Homicide in American Fiction, 1798–1860

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AMERICA'S first serious writers of fiction matured in a world strongly colored by the European Enlightenment and at a time when educated men were assumed to be familiar with the theories of Locke, Hutcheson, Paley, and Reid. At one extreme, of course, there were theologians who tried to preserve the doctrines of original sin and total depravity, while at the other end of the intellectual spectrum, a few radicals defended Thomas Paine, William Godwin, and the French philosop hes. By the turn of the nineteenth century, there was a general tendency to reject the belief that evil arose from the instigation of Satan, from the imputation of Adam's guilt, or even from man's disobedience to external command. The more en­lightened writers of fiction assumed that evil resulted from error, which might be defined as a delusion of reason or as a violation of natural law. But granting that reason depended upon the senses, and thus upon the
environment, most of these early American writers protected the concept of responsibility by emphasizing the human capacity for virtue. As we have seen, this capacity might be thought of as an inherent moral sense or as a self-correcting power to suspend desire while the reason calmly determined the greatest good. As long as man's capacity for virtue was considered to be universal, except in lunatics and idiots, moral responsibility seemed to be a self-evident truth.

Washington Irving's "The Story of the Young Italian," included in Tales of a Traveler (1824), was a conventional expression of this morality, but showed, at the same time, a changing attitude toward crime. To provide explanation for a brutal act of murder, Irving carefully traced the development of a moody, sensitive child, the frustrations of the criminal's youth, and the circumstances preceding his outburst of violence. First of all, the young Italian had been born with "an extreme sensibility," which, under proper guidance, might have contributed to artistic genius: "Everything affected me violently. While yet an infant in my mother's arms, and before I had learned to talk, I could be wrought upon to a wonderful degree of anguish or delight by the power of music." But as the child grew older, ignorant relatives and domestics transformed his sensitivity into a temperamental irritability: "I was moved to tears, tickled to laughter, provoked to fury, for the entertainment of company, who were amused by such a tempest of mighty passion in a pigmy frame."

When the young Italian's mother died, his "power as a spoiled child was at an end," and he was confronted by a stern, authoritarian father, whose preference for an older brother was not concealed. Thus a heart which was "naturally disposed to the extremes of tenderness and affection" was distorted by the extremes of parental attention
and rejection. Sent to a convent at an early age, the boy acquired a “tinge of melancholy” from “the dismal stories of the monks, about devils and evil spirits, with which they affrighted my young imagination.”

The second stage in Irving’s development of a murderer came when the Italian had reached manhood and had at last found happiness. He rebelled against the injustice of his father, became a successful artist, enjoyed the patronage of a nobleman, and fell in love with the beautiful Bianca. As a climax to this change of fortune, the young Italian learned that his brother had died. He now had promise of acquiring a home, a name, and the rank of a nobleman. No longer a rejected outcast, he was able to make a formal proposal to Bianca; but first it was necessary to return to his ancestral home and win the affections of his father. He entrusted Bianca to the care of Filippo, his best friend and the only son of his benefactor.

Finding his father a helpless invalid, the Italian was forced to remain at home for eighteen months. He nursed his formerly tyrannical parent with the faithfulness of a loyal son:

I knew that his death alone would set me free; yet I never at any moment wished it. I felt too glad to be able to make any atonement for past disobedience; and, denied as I had been all endearments of relationship in my early days, my heart yearned toward a father who, in his age and helplessness, had thrown himself entirely on me for comfort.

Filippo generously served as an intermediary for the secret correspondence between Bianca and her lover.

The third stage in the history of a murderer began when the young Italian returned to claim Bianca after his father had died. Bianca was horrified by his appearance. Filippo, it turned out, had told Bianca that her lover had perished at sea and had then married her himself. The young
Italian could see “in her pallid and wasted features, in the prompt terror and subdued agony of her eye, a whole history of a mind broken down by tyranny.” Realizing that he had been cheated out of marriage by deceit and that Bianca’s life had been ruined, the Italian clenched his teeth and foamed at the mouth. At that opportune moment, Filippo appeared: “He turned pale, looked wildly to right and left, as he would have fled, and trembling drew his sword.” The Italian’s whole life had been a preparation for this moment. First he stabbed the villain with his poniard: “He fell with the blow, but my rage was unsated. I sprang upon him with the bloodthirsty feeling of a tiger: redoubled my blows, mangled him in my frenzy, grasped him by the throat.”

Remorse, however, was the final stage in the murderer’s history. In the Apennines, where he fled from justice and from the shrieks of Bianca, the young Italian could not escape from the horrible countenance of his victim, which followed him like a phantom wherever he went: “Could I but have restored my victim to life, I felt as if I could look on with transport even though Bianca were in his arms.” He passed days and nights in “sleepless torment,” a “never-dying worm” preyed upon his heart, an “unquenchable fire” burned within his brain, and finally, resolving that only his own blood could atone for his crime, the young Italian surrendered himself to justice.

This is a simple, unconvincing tale, doubtless intended by Irving to excite the horror and sympathy of sensitive readers, who, like himself, might look upon the young Italian’s career as a sauntering American traveler might view the plight of Italian peasants. But in addition to this stereotype of Italian passion and deceit, there are several important assumptions about crime and human behavior in “The Story of the Young Italian.”

It should be noted that Irving began with the theory
that a child born with "extreme sensibility" had a great chance of becoming either a genius or a criminal and therefore required special guidance and care. Presumably, a stolid, unimaginative child would not have been spoiled by relatives, would not have suffered such anguish from parental rejection (if, indeed, he had been rejected at all), and would have remained calm and rational when defeated in love. Yet Irving did not identify a passionate temperament with inherent sin, or even with a tendency toward sin. Man's fall from goodness was a result of circumstances beyond his control. These circumstances might operate in two ways: the ignorance and neglect of parents could distort a child's passions, stimulate his temper, and weaken the power of his reason to suspend impulsive desire; or external circumstances could liberate aggressive passions which, heretofore, had remained latent.

Irving also took pains to show that while reason could be temporarily overthrown in an extreme crisis, the soul of even a murderer was not totally corrupt. The young Italian, despite his abnormal temperament, seemed to possess an adequate moral sense. He sacrificed love for filial duty, he was impelled to violence only after discovering that Filippo had mistreated Bianca, and his final remorse was complete. It was this conventional treatment of remorse which kept Irving from a theory of strict environmentalism. Seemingly, the murderer's actions had been determined by a rigid chain of circumstances, yet the very fact that he felt guilty proved, according to the contemporary morality, that he had possessed the capacity to resist his criminal impulse. Responsibility, in other words, was deduced from the presence of remorse, which all criminals were supposed to have.

So far, we may conclude, Irving's assumptions were based on an adaptation of the Lockian psychology, which he vaguely associated with the theory of an inherent moral
sense. The theme of this morality may be put simply: faulty training in childhood made a sensitive boy more susceptible to outbursts of passion and circumstances pushed him toward an act of violence; but while this criminal act might be understood by analyzing the subject's past, his remorse proved that his will was free to resist his desire and that he violated the natural law of his reason, or that he ignored the counsel of his moral sense.

But there is another problem in Irving's treatment of murder. If he avoided a theory of complete environmentalism, he did so only by an ending which must have seemed contrived to even the most sentimental of his readers. Every sentence of the tale relates to the central act of homicide, and every event tends to justify the protagonist. Irving lost no chance to describe the young Italian as a persecuted boy, whose attempts to achieve happiness were thwarted by a malicious plot. The Italian did not track down his victim in premeditated revenge, but he encountered Filippo by accident, immediately after his discovery of deception. Even then there was a mitigating circumstance, for Filippo's sword was drawn before the young Italian attacked. In common law this fact would have reduced the crime to manslaughter.

The question arises why Irving wrote a tale in which every incident justified an act of homicide and which was carefully constructed to arouse the reader's sympathy for a man whose haunting guilt seemed to conflict with the circumstances of his crime. To pursue the implications of this question, we must utilize certain modern concepts which, if inappropriate for historical analysis, are nevertheless useful in the interpretation of imaginative expression. If Filippo, the victim, is accepted as merely an unfaithful friend, who is otherwise unimportant to the plot, neither the Italian's guilt nor Irving's attempt to justify
him can be understood. But Irving implied that Filippo represented something more than an unfaithful friend, at least in the eyes of the young Italian. It should be remembered that the Italian's original frustrations, as well as his first aggressive desires, began in a family conflict in which his brother was the favored son. After rebelling against his father's tyranny, he became a wandering outcast, whose status was regained only when his brother died. By winning his father's affection through loyal service, the Italian achieved a legitimate claim to wealth and rank which would otherwise have been his brother's. Filippo, his closest friend, was, significantly, the son of his benefactor, who had taken the place of a father in the Italian's youth. We thus arrive at the inference that Filippo represented a competing brother, whose evil deception stood for all of the injustice which the young Italian had suffered in childhood. His lonely wandering in the barren Apennines was, for the early nineteenth century, an unmistakable allusion to Cain's eternal punishment.

We have already observed that when moral philosophers discussed crime they attempted to combine a theory of environmental causation with a belief in individual guilt and responsibility. Proper education, religious discipline, or a reformed environment would protect the growing child from contamination. On the other hand, once a criminal had actually developed, he carried a personal guilt and responsibility for his acts, since he presumably retained the universal capacity for moral choice. Remorse, which appeared in even the most depraved, was evidence of every man's power to resist the force of environment and circumstance. Washington Irving tried to unify these seemingly incompatible ideas by employing a theme whose subtle overtones of feeling helped to modify the theories both of environment and of positive guilt. Fratricide, of course, was a more difficult crime to justify than was a
simple act of manslaughter. By striking at the primal bonds of family unity, the rebelling brother proclaimed himself an enemy of all order and authority, of all obligation and self-restraint. Irving suggested that, despite the mitigating circumstances, an act of murder was essentially a fratricide, an act of total anarchy, which could be neither explained nor justified by precipitating causes. Yet he sympathized with this persecuted Cain and emphasized the son's reconciliation with the father, so that aggression could not be equated with a revolt against the highest authority. By tracing the causes of violence to the ambiguities of family conflict, and by sympathizing with a passionate but sensitive murderer, Irving outlined a theme which was to be repeated countless times in American magazines and popular romances before the Civil War.

II

In briefly analyzing the history of moral philosophy from the early eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, we have seen a tendency to deny the doctrine of man's total depravity and to restore "natural man" to the original purity of an Adam who possessed capacities for either good or evil. In America, especially after 1830, "nature" was associated with the goodness of children, with the spontaneous expression of the "real self," and with the innocence of desires uncorrupted by civilization. According to an increasing number of writers, morality did not result from the discipline of passions by a stern conscience, but rather from a liberation of the finer impulses. Yet this identification of conscience with instinct, which was an outgrowth of the moral-sense theory, tended to blur the ancient distinction between reason and sinful desire. Just as Jonathan Edwards, after surrendering the intellect to Lockian psychology, had difficulty in
distinguishing religious from nonreligious affections, so nineteenth-century writers who had abandoned intellect as a source of virtue found it difficult to differentiate between pure impulse and improper desire.

If we may use for a moment the convenient terminology of Freud, this change in moral theory as reflected in literature might be described as an awakening of interest in the human libido and as a rejection of the belief that law rested upon the authority of the superego. Yet even those imaginative writers who glorified man’s primal instincts as the foundation of both genius and morality were conscious of the fact that impulses, unguided by reason, might lead to violence and crime. Consequently, they went back in their search for natural virtue to man’s original, undifferentiated libido, which had the capacity for either love or hatred and which, before it had been expressed as conscious desire, was sinless. In such a vitalistic psychology, with its confusion of various nonintellectual powers, moral purity became synonomous with unrestricted impulse, unenlightened by conscious choice, and unaware of the superego’s law. Writers found obvious symbols for this sinless libido in Adam, in natural men, and in children. But since a primitive impulse is at least partly sexual and preserves its purity only in being unconscious, these same writers found it difficult to describe an uncorrupted passion without thereby corrupting it. Thus we have the misty idylls, the innocent, sylvan dance, with eunuch Satyrs and somber Pans.

Although Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* was published in 1860, it is curiously remote from the world of Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin. It rather presents a world of pensive sculptors and fiery young painters who dare to reproduce “the exact likeness” of an old masterpiece, a world where every artist is a genius, where doves flutter, glances are bewitching, and mysterious meetings
occur in the Colosseum and catacombs. Like Irving, Hawthorne associated Italy with artistic genius, with mystery, and with passionate violence, but Hawthorne's romance of natural man's corruption was a significant departure from the psychology which Irving had postulated. In _The Marble Faun_ all traces of Lockian theories have disappeared, while various human faculties have been merged in a single flood of human passion, which contains potentialities for benevolence, artistic creation, love, and aggression. This basic, original passion is innocent, but it is also unstable, since it yearns for expression and self-consciousness. Man is at first immersed in nature and there enjoys a naïve happiness, but as he begins to transcend nature, man's spontaneous and diffused impulses coalesce into sustained desire. At this critical point, so the theme goes, man either falls into sin or his passions are sublimated to artistic creation. Natural man, it should be noted, is not a rational man whose intellect calmly selects the greatest good, nor is he even a personification of the moral sense. Natural man is essentially a spontaneous man with a self undivided by separate senses or faculties.

Donatello, Hawthorne's natural man, was an Italian nobleman, not exactly a child or a man, but in "a high and beautiful sense, an animal." He was described as a more nearly perfect being, in his own state, than man, but he also possessed the capacity for enlightenment and thus for evil. This, of course, was a complete reversal of traditional morality, which regarded enlightenment as the only source of virtue and which would have interpreted an animal-man as a monstrosity. But if Donatello embodied the ideal of man in nature, Hilda, the mawkishly good dove-girl, was definitely beyond nature. She was good only because her passions had been trained and refined to the point of elimination; but unlike Donatello, she was
not especially happy in her goodness, despite her artistic
genius. After human nature had been enlightened, it
would seem, no amount of cultivation could restore the
freedom and happiness of the beautiful animal, who lived
only for the present moment and who had never experi­
enced guilt or shame.

But Donatello was also a man, even though he was
referred to as a cousin of a satyr and took part in an
expurgated sylvan dance. It was when his passions con­
centrated on a particular object, on a woman, that he
began to rise above the sea of undifferentiated desire and
into the crisp, harsh air of conscious choice. Originally,
he had loved all people equally and had hated none. His
corruption came, however, from directing all of his en­
ergies toward the possession of a single woman's love,
whereby he excluded the rest of the human race from his
affections. In a sense, then, he became alienated from
humanity by his growing incapacity for universal benev­
olence. Hawthorne seemed to say that a man's potentiality
for hatred and aggression increased in proportion to his
passionate love for a single woman. When Donatello
murdered Miriam's persecutor merely because her eyes
consented to the act, he achieved a mystical union with
his lover but he had symbolically renounced human­
ity.

In this allegory of man's fall, Hawthorne reinterpreted
the biblical drama in terms of a vitalistic psychology. The
conflict between good and evil did not arise from man's
disobedience to external command, nor from an internal
struggle between reason and passion. Instead of locating
good and evil in different human faculties, Hawthorne
saw them as possible stages in the development of a single,
passionate energy. At the beginning of this process was
the pristine goodness of natural man. The final, if some­
what unsatisfying, end of human development seemed to
be the conventional heroine, whose tense virtue resulted from a refinement that killed her human warmth and sympathy. The question which Hawthorne posed was whether natural man could develop beyond nature without falling into sin; or, to put it another way, whether nature could become self-conscious without becoming guilty. He concluded, of course, that virtue was secure only in the bosom of a Hilda, where passionate energy had been converted into a New England conscience and a love of art; but his sympathy for the spontaneous impulse was otherwise unconcealed.

III

When we search for assumptions concerning human evil over sixty years of American literature, we find a growing tendency to reduce the importance of reason in man's moral conduct. In Ormond (1799), one of Charles Brockden Brown's characters expressed a theory which made man subject to the power of habit, and thus to an external moral or physical environment: “Human life is momentous or trivial in our eyes, according to the course which our habits and opinions have taken. Passion greedily accepts, and habit readily offers, the sacrifice of another's life, and reason obeys the impulse of education and desire.” If native reason was subservient to habit, it also followed that a heroine like Brown's Constantia Dudley, whose habits had been properly directed to the pursuit of virtue, would be morally secure even in the face of calamitous plagues, murders, and attempted rapes.

A generation later, the elder Richard Henry Dana refused to believe that an enlightened mind would make a man invulnerable to sin: “So evil, however, is the nature of men, that almost the love of what is excellent may lead us astray, if we do not take heed to the way in which we seek it; and we may see, and understand, and wish for it,
till we come to envy it in another.” ¹ No mistake could be greater than the rationalist’s confidence in reason, for, as one Cooper character said in 1825, “The amount of human knowledge is but to know how much we are under the dominion of our passions; and he who has learned by experience how to smother the volcano, and he who never felt its fires, are surely fit associates.” ² Conscience might be an innate and divine power, as Cooper at times maintained, but it needed confirmation by habit and training.³ The human passions were often likened to a growing plant. Capable of developing wholesome flowers, or dazzling but poisonous blossoms, as in Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1846), they required careful cultivation and pruning. Seldom could conscience prevent or reason detect a gradual warping of the soul “because of that instinctive sophistry with which the mind is ever ready to defend itself from whatever is painful. . . . Indeed, evil is but another name for moral discord; its law, revulsion; and its final issue, the shutting up the soul in impenetrable solitude.” ⁴ Thus Washington Allston described the process of rationalization in 1841, indicating a belief in the essential unity of human faculties. Four years later Cooper was even more explicit: “Seldom does man commit a wrong but he sets his ingenuity to work to frame excuses for it. When his mind thus gets to be perverted by the influence of his passions, and more especially by that of rapacity, he never fails to fancy new principles to exist to favour his schemes.” ⁵

¹ Richard Henry Dana, Poems and Prose Writings (New York, 1849), I, 271.
² James Fenimore Cooper, Lionel Lincoln; or, The Leaguer of Boston (New York, 1852), p. 66.
⁵ James Fenimore Cooper, The Chainbearer; or, The Littlepage Manuscripts (New York, 1852), II, 24.
The Christian doctrine of man's total fall received a naturalistic interpretation whenever writers stressed the interdependence of man's faculties, since either a delusion of reason or a corruption of passion would pervert an individual's total behavior. The passage just quoted from Cooper is an echo of the eighteenth-century belief in a "ruling passion," which may be seen in the antirationalism of Bernard Mandeville and David Hume. This idea of a passion which dominates thoughts as well as actions was most popular in nineteenth-century literature and played, as we shall see, an important part in shaping attitudes toward insanity. In explaining the process of rationalization, it also substantiated the older doctrine that a single sin opens the way for multiple and repeated crimes. As one of Hawthorne's first villains said, in Fanshawe (1828), "There is a pass, when evil deeds can add nothing to guilt, nor good ones take anything from it." If a ruling passion showed that sin could infect the entire nature of a man, evil was also felt by some writers to be contagious in space and time, so that one evil act might spread outward or be transmitted to future generations (like Hawthorne's Maule's curse).

Another biblical doctrine—that evil embodies the seeds of its own destruction—was commonly given a naturalistic justification. Passions could drive a man to outward violence and maliciousness, but they could also turn inward as self-inflicted aggression. "Perhaps," as William Gilmore Simms wrote in 1835, "one of the most natural and necessary agents of man, in his progress through life, is the desire to destroy." But in 1841 Simms added that this impulse could also mean self-destruction:

There is a perversity of mood which is the worst of all such penalties. There are tortures which the foolish heart equally inflicts and endures. The passions riot on their own nature; and, feeding as they do upon that blossom from which they spring . . . may [they], not inaptly, be likened to that unnatural brood which gnaws into the heart of the mother-bird, and sustains its existence at the expense of hers.  

Cooper, whose theories of human nature were generally less naturalistic than were Simms's, simply said that "it is a law of human nature, that the excesses of passion bring their own rebukes." 9 Such a belief in natural nemesis, as opposed to eternal punishment in an afterlife, raised disturbing questions concerning human justice. If the dominance of evil passions destroyed a criminal's happiness, and if a contorted and twisted soul was its own punishment, then sin seemed very much like a disease which no man would consciously choose. How could official punishment administered by the state cure a diseased mind which actually had an impulsive desire for suffering and self-destruction?

Moreover, as the idea of a ruling passion was adapted to a vitalistic psychology that reduced the importance of reason in even normal life, it seemed that vice might be directed by many influences which were not necessarily evil in themselves: "It carries the knife, it strikes the blow, but is not always the chooser of its own victim," according to Simms. In other words, political and religious aggression, justified by high motives and good intentions, were not essentially different from the violence of an individual criminal. Despite the fact that aggression was universal in human nature, men thought of themselves

8 William Gilmore Simms, Confession; or, The Blind Heart (Chicago, 1890), pp. 11–12.
9 Cooper, Chainbearer, p. 149.
as virtuous beings and justified their actions with extravagant theories:

The murderer is not unfrequently found to possess benevolence as well as veneration in a high degree; and the zealots of all countries and religions are almost invariably creatures of strong and violent passions, to which the extravagance of their zeal and devotion furnishes an outlet, which is not always innocent in its direction or effects. Thus, in their enthusiasm—which is only a minor madness—whether the Hindoo bramin [sic] or the Spanish bigot, the English roundhead... it is but a word and a blow—though the word be a hurried prayer to the God of their adoration, and the blow aimed with all the malevolence of hell at the bosom of a fellow-creature. There is no greater inconsistency in the one character than in the other.10

The more that writers abandoned reason as a firm, autonomous judge of right and wrong, the more it seemed that human personality was determined by environment. Men might not be predestined saints and sinners, but writers often referred to them as moral weathervanes or as stones “divinely kicked.” When responsible moral choice was identified with refined impulse, a wholesome environment acquired a greater importance in raising moral children; it became a substitute, in some degree, for religious conversion and formal education. In the atmosphere of a tavern, according to Timothy Shay Arthur, a youth’s pure, original impulses would be corrupted, his face would acquire a “sensual expression,” and his natural disgust for obscenity would be transformed into a licentious smirk. An adolescent’s environment required strict supervision: “Thousands and hundreds of thousands are indebted to useful work, occupying many hours through each day, and leaving them with wearied bodies at night,

for their safe passage from yielding youth to firm, resisting manhood.” ¹¹ The belief that moral stability may be ensured by the discipline of work was implicit in Locke as well as in the Christian doctrine of an “effectual calling,” but in neither Locke nor traditional Christianity was work presented as a cultivation of pure, original impulses. For such men as Timothy Shay Arthur, it was necessary to believe that moral development depended on the environment, or there would be no need for reform; on the other hand, moral certainty and responsibility could be defended only by assuming that children possessed an original capacity for virtue, an assumption which implied an inherent moral sense within all men. Reform would bring the environment into accordance with the dictates of this original conscience and would thereby liberate the enslaved moral sense of those whom circumstances had depraved.

Between 1798 and 1860 American writers differed violently on moral questions concerning such matters as the virtue of children and Indians, but perhaps the most important contradiction pertained to the strength of human conscience and will. Most writers accepted the conviction of philosophers that good and evil were absolute terms, which could be sensed by feeling, if not understood by reason. We have seen that even a capacity for moral feeling could be interpreted as proof of responsibility by certain moral philosophers, since man was presumed to be able to will whatever he was capable of doing. Many writers assumed that if the moral sense was properly cultivated from childhood, man could resist most temptations. A heroine like Brown’s Constantia Dudley, whose reason and habits had been carefully trained, was able to preserve her virtue and dignity under the pressure of a

most adverse environment. Cooper's Leatherstocking and the hundreds of popular heroes who followed him preserved their inner sense of justice in remote forests and on the high seas.

Yet moral feelings are intimately associated with other feelings, and a distinction between evil and moral impulses might be lost in a unity of emotion. Even those who celebrated the natural goodness of children warned that original virtue was exceedingly fragile. Writers who assumed a vital unity among the human faculties also concluded that any man could be reduced to animal madness by physical or psychic torture.

There is a striking scene in Simms's *Beuchampe* (1842), where the heroine wants to die with the imprisoned Beauchampe so that they might go together "to another country." The hero, who was perhaps familiar with Dante's Count Ugolino, was not sure about love and loyalty in other countries. He told a tale of two lovers who were imprisoned together by a tyrant. The first days only intensified their love, since they were overjoyed at finding themselves together. But as famine reached across the tiny cell, they drew apart, and the tyrant was finally able to gloat at the vision of the lover-hero with his teeth buried in the neck of the girl. That such possibilities were not totally foreign to American experience is seen in the famous Donner tragedy, which occurred four years after *Beuchampe* was published. Beauchampe himself was pessimistic concerning human strength:

In those dreadful extremes of situation, from which our feeble nature recoils, all passions and sentiments run into one. . . . It is not our love that fails us, in the hour of physical and mental torment. It is our strength. Thought and principle, truth and purity, are poor defenses, when the frame is agonized with a torture beyond what nature was intended to endure. Then the strongest man deserts his faith and disavows his principles.
Then the purest becomes profligate, and the truest dilates in falsehood. . . . Ah, of this future, dear wife! This awful, unknown future! 12

Some writers felt that man's own evil increased as he left the limits of organized society and penetrated the heart of nature. Nature, like Dante's hell, was under the primitive law of retribution. Poe used the sea as a symbol of man's evil and violence in The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838). As the "Grampus" headed away from the restraints and order of land, there were increasingly bloody scenes of mutiny and treachery. Freedom and liberty from social frustrations meant subjection to the primitive impulses of nature, especially to the impulse to eat and the necessity of being eaten. The men lost all bearings and direction, they were rootless on a sea of violence and evil, and their cannibalism on the ocean's surface was only an echo of the primeval "law" of the sea. When a character, Augustus, died from wounds after he had eaten human meat, he was thrown into the sea where he was instantly torn to pieces by sharks.

Thirteen years later another fictional voyage was to signify the collapse of reason and restraint when the psychic and physical pressure of the ocean and an even more inscrutable embodiment of power would arouse only the defiant and aggressive passions of man. In Moby-Dick (1851) the impotence of intellect not only appeared in Ahab's rejection of Starbuck's judgment and in Starbuck's unwillingness to mutiny, but also was symbolically expressed in the heedless destruction of nautical instruments, the instruments of reason which plotted man's course through the unknown.13 That this black, irrational

aggression was latent in all men and groups was the theme of "Benito Cereno" (1856), wherein negligence and the isolation of a ship at sea once again provided the opportunity for an eruption of evil. In Pierre (1852) Melville pictured innocent, virtuous man as bewildered and helpless before a malicious fate. In this final statement of man's frailty, reason was illusory, the impulse to love became incestuous, and friendship resulted in murder. In no other American work of the nineteenth century was the confusion of impulses so complete.

IV

By associating the human will and conscience with instinctive impulses which at once dominated reason and were themselves shaped by circumstance, some writers were led to the pessimistic conclusion that man is incapable of knowing or choosing the greatest good. The moral impotence of Melville's Pierre Glendinning may be taken as one of the extreme developments of a psychology which reduced intellect to mechanism and searched for moral certainty in man's feeling. The moral sense, invented to preserve absolute virtue from the contingencies of experience, broke down in the ambiguities of passion. Men might glorify the pure, original impulses of nature, but as Hawthorne sensed, these impulses often lost their innocence when translated into action.

The same psychology, however, might result in an entirely different creation. Pierre Glendinning seemed morally impotent because he was driven by necessity and was therefore unable to conform to a higher law. But inner necessity might also produce the absolute outer freedom of the superman. The jutting crags, steaming volcanoes, and blasted oaks which men called sublime were considered "interesting" because they broke the natural order, the harmony and balance of a perfect system. They had been caused, of course, but they were not
without a certain exhilarating freedom. Conformity implied diffusion and dissolution, whereas deformity had a stark, specific quality, a freedom in the very intensity and uniqueness of being. There was a kind of freedom in not conforming to God's law or to the inclinations of a moral sense, but in being one's true self. If there were no guiding principle, no innate ideas, and no sense which could not be transformed by environment, each man would be exceptional, a product of unique pressures and influences. He would be a law unto himself, since he differed significantly from every other man. Society might demand obedience to certain laws in the interest of order, but man would have no inner obligation to obey, except for temporary expediency.

The superman was doubtless a logical outcome of the general shift from God- to man-centered morality. Such a frightening specter was probably responsible for the tenacity with which men held to the doctrines of a divine conscience or an immanent moral sense. The concept of superman was a kind of nuclear fission in the history of ideas, from which men shrank with horror. The explosive quality of the French Revolution accentuated the dangers of this new kind of freedom and of materialistic philosophy in general; the vision of superman was too powerful to eradicate.

After the French Revolution, literature in the West was compelled to face the implications of superman, whose freedom lay in the necessity of his individual inner law and in his isolation from the transcendent laws of God or nature. If Adam's original freedom had been the power of conforming contingent actions to a necessary good, the superman's freedom was the power of conforming a contingent good to a necessary act. Inasmuch as the superman's moral standard was limited to his own actions, it followed that the actions of all other men were differ-
ent, hostile, and, in a sense, immoral. Hence the superman was self-sufficient, autonomous, and in a state of war with the rest of humanity.

He was an ideal villain, a sublime rebel, an abrupt fissure in the great chain of being, one who commanded awe and wonder. Though he considered all men as essentially like himself in their true motives, the superman was a genius because of his great sensitivity and his inherent honesty. Contemptuous of the moral hypocrisy of others, he succeeded in worldly endeavors because he did not allow his inner self to be stifled by slavelike submission to false values.

In American literature of the period the concept of superman usually had four implications. The first was insanity, which will be discussed in later chapters. The second was an association with Europe, especially with the French Revolution and its aftermath. Closely related to this association was the idea that some organized conspiracy sought to gain control of at least part of the world. Finally, the superman might be either a scientist, the creation of a scientist, or a man familiar with mesmerism or Far Eastern magic.

Charles Brockden Brown was deeply troubled by the results of the French Revolution, since he had himself held the belief that evil was nothing more than error reduced to practice and that genuine progress was therefore possible through social and political reforms. In his journal he had plotted a utopian commonwealth, strongly influenced by William Godwin’s *Political Justice* as well as by the agrarian philosophy of Thomas Jefferson. Yet he had the following comment on the French Revolution:

From the miscarriage of a scheme of frantic innovation, we conceive an unreasonable and undiscriminating dread of all change and reform. The failure of an attempt to make government perfect reconciles us to imperfections that might easily be removed. . . . The French revolution has thrown us back half a century in the course of political improvement and driven us to cling once more, with superstitious terror, at the feet of those idols from which we had been nearly reclaimed by the lessons of a milder philosophy.16

Such is the dilemma of the liberal in an age of revolution; and while Brown was repelled by the excesses of the French, he was also fascinated by the fearlessness of European radicals. Yet his gradual shift toward conservatism, as with many other liberals, implied a certain guilt, since the Revolution showed what his earlier ideas might have brought about. He could maintain an interest in mild reforms like women's rights or the abolition of dueling, but his impulse toward extreme radicalism found its outlet in fictional villains.

We might hypothetically suppose that Brown and many of his readers felt a curious ambivalence toward the villain supermen. Included in this complex attitude would be their original desire to see the American Revolution culminate in sweeping social changes and a man-centered morality—the realization, in other words, of the potentialities for reform implicit in the sensational psychology. But there was a disturbing awareness that such idealism might in reality be reduced to a government of unchecked and brutal power, a morality of sheer expediency, and an obliteration of man's dignity. The original desire was consequently projected as the image of the superman, and the guilt was expiated by his necessary destruction. As Bernard Shaw later put it in his analysis of the superman's

evil and cruelty, "men felt all the charm of abounding life and abandonment to its impulses," but they did not dare "in their deep self-mistrust, conceive it otherwise than as a force making for evil—one which must lead to universal ruin."  

Like many of his fellow Americans, Brown was obsessed by the dangers of the Society of the Illuminati, founded by an anti-Jesuit at the University of Ingolstadt in 1776, "to reform mankind." Proclaiming itself at war with man-made religious and social institutions, the society intended to enlighten humanity by liquidating error and superstition, to which end no means were to be spared. Any member who revealed the secrets of the order was supposedly doomed to certain death. Brown shared many of these beliefs about error, superstition, and the necessity of rational education, but he was also conscious of the totalitarian character of such a movement. Hence in his Memoirs of Carwin, the Biloquist (1815), in Wieland (1798), and in Ormond (1799), the villain supermen were all, by implication, associated with an invisible empire.

It has often been said that Brown copied his villains after William Godwin's Falkland in Caleb Williams (1794), but there was an important difference. Falkland represented the evil of the existing system, which Godwin wanted to change. Brown's villains were themselves radicals who preached the philosophy Brown once believed, but who proposed to put it into effect by a ruthlessly cold logic which never stopped at murder. In a young and expanding democracy, the opportunities for the superman were very great; therefore, Brown implied, these villains

represented what we might have become and what we should avoid becoming, no matter how attractive their ultimate objectives might be.

The superman who makes his own law was a common figure in later American novels. The Byronic heroes of John Neal carried a strong imprint of Brown in their sublime passions, their unappeasable ambition, and their compulsive drive for a single end, regardless of means. When a villain in a Robert Montgomery Bird novel was accused by the heroine of being a scoundrel, he freely confessed and said that if a man cannot win one way he will win another; it was only natural that he should be a villain when she resisted him.

But after 1830 a new superman began to appear in popular American literature, one whose powers included a mystical exploitation of "science." The superman scientist was related directly to the revival of mesmerism in France and England. The French Royal Academy of Medicine, which had discredited Franz Anton Mesmer's experiments in 1784, had by 1831 accepted hypotism, or "psycodunamic somnambulism," as a legitimate area for research. Joseph du Commun is alleged to have given the first lectures in America on mesmerism in 1829, to be followed some years later by the more famous Charles Poyen de St. Sauveur. As mermerism attracted popular interest in England and America, the mysterious hypnotist became a stock figure in adventure fiction.

In The Quaker City (1844) George Lippard combined Brown's Society of the Illuminati with a stereotype of the mystical scientist. Ravoni, a European mesmerist with a

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large American following, preached a new faith in the name of man and for the good of man. Since the worship of God had resulted in superstition and murder, it was time to develop the mysteries implanted in man's own bosom, so that man himself might walk the earth as a god. The leader of an ancient, secret organization with the purpose of liberating man from priestcraft and ignorance, Ravoni had a magnetic glance and an all-powerful will. He denied the existence of an afterlife, but he argued that immortality was possible through a mysterious cultivation of the senses. Unlike many of the supermen in European fiction, who were often isolated villains perverting mysterious powers for selfish purposes, Ravoni intended to transform society and to make science the instrument of ideology. Very often in popular American literature the mysterious organization for world domination was simply the Catholic church. The superman was a Jesuit priest charged with gaining control of America, while Catholic doctrine was merely a cloak to conceal his basic atheism. Whether mesmerist or Jesuit, however, the superman never hesitated at murder.

The major exception to the European superman may be seen in the literature of the South and Southwest. There the superman was definitely native, and the conspiracy involved the capture of Mexico, domination of the southern states, and ultimate control of the Western Hemisphere. Yet the motives and psychology were strikingly similar to those of Brown's Ormond. In Alfred W. Arrington's *The Rangers and Regulators of the Tanaha* (1856), a bandit leader controlled an extensive organization extending over many states and territories with the object of subverting law and order. Like Ormond, the bandit argued that sin and punishment were only idle words, since the Hand of Destiny shaped all actions. Thoughts, he maintained, follow the unalterable laws of association
with the regularity of a pulse. He denied the existence of a will or conscience and said that terror and imagination made the gods. Thus could the sensational psychology of the Enlightenment be perverted to justify the ambitions of selfish and evil men, at least in American fiction.

It is important to note that the superman villain was not a representative of tradition, of authority, or of a father. Native or immigrant, he was in one sense the projected image of young America. He was a member of the peer group who was not playing according to the rules of the game, which had been handed down by tradition. In a land without the absolute authority of king or church, in a land where law ultimately rested upon the natural virtue of the people, men might confuse total amorality with rigorous individualism. It was necessary, therefore, to consider superman as a villain, as an embodiment of mysterious evil, and as an alienated competitor.

One could gaze upon the self-sufficient superman, the sublime deformity of human nature, one could follow his career with an emotional interest, achieving a certain freedom from conformity by identifying oneself with the superman’s power, and at the same time it was easy to explain him as a distorted and poisonous root, a unique growth whose moral impulse had gone to rot. Despite his brief and exciting freedom from natural law, it was only proper that the superman should wither and die from his own unnatural freedom.

His very existence, however, was evidence that sensational psychology, environmentalism, and materialism, could not be ignored. Neither writers of fiction nor moral philosophers could avoid a fundamental question posed by David Hume: Do morality and immorality proceed from an amoral source? Any attempt to reform society was based on an assumption that individuals were morally influenced by their environment, a presupposition seldom
questioned in American fiction. Yet such a doctrine of moral environmentalism, if allowed to stand as a final explanation, would endanger the concept of human guilt. Imaginative writers were united with theologians and philosophers in their effort to find some autonomous faculty within man's nature, some divine prism which would automatically break the light of experience into its moral components, revealing eternal laws to the human will and reason, regardless of individual misfortune or handicaps. After Locke had refuted the theory of innate ideas, it was obvious that the understanding, dependent on sensory impressions, would not satisfy the need for an independent moral faculty. But as men abandoned the intellect and turned to the senses and emotions for moral certainty, they were made even more aware of individual differences and of the subjectivity of ethical judgment. Imaginative writers tended to identify the moral sense with natural man, implying that improper environment might blunt such a delicate sensitivity. The relations between brothers or between father and son were of supreme importance, since only in the love and unity of a family could mortality be nurtured. Yet the literature of our period was haunted by a basic problem which has never been answered: if the moral sense is innate and universal, why are some men evil? and if the moral sense is corrupted by external forces, are evil men truly guilty? This question was central to the interpretation of insanity.