of men, when long unmixed with newer blood" (430-431). He was, in true gothic fashion, much older than Miriam; in fact, Hawthorne emphasizes that they were of "disproportioned ages" (430). Critics have conjectured that Miriam was forced to marry a half-brother, an uncle, or a distant cousin. Whatever the relation, and Hawthorne is deliberately vague here because he was playing on gothic conventions well known to his readers, Miriam escaped the older man only to find herself haunted by the model, a younger version of paternal tyranny.

27

But, as Miriam was in "thrall" to the model, so is Hilda in thrall to the old masters, who are called that "tyrannous race" by a fellow copyist (334). When this copyist warns Hilda to return to America before she is entirely consumed by their spirits, Hilda replies that it would be "a happy martyrdom" (334). This comment reveals that Hilda is engaging in a form of self-destruction by copying from the fathers, but the sin of Miriam and Donatello sets her free, much against her own will. The sins of others have awakened her own individual consciousness so that she can no longer sit before the masters like a mindless medium possessed by their spirit. She has, she moans, "lost ... the faculty of appreciating those great works of art" (335). As she has lost her artistic sense, so does she also fail to learn compassion or understanding. Immediately after witnessing the murder, she rejects Miriam, who responds by rebuking Hilda: "You have no sin, nor any conception of what it is; and therefore you are so terribly severe. As an angel, you are not amiss; but, as a human creature, and a woman among earthly men and women, you need a sin to soften you!" (209).

28

Whether Hilda is ever softened is a debatable question, but it would seem that Hawthorne does suggest that Hilda embodies the element in Beatrice Cenci that has been sinned against and should seek vengeance. During Hilda's mysterious captivity, the narrator fancies that she has been shown by Guido Reni another portrait of Beatrice, "done from the celestial life" (452). This celestial Beatrice realizes that vengeance leads only to a renewed cycle of misery and sin. Hilda, rejecting the path of Beatrice and Miriam, returns to society and accepts the compromises that history has bestowed. Kenyon, previously a "consummate artist," has become a shadow of himself and together the couple return to America, where there will be no garden.

The central action of the novel, the murder of the model, precipitates all four characters into defining themselves as free agents in a new world devoid of authority figures. Kenyon and Miriam are best able to accept this new freedom and it is they who minister to and instruct their weaker friends. Donatello immediately retreats to his ancestral home and wallows in self-pitying legends about his forefathers. He cannot accept his act of parricide until he is taken by Kenyon and Miriam to the statue of Pope Julius in Perugia. Only after he feels that he has received a blessing of paternal forgiveness can he return to human society—ironically, a prison. Hawthorne is implying that, for the European at least, there can be no new garden, no new order purged of the corruptions of fathers, for the European carries the image of the father within his heart. Hilda, as the American ideal, the virgin, suffers a similar guilt and flees to a confessional in St. Peter's, bastion of paternal infallibility. Only after confessing her friends' sins and seeking justification for her own rejection of those friends does she feel cleansed.

The America that was founded on a rebellion against the British royal family is as guilty as the Europe which created the modern political state through war and decapitation. Both sides of the Atlantic have witnessed the violence that makes up the history of Western civilization. For America there can be no easy escape into a new garden or a redeemed land free from the sins of our European brothers. In short, there can be no other kind of history but what we have always known and always experienced, for we share the same human nature and are therefore prone to the same sins. The pattern that emerges in both novels, then, reveals that both Hawthorne and Melville believed that history was an inescapable wheel, a cycle from which there was no ultimate change—only repetitious variations on the same themes. (Again one recalls Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*.) Pierre is doomed to repeat his father's fate, just as Donatello repeats his ancient forefather's, and as Miriam and Hilda repeat aspects of Beatrice Cenci's history. The hope that Hawthorne holds out is not great, considering that Kenyon and Hilda return to America as chastened versions of themselves and Donatello and Miriam spend their lives in repentance. The final comment by Miriam seems almost blackly humorous when she boasts to Kenyon about Donatello: "'So changed, yet still, in a deeper sense, so much the same'. He has travelled in a circle, as all things heavenly and earthly do, and now comes back to his original self'" (434). The circular nature of reality ultimately suggests that there can never be radical or permanent change in human beings or in the social order. The portrait of Beatrice Cenci emerges in both novels as an ominous warning to American idealism.

Notes

[1]

For other readings of the Americanists' relations to their British predecessors, see Rose (216-29); and Behrendt (214-34).

[2]

For examples of early approaches to the incest theme, see Damon who says: "Hawthorne, in *The Marble Faun*, chose incest for the secret sin," while in *Pierre* "the hidden motive is incest, and Melville's treatment of it is such that *Pierre* takes its place in literary history as the first novel based on morbid sex" (115; 112). Homans interprets "the over-bizarre incest machinery" as "the tragedy of the mind turning on itself, the last phase of the quest for the Ultimate" (723). A few years later, Frederic Carpenter claims that the use of incest in *Pierre* is "a dramatic symbol for the sense of sin which the worshipers of purity have always associated with the sexual experience" (260-261). Henry A. Murray, in his extended introduction to *Pierre*, argues that the repeated incestuous motifs express Melville's discovery of the "Oedipus Complex, as it would flower in the wishful fantasy of a victimized adolescent" (xxxvii). The two most extended discussions of the Cenci figure are R. L. Carothers and Louise K. Barnett. More recently, Leland S. Person, Jr. has claimed that the portrait of Beatrice "forces *Pierre* to face his attitudes toward women....Melville forces his characters to find themselves in art, and the Cenci in particular provides a kind of archetypal aesthetic image of woman, whose complexities and apparent contradictions perfectly express the conflicts in the male imagination" (86).

[3]

Otto Rank discusses Freud's theory of narcissism. According to this view, the double represents elements of morbid self-love which prevent the formation of a happily-balanced personality (40-41). I have also developed at much greater length the theme of narcissism in the British canonical romantic poets in my *Romantic Androgyny: The Women Within*. James D. Wilson reads *Pierre* in a cultural context, arguing that "*Pierre* [is] a history of the Romantic movement. The resemblances between *Pierre*'s father and Wordsworth are too profound to be coincidental: the illicit sexual relationship with the French girl during the

French Revolution and the bastard offspring of course call to mind the Annette Vallon affair" (47). What Wilson fails to mention is that the "Vallon affair" was not known until the 1920s and could not have been known to Melville.

[4]

Northrop Frye lists the components of romance: mysterious births, maidens in distress, and a descent into the underworld. Melville's *Pierre*, however, internalizes these actions so that Pierre's descent is a psychic and genealogical quest. Pierre is concerned with discovering the real relationship between himself, Isabel, and their parents. But in *Pierre* there is no reemergence into the world of light. Further, *Pierre* can be read as a parody or inverted romance. As Frye points out, in a traditional romance sexual relations between the hero and heroine do not occur until after the mystery of birth is solved and they are assured that they are not brother and sister. The opposite, of course, occurs in *Pierre*; the hero is only able to become sexually attracted, not to his fiancée, but to his sister (122, 73).

[5]

Raymond J. Nelson claims: "We have no reason to believe that anything in the book after the arrival in New York happens, except in the mind of Pierre" (209). The tendency to read these novels as psychomachias has been criticized by critics who attempt to place their mutual interest in incest in a biographical, personal realm. See Philip Young and Nina Baym, as well as the article by Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker for a discussion of the question of Melville's unacknowledged half-sister (Higgins 222-223)

[6]

Melville's *Journal Up the Straits* records Melville's entries about viewing the portrait wrongly attributed to Guido Reni at the Barberini Palace in Rome, March 1857 (129-133). Weaver notes that "there can be no doubt that the Cenci exerted upon Melville an almost obsessional fascination" (133n). The power of the portrait as a tourist draw is also reflected by Charles Dickens, who in his own essay on the portrait, observed: "I am willing to believe that, as you see her on his canvas, so she turned towards him, in the crowd, from the first sight of the axe, and stamped upon his mind a look which he has stamped on mine as though I had stood beside him in the concourse (149). Edith Wharton refers to the portrait of Beatrice in her novels *The House of Mirth* (1916) and *The Mother's Recompense* (1925).

[7]

See Hawthorne's *French and Italian Notebooks* for 20 February 1858: The Cenci "is the most profoundly wrought picture in the world ... I wish, however, it were possible for some spectator, of deep sensibility, to see the picture without knowing anything of its subject or history; for no doubt we bring all our knowledge of the Cenci tragedy to the interpretation of the picture" (93). On 15 May 1859, he continues: "the picture is quite indescribable, inconceivable, and unaccountable in its effect; for if you attempt to analyze it, you can never succeed in getting at the secret of its fascination." After a lengthy description, Hawthorne concludes that he "hated to leave the picture," but he was finally "glad" because "it so perplexed and troubled me not to be able to get hold of its secret" (520-521). For further information on Hawthorne's and Melville's fascination with the Cenci, see both Haselmayer and Dalke.

[8]

Nina Baym views the triangle of Miriam-Donatello-the model as the "Eternal Oedipal triangle" (*Marble Faun* 359). In her *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* she further elaborates by stating that "the initial relationship of Donatello to Miriam is so patently that of a small boy to his mother" (238). Also see Frederick Crews for a discussion of the novel in which "the imagery shrieks of incest" (211). Crews also sees the murder of the model as "the removal of an incestuous tyrant which only provides the circumstances for still further hints of wicked love between Miriam and Donatello" (228).

[9]

See Hall's "Beatrice Cenci."

Works Cited

Barnett, Louise K. "American Novelists and the 'Portrait of Beatrice Cenci'" *New England Quarterly* 53 (1980), 168-83. [DOI:10.2307/365168](https://doi.org/10.2307/365168)

Baym, Nina. "The Marble Faun: Hawthorne's Elegy for Art." *New England Quarterly* 44 (1971), 99-114. [DOI:10.2307/364780](https://doi.org/10.2307/364780)

———. "Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Mother: A Biographical Speculation." *American Literature* 54 (1982), 1-27. [DOI:10.2307/2925718](https://doi.org/10.2307/2925718)

———. *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career*. Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1976.

Behrendt, Stephen C. "Beatrice Cenci and the Tragic Myth of History." *History & Myth: Essays on English Romantic Literature*. ed. Stephen Behrendt. Detroit: Wayne State U P, 1990.

Carothers, R. L. "Melville's 'Cenci': A Portrait of Pierre." *Ball State University Forum* 10 (1969), 53-59.

Carpenter, Frederic. "Puritans Preferred Blondes: The Heroines of Melville and Hawthorne." *New England Quarterly* 9 (1936), 253-72. [DOI:10.2307/360391](https://doi.org/10.2307/360391)

Crews, Frederick. *The Sins of the Fathers*. London: Oxford U P, 1966.

Dalke, Anne French. "The Sensational Fiction of Hawthorne and Melville." *Studies in American Fiction* 16 (1988), 195-207.

Damon, S. Foster. "Pierre the Ambiguous." *Hound and Horn* 2 (1929), 107-18.

Dickens, Charles. *Pictures from Italy, The Works of Charles Dickens* London: (1900), VIII.

Frye, Northrop. *The Secular Scripture: The Structure of Romance*. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1976.

Hall, Spencer. "Beatrice Cenci: Symbol and Vision in *The Marble Faun*." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 25 (1970), 85-93. [DOI:10.1525/ncl.1970.25.1.99p0006x](https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.1970.25.1.99p0006x)

Haselmayer, Louis A. "Hawthorne and the Cenci." *Neophilologus* 27 (1941), 61-62.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Marble Faun, or The Romance of Monte Beni*. Columbus: Ohio State U P, 1968.

———. *French and Italian Notebooks*. Ed. Thomas Woodson. Columbus: Ohio State U P, 1980.

Higgins, Brian and Hershel Parker. "Reading Pierre." *A Companion to Melville Studies*. Ed. John Bryant. Westport: Greenwood, 1986.

Hoeveler, Diane Long. *Romantic Androgyny: The Women Within*. University Park: Penn State P, 1990.

Homans, George C. "The Dark Angel: The Tragedy of Herman Melville." *New England Quarterly* 5 (1932), 699-730. [DOI:10.2307/359330](https://doi.org/10.2307/359330)

Melville, Herman. *Journal Up the Straits*. Ed. Raymond Weaver. New York: Colophon, 1935.

———. *Pierre or The Ambiguities*. Eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern U P and The Newberry Library, 1971.

Murray, Henry A. Introduction. *Pierre or The Ambiguities*. By Herman Melville. New York: Farrar Straus, 1949.

Nelson, Raymond J. "The Art of Herman Melville: The Author of Pierre." *Yale Review* 59 (1970), 197-214.

Person, Leland S., Jr. *Aesthetic Headaches: Women and a Masculine Poetics in Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988.

Rank, Otto. *The Double*. Trans. Harry Tucker, Jr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971.

Rose, Edward J. "'The Queenly Personality': Walpole, Melville, and Mother." *Literature and Psychology* 15 (1965), 216-29.

Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto and The Mysterious Mother*. Ed. Fred Frank. Ontario: Broadview, 2003.

Wilson, James D. "Incest and American Romantic Fiction." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 7 (1974), 31-50.

Young, Phillip. *Hawthorne's Secret: An Untold Tale*. Boston: Grodine, 1984.

Auteur : Diane Long Hoeveler

Titre : Beatrice Cenci in Hawthorne, Melville and her Atlantic-Rim Contexts

Revue : *Romanticism on the Net*, Numéro 38-39, mai 2005

URI : <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/011670ar>

DOI : 10.7202/011670ar

Copyright © Michael Eberle-Sinatra 2005 — All rights reserved

[À propos d'Érudit](#) | [Abonnements](#) | [RSS](#) | [Conditions d'utilisation](#) | [Pour nous joindre](#) | [Aide](#)

Consortium Érudit © 2013