La Cenci: The Incest Motif in Hawthorne and Melville

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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 (Act II, Scene 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 (Chapter lxxxix)

I

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 nineteenth-century English and American literature. Indeed, the renewed fascination with her story indicates several important psychological as well as social themes that authors as diverse as Shelley, Swinburne, Hawthorne, and Melville all attempted to delineate.

Although critics have analyzed the Cenci figure in Pierre and The Marble Faun separately, comparing the utilization of this motif in both works allows us a different perspective on an obvious though neglected theme in the two novels. Both 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 do, although both see her as an omen predicting the failure of America to achieve its original promise.

II

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.

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. 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 eyeing each other, beholding mutual reflections of a boundless admiration and love" (p. 4). Further, Mrs. Glendenning reveals her narcissism; the narrator tells us that she is extremely proud of Pierre because she "saw her own graces strangely translated into the opposite sex" (p. 5). Allusions to mirrors and pools function throughout the first part of the novel to make the Narcissus association 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" (p. 284).
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!" (p. 58). Melville, however, weaves a number of ambiguities into a text that to a large degree conforms, albeit perversely, to romantic conventions; 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." (p. 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!'" (p. 358).

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 (p. 5). Later, when Pierre chooses to play the role of Isabel's protector, his rejection of and by his mother is total.

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!" (p. 7)

"[H]eaven," of course, 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.

As if an embodiment of 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" (p. 48). The reference to the artist is significant, for Pierre is the supreme artist of his own life throughout this novel. 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.

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'" (p. 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" (p. 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 in 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'" (p. 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'" (p. 154).

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, 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. 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" (p. 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 as a means of replacing the father, embodiment of the social order.

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" (p. 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. (p. 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?" (p. 274). Their "embrace" follows.

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" (p. 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" (p. 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" (p. 311).

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" (p. 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. So Enceladus was both the son and grandson of an incest; and even thus, there had been born from the organic blended heavenniness and earthliness of Pierre, another mixed, uncertain, heaven-aspiring, but still not wholly earth-emancipated mood. (p. 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.

The second image Pierre encounters during his descent is a copy of Guido's Cenci, which the narrator describes as that "sweetest, most touching, but most awful of all feminine heads" (p. 351). 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. 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. 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. (p. 351)

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" (p. 351). This reference reminds us of the earlier description of the chair portrait, which seemed "as if slyly winking to some other picture" (p. 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 image Melville captures the pessimism one experiences when it becomes clear that the father, embodiment of the social order, can never be escaped or successfully overthrown because the son is his father and repeats his father's sins. Pierre's self-righteous rebellion began as an attempt to vindicate his father's crimes. His real motive, however, was to undermine all authority figures. Fittingly, Pierre's self-deception throughout the novel culminates in his self-destruction.

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

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 Guido's portrait of Beatrice Cenci, the subject of numerous notations in his Notebooks. 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.

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 light and dark heroine device that was popular throughout 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.

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" (p. 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 order.

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. 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 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'" (p. 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" (p. 465).

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. 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 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.

As the two women stare at the portrait, it is described:

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. (p. 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" (p. 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" (pp. 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'" (p. 66). When Miriam reminds Hilda of the events surrounding Beatrice's death, Hilda immediately alters her opinion and remarks, "'[I]t was terrible guilt, an inexiable crime . . . Her doom is just'" (p. 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" (p. 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 (p. 67).

The "sisterhood" to which Miriam, Hilda, and Beatrice belong is a microcosm of all human beings 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 futile, both novelists believe it is essential in maintaining the dialectic between old and new, evil and good.

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'" (p. 430). 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" (p. 430-431). He was, appropriately, much older than Miriam, in fact Hawthorne emphasizes that they were of "disproportioned ages" (p. 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 considered it unimportant, Miriam escaped the older man only to find herself haunted by the model, a younger version of paternal tyranny.

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 (p. 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!" (p. 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" (p. 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 with disdain. Miriam 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!'" (p. 209).

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. But during Hilda's mysterious captivity, the narrator fancies that she has been shown by Guido another portrait of Beatrice, "done from the celestial life" (p. 452). This celestial Beatrice realizes that vengeance leads only to a renewed cycle of misery and sin. Hilda, instead, 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 American is not literally guilty of parricide, but he has witnessed the
violence that makes up the history of Western civilization. For America there can be no other kind of history, 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 of the same themes. Pierre is doomed to repeat his father’s fate, 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’” (p. 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.

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Notes

1Herman Melville, Pierre or The Ambiguities, eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1971), p. 351. The other text considered will be Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Marble Faun, or The Romance of Monte Beni (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968). All quotations are from these editions; page numbers will appear in the text in parentheses.

2For example, S. Foster Damon, "Pierre the Ambiguous," Hound and Horn, 2 (1929), 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" (pp. 115, 112, respectively). George C. Homans, "The Dark Angel: The Tragedy of Herman Melville," New England Quarterly, 5 (1932), 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 in "Puritans Preferred Blondes: The Heroines of Melville and Hawthorne," New England Quarterly, 9 (1936), 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).


Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture: The Structure of Romance (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), lists the components of romance: mysterious births, maidens in distress, a descent into the underworld. Melville's Pierre, however, makes these actions internal, that is, 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 able to become sexually attracted, not to his fiance, but to his sister (pp. 122, 73).


Melville's Journal Up the Straits, ed. Raymond Weaver (New York: Colophon, 1935), records Melville's entries about viewing the Guido portrait at the Barberini Palace in Rome, March 1857 (pp. 129-133). Weaver notes that "there can be no doubt that the Cenci exerted upon Melville an almost obsessional fascination" (p. 133n).

See Hawthorne's French and Italian Notebooks, ed. Thomas Woodson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980) 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" (p. 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" (pp. 520-521). Also see Louis A. Hasel Mayer, "Hawthorne and the Cenci," Neophilologus, 27 (1941), 61-62.

Nina Baym, "The Marble Faun: Hawthorne's Elegy for Art," New England Quarterly, 44 (1971), views the triangle of Miriam-Donatello-the model as the "eternal Oedipal triangle" (359). In her The Shape of Hawthorne's Career (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), she elaborates by stating that "the initial relationship of Donatello to Miriam is so patently that of a small boy to his mother" (p. 238). Also see Frederick Crews, The Sins of the Fathers (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 211ff, for a discussion of the novel in which "the imagery shrieks of incest" (p. 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" (p. 228).