

**UNIVERZITA KARLOVA –FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA**  
**ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR**

**The Social and Political Reasons for Incest Fascination In 19<sup>th</sup>  
Century America**

**BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE**

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Prague, August 2019

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Anglistika -amerikanistika

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V Praze dne 14.srpna 2019

I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

Prague, 14 August 2019

## **Acknowledgement**

My gratitude goes to prof. Robbins for his expertise and unbound patience. You are a source of inspiration.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

## **Abstract**

The subject of this BA thesis is social and political reasons behind the incest fascination in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. My aim is to investigate the surprisingly common details prevalent in this area of American literature and to find and explain reasons behind their presence. In such stories, due to the fathers' infidelity a young man or women eventually end up in a situation of nearly committing incest with either their father or their own half sibling. Afterwards, the realization of said fact causes misery and often death to both parties involved. The mother's presence plays no role in this kind of novels, as she is either narratively absent or outright dead. This thesis will attempt to prove that abovementioned scenario is not merely a way to attract fame and riches but the representation of fears that plagued the population of New World. The works which will be discussed are Alice Doane's *Appeal* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Marian and Lydia, *Mentoria; or The young lady's friend* by Mrs. Rowson, *Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*, Herman Melville, *The Power of Sympathy: or, the Triumph of Nature* by William Hill Brown and Louisa May Alcott's *The Marble Woman, or the Mysterious Model*.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction in which I discuss the reasons behind the thesis, define the argument and explain my methodology. Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of the relevant time period, emphasizing the elements that created the socio-political instability of American society. Chapter 3 provides analysis of the chosen books, showing the similarities narrative in the featured stories and explaining their shared aspects through the historical facts mentioned in the previous chapter. Chapter 4 deals with the secondary connections between the novels, while finding the basis behind their presence in the fears and actions of 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans. The last chapter, being the conclusion, reiterates my aim and argument while also providing my advice on the further research of the topic.

## Abstrakt

Předmětem této bakalářské práce jsou společenské a politické příčiny doprovázející fascinaci incestem v Americe 19. století. Mým cílem je prozkoumat překvapivě běžné zmínky převládající v této oblasti americké literatury a najít a vysvětlit důvody jejich přítomnosti. V předmětných příbězích se v důsledku nevěry otce mladý muž nebo žena nakonec ocitají v situaci, kdy téměř spáchají incest buď se svým otcem, nebo svým nevlastním sourozencem. Uvědomění si této skutečnosti následně vede k trápení a často ke smrti obou zúčastněných stran. V tomto druhu románů nehraje přítomnost matky žádnou roli, neboť matka v naraci často úplně chybí nebo je rovnou mrtvá. Práce se pokusí dokázat, že shora popsany scénář není pouze způsobem, jak dosáhnout slávy a bohatství, ale též vyjadřuje strach, jež sužoval obyvatele Nového světa. Probíraná literární díla zahrnují *Prosbu Alice Done* od Nathaniela Hawthorna, *Marian a Lydie, Mentoría, aneb Přítel mladé dámy* autorky paní Rowson, *Zánik domu Usherů* Edgara Allana Poea, *Pierre, aneb Dvojznačnosti* Hermana Melvilla, *Síla soucitu, aneb Triumf přírody* Williama Hilla Browna a *Mramorová žena, aneb Tajemná modelka* Louisy May Alcott.

Práce je rozdělena do pěti kapitol. První kapitola představuje úvod, kde předkládám důvody této práce, vymezuji argumentaci a vysvětluji použitou metodiku. Druhá kapitola prezentuje historický přehled předmětného časového období, s důrazem na prvky vytvářející politickou nestabilitu americké společnosti. Třetí kapitola je analýzou vybraných knih, s poukázáním na podobnosti v naraci zkoumaných příběhů a vysvětlení jejich společných aspektů s využitím historických faktů zmíněných v předchozí kapitole. Čtvrtá kapitola se věnuje sekundárním vazbám mezi romány a hledá kořeny jejich přítomnosti ve strachu a konání Američanů 19. století. V poslední kapitole - závěru - je zopakován můj cíl a argumentace a uvedeno mé doporučení k dalšímu výzkumu k tématu.

# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>1. Chapter I. Introduction</b>                   | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>2. Chapter II. The Unstable American Society</b> | <b>13</b> |
| <b>3. Chapter III. The Primary Connections</b>      | <b>24</b> |
| <b>4. Chapter IV. Additional Connections</b>        | <b>36</b> |
| <b>5. Chapter V. Conclusion</b>                     | <b>47</b> |
| <b>6. Bibliography.</b>                             | <b>54</b> |

## Chapter I. Introduction

My fascination with the thesis theme began some time ago when I happened on three American novels: *Invisible Man*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *The Color Purple*. Despite the significant differences between the stories, they do share one element: that of an abusive incestuous father figure. In *The Bluest Eye* Cholly rapes his daughter Pecola several times, impregnating her in the process. While the action in itself was traumatic for the girl, the resulting public scorn combined with persisting discrimination and her miscarriage made her lose her mind. *The Color Purple* has the main character, Celie, also being raped by the man she called father, who also disposes of the children she gave birth to. Besides a rather obvious trauma, her experience makes her fearful of men and greatly damages her self-confidence, which takes many years to recover. In comparison, Jim Trueblood is the lesser evil. He does indeed rape and impregnate his daughter, but it seems to be done unwittingly, as he appears to have been sleepwalking for most of the act. Still, he irrevocably changes his family as neither his wife nor his daughter will talk to him, as a result of both having borne his children. "I can understand then why Matty Lou won't look at me and won't speak a word to nobody".<sup>1</sup> One could further speculate the untold psychological damage done to the girl, as being forced into incest and enjoying it to an extent is unlikely to have improved her mental health even without taking into the consideration her pregnancy and the rift between her parents. As for myself, I was intrigued by the recurring element and tried to find the reason behind it. After being advised by other scholars, I have learned that African American incest in the literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was only a part of a bigger whole that was rooted in the previous century. Thus my attention shifted towards the 19<sup>th</sup> century in America. After separately confirming the noticeable presence of incest in the contemporary literature, I had to learn the reasons behind it. After all, the books of both centuries that I have read did not use incest for a mere exotic salacious element for their readers. Instead, there appears to be a

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<sup>1</sup>Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952)

deeper, more serious reason behind it, and so I chose to satisfy my curiosity by finding and explaining this reason through my thesis.

To do so, I took six independent authors who lived in the relevant time period and wrote an incestuous novel. Then I compared the works to see the similarities between both the characters and the plot developments, correcting my personal impressions with that of respected critics. Following this procedure, the analysis of these common elements was made with the goal of establishing whether or not the correlation was accidental. From there, a careful research of the delineated period of American history was made through the usage of trustworthy history books and articles. Special attention was paid to events and persons that significantly affected both the society and the perception of it in the eyes of individuals constituting the reading public. After it was done, I did another analysis with the aim of finding whether or not these historic facts resembled the shared themes and motifs between the incest novels. After the connections were found and deemed substantial, a final investigation was made concerning the likelihood of authors' voicing both their and public opinions about politics and the state of their nation. Throughout the act of writing the thesis, multiple inquiries were made to my supervisor regarding both the technical issues and the viability of my ideas and sources.

For the most part, writers write for several reasons: to educate, to earn money, for the sake of writing, to introduce something new into the concept of writing, for the pleasure of readers, or to influence them in some way or form. For example, cooks are often interested in the new recipes and so culinary books will affect them through giving them some new advice. Experimental fiction allows one to experiment with previously established rules in an attempt to create novelty. For some authors, writing is their chosen job and so they must continue their work in order to support themselves and their families. Others are inspired to create through their experiences and surroundings, while some are eager or forced to please their readers. And thus many literary genres were brought into existence. However, many literary works deal with topics that would normally hold little interest to masses. In such novels there is no thrill of adventure,

no wonders to behold, and no fantasy world to immerse oneself into to escape the harsh realities of the real one. As such their true value must lie elsewhere. Because these stories often deal with dark and hidden aspects of human nature that are usually shaded from the public eye, a reader must then have either some sort of fascination with such things or, alternatively, these topics have an indirect appeal for them. In particular, plots of various incestuous novels of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America were unlikely to encourage people to commit such an act of immorality, nor was it depicted in a flattering light. Due to strict public and religious morals, it is also dubious that authors were motivated purely by their desire for money, as such stories were more likely to attract people's scorn and anger. It is also improbable that they were supposed to guide audiences on how to do the depraved thing. Quite the contrary, this type of fiction in this specific time period was supposed to steer people away from incest itself; but that was not its only purpose. Though individuals are inevitably influenced by their surroundings, these surroundings, in turn, are the result of action undertaken by the community at large. And as history shows, 19<sup>th</sup>-century America was volatile enough to provide dark inspirations to many novelists. I aim to prove that the abundance of incest-centred literature in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America was generated primarily not by the authors' seeking to gratify their audience through provocative topics, but by their reflection of and on contemporary social and political factors which were closely related to the development of America as a nation.

This thesis is separated into the five chapters, of which this introduction is the first. The second chapter provides historical information about the 19<sup>th</sup> century, specifically its major crises and authoritative figures that in spite of their position inflicted harm on the secure self-image of many individuals in American society. By this I mean actions that threatened the stability of the nation's religious and public morals. Writing about incest, I would suggest, is, at least in part, to metaphorize at the family and personal level the public betrayals that provoked citizens' doubts and fears, which in turn led to writers' embracing the incestual novels as a critical vehicle. The third chapter provides an overview of the stories used to form this thesis and

an analysis of the similarities between them. Its purpose is to make the reader aware of the fact that for stories written by unrelated people, they share certain disturbing elements. The true importance of chapters two and three is that together they rely on each other to get my point across, as, from my perspective, proper analysis of these similarities is impossible without knowing the historical basis behind them. On the other hand, by itself knowledge of the past is not sufficient for my thesis, as it does not supply the contemporary society's atmosphere, which is reflected through the authors' creations. Chapter four in turn explains the additional reasons why it was the theme of incest that was used by writers to voice their larger societal and political concerns and how it was supposed to convey moral lessons to readers. After all, various religious texts only cover the timeless need for the perfection of oneself and society at large and non-specific ways to achieve this goal, whereas political propaganda only did its best to point out various flaws in 19<sup>th</sup>-century American government in general and the candidates for the seat of president in particular. Incest, as presented in 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature, not only discussed both the human failings and lack of ethics but also did it through the new medium that was not bound by theology and matters of state. In the end, chapter five summarizes the conclusions of the thesis, and it also contains recommendations for further research.

It must be mentioned, however, that there are inherent flaws in such an approach due to the fact that the thesis relies on literary works of a time period, which is separated by many years from the present. As such, the first issue would be lack of verifiability. Though it is possible to make an educated guess based on general knowledge of human nature and people's reaction to similar events, it would be very difficult to guarantee that the reaction towards issues that plagued days of the past was as presumed in this work. Though this issue is alleviated by consultation of historians and historic records, there is no sure way to tell whether or not their analyses suffer from some inaccuracies. The second problem to consider is my potential lack of awareness. This thesis relies on specialist knowledge of contemporary 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels and stories to illustrate its ideas, and is therefore vulnerable to my possible ignorance. The

complication is two-fold. To begin with, not every incest work produced in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America survived the passage of time. Thus, if all the missing pieces were to be brought together for research purposes, the resultant analysis might yield a completely different result from this thesis's conclusion. On the other hand, though the originals might be lost forever, there are still reviews and off-handed mentions in other writings which can increase accuracy. A second issue is, is that not every 19<sup>th</sup>-century incestuous fiction was or is widely known, either to 19<sup>th</sup>-century readers or to 21<sup>st</sup>-century cultural historians. This further limits the spectrum of analysis because one cannot read something s/he has no idea even exists. The third issue with the methodology is the simple fact that this work could suffer from lack of the objectivity intended by the author. This problem is addressed through the use of relevant secondary sources and advice from other knowledgeable scholars.

## **Chapter II. The Unstable American Society**

To begin understanding America's antebellum fascination with incest in literature, it is very important first to recognize the contemporary society's predicaments. These issues could be roughly separated into three groups: corruption and incompetence of the government, societal crises, and last but not least, the development of American civilization. There is nothing new in the population of a county's being disappointed with their rulers; throughout history ineffectual leaders caused immeasurable grief and misery, both to their inner circles and their subjects. These emotions were also often caused by events, which often happened to be religious, economical or political in nature. On the other hand, there were regularly positive occasions that strengthened the nation's well-being. The still-developing community did not evade such a fate: 19<sup>th</sup>-century America had its share of both ruinous and constructive events that forever changed the land and solidified the spirit of its people. For the purposes of this thesis, some of them will be discussed in this chapter to explain how these complications were responsible for filling the minds of Americans with fears and unease, which had a direct role in the formation of incest fascination.

As it happens, a key figure to the issues surrounding the politics of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the controversial president Andrew Jackson, a national hero who won his bid for the presidency in 1828. What is important to note is that contentions surrounding him began long before his ascension to become leader of the state; Jackson also participated in the elections of 1824, which he lost to John Quincy Adams. Adams's win was the result of a deal he made with his fellow candidate Henry Clay that resulted in Clay's becoming Secretary of State after persuading Congress to elect Adams as president. Needless to say, Jackson and his supporters were greatly aggrieved with the so-called "corrupt bargain," believing it to be a breach in what was supposed to be a fair and impartial election process, an opinion that undoubtedly was not improved with even more infamous election of 1828. This election is known for being among the dirtiest in American history due to a large amount of slander both parties used against each other.

In Jackson's case, a significant bulk of it was directed towards his wife Rachel, as despite their long marriage she was reputed to be an adulteress. This was due to the fact that while she was previously married to an abusive husband, she had not divorced him until after she married Jackson, which made their relationship an infidelity in the eyes of Jackson's adversaries. Additionally, Jackson's personal habits, such as dueling and gambling, were made public to the nation, an act that failed in its primary purpose of removing him from the election, but on the other hand did nothing to improve the moral image of the government. The situation was worsened by the fact that back in 1824 "Jackson's chief campaign document appeared anonymously under the pseudonym "Wyoming"; it was largely the work of his aide John Eaton. The Letters of Wyoming called for the election of Jackson to restore accountability and public spirit (then called "virtue") to a republic whose government allegedly had lost touch with the people and become corrupt<sup>2</sup>".

To be fair, The Letters of Wyoming were not wrong about the pre-Jackson regime's wrongdoings. After Jackson's inauguration America soon faced the unpleasant truth about their illegal activities:

The first weeks of the Jackson presidency were marked by scandals – the first involving not the new administration, but the one that had just departed.... He [Jackson] appointed the trustworthy Amos Kendall as fourth auditor at the Treasury Department, with instructions to report directly to the president. Almost instantly, Kendall discovered that his own predecessor, one Tobias Watkins, a Clay man, had embezzled seven thousand dollars, and there were many more discoveries to come, involving fraud by more than a dozen of the former administration's Treasury and customs house agents...<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought : The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*. Oxford University Press, 2007. [http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/ebookviewer/ebook/bmx1YmtfXzI4NDA1MV9fQU41?sid=e27d0916-e3ca-4de9-981a-317bbab80916@sessionmgr102&vid=1&format=EB&lpid=lp\\_203&rid=0](http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/ebookviewer/ebook/bmx1YmtfXzI4NDA1MV9fQU41?sid=e27d0916-e3ca-4de9-981a-317bbab80916@sessionmgr102&vid=1&format=EB&lpid=lp_203&rid=0) Last accessed 10.08.2019 p.207

<sup>3</sup> Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, W.W.Norton & Company, Inc, 2005), p.314

In other words, Jackson's assistant revealed to the public that some members of the government were corrupt and prioritizing their personal prosperity to that of the nation at large. At the same time the revelation made it obvious that various financial hoaxes were present at the highest levels of authority, which could not have possibly sit well when combined with all the uncovered dirt from elections of 1828. "By the end of the year, close to three hundred thousand dollars turned up missing at the Treasury Department alone. Additional fraud was exposed in virtually every executive department, down to a racket in the awarding of fishing bounties".<sup>4</sup>

The damage was threefold. Most obviously, the government lost a significant portion of the nation's funds. Secondly, in an attempt to rectify this issue Jackson implemented rotation in office, an action that was looked on unfavorably due to the fear of his replacing experienced workers with incompetent ones. Thirdly, a subtler wound was dealt to the spirit of the nation. Though it was nothing new, the corruption of public servants again demonstrated the general fallibility of authorities, and the decline of corrective actions in politics did little to inspire confidence.

According to one set of statistics, Jackson removed 919 federal officials during his first year; this represented about 10 percent of all government employees. The precise number removed is subject to confusion, but it was more than all his predecessors had done in the previous forty years. By the time Congress assembled in December 1829, Jackson had already removed thirteen district attorneys, nine marshals, twenty-three registers and receivers, and twenty-five customs collectors, replacing them all with recess appointments.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted this discharge policy was not without its flaws. First of all, it did not target purely the criminals. As such, many honest workers were unjustly and forcibly retired, which decreased the overall quality of public services. Secondly, it was vulnerable to deliberate slander and deceit, providing a powerful tool for personal ambitions.

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<sup>4</sup> Wilentz, 314.

<sup>5</sup> Howe, 333.

The removal policy hit the Post Office hard. Within the first year, the new administration dismissed 423 postmasters, many with long and creditable records of service...After several months, it became obvious that the charges against incumbent office holders were all too often fabricated.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, to many Jackson's preference for appointing loyal newspaper editors was outrageous. "To the fastidious – including Jackson supporters like Thomas Ritchie, himself an editor – the policy seemed to endanger the future of a free and independent American press".<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately for Jackson his policy failed to quell the corruption as, among others, his appointment of Samuel Swartwout resulted in the latter's absconding with over one million dollars.<sup>8</sup>

Though it might be unfair to blame Jackson for the moral failings of his subordinates, the man himself too was involved in disturbing rumors. In particular his defense of Margaret Eaton resulted in a scandal that threatened public morals. John Eaton, her husband, caused a social uproar by swiftly marrying her after the suicide of her first husband John Timberlake, which was potentially caused by the whispers of the infidelity on the part of Margaret, who was known for widely bestowing her favors. After the marriage she quickly found herself boycotted by the group of administration wives:

The women who ostracized Margaret Eaton did not act out of mere snobbish rejection of a tavern-keeper's daughter; social mobility was not despised in the Jackson administration. The women saw themselves defending the interests and honor of the female half of humanity. They believed that no responsible woman should accord a man sexual favors without the assurance of support that went with marriage.<sup>9</sup>

While in the present some might consider such reasoning to be excessive, for the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its much stricter morals this rejection was justified on the basis of self-defense.

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<sup>6</sup> Howe, 333.

<sup>7</sup> Wilentz, 316

<sup>8</sup> Wilentz, 317

<sup>9</sup> Howe, 338.

A woman who broke ranks on this issue they considered a threat to all women. She encouraged men to make unwelcome advances. Therefore she must be condemned severely even if it meant applying a double standard of morality, stricter for women than for men. This conviction was widespread among women, not only in the middle class and regardless of political party. The women who had the courage to act upon it, standing up to Andrew Jackson and risking their husbands' careers, insisted that expedient politics must not control moral principle.<sup>10</sup>

Andrew Jackson, likely reminded of his own relationship with his late wife, remained Margaret's fiercest defender. He spent a lot of his time trying, however unsuccessfully, to force Margaret's acceptance by the administration wives. "Jackson was not trying to revise the prevailing code of sexual morality but defending his honor as a patriarch. He expected to be able to control his cabinet members and thought they in turn should be able to control their wives".<sup>11</sup>

Eventually Van Buren even figured a way out of the seemingly intractable social deadlock. Eaton and his wife would have to go, in order for the administration to get on with the business of government. But the only way the president could save face would be for all the cabinet to resign, including the husbands of Mrs. Eaton's detractors. Van Buren was willing to lead the way, confident that he had secured his place in the president's esteem. The other cabinet members were harder to persuade ... but of course they had no real choice.<sup>12</sup>

This sex scandal also damaged the credibility of American authorities. After all, instead of spending his valuable time ruling and guiding the nation towards prosperity Jackson invested most of his efforts into continuously defending a woman whereas "at bottom, it was a cultural divide, pitting pious, self-important Washington fixtures against new arrivals and local

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<sup>10</sup> Howe, 338.

<sup>11</sup> Howe, 337.

<sup>12</sup> Howe, 339.

commoners whom they deemed vulgar, loose in morals, and uppity.”<sup>13</sup> This event also played a role, unexpectedly and mostly unnoticed at the time: the beginning of the women’s rights movement, inspired by the example of administration wives who that bravely fought against overwhelming odds for sake of ethics.

They believed that women acting collectively could advance the moral state of society. Theirs was the attitude that justified women’s role in contemporary moral reform causes like temperance and antislavery. And although most or all of them would have been shocked if had been pointed out, theirs was the attitude that would lead in a few more years to an organized movement on behalf of women’s rights.<sup>14</sup>

The one person who openly benefited from the whole fiasco was Martin Van Buren who managed finally to solve the problem, gaining Jackson’s favor in the process, which led eventually to Van Buren’s ascension to the seat of the president.

Martin Van Buren’s claim to infamy came from what is now known as The Panic of 1837, which happened at the beginning of his term of service. As a financial crisis that lasted for more than a decade it left its mark on the population due to the high rate of unemployment, economical decline, and the depression that followed. While the roots for the collapse can be traced overseas, to Great Britain in particular, there were also internal reasons. Andrew Jackson’s policy of vetoing the bill regarding the second Bank of United States, America’s central bank at the time, allowed other banks to bring their lending practices to unsafe levels. One other issue was Jackson’s insistence on a policy that permitted the buying land only with gold and silver, to avoid land speculation. Unfortunately, it prevented actual land purchase, as not many had enough hard money to allow cash transactions. And so, with the combination of both internal and external factors, there was no escape from the disaster. It is important to note, that although it happened a mere five weeks after the inauguration of Van Buren, he was blamed by many along with Jackson. His inability to solve the problem and the unwillingness to

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<sup>13</sup> Wilentz, 318.

<sup>14</sup> Howe, 338.

authorize governmental intervention won him few supporters, with his coming also to be known as Van Ruin. The effect of the Panic was severe; as it came after an economical expansion, it shattered many hopes and expectations. In particular,

Prospects for western farmers seemed dark as the decade of the 1840s dawned: an oppressive debt that meant increased taxes, half finished roads and canals and railroads that would never be completed, hopes of competitive markets that would have elevated prices forever shattered.<sup>15</sup>

The growth of unemployment rates meant that fewer people could provide their families with necessities and food; this caused despair, and despair led to abuse and instabilities in households. Such an event could not have failed to leave its mark on all social levels of American society.

As for Van Buren himself, he too faced public disapproval caused by a woman. As he was a widower, which is what allowed him to help Jackson with the Margaret Eaton fiasco, he did not have a wife to name America's First Lady. To follow tradition, he instead nominated his son's spouse, Angelica Van Buren, for the position. Alas, for her many virtues she was not spared the ever-present criticism famous people get. Unfortunately, her social standing meant that every moment of weakness would cast a shadow on the image and the reputation of the country she represented:

Still, her [Angelica's] aunt Sally, married to U.S. Minister to Great Britain Andrew Stevenson, was disturbed by how enamored her niece had become with royal life. During her time in England, her uncle Stevenson drew her into an international scandal after being denounced by Irish patriot Daniel O'Connor as not merely an owner of enslaved people but a "slave breeder." ... it [scandal] reflected poorly on the U.S., fueled by the President's refusal to recall him because he was the First Lady's uncle.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, Fifth Edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1982), p. 335

<sup>16</sup> Carl Anthony, *First Ladies Never Married to Presidents: Angelica Van Buren*, September 2014, <http://www.firstladies.org/blog/first-ladies-never-married-to-presidents-angelica-van-buren/> Last accessed 10.08.2019.

This preferential treatment in spite of the continuous attack on America's public image was not left unnoticed.

The controversy prompted the abolitionist U.S. Whig Party to attach a negative association to Angelica Van Buren as they geared up for their 1840 challenge to defeat Van Buren for a second term in the 1840 presidential election.<sup>17</sup>

Of course the Panic of 1837 and the following depression played a large role in the dismissal of Van Buren as a corrupt and inept president. However:

As the nation endured a deep economic depression, newspaper coverage of Mrs. Van Buren's receiving style at the New Year's Day reception, as well as the anecdotal claim that she intended to re-landscape the White House grounds to resemble the royal gardens of Europe were used in a political attack on her father-in-law by a Pennsylvania Whig Congressman Charles Ogle. ...The attack was delivered in Congress and the depiction of the President as living a royal lifestyle was a primary factor in his defeat for re-election.<sup>18</sup>

With the above-mentioned events' being far from the only ones in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is easy enough to see that many Americans had a dim view of their government. The failures of the prominent authorities combined with the various stressful economic events such as numerous Panics would have been enough to destabilize the overall faith and spirit of the nation. However, the 19<sup>th</sup> century housed many different types of tragedies, of which the Civil War is perhaps the best known. Caused by the conflict of interests between South and North regarding the enslavement of black people, the war that lasted for four years took the lives of more than one and a half million people. Though there were many reasons for the conflict, such as territorial disputes, regionalism, and the election of Abraham Lincoln, the reason most remembered nowadays was slavery. The South relied on the slave labor for their economy, and to preserve "Southern" ways it utilized the rhetoric of black people's being inherently inferior to

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<sup>17</sup> Carl Anthony.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Anthony.

their white masters. For many Southerners, the notion of free Blacks was unthinkable, as it went against their fundamental traditions and common sense. Not helping matters was the fact that there were substantial efforts to discredit the concept of liberated blacks. Research reports were written that claimed that black people were less intelligent than Whites and that to free them was to doom them to pitiful deaths. Propaganda was written and painted to make people doubt their mental capacities. And so, once Lincoln became president, seven states seceded and formed the Confederate States of America. It required a long and bloody war to bring an end to American slavery. Such an event undeniably played a large role in the formation of the national identity, as can be seen from the fact that it is one of the most researched subjects in the American history. However, for a contemporary American who was not an abolitionist, the very idea of the constitution was threatened. Before Emancipation, slaves were viewed as legitimate property, and the expropriation of their owners represented a potential threat to other forms of property, the sanctity of which was a cornerstone of the American political formation. The appropriation, though many would say usurpation, of jurisdiction over what had previously been viewed as the exclusive prerogative of the states also raised major concerns.

On a more positive note, bloodshed and tragedies were not the only occurrences in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. One could mention, among the many quality improvements, the development of water transportation, which was previously held back by the sheer distances, small population and the lack of technology and engineering skill. “During the years after 1815, a society eager for transportation and open to innovation finally surmounted these difficulties.<sup>19</sup>” The creation of the Erie Canal improved

the quality as well as the quantity of life in western New York state. Where earlier settlers had been to some extent “self- sufficient”—eking out a subsistence and making do with products they made themselves or acquired locally—people now could produce

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<sup>19</sup> Howe, 216.

for a market, specialize in their occupations, and enjoy the occasional luxury brought in from outside.<sup>20</sup>

The success of the canal encouraged other states to create their own facilities for the betterment of trade, and they improved speed of delivery all the more as development of railroads rendered canals obsolete. The invention of the steamboat improved the value of water transportation<sup>21</sup>, which only advanced as technology improved the safety of steam engines and eventually led to the introduction of intercontinental steamboats. The expansion of publishing through mechanization meant that many more writers were able to earn their livelihood purely through their writings. Mechanized papermaking and printing also supported a more democratic politics, as newspapers that promoted many different agendas were made available. Moreover, the advancement of transportation and communication meant increased exchange of goods and information that increased the quality of life for many Americans.

By now it should be clear that there were a lot of transformations, both positive and negative, in the United States of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They changed the lives of men and women for better and for worse, offering a chance for a bright future while sometimes also demanding difficult sacrifices. What they did not offer to the mind and soul of American citizens was the certainty of social order. The government proved time and again that it was not above petty quarrels, greed, and the failings of human nature. Its shortsightedness was often blamed for the catastrophes it was supposed to prevent. Territorial expansion was often achieved through illegal means, frequently going against previously-established treaties and basic human decency as Native Americans in particular were repeatedly robbed of their ancestral lands and forced either to be assimilated or to move to harsh and unwanted territories. Continuous migrations in search of improved conditions meant that it was difficult to establish order and stability, with the constant influx of immigrants, settlers, and adventurers. Previous practices were repeatedly abandoned, sometimes producing violent results. Strip mining, for example, which formed a

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<sup>20</sup> Howe, 217.

<sup>21</sup> Howe, 215.

large part of America's national identity, was eventually deemed no longer sustainable and required a different but sustainable approach. Recurrent transition made many people nostalgic for a time (imagined or otherwise) when social norms were more clearly defined. Their wish was reflected in the contemporary literature that dealt with incest. For what is a better symbol of the breakdown of social norms and traditions than incest?

### Chapter III. The Primary Themes

As was established in a previous chapter America had undergone various changes in the 19th century. Those transformations, beside their primary role, had a side effect in making denizens much less sure of their stability because of the constant threat to the establishment of a stable social order and the lack of traditions. As the problem was present on all levels of society, as were its consequences, it found its reflection in the contemporary literature, more specifically works dealing with incest.

Eight times before 1830, the early American novel raises the possibility of unwitting incest. The discovery usually results in madness or suicide; only once does the threat prove specious. By dwelling on such disastrous consequences, the earliest American novelists expressed no literal fear of widespread incest, but rather a fear of the dreadful condition incest symbolizes: the absence of a well-defined social system. They used a story of thwarted love to express, obliquely, deep anxiety about ease of social movement.<sup>22</sup>

Incest, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is “Sexual relations between people classed as being too closely related to marry each other”<sup>23</sup>. Though it has occurred throughout the human history, it is generally deemed taboo and unnatural, forbidden by law and religion. However, in the American literature of the 19th century the topic is relatively common. What is interesting, however, is, is that despite being written by different authors, the plots of incestuous novels have certain similarities. Typically in such a story, a man attempts or is tempted to enter into a sexual relationship with a woman who is later revealed to be his sister or just as often his daughter. For the most part actual intercourse is averted; however, at least one side ends up dead. The bond is allowed to take place because neither side is aware of their relation, usually because

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<sup>22</sup> Anne Dalke, “Original Vice: The Political Implications of Incest in the Early American Novel.” *Early American Literature*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1988, pp. 188–201. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/25056714](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25056714). Last accessed 10.08.2019 p.188

<sup>23</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/incest>

of the unfaithfulness of a family patriarch who abandons his offspring. These novels also often lack the presence of a mother, because she is either ill or dead, which also conveniently allows the patriarch not to face retribution from her.

The typical grouping of kin in early American fiction is most often a profligate father, a dead mother, an illegitimate daughter, and a legitimate son and heir. The family unit is not dissolved by incest, but is rather fragmented even before incest occurs. Indeed, it is precisely this fragmentation that leads to the unwitting commission of the deed. .... But his misbehavior destroys the group entirely. Early American fiction depicts young men and more particularly young women entangled in the ties of family, their social mobility hampered by the sexual sins of their fathers.<sup>24</sup>

To begin with, in "Alice Doane's Appeal" by Nathaniel Hawthorne there is no description of Alice's mother nor of her brother Leonard. No mention is made of the mother of Walter Brome, who is either the twin or a half brother of Leonard. On the other hand, readers are briefly introduced to the figure of the father, but in a scene that raises some questions. While young Alice and Leonard were present to view the corpse of their father, no mention is made of Walter, who later does not seem to recognize them when he attempts to seduce Alice. The fact that they do not recognize him as well implies that the children were not raised together. However as Leonard and Walter are named twins at one point in the story, the implication is that the three are full-blooded siblings. Therefore, for them to be raised apart implies a conscious choice made by their parents, most probably by the father. In other words, a father first tears away a part of his family, an action which later enables an attempt by the story's villain completely to destroy the family through incest and fratricide. On the other hand, it is possible that "twins" are not twins at all, either through the mistake of the author (the word "twins" meaning in the context just the physical likeness) or through deception by the villain, which would explain the inability of siblings to recognize each other despite their similarities and the presumed knowledge of the

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<sup>24</sup> Anne Dalke, 188-189.

existence of kin. In the latter case, one might conclude that the father has broken up his family by his infidelity and has set in motion the chain of events that would become the story.

Alternatively, it could be that Alice was born to a different mother but was raised alongside her brother by their father, whereas Walter remained with his mother--all of which could be conceivable given the general social and geographical mobility of the time period. But in any version of the backstory, the family of four is fractured with the disastrous consequences.

In *The Power of Sympathy: or, The Triumph of Nature*, sometimes described as the first American novel, the situation is little different. The mother is absent and presumably dead. Thomas Harrington, the protagonist, lusts after Harriot Fawcett and later falls in love with her. His father is opposed to the marriage, but the pair decides to become engaged nevertheless. Near the near end of the story, the secret of Harriot's being Thomas's illegitimate half-sister is revealed: Mr. Harrington had an affair that resulted in Harriot's birth. Unwilling to risk his family's honor, the patriarch kept the girl secret, which allowed his children to fall in love with each other and led to their deaths from being unable to enter the marital union. This particular case provides an illustration of fears that plagued the contemporary society. What the book offers, is a warning against the mixture of different social levels, the fallibility of an authority figure, the vulnerability of public reputation, the upheaval of order and the undermining of traditional morality. By entering the affair, Mr. Harrington commits an error of judgment that could destroy his reputation if revealed. It also actively destroys his own family, because of the incestuous love of his offspring. He proves too powerless and fearful to resolve the issue on his own while he had a chance and has to rely on the help of a family friend even to attempt damage control. The fact that properly courting a woman to get her hand in marriage turns out to be the wrong choice for the parties involved marks the dissolution of social order and morality. After all, if Harriot only was Thomas' mistress then there would have been a decent chance of both surviving the affair if they had managed to hide it. And also not to be overlooked is the fact that

choosing to mingle with a person of different social standing doomed both lovers to death from grief.

Herman Melville's *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* also deals with the disintegration of traditional morals, failures of the authority figures, mixture of social classes and, of course, incestuous love. Young Pierre Glendenning, heir to the estate of Saddle Meadows, lives with his mother in a blissful existence until the day he accidentally meets Isabel, who claims to share a father with him. All she asks is help in getting out of a life of poverty, but Pierre is moved by her story and decides to engage in a false marriage to her to restore her to the family's fortune without hurting his father's public image and his mother's feelings. Predictably, all he accomplishes is getting himself banished from his home, with his friends, relatives and his actual betrothed abandoning him and/or being deeply hurt by his action. And so the young hero moves with his newfound sister to the New York City to provide for them by becoming an author. Unfortunately for him, he fails to accomplish his goals and, through the return of his betrothed Lucy, a chain of event forms that ends with them all dead. While at first glance it is a relatively simple tragedy, a deeper look reveals important details. To begin with, the book deserves its title by not openly confirming the theme of incest that permeates the novel.

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.<sup>25</sup>

Isabel makes quite an impression on Pierre when they first meet, which makes him willing to hear out her story. He is dead set on protecting her, yet his way to do so is grossly impractical. Of all the possible ways to help her--for example, by revealing the truth to his mother, or simply giving Isabel money or a valuable trinket, or arranging through his connections for a better job

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<sup>25</sup> Diane Long Hoeveler, "La Cenci: the Incest Motif in Hawthorne and Melville." *American Transcendental Quarterly*, No. 44 (Fall 1979): 247-59. p.251

for her--Pierre chooses the sham marriage, which, as he himself realizes, has a low chance of succeeding. After the inevitable occurs, the pair remains close to each other, even though Pierre only made things worse for them both. After Lucy chooses him instead of her family, Isabel is noticeably jealous enough of her to consider poisoning her, whereas Lucy has no trouble seeing the two as a husband and wife even though Pierre does not consummate his "marriage". When Pierre commits suicide, Isabel follows him willingly while claiming to know him better than anyone, despite knowing him only for a couple of months. Although a reader may see it as a love between siblings, certain passages sooner or later would have indicated to the audience the truth about them. As for the authority figures in the story, Pierre has three of them: both of his parents and a priest. In an inversion of the typical incest work, it is his father who is long dead, though he managed to do his part in tearing his family apart post-mortem through his legacy. He is a controversial figure due to his being deified by his wife, yet his son's opinion about him is less reverent because he was told several stories about his father's youth. After the appearance of Isabel, his opinion becomes even more conflicted by confirmation of his father's premarital affair, the authenticity of which is further supported by the facts previously given to Pierre. His mother is the person he respects and obeys the most, though this does not stop them from jokingly calling each other brother and sister. For her part she wishes to raise him as a man of great virtue and respect, though one still subservient to her; Lucy Tartan was specifically chosen as a woman who would know her place in the Glendenning household. However, once Pierre deviates from the path she has chosen for him by claiming to be engaged to Isabel, she immediately banishes him from her household, revokes his family name, and ultimately disowns and disinherits him out of jealousy. The last figure of authority is a priest who happens to be a common visitor to the household. Pierre ultimately sees him as a failure after the priest decides not to argue with Pierre's mother regarding the fate of a woman who had a premarital affair, even though as a man of religion he was obliged to denounce the harsh punishments that befell her. In other words, all of Pierre's moral guides failed him in one way or another, nor did they

help him to preserve his morals. A similar thing happens to Isabel, who, raised in the absence of her parents by unaffectionate relatives (possibly her grandparents), emerges as a result with her exotic personality. Though Glendenning Sr. possibly did participate in her later life, he did so without revealing his identity for fear of public outrage. Therefore, the two had no one to rely on when the crisis struck, and so were doomed to an early death. Needless to say, the two were of different social standings, even though Isabel should have had the same status as Pierre, had it not been for their father's refusing to legitimize or acknowledge her.

*Marian and Lydia* features a variation on the previously-mentioned concerns, in that the incest almost occurs between a father and his daughter. Marian, the woman in question, was seduced by a man, which resulted in her escaping her mother Dorcas and sister Lydia. As it often happens the man grew weary of her and abandoned her, forcing her to resort to prostitution. One day she meets Major Renfew who, she believes, wants to be her benefactor and to save her from her misfortune, while in reality he wants her to become his mistress. Marian refuses to sleep with him and while escaping his advances calls her mother's name. This shocks the man to the core, as he is revealed to be Dorcas's former husband, and thus the father of Marian and Lydia. Eventually the family reunites, but Marian dies soon after. In this putatively educational story [cautionary tale?], there is still the failure of the patriarchal authority figure, as Renfew deserted his family long ago and so left them to fend for themselves--not to mention that, despite his desire to find and save his missing daughter, when he does meet her, he tries to seduce, and nearly commits incest with, her before he recognizes her true identity. Once again when a man tries to engage in a relationship with a woman of a lower social status, they are both severely punished for it, though only Marian dies whereas Major Renfew is only beset by regret and shame.

*A Marble Woman; or, the Mysterious Model* is a novel that flirts with incest but does not actually have it:

Further, the sensational element of the tale is its flirtation with incest.[...] Basil Yorke is a father figure for Cecil, and she is a substitute for her mother, who left him; thus she is the child they should have had, and since she and her mother have put Cecil under his protection, Yorke's desire to sculpt her into an unfeeling and undemonstrative piece of marble is displaced sexual frustration. [...] Cecil occupies the center of a perversely erotically charged love triangle between Yorke's "mysterious model" who, disturbingly, is her real father, and the jealous yet protective Yorke.<sup>26</sup>

The story begins when young Cecil pays a visit to Basil Yorke as per the request of her recently expired mother. Basil, initially unwilling to let Cecil live with him, permits her to stay as long as she does not disturb him. Being a talented sculptor he teaches Cecil the art and as a result grows closer to his ward. After several years Cecil, now an attractive woman, is in love with Basil, but because of his past experience with Cecil's mother, who abandoned him for another even though they were engaged, he both does not realise her feelings and actively teaches her to ignore and suppress her desire for love, which she can only do through the heavy usage of drugs that almost kill her. After circumstances conspire to get them married Basil eventually realises his romantic affection for her, which at the end of the novel leads to their confessing to each other.

Meanwhile Cecil also greatly enjoys the company of sculpture model Germain, who is greatly predisposed towards Cecil and who has a semi antagonistic yet friendly association with Basil. Throughout the novel, the mentioning of a dark secret that justifies Basil's romantic coldness towards Cecil, the hints from Germain, and the past relationship with Cecil's mother creates the impression that Basil is actually Cecil's father, despite Cecil's mother's having claimed his death. At the climax of the story, we learn that it is Germain who is Cecil's actual father, declared dead by the virtue of his being an escaped convict. His association with Basil is based on the fact that he seduced his betrothed, failed to provide for her and their child, then in the fit of jealousy killed the doctor who was sent by Basil to save Cecil's life. After he escapes prison,

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<sup>26</sup> Monica M. Elbert and Lesley Ginsberg, *Romantic Education in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: National and Transatlantic Contexts*. (New York: Routledge, 2015) p.97

he disguises himself and becomes Basil's model. When he learns of Cecil he wants to reconnect with her but is opposed in his desire by Basil, who was asked to prevent that, and himself, because of his criminal past. As a result, he poses as Basil's friend to occasionally meet and entertain Cecil, who is implied to be enamoured with him. Only on his deathbed does he reveal the truth to Cecil, who accepts and forgives him, and it is explained that Cecil and Basil love each other. The book shares certain elements common in incestuous novels. The mother is dead; the father-like figure both harbours romantic feelings and inflicts immense emotional harm towards his child; though adopted, the child is fascinated with a person from a different social circle who turns out to be a close blood relative; and when the affection between the two grows too close, one of them dies.

As for Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," it is accepted by many critics that it, too, is about incest. After all, "The incest motif is so pervasive in Poe's other works, as well as so embedded in the American nineteenth-century *Zeitgeist*, that one suspects it is more closely tied to cultural anxieties than to personal eccentricities."<sup>27</sup> The Gothic short story is about the narrator visiting his friend Roderick Usher to help him deal with his sister's mysterious illness. After some time the sister dies and is laid to rest in the family crypt for two weeks. They grow more agitated in the next week until the storm during which Roderick hysterically reveals his belief in his sister's survival. This is proven true when said sister Madeline appears in the door; she then falls upon Roderick, killing them both. When the narrator runs from the house it immediately falls apart. The story's connection with incest may seem dubious, as there is no direct confirmation. However, it is known that the Ushers never had any branch families: "the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch;"<sup>28</sup> More importantly, the following lines of Roderick are perhaps the strongest implication: " 'Her decease,' he said, with a bitterness which I can never forget, 'would leave

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<sup>27</sup> James B. Twitchell, "The Disease of the Last of the Ushers': Incest in Nineteenth-Century American Culture," in *Forbidden Partners: The Incest Taboo in Modern Culture*, Columbia University Press, 1987, pp. 185-219.

<sup>28</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/932/932-h/932-h.htm>

him (him the hopeless and the frail) the last of the ancient race of the Ushers.' ”<sup>29</sup> The problem with his words is that his sister’s death does not actually have to mean the end of Usher’s line. All he needs to do is to find a woman to marry and have children with, which should not be too difficult given his family’s reputation for being kind to the poor and also for being supporters of the arts. However these words make sense if one is to assume that the Ushers practiced incest for generations. This would account for both Roderick’s inability to continue his family’s line on his own and his declining mental health, while also explaining the origins of Madeline’s mysterious illness. On a symbolic level, the state of the house itself and its surroundings also supports the incest theory. The general decline of the land around it, with its rotten trees, decaying building-stones, and the impression of unhealthy air, reflect the state of the Ushers’ bloodline for as soon as the siblings die, the mansion collapses. And so, once again, the elements of American incest appear. In this case, if incest was committed, then it was done knowingly between at least Roderick and Madeline, if not their ancestors too. This bond leads to the lovers’ demise, and the parents are to be blamed for it on account of participating in, if not actively teaching the children, Usher’s private custom that is likely responsible both for the degradation of line. As Roderick was always aware of his sister’s survival, then what reason would he have had to let her be trapped in the tomb, if not that she would die for real, and he at last be freed from the Ushers’ legacy. Even if this reasoning is false, the implication of generational incest suggests that the siblings were taught to continue the bloodline with each other, which is not a tradition one can sensibly approve.

It would seem that many American authors chose to write about incest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their works feature several surprisingly consistent themes and motifs, even though the writers were completely different people. What they all undeniably had in common, however, was the fact that they lived in the New World roughly at the same time. As America was still developing its national identity after becoming independent, its society was much more chaotic than that of

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<sup>29</sup> Poe

the Old World. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were a lot of infamous events that created malfunctions within the nation. And so, inspired by the socio-political situation, some writers wanted to warn people of what could happen if things were to be allowed to continue the same way. The main question still remains though: Why use incest specifically? The answer to that is twofold. First of all, as commented before: “By dwelling on such disastrous consequences, the earliest American novelists expressed no literal fear of widespread incest, but rather a fear of the dreadful condition incest symbolizes: the absence of a well-defined social system. They used a story of thwarted love to express, obliquely, deep anxiety about ease of social movement.<sup>30</sup>” The second reason lies in the rhetoric of an address that was given on March 4<sup>th</sup> 1817, by the new president James Monroe: ““Monroe’s inaugural address celebrated the people of the United States as “one great family with a common interest”. “Discord does not belong to our system” ”.<sup>31</sup> As the head of state did not elaborate on his comparison, multiple variations are possible. One interpretation of this metaphor is that in this big family, the American government takes the role of the patriarch, both being the leaders and supreme authorities, whereas the American nation becomes children, the ones being told what to do, who were expected to obey orders and eventually to grow up into prosperity and stability. If so, then the relationship between the parent and his children is that of negligence or abuse given the many examples from history where the president or his office fails to uphold morals or to ensure stable cultural or economical growth of the population. Of course the view held by Monroe did not automatically appeal to every single member of New World society, but people would nonetheless have been aware of it, given that the presidential inauguration was the sort of event to get the most coverage from the contemporary news. Therefore, when writers needed to reflect their fears about their contemporary society, the guise of family malfunction was perhaps the most appropriate one. And what family issue would be seen as the most unnatural one, if not that of incest. After all, what is lust one feels for their own child if not the tragic abuse said

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<sup>30</sup> Anne Dalke, p.188.

<sup>31</sup> Howe, 92.

child? A supposedly wise and benevolent person with undisputed authority over their progeny instead makes them participate in an action that has a high chance of ruining them both physically and mentally. If viewed from this angle, it is possible to see incest as a representation of common fears a 19th century American would have had. In both incest and the 19th century, a figure of authority continuously fails the ones they are responsible for by making wrong decisions, which in time ensures the youth's doom or damnation; what is a child in the story, is the whole population in reality. The element of the mother is non-existent or unimportant; in Monroe's metaphor, the mother would likely mean the lands of America, which nurtured newly established civilization but played little role in the conflicts that happened on it. In the incest works of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a mother is usually dead or absent from the narrative, which aligns well with Monroe's analogy.

Monroe was not the only one who treated America as one big family. The very idea of household institution having parallels with some forms of the state predated him for many centuries. Philosophers such as Confucius and Aristotle mentioned in their respective works while in the 17<sup>th</sup> century English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his work *Leviathan* outright compares family to state<sup>32</sup>. More importantly, the belief clearly survived up until 19<sup>th</sup> century and was utilised ubiquitously by many politicians. For example, Edmund Roberts, a diplomat appointed by Andrew Jackson, in his work *Embassy to the Eastern Courts of Cochinchina, Siam, and Muscat* wrote the following lines in chapter VII:

The sovereign of men, say they, "is heaven's son; nobles and statesmen are the sovereign's children; the people are the children of nobles and statesmen. [...] Nobles and ministers of state should serve their sovereign as a father [...]; thus their noble rank will be preserved. The people should never forget to cherish reverential thoughts towards the

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<sup>32</sup> Gordon J Schochet, "Thomas Hobbes on the Family and the State of Nature." *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 82, no. 3, 1967, pp. 427–445. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2146773](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2146773). Last accessed 10.08.2019, p.429

nobles and ministers of state, to obey and keep the laws; to excite no secret or open rebellion; then no great calamity will befall their persons.<sup>33</sup>

In the book these words were used to describe the government of China, which should normally not concern the general population of America. However, Edmund Roberts wrote this account of his voyages and by having it published allowed his readers to become aware of this opinion. The comparison was easy enough to accept based on men's role in the family "The privileges of the husband were, at the same time, part of his obligation to provide a home, support his wife and children, and protect them from injury and insult (Peck 1921, 28)".<sup>34</sup> Government's purpose was essentially the same though, of course, much larger in scale.

The obligation of the husband to provide material goods and to assume personal and financial liability served as a proto-welfare arrangement. The government ensured that its citizens were taken care of, that creditors could identify their due, and that homes remained fairly stable by designing the rules of domestic relation.<sup>35</sup>

With this in mind, there should be no doubt that many people of America accepted the idea at least on some level. Thus, when the concerns about the failings of the state needed to be voiced the corruption of the concept of family unit proved to be a viable analogy, with incest being the best way to do so due to its sheer amount of criticism it inherently held.

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<sup>33</sup> Edmund Roberts, *Embassy to the Eastern Courts of Cochin-China, Siam, and Muscat* [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/44075/44075-h/44075-h.htm#Page\\_89](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/44075/44075-h/44075-h.htm#Page_89) Last accessed 10.08.2019 p.98

<sup>34</sup> Patricia Strach and Kathleen S. Sullivan. "The State's Relations: What the Institution of Family Tells Us about Governance." *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 1, 2011, pp. 94–106. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/41058325](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41058325). Last accessed 10.08.2019 p.98

<sup>35</sup> Patricia Strach and Kathleen S. Sullivan, 98.

## Chapter IV. Additional connection

In the previous chapters I talked about incest fascination being caused by the combination of many societal problems and political mismanagements. Together, these two issues troubled the minds of Americans severely enough to cause doubts and anxiety about potential collapse of order and traditions as they knew them. In turn, contemporary writers vented their frustrations and critiques of society in the form of incestuous stories, with the purpose of warning people of the threat, and that the course of actions America took needed to be swiftly corrected. And so, in the writings that dealt with forbidden affections, particular story elements, representative of real life troubles, were quite often present: A neglectful or abusive authority figure, incomplete family, and an incestuous bond between a man and a woman that are unaware of their close relation with the two invariably facing doom and death. However, the incest stories of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America have other motifs present, based on the historical elements.

To begin with, a rather obvious component in such stories is a flawed human nature. In all of the stories, the problem was caused by the simple fact that both a father and his mistress were seduced into an extramarital or premarital affair. In *Pierre*, the old Glendenning in his youth had a liaison with an immigrant woman, who was not his future wife. In *Marian And Lydia*, major Renfew wants to make a mistress out of an attractive but destitute woman who turns out to be his lost own daughter, who was in turn persuaded to become a lover by another wealthy man. In *The Power of Sympathy*, Mr. Harrington had a short fling that resulted in the birth of his illegitimate daughter, who fell in love with her half brother. In *Alice Doane's Appeal*, both Leonard Doane and his sibling Walter Brome lust after their sister Alice, with the implication that Alice and Walter possibly slept with each other. As they do not have the same surname, it is clear that their shared father was not monogamous. The ending of *The Marble Woman* reveals that Germain seduced Basil's betrothed and is the father of her child. Only in *The Fall of the House of Usher* is there no

infidelity insofar as readers are made aware. However, one could argue that if the Usher family's members practised incest for generations, then none of them should have been pronounced husband and wife, therefore making it into a form of affair.

Secondly, another common element would be something many Americans could understand: the inability to escape one's past and the sins of the fathers. How likely is it in real life that two unknown relatives would meet each other and develop lust or romantic feelings towards one another? The possibility is rather small though, admittedly, the chance for it is above zero. And yet in incest novels a father's past always finds its way back to him or his family and ruins them no matter what. Isabel was raised outside of America, yet was eventually moved there. When she is introduced to her father, he hides his identity from her. Yet not only does she deduce (or thinks she does) his name, but a chance encounter allows her to see her brother, who is immediately taken with her and willing to talk to her in private despite both the disapproval of his mother and his own impending marriage. During the meeting, Pierre believed Isabel's words because he knew of his father's past affair. From there he spends the rest of his time trying to undo his father's injustice to a ruinous effect, all while losing his status, his family, and eventually his mind and his life. In *Marian and Lydia*, Renfew just happens upon his lost daughter whom he does not recognise, since he abandoned her and her mother long ago. Because of that, he tries to sleep with her and is only stopped when he hears his former wife's name. As for Marian, her failure to perceive the man as her relative is in no way her fault, as he never deigned to meet her. *The Power of Sympathy* has Thomas Harrington covet his half sister Harriot, of all women, with neither being aware of the blood bond between them until after they properly fall in love with each other "... [Sr.] Mr. Harrington himself is also made to suffer by the repercussions of his earlier behavior. His crime has been the seduction of

Maria, who died after he had deserted her.”<sup>36</sup> A slightly more realistic example occurs in *Alice Doane’s Appeal*, where the fateful meeting between the separated siblings occurs only due to the deliberate design of a malevolent person. The same could be said about Cecil from *The Marble Woman*, where the plot starts specifically because her dying mother directed Cecil to her former fiancé Basil’s home where, unknown to them both, her real father was working. In an inversion of the common pattern, Germain is the one who actively tracks down his past instead of Cecil’s stumbling upon him by accident. On the other hand, his revealing himself as her father would have made her a daughter of the escaped convict and, because of filial piety and love, separating her from her beloved. It is possible to think on first glance that in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, there is neither a father’s sin nor an attempt to escape from one’s past. However, if one is to consider the situation presented in the story, then there is a case to be made that Roderick Usher was both dominated by the legacy of the Usher family and that he attempted to free himself from it. The narrator of the story and Roderick bury Madeline Usher in the family crypt following her demise from mysterious illness. Sometime later, during a storm, Roderick reveals that his sister is actually still alive, with her apparent departure from the world resulting from a bout of deathlike sleep caused by her affliction. After the revelation, despite being at death’s door Madeline still tracks Roderick throughout the house, falls on him, and causes him to die from fear. The interesting part of the story is the fact that there is no apparent reason for Roderick’s actions. He claims to love his sister and is saddened by her disease, as it would leave him the last of his family line. When she is presumed dead, he lays her in the family crypt for two weeks before the intended burial. And yet when he hears her cries for help, he proceeds to ignore them until she manages to free herself from the tomb. He easily could have opened the crypt if only to check whether or not his hearing was correct, especially since he knew that his sister’s malady occasionally rendered her

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<sup>36</sup> Henri Petter, *The Early American Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971) p. 243

narcoleptic. The only possible reason for his actions that makes sense is that he actually wanted her gone without directly killing her himself, presumably due to their shared and quite likely incestuous past, because as the patriarch of the family he already had all the power in the house. In which case, Madeline's breaking out of her resting place, finding her way back to Roderick with the last of her strength and scaring him to death demonstrates his inability to escape his prior actions.

Another interesting and characteristic feature of 19<sup>th</sup>-century American incest literature is the fact that actual intercourse between kin simply does not occur. Circumstances inevitably conspire to reveal to lovers their mutual blood relationship before things go too far. Nonetheless, the emotional damage produced by such revelations causes considerable misery for both participants, with at least one of them dying or committing suicide. Similar abstinence, however, did not happen in real life as certain studies indicate that family incest violence was present:

*Herman's work rested on a comparison between father-daughter incest and other cases in which there was a seductive, but not sexual, relationship between father and daughter. She found that the former were characterized by families with a rigid conformity to traditional sexual roles, fathers who dominated families through use of force and expressed no contrition for their behavior, frequently disabled (physically or psychologically) mother.<sup>37</sup>*

Although the study covers the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup>, one important thing is that details between fiction and reality are shared. Mothers offer no protection and are of little importance, while the male parent forgoes his duties in favor of his gratification. Also, it is a reasonable guess that such a thing happened at least throughout

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<sup>37</sup> Linda Gordon, and Paul O'Keefe. "Incest as a Form of Family Violence: Evidence from Historical Case Records." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 46, no. 1, 1984, pp. 27-34. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/351860](http://www.jstor.org/stable/351860). Last accessed 10.08.2019. p. 27

the whole of American history, and thus novels dealing with inbreeding were offering a warning against this act of carnality.

Infidelity needs no proof of existence, for it is an enduring problem throughout the ages. No matter the time period, no matter the country, and no matter the morals, it is an undeniable fact that many men and women cheat on each other. Their reasons may vary from sympathetic and understandable ones to the simple desire for physical pleasure and thrill, but nonetheless they behave against the laws of decency. On the other hand, for every sin there is a virtue, and the constant struggle to uphold it. In the case of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, one form this struggle takes is that of the moral education that many authors did through their works.

*In the nineteenth century, many writers and tastemakers worried about the quality of the literature (especially novels) available for public consumption ... Many in the audience too shared the view that their reading habits should make them better people, not simply more cultured but more earnest and hardworking, more highly skilled, better informed citizens. The popularization of science that Channing noticed reflected a widespread attitude that all reading, fiction or nonfiction, should be "elevating" or "improving."<sup>38</sup>*

As was previously discussed, in such works lust is always punished by causing suffering, directly or indirectly, to the adulterer. In particular, in the incestuous novels the retribution is represented by the anguish felt by both cheaters and their progeny. Through these cautionary tales, readers can see the moral lesson and, ideally, be horrified or shamed into redemption and abstinence from the misdeed. Another thing to note is that, in these narratives' service to cultural improvement, incest is never portrayed favorably. Books that deal with wars, violence, and adventures were relatively common in America, as befitting its spirit of colonisation.

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<sup>38</sup> Howe, 628

*Writers such as George Lippard achieved commercial success by targeting an audience of young working-class males with sensationalism, violence (mild by our standards), social criticism, and escapism. Like the domestic fiction aimed at women, working-class "dime novels" told about characters with whom their readers could identify... Middle-class readers throughout the Union also liked novels about frontier bloodshed, Indian wars, and the Revolution.<sup>39</sup>*

Through such stories, thrill-seeking readers were able to glimpse a life that was not possible for them, and so they sought out such books--tempting many authors specifically to target this sort of audience, producing the abundance of daring explorers and brave soldiers in American literature. However, no such thing could be said concerning the novels about incest. For what is there to envy there? In such works, families are ruined, inner peace is lost, and so, too, is the self-confidence of the protagonists, who are often become sinners in the eyes of God, the law, and themselves. While some might have been mesmerized by the sheer strength of a forbidden passion, that compulsion was counteracted by the simple fact that incestuous affection always led, in such accounts, to misery and death. Thus, the chance that incest stories were written for reader's prurient titillation is rather low. Of course there are several other possible reasons for such a fascination. Some, like Poe, wrote for the sake of art, though drawing inspiration from surrounding conditions and events. Others wrote to explore the dark aspects of the human nature. And yet some writers, as some critics choose to believe, wanted to shame people into becoming their better selves. For example, it is of no surprise that Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *Alice Doane's Appeal* as he also wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, to deal with the betterment of one's self and with the hypocrisies of humanity. Notably, one of the elements shared across both works is the author's critique of puritannical attitudes. *The Scarlet*

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<sup>39</sup> Howe, 632

*Letter* needs no explanation, whereas *Alice Doane's Appeal's* judgment is revealed in the following lines:

*Behind their victims came the afflicted, a guilty and miserable band; villains who had thus avenged themselves on their enemies, and viler wretches, whose cowardice had destroyed their friends ... In the rear of the procession rode a figure on horseback, so darkly conspicuous, so sternly triumphant, that my hearers mistook him for the visible presence of the fiend himself; but it was only his good friend, Cotton Mather, proud of his well-won dignity, as the representative of all the hateful features of his time; the one blood-thirsty man, in whom were concentrated those vices of spirit and errors of opinion that sufficed to madden the whole surrounding multitude.<sup>40</sup>*

Cotton Mather was a Puritan minister famous for, among other things, his participation in the Salem witch trials, during which many residents were deemed guilty, tortured, and executed based on very circumstantial evidences. Afterwards he was seen in polarising light, as some believed that his actions were just, whereas others, such as Hawthorne, decried him as afflicted and blinded by religious dogmas. Similar opinions about religion and the clergy are to be found in Herman Melville's *Pierre*, where he, through a conversation between Pierre and Mr. Falsgrave, asks his audience, as does Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*, whether or not a woman with an "out of the wedlock" child should be forever punished, as the letter of the law demands, or helped, as the spirit of religion teaches. Pierre's conclusion to the dialogue is telling:

*I perfectly comprehend the whole, sir. Delly Ulver, then, is to be driven out to starve or rot; and this, too, by the acquiescence of a man of God. Mr. Falsgrave, the subject of Delly, deeply interesting as it is to me, is only the preface to another, still more interesting to me, and concerning which I once cherished some slight hope that thou*

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<sup>40</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Alice Doane's Appeal* <https://sites.tufts.edu/ghoststories/files/2017/08/Alice-Doanes-Appeal.pdf> Last accessed 05.08.2019

*wouldst have been able, in thy Christian character, to sincerely and honestly counsel me. But a hint from heaven assures me now, that thou hast no earnest and world-disdaining counsel for me. I must seek it direct from God himself, whom, I now know, never delegates his holiest admonishings. But I do not blame thee; I think I begin to see how thy profession is unavoidably entangled by all fleshly alliances, and can not move with godly freedom in a world of benefices.*<sup>41</sup>

In other words, the principles of inner goodness and the laws of the church were not mutually interchangeable terms. Therefore, one of the messages of Hawthorne and Melville seems to be the importance of adhering to the spirit of religion and morality—that being compassion, kindness, and tolerance.

One of the main allures of the New World for several centuries was its promise for a new beginning. As long as the individual was hard-working, determined, and talented, s/he had the opportunity to rise above his or her old status and perhaps get rich in the process. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this promise was supported by the California Gold Rush, among other things, and a promise of new lands through several frontier expansions. On the other hand, the Old World religious and political intolerances and hardships (such as Ireland's Great Hunger or Germany's political unrests) caused many people to migrate to America in search of a better situation. And as it often happens, once the number of immigrants grew to a critical mass, several problems began to emerge, which found their reflection in contemporary popular culture. To start, immigrants were often unwelcome due to the fact that they were accused of taking jobs from "native" Americans (as non-Indian U.S.-born residents were often called at that time by anti-immigrant parties, such as the "American" or "Know-Nothing" party), as foreigners were willing to work for wages even lower than those paid to "natives," allegedly threatening the financial stability of the American lower

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<sup>41</sup> Herman Melville, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* ( New York: Harper & Brothers, 1852.)  
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34970/34970-h/34970-h.htm> Book VII, ch. VII.

classes. Incest works reflect this situation to an extent in the form of disruptive outsiders. To elaborate, one of the motifs of such stories is that an established order within a family is disturbed by an intrusive figure, leading everyone to ruin. In *Pierre*, Isabel is the one who actively intrudes, even from outside America, on a tidy Glendenning household and tears its workings apart. In *Alice Doane's Appeal*, Walter Brome also breaks the status quo between the siblings, tainting the reputation of one and turning the other into a murderer. *The Power of Sympathy* has Harriot intrude into the Harrington family, though she is not the initiator. Similar thing happens in *Marian and Lydia*, where Marian is seduced into a life of sin by a passing gentleman, thus causing immense grief to her whole family and her own death. *The Marble Woman* has the role of invader being played by Germain, who disrupts the dynamics between Cecil and Basil, first by being violent and frightening, and later by being charming and knowledgeable. Of the works discussed in this thesis, only Poe's is a true exception, as the narrator's presence does nothing to affect the ultimate decline of Usher's family, and the only bond he shares with them is that of friendship. As such, the figure of the outsider, who breaks down a family order by her or his presence and actions, can be seen as a symbol representing the fear of immigrants, the abundance of whom was perceived by many as threatening to the stability and safety of the U.S.'s lower classes.

Another issue provoked partially by the "immigration crisis" was the religious struggle. While the primary belief system was that of Christianity, it is a common fact that there were different movements within it. The United Kingdom chose the path of Protestantism, whereas majorities in much of Europe (outside northern Germany and Scandinavia) rejected it in favor of Catholicism. One reason people colonised America was the desire to practise one's faith free from persecution, as can be seen from the actions of the Puritans (who, of course, upon establishment in America, began immediately to discriminate against all other faiths). Although religious "toleration" was eventually

enshrined in the U.S. Constitution of 1789, as the nation grew and became more diversified, old and new “European” religious antagonisms reasserted themselves. For immigrant foreigners, this meant that unless they travelled to a community which had a compatible religious doctrine, they were facing distrust and contempt from their neighbors. This meant, ironically, that despite a major aspect of America’s settlement being freedom from the Old World’s spiritual restraints, the descendants of the colonists were as guilty of oppression as their forefathers had been, thus threatening to subvert the promise of a new life. The same fate also befell non-Christian theological movements developed within America. A chief example of such hypocrisy is the treatment of Mormonism. Founder Joseph Smith’s mythology and morality contained parallelisms with Christianity. yet its practice of polygamy attested its conspicuous heterodoxy. It was this part that led their neighbors to force the Mormons to relocate their community several times. Ultimately, founder Smith was unlawfully killed, yet the movement still lives on.

All in all, incest surprisingly represents a lot of important problems that plagued New World, from the internal corruption to the troubles caused by the many outsiders. In other words, the overwhelming interest in inbreeding in early American literature shows a great concern with paternal authority and how it relates to social order, which is in itself was the matter of importance. Moreover, books where incest was present provided a deconstruction to one of the most popular myth about New World. Unlike the fantasy America that accepted everything and everyone, the reality was such that there could be no such thing as a true fresh start.<sup>42</sup> Many immigrants were bound by their still living relatives, who often needed to be provided financial support, their religion was not guaranteed to be accepted or deemed harmless, and, of course, the past remained always

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<sup>42</sup> James D. Wilson, Incest and American Romantic Fiction In his *The Romantic Heroic Ideal*, pp. 133-67. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1982) <https://archive.org/details/romanticheroicid00wils> Last accessed 2.08.2019. p.142

closed by, whether in the form of memories or another living being. It could be said that incestuous stories convey this message in a simple if cruel manner befitting its tone.

## Chapter V. Conclusion

As discussed in previous chapters, it would appear that incestuous novels of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America have several shared elements that represent the nation's complicated social and political situation of the period. The similarities between fiction and reality begin with the issues concerning authority figures, who were often seen as corrupt and weak. In incest literature, these beings were usually parents, namely fathers. As such, they were supposed to be protectors of their own families, both ensuring the survival of their kin and nurturing their progeny. However, parental and personal flaws resulted instead in misery or death for them and their household. In *Alice Doane's Appeal*, a man begets all three main characters. Whereas Leonard and Alice Doane are aware of each other and for the most part both behave as brother and sister, the last sibling lusts after Alice and hates Leonard. This results in Leonard's killing Walter, driven by both jealousy and indignation for the person who claimed to have seduced Alice. This situation would not have come to pass if not for their father's cheating on lady Doane with Walter's mother and leaving the third child both in an incomplete family and unaware of his relatives, which is at least partially responsible for Walter's being the worst of the three. As a consequence, at the end of the story one of his sons was killed by the hand of the other for attempting to seduce the daughter who had to endure a broken heart and a trial of evil spirits through no fault of her own. In *Pierre* and *The Power of Sympathy*, the protagonists' fathers engaged in affairs that resulted in illegitimate daughters bereft of the knowledge of their heritage. These women then eventually met their legitimate brothers and fell in love with them. After being made aware of the shared blood between them, the children find themselves in relationships that cannot romantically continue but are too powerful to be ignored or changed into more appropriate bonds. As a result, they all die in pointless suffering. In *Marian and Lydia*, Major Renfew's sexual appetite and lack of responsibility towards his own family almost results in his sleeping with a destitute prostitute, who turns out to be his own child Marian.

The poor girl was led astray by another lustful man, and, without her father to explain the dark nature of such people, she did not realize her situation until after she was thrown away. Due to the fact that Renfew, however unknowingly, refused to help her in her time of need, Marian lost both her health and her mind, which caused her death after barely having time to see her mother once again. *The Fall of the House of Usher* had the narrator's meeting two siblings who were implied to have been lovers. Moreover, their ancestors were also hinted to have engaged in such a practise, passing this depravity onto their heirs. As a result of inbreeding, both were dominated by illnesses that were responsible for their own demise. Though *The Marble Woman* did not contain incest in its biological sense, it is still a work influenced by it, and as such it too possesses common elements with the abovementioned stories. In it, there is a love triangle between Cecil and two men who happen to be her adopted or biological fathers. Basil, her mentor and true love, does not realise her needs and wants, despite raising and tutoring her, and thus almost causes her death through negligence. Germain, her actual relative and greatest friend, keeps her unaware of their real connection, thus heavily damaging the bond between Basil and Cecil—not to mention that he failed in his duty as a protector, as he was unable to provide for her and her mother, almost causing their deaths.

This recurring element is a reflection of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, as the nation had to endure figures of authority who were deemed to be either corrupt or impotent in their responsibilities. Among the most notable was Andrew Jackson who, though a war hero, degraded public morale and morals through his scandalous actions. The elections he won were among the dirtiest in American history; he was considered to be an adulterer because of his wife's previous marriage; his regime both exposed and allowed financial frauds, with the biggest one being caused by the person he trusted. His removal policies caused grief for

many honest workers<sup>43</sup>, and his desire to control newspapers was met with outrage. His first year in office was also remembered because of Margaret Eaton, whose reputation was that of a fallen woman. As it was, Jackson fiercely protected her even though arguing about the whole fiasco took most of his time and the time of his cabinet members that was supposed to be spent properly ruling the country. His successor, Martin Van Buren, was infamous for the Panic of 1837, which was partially caused by Jackson's previous arrangements. Nevertheless, Van Buren was blamed for it by the people of America, who suffered greatly from economic instability and depression for a decade. His daughter-in-law further damaged his reputation because her actions depicted him as living a royal life in a time of poverty and need.

The second important historical element that caused 19<sup>th</sup>-century American incestuous novels to take form as they did was the fear of outsiders. Unlike certain African-American books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in such stories the eventual breakdown of a familial unit's workings is the fault of strangers suddenly appearing and interacting with their long-lost relatives, and not because of a family member's knowingly committing the sin of inbreeding. Leonard and Alice Doane have the status quo between them broken by the arrival of Walter Brome, in that Leonard was no longer the single most important person in Alice's life, while Leonard suspected Alice of the loss of her virtue and was consumed by his passion. After Leonard kills Walter, the pair inevitably had to adjust to the guilt of fratricide. Marian, Lydia, and Dorcas have their family torn apart by the appearance of Sir George, who seduced Marian and eloped with her. Whereas Lydia and Dorcas faced depression and grief, Marian was eventually ruined, abandoned, and perished in an attempt to return to her relatives. The stewardship and later marriage between Basil and Cecilia are threatened primarily by Germain and Alfred, who are both aliens to their small world of art and tranquillity. Harrington's household is irreparably broken when young

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<sup>43</sup> Howe, 333

Thomas falls in love with Harriet, a young woman from a separate social class. Not only was Mr. Harrington forced to reveal his past affair to separate the two lovers, but by doing so he caused them to die from grief, leaving no male heir and severely damaging his reputation. In the beginning of *Pierre*, the future of the eponymous character is planned and secured. He has a decent sum of money that he is poised to inherit from his mother along with a place to call home, a beautiful and angelic girl to marry, and a talent for writing already noticed by literary critics. However, this all changes with the appearance of Isabel, whose attempt to improve her standing makes Pierre lose not only his physical riches but also his talent in writing, which is corrupted by his experiences directly caused by Isabel's presence. There are exceptions to this rule, one of which can be seen in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. While the narrator's presence coincides with the end of the Usher bloodline, he does nothing to cause its collapse. At the very worst, all he could be blamed for is not acting on his rather brief observation of Madeline's not looking like a corpse, or, perhaps, for not trying to get the sibling away from their grim and rotting house. The prominence of this "outsider" trope in 19<sup>th</sup>-century writings is associable with the constant migrations into America. As immigrants arrived in the New World in search of a better life, many of them were willing to work as hard as "native" Americans themselves, but for lesser pay. Thus many "natives" believed that they had fewer opportunities to earn their living, a situation prominent in the lower social classes. It is of little surprise, then, that this caused both fear and hatred of foreigners, emotions that were prominent enough to be reflected culturally. Another argument against immigrant arrivals was the religious aspect. Some people went to America to be able safely to practise their religious beliefs. Yet, as often happens, when different groups in the New World met each other, they did not always agree on mutual coexistence, fueling resentment between different doctrines and their followers.

Another factor to consider in the significance of incest in the discussed literature is the authors' obvious attempts at improving the moral standing of readers. While some of them chose to write for art's sake, others based their creations on their intended audiences. The reasons for that differed, though three of them are more characteristic. Firstly, quite a few chose to write experimental fiction, playing with styles of writing and genres. Secondly, many wrote to earn money, and for this purpose were willing to use popular and shocking topics. Thirdly, and perhaps, most importantly, a lot of individuals wanted to impart their knowledge and opinions on their audiences. Said opinions were often influenced by the society around them, and thus reflected to an extent both the positive and the negative aspects of that society. When faced with various corruptions and injustices of the New World and, particularly, of the United States, it was unavoidable that some authors desired to preserve and improve the better parts of human natures. To accomplish this goal, the usage of incest proved to be a versatile tool, as the topic itself was inherently a result of many wrongdoings. For example, the very basic instance of the inbreeding act contains such issues as abuse of authority, degeneration of morals, broken families, defilement of long-present social norms, and the debasement of minors. All of these issues were present in some form in America, further enhanced by the very nature of the New World's colonisation. Technological advancement made life easier, but its usage both disturbed those who sought stability and was indirectly responsible for several crises, of which various Panics left lasting impressions. Though the Civil War ended long-lasting debates regarding the enslavement of black people, it is also marked the end of a lifestyle perceived by many to be American, as slaveowning was the most unfortunate, but also an enduring, part of America's way. Social and geographical mobility was also unfamiliar to many new Americans, as the Old World was much stricter with it. All in all, the general atmosphere proved to be a rather rich soil for incestuous novels, and further wonderings about America's future served only to encourage the growth of fears that made incest an

attractive metaphor for representing and discussing these problems. Together, all these details serve to suggest that the abundance of incest-centred literature in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America resulted primarily from the authors' seeking to gratify their audience through provocative topics, but from contemporary social and political factors which were closely related to the development of America as a nation.

Those who are interested in the topic of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America's incest fascination as a result of social and political issues might further benefit from research on the two previous centuries. One relevant importance of the 18<sup>th</sup> century lies in the American War for Independence, which resulted in the separation from the United Kingdom and transformation from colony into its own society. Afterwards, it was no longer bound to the whims of British society, allowing for more New World-based issues to take form. Moreover, it is advisable to examine closely the Puritan movement and its religious ideology, familial descendants of which significantly influence American culture even in present day America. It would thus follow that in previous ages their doctrine held much more significance and that, despite its ultimate attenuation, it helped to shape 19<sup>th</sup>-century New World and, particularly, American identity, through, for example, the promise of being the people chosen to create a new Jerusalem and lead the rest of humanity into a new, glorious era. That the idea of earthy paradise did not survive the all too familiar flaws of human nature is one of the reasons behind the fear of an inescapable past. As for the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it too was not free from its share of crises based on political, social, economical, and racial issues. As previously stated, the African-American writers who wrote about incest inspired the whole idea of this thesis. However, their works differ significantly from those of their predecessors, as they seem to deal with the more explicitly shown acts of abuse, not softened by the lack of knowledge between the participants. Furthermore, the theme and horrors of racism may have significant importance for this immorality-becoming-amorality, which was not present in older works. Therefore, it should be

interesting and illuminating to compare 19<sup>th</sup>-century and 20<sup>th</sup>-century incest-based stories, to observe their evolution and whether or not they invariably reflect the flaws of contemporary society.

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