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Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*: A Family Tragedy

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN'S WIELAND: A FAMILY TRAGEDY Roberta F. Weldon* In *Wieland* Charles Brockden Brown creates a family and shows how its flaws lead to its tragic fall. The elements of the novel direct the reader away from a concentration on any one character and towards a consideration of the basic unit of society, the family. Although the title character of the novel may be *Wieland*, his tragedy and fall affect Clara, Catherine, and Pleyel and are caused partly by his family history—the tragic lives of both his father and grandfather. This perspective allows Brown to emphasize a conception of man as primarily a social being, and yet the social order in *Wieland* is one near collapse where the promise of restoration seems remote. Moreover, the history of the *Wieland* family, one of the first literary American families, with its ghastly murders and undercurrents of incest, rivals that of the most bizarre Roman tragedy and causes the *Wielands* to become finally not a model for emulation but a standard of failure. The nature of this family, the reasons for its

failure or fall, and the tragic consequences make up the central concerns of the novel and reveal a work that, while it has at its center a strong pattern of classical allusions and resonances, uses the pattern to show that the classical ideals are ultimately flawed and not viable for an American social model. Identifying the central character in *Wieland* has caused some disagreement among critics. Most of the earlier interpretations of the novel accept Wieland as the central figure, but later criticism devotes more attention to the role of the narrator, Clara, Wieland's sister.¹ The interpretations that emphasize one character and diminish the significance of the role of the others can tend to distort an understanding of the main concerns of the novel. From the start, Clara is careful to establish that the story she relates is not simply hers or her brother's; it is instead a narrative of the events "that have lately happened in my family."² Her personal despair is subsumed by her sense of the enormity of the tragedy as it has altered the history of an entire family. She describes "the storm that tore up our [emphasis added] happiness, and changed into dreariness, and desert the blooming scene of our [emphasis added] existence" (pp. 5-6). The title does not refer only to the patriarch of the family, Theodore Wieland, as much as it does to the entire Wieland family—grandparents, husband, wife, sister, children, and even future in-laws (Pleyel). 'Roberta F. Weldon is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Houston. Since completing her graduate work at Harvard, she has published widely on nineteenth-century fiction. ² Roberta F. Weldon Early in the novel Clara relates a discussion between Wieland and Pleyel concerning Cicero's Oration for Cluentius that first establishes the emphasis on the family. The oration uses the crimes of one family to present a disturbing picture of Roman life in the final days of the Roman republic. In defending Cluentius against the charge of murder, Cicero recounts a long list of depravities—mainly incest and murder—committed for political and financial gain by one member of Cluentius's family against another. In this way, Cicero succeeds in creating a strong impression of the corruption and depravity caused by the breakdown of the family's structure and its values in Roman society. Significantly, Wieland and Pleyel are concerned with determining whether the oration's account mirrors "the manners of the time" (p. 30). Pleyel is reluctant "to make the picture of a single family a model from which to sketch the condition of a nation" (p. 30), while Wieland is apparently willing to accept Cluentius's history as representative, in a microcosmic way, of Roman life. The conversation between Wieland and Pleyel provides an allegory from which to view the history of the Wieland family. Clara's narrative contains many of the same sordid details that are related in the Oration for Cluentius. Wieland's mania is so appalling because it is so unnatural; it causes him to seek to destroy those most closely related to him—his wife, children, sister, and dearest friend. To win...

CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN'S *WIELAND*: A FAMILY TRAGEDY

Roberta F. Weldon⁶

In *Wieland* Charles Brockden Brown creates a family and shows how its flaws lead to its tragic fall. The elements of the novel direct the reader away from a concentration on any one character and towards a consideration of the basic unit of society, the family. Although the title character of the novel may be Wieland, his tragedy and fall affect Clara, Catherine, and Pleyel and are caused partly by his family history—the tragic lives of both his father and grandfather. This perspective allows Brown to emphasize a conception of man as primarily a social being, and yet the social order in *Wieland* is one near collapse where the promise of restoration seems remote. Moreover, the history of the Wieland family, one of the first literary American families, with its ghastly murders and undercurrents of incest, rivals that of the most bizarre Roman tragedy and causes the Wielands to become finally not a model for emulation but a standard of failure. The nature of this family, the reasons for its failure or fall, and the tragic consequences make up the central concerns of the novel and reveal a work that, while it has at its center a strong pattern of classical allusions and resonances, uses the pattern to show that the classical ideals are ultimately flawed and not viable for an American social model.

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⁶Roberta F. Weldon is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Houston. Since completing her graduate work at Harvard, she has published widely on nineteenth-century fiction.





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