

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00791-8 - The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Justine S. Murison

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

“I think anxiety is very interesting,” observed Amy, eating sugar, pensively.

Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (1868)

This book refocuses the study of nineteenth-century American literature on frogs shorn of their heads, tables that report on the afterlife, and men who think they are teapots. These instances constitute more than a “curiosity cabinet” of outré psychology or outright fraud; rather, the nineteenth-century understanding of the nervous system united them as possible, even plausible, sources for psychological insights. Many crucial discoveries about the nervous system predate 1820, but not until then did nerves come to shape the representations and experiences of cultural, political, and religious tumults in the United States. By the 1830s and through the rest of the century, writers absorbed, expressed, and popularized the medical language of the nerves. In turn, their narratives of nervousness swayed debates about the biological and cultural meanings of “freedom” and “possession,” subjects to which all of the writers in this study return. “Free society” was understood to be nervous; that is, it was open, vulnerable, and fraught with the power to derail reform while also dependent upon an active, participatory body politic, a paradox not lost on political and social commentators before and after the Civil War. “Why,” George Fitzhugh, pro-slavery author of *Sociology for the South* (1854) and *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters* (1857), asks, “have you Bloomer’s and Women’s Rights men, and strong-minded women, and Mormons, and anti-renters, and ‘vote myself a farm’ men, Millerites, and Spiritual Rappers, and Shakers, and Widow Wakemanites, and Agrarians, and Grahamites, and a thousand other superstitious and infidel Isms at the North? Why is there faith in nothing, speculation about everything? Why is this unsettled, half-demented state of the human mind co-extensive in time and space, with free society?”¹ Although Fitzhugh’s defense of slavery may not have survived the war, *The Politics of Anxiety*

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00791-8 - The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Justine S. Murison

Excerpt

[More information](#)

in Nineteenth-Century American Literature shows why his diagnosis of freedom did.

The parameters of this study are wide: from teapots to mental pathology; from galvanic batteries to abolitionism; from phantom limbs to domestic ideology. Nineteenth-century Americans connected these subjects – some quite far afield from each other – through the popular understanding of the nervous system. Strictly speaking, for a nineteenth-century anatomist the “nervous system” consisted of the brain, the spinal cord, and the nerves that radiated out from these centers. To understand nineteenth-century psychology, therefore, we must begin with the body. The body, as it turns out, was not a stable unit precisely because the nervous system governed it. As Charles E. Rosenberg explains, in early nineteenth-century medicine the “body was seen, metaphorically, as a system of dynamic interactions with its environment.” Food, drink, clothes, climate, work: All of these elements, and an infinite number of others, demanded “a necessary and continuing physiological adjustment,” and therefore the body was “always in a state of becoming – and thus always in jeopardy.”² The nervous system made possible this exposure to the environment. The senses relayed environmental information along the nerves and, in turn, the nerves cued muscles to move the body. When in working order, the nervous system kept the mind in tune with bodily actions and reactions. The basic assumption, put best, was of an embodied mind and a thoughtful body.

To be nervous in the nineteenth century was therefore more than a passing description of individual personality; rather, nervousness characterized the basic psychological assumption of the century. Because the nervous system united the body together, from the brain all the way to the toes, the cultural impact of the nerves proved both physical and metaphysical. The somatic emphasis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century psychology responded to the theological need to cordon off the soul from disease. Doing so, according to Roy Porter, allowed for the diagnosis of “nerves” to preclude “moral blame, by hinting at a pathology not even primarily personal, but social, a *Zeitgeist* disease,” a disease of the body, in other words, as shaped by the social and physical environment rather than one primarily lodged in a “deep” conception of the self.³ Often signaled by references to “susceptibility” and “susceptible subjects,” this experience of the self was profoundly tumultuous, barely “buffered” from the world in the way that Charles Taylor has described it.⁴ Because both body and mind were open to environmental pressures, they proved vulnerable to the political climate and the social world. Indeed, for the nineteenth century,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00791-8 - The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Justine S. Murison

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

an affect such as anxiety was somatic and cultural or, more accurately, somatic *because* cultural. By the 1830s, a popular language of the nervous system helped Americans express the consequences on the body and for society of major historical changes: from the pace of technology and urbanization to the rise of Jacksonian democracy; from the turmoil of social reform to the fraught relations between classes, races, and genders. Far from “naturalizing” what was otherwise cultural or political, the predominant theory of the nervous system knit the body and mind together through their interactions with the world.

The nineteenth-century “open” body, as I refer to it throughout this book, culminated a much longer medical history. In the seventeenth century, physicians in the Atlantic world innovatively theorized that the relation between mind and body was not produced by the fluid exchange of the humors but by a network of nerves. In doing so, they conceived not just a “nervous body,” to borrow Peter Melville Logan’s phrase, but a nervous self – a mind and body in tight, inextricable connection.⁵ Work by seventeenth- through early nineteenth-century investigators such as Thomas Willis, Robert Whytt, and Charles Bell outlined the anatomy of the nervous system: Sensory organs transferred information to the brain, and the brain, in turn, exerted a will over the body.⁶ *How* this happened, though, was anyone’s guess. Thus the horizon of medical excitement in the nineteenth-century was physiological rather than anatomical, focused on invisible functions rather than visible structures.⁷ Early nineteenth-century physiologists such as François-Joseph-Victor Broussais in France, Johannes Müller in Germany, and Marshall Hall in Britain explored these mysteries, but nervous physiology would nonetheless remain inexplicable for decades to come. The nervous system therefore could not offer cultural or political (let alone medical) stability, for its physiology persistently baffled scientists, physicians, and patients throughout the century. This instability, though, allowed the nerves to become a flexible vocabulary, used widely to express different, sometimes even contradictory, experiences and opinions.

The advent of this unstable yet exciting realm of nervous physiology coincided with the nadir of medical professionalism in the United States: the Jacksonian era.⁸ Medical contest, from both within the profession and around its margins, dominated the century. By the 1850s, prominent “regular” physicians such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., finally revised typical therapeutic interventions such as bloodletting and mercury ingestion, challenging, quite controversially, the dispensation of poisonous minerals and lack of hygiene in surgery and childbirth.⁹ If

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00791-8 - The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Justine S. Murison

Excerpt

[More information](#)

debates such as these within the profession unsettled any unified “medical” voice, what counted as “professional” further complicated this picture. Because medicine remained unlicensed until the 1870s, the field encompassed “lay” practitioners and theories that we now disparage as “pseudosciences.” Indeed, while physicians certainly had a stake in, as Dana D. Nelson puts it, generating “scientific rationales for the organization and supervision of the national economy, and the civic, public, and private arenas,” it is equally true that “irregular” practitioners – from homeopaths and botanical Thomsonians to mesmeric doctors and spiritualist mediums – diverged widely from regular physicians and were popular with patients for precisely this reason.¹⁰ The nineteenth-century “fads” of the water cure and mesmeric healing, for instance, were explicit responses to the potentially deadly hand of the physician.

Rarified medical studies of the nerves, therefore, could not alone account for the prevalence of nervous terminology in nineteenth-century American culture. Indeed, odd physiological terms for the nerves – which included “sympathy,” “animal electricity,” “the nervous fluid,” and the “odylic principle” – only became truly ubiquitous through the heady world of popular science and health reform. Antebellum Americans witnessed the wonders of the nervous system during popular demonstrations of mesmerism and clairvoyance; when having their heads “read” by traveling phrenologists; by perusing health reform manuals and attending lectures by men and women such as Sylvester Graham and Mary S. Gove; and by visiting séances with “modern” spiritualists such as the Fox sisters or Emma Hardinge. The terms of the nervous system peppered readers’ letters to newspapers; essays on everything from the Democratic Party to the afterlife in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* or *Putnam’s Monthly*; and theological debates about revivalism and spirit bodies among all of the major Protestant sects. Perhaps more than any other influence, the phrenological print empire of Fowler and Wells widely circulated books on a variety of health subjects, including phrenology, physiology, calisthenics, and electrical psychology. From the family physician to their favorite periodical, nearly everywhere Americans turned reinforced the experiences of a “nervous” self.

Nineteenth-century fiction exemplified the cultural stakes of this nervous, “susceptible” self. Although fiction was by no means the exclusive literary form in which nervous language found expression – any glance at Walt Whitman’s invocations of the “body electric” or Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.’s essay on “The Physiology of Versification” would belie such a claim – it was nonetheless the primary genre to spark debates about the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00791-8 - The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Justine S. Murison

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

effects of reading on mental health. As the pitched battles of eighteenth-century anti-novel discourse cooled by the middle of the nineteenth century, they produced a well-worn theory about “good” and “bad” novels that fused moral issues to health concerns, particularly the health of “susceptible” women readers. “[A]lthough the true novel is of modern date,” expounds one commentator in 1844, “its first rude progenitor was an offspring of iniquity, and the impurities of the original blood are constantly appearing in the tatters and blotches upon the features of its legitimate children.”¹¹ Providing the novel with a metaphoric family history, the *Christian Parlor Magazine* claims that even the purported “best” novels, such as those by Sir Walter Scott, never shed the taint of their illegitimate origins. And it is not just Christian advocates who fretted over the “tatters and blotches” of fiction. Some novels, according to the *National Era*, “do terrible mischief” to readers, “rendering their sensibilities irritable, morbid, feeble, approaching to exhaustion, by constant abuse upon the ridiculous distresses of ranting fools and hysterical puppies of both genders.” This nexus of health and morality exceeds metaphor, for later this writer laments how readers devour every book “in the spasms of a hysterical paroxysm” that ends with the “nerves vehemently shaken, the muscles, in an earthquake, the lungs worked to exhaustion, flushed cheeks, boiled eyes, and a sharp appetite for bread and butter.” To counteract these hysterical, orgasmic symptoms, the article recommends those novelists “enlisted in the service of moral, social, and political reform.”¹² An anti-slavery newspaper that would serialize Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1851, the *National Era* had a stake in marking some fiction as healthy. Yet it nonetheless shares assumptions with stauncher anti-novel voices like that in the *Christian Parlor Magazine*. The presumption behind both is that fiction, whether moral or licentious, can infiltrate the reader – get beneath her very skin to shake her nerves and upset her physiology.

Because fiction potentially threatened the health of readers, formal choices – most especially the balance between romance and realism – carried moral and medical weight in the early nineteenth century. In the novels and tales that address directly the cultural implications of the nerves, writers’ narrative choices reflected the exciting yet unstable medical world of the nervous system. Fiction tested, imagined, and extended these medical developments, a role that physicians such as Holmes and S. Weir Mitchell, both of whom wrote fiction, appreciated. In particular, fiction afforded them a mode to explore those aspects of the nervous system that reached beyond clinical analysis. As Holmes explains

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00791-8 - The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Justine S. Murison

Excerpt

[More information](#)

in his preface to *Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny* (1861), a novel about serpentine hysteria, “a grave scientific doctrine may be detected lying beneath some of the delineations of character,” and he employs “this doctrine as a part of the machinery of his story without pledging his absolute belief in it to the extent to which it is asserted or implied.”¹³ Holmes’s description of romance accords neatly with the mid-century definition Nathaniel Hawthorne promotes in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851): the mingling of the “marvelous” and the mundane. Where medicine leaves off, romance begins; however, Holmes insists that he grounds his version of “romance” in science even as it stretches beyond known scientific limits. Romance did not function as the opposite of scientific realism but as its critical supplement in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Indeed, that Holmes chooses to call *Elsie Venner* a “romance” points to how nineteenth-century medicine inspired – and was inspired by – experimental, nonrealist fiction, including genres such as the Hawthornian “romance,” the gothic tale, the political satire, and the city mystery novel. These fictions were continuous with rather than rejections of nineteenth-century scientific speculation, and no more so than in their scrutiny of the susceptibilities and sympathies of social life. Representing the “romance” of the nervous system thoughtfully and, at times, critically, the writers in this study helped construct and explore (and thus popularize in many cases) a neurological vision of the body and mind. This literary participation in the vagaries of nerves – in their wild, disruptive, and, at times, contradictory biological imperatives – continued throughout the century. After the Civil War, though, many writers began to pitch their fictional explorations of the nerves in opposition to the professional aspirations of neurologists as those physicians (including Mitchell and George Miller Beard), increasingly supported by institutions and licensure, defined nervousness as merely pathological and in need of professional, therapeutic control.

The literal and metaphoric symptoms ascribed to “susceptible” readers and “nervous” citizens in the nineteenth century are also a reminder that “symptomatic reading,” the hallmark of critical approaches to literature in the twentieth century, has a somatic pre-history, which this book introduces. That history is best encapsulated by the transition (typified by Sigmund Freud’s work) from “nervousness” to “anxiety,” that is, from a literal invocation of a physiological symptom to a psychological term that defers to an unconscious. This transition speaks directly to literary scholarship because anxiety has been the longstanding affective orientation of the symptomatic tradition. Etymologically and medically,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00791-8 - The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Justine S. Murison

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

“anxiety” reaches back to the classical period and forward to current colloquial expressions derived from Freudian psychoanalysis. Coming from the Latin for a feeling of choking or distress, “anxiety” connotes the hysterical symptom of a ball rising in the throat, which partially explains the theory of the womb’s wandering during the classical period. As the nervous system became the central anatomical and physiological basis of the body’s relation to the mind in the eighteenth century, physicians reclassified hysteria as a nervous disorder. The symptom of choking became psychosomatic in this process, disguising the linguistic connection between hysteria and anxiety. In colloquial English by the early nineteenth century, “anxiety” did not display the somatic richness of the classical period or the psychological complexity it would achieve after Freud, and yet its history contained both.

Because anxiety accrued both somatic and psychological meaning throughout the centuries, it is well poised to open a conversation both about the history of affects and the affects of critical methods.¹⁵ The meaning of anxiety in contemporary criticism emerges out of the surprising confluence and compatibility of the work of Freud and Michel Foucault. Freud famously broke with the somatic culture of nineteenth-century neurology. In doing so, he reinvigorated anxiety as a psychological rather than physiological term for the early twentieth century, obscuring the somatic roots of “anxiety” in the nervous system. Freud constructed the modern meaning of anxiety in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), and “Anxiety and Instinctual Life” (1932). In the process of writing these works, Freud notably reversed his original theory of anxiety. Whereas in the 1920 essays “neurotic anxiety” arises out of repression, in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, anxiety *produces* repression. Positioning the source of anxiety outside the self in an “external situation of danger,” Freud argues that anxiety perpetuates the lesson of this original trauma by producing a repressed subject.¹⁶ In turn, any “return of the repressed” reveals the traces of anxiety by way of its failures fully to enact repression.

The Freudian explanation of repression and anxiety has maintained its relevance despite Foucault’s influential critique of the repressive hypothesis. As part of Foucault’s broader project to delineate the knowledge–power nexus that discourse produces, volume I of *The History of Sexuality* (1976) directly confronts the limitations of repression as described in psychoanalysis. If anxiety produces repression, and repression is the result of the prohibitions of the libido, then its process is negative in Freud’s argument. Foucault turns this theory on its head in *The History of Sexuality*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00791-8 - The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Justine S. Murison

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The repressive hypothesis, according to Foucault, overlooks the “discursive explosion” surrounding what seem to be linguistic prohibitions.¹⁷ Yet implicit in Foucault’s recounting of discursive explosions is exactly the emotional valence Freud too addressed: fear, panic, and anxiety. Through “nervous disorders” and newly categorized sex crimes, Foucault argues, medicine and law produced “social controls” that undertook to “protect, separate, and forewarn, signaling perils everywhere, awakening people’s attention, calling for diagnoses, piling up reports, organizing therapies.” As he puts it, “These sites radiated discourses aimed at sex, intensifying people’s awareness of it as a constant danger, and this in turn created a further incentive to talk about it.”¹⁸ To be sure, Foucault does not invoke “anxiety” in its full Freudian sense, but he implicates anxious emotions as both motivation and consequence of power and discourse. Even as discourse produces power in this formulation, it also evinces the traces of anxiety. Foucault thus reaffirms anxiety as the affective underside of discourse and power. Following the logic of Foucault’s Freudianism (a seemingly contradictory phrase), discourse implies anxious repression, which, in turn, becomes the subject rooted out and symptomatically interpreted. As an efficient term for the productive nature of all that an individual or society represses, “anxiety” evokes power projected, experienced, and embodied. “Anxiety,” at its richest, therefore, restores to texts political meanings that may lurk in their margins and lacunae.

If I am correct that “anxiety” operates as “productive repression,” then its usefulness for literary study lies in its shorthand expression of the motivating affect of discursive production. This longstanding use of anxiety has been generative of keen inquiries into how discourse constructs and subsequently attempts to control categories of identity such as race, gender, and sexuality. To locate disjunctions between the power of discourse and resistances to it demands a turn to a language outside its historical moment, one that can reveal the contradictions endemic to ideology. “Anxiety” has usefully described just such a disjunction. The role “anxiety” plays as both discursive source and its result, however, complicates literary historicism by resisting causal relationships: “Anxiety” stands metonymically for the motivation behind which analysis cannot go, and it therefore serves as the transcendent cause of cultural production. My study clarifies these psychological stakes of literary historicism by placing “anxiety” – and the broader theory of the nervous system it registers – as the historical subject of analysis rather than its structuring frame. By changing focus in this way, I seek to demonstrate how an attentive history of psychology can reveal the various ways writers responded

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00791-8 - The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Justine S. Murison

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

to biological embodiment, dreams of emancipation, and concerns about determinism in their fiction, and how they did so by engaging complexly with pre-Freudian nervous physiology.

What may prove most surprising – what is, in other words, hiding in plain sight – is how the nineteenth-century emphasis on nerves and “susceptibility” is a deeply somatic *and* symptomatic rendering of the relation of self to society and culture. Although the chapters of this book consider local meanings that the nervous system accrued across a variety of registers, the book as a whole inspects how the nervous system structured nineteenth-century narratives of national history and social life. Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* usefully illuminates the role nervousness played in the nineteenth-century historical imaginary. In his second novel, Hawthorne traces the Puritan lineage of the Pyncheons from the seventeenth-century witchcraft trials – in which the family’s progenitor Colonel Pyncheon opportunely used witchcraft accusations to seize land from his poorer neighbor Matthew Maule – to the Pyncheons of the antebellum United States, including the elderly Hepzibah, her brother Clifford, and their conniving cousin, Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon. A series of characters in the novel refract the contradictions of antebellum nervousness as a physiological relation to others and to the environment: The bell and door of the shop continually smite Hepzibah’s “nervous system”; Clifford grows “pettish and nervously restless” when too long denied Phoebe’s company; a crowd of children flee the house after their “susceptible nerves” take alarm; even the old hen in the garden has a “nervous cluck.”

Although Hawthorne continually returns to variations of the word “nervous” to describe Hepzibah and Clifford, the character of Judge Pyncheon best exemplifies the nineteenth-century teleology of somatic nervousness. The narrator tells us that Phoebe, the Pyncheons’ sweet “country cousin,” briefly imagines the judge as the founder of the House of Seven Gables merely updated by a trimming of the colonel’s beard, the purchase of readymade clothes, and the acquisition of a gold-headed cane. The narrator demurs from this dressing of the colonel in antebellum consumerism only to offer a physiological (rather than sartorial) difference between the colonel and the judge as more accurate: “The long lapse of intervening years, in a climate so unlike that which had fostered the ancestral Englishman, must inevitably have wrought important changes in the physical system of his descendant,” changes that include muscle volume, weight, complexion, and, “[i]f we mistake not, moreover, a certain quality of nervousness [that] had become more or less manifest, even in so solid

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00791-8 - The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Justine S. Murison

Excerpt

[More information](#)

a specimen of Puritan descent, as the gentleman now under discussion.”¹⁹ The narrator dwells on Jaffrey Pyncheon’s nervousness, speculating that as “one of its effects, it bestowed on his countenance a quicker mobility than the old Englishman’s had possessed, and keener vivacity, but at the expense of a sturdier something, on which these acute endowments seemed to act like dissolving acids,” a process that, “as it diminishes the necessity for animal force, may be destined gradually to spiritualize us by refining away our grosser attributes of body.”²⁰ By describing the modern, nervous nature of Jaffrey Pyncheon as simultaneously spiritualizing “our grosser attributes of body” while sacrificing a “sturdier something” of the Puritan past, Hawthorne emphasizes the environmental and social conditions of the two men. Shaped by his historical situation, the judge’s nervousness corresponds to a definitional paradox that had developed by mid-century. According to *An American Dictionary of the English Language* from 1849, “nervousness” had variant, even opposing definitions: the first, “[s]trength; force; vigor”; and another, “colloquial” one, “weakness or agitation of the nerves.”²¹ Hawthorne seizes on this potential paradox. While an increase in the nerve force animates and spiritualizes matter, it indicates nonetheless a loss and weakness of the modern body. Even if one is “a gentleman of sturdy nerves” as Hawthorne describes the judge later in the chapter, this characterization always suggests both self-control and the lurking capacity of the nerves to undermine that control.²²

For antebellum Americans, as for Hawthorne, this newly nervous body signified not just an unsteady, contradictory modernity; it was uniquely national. The historical trajectory Hawthorne sketches, in which the United States becomes a nation of nerves, depended upon the eighteenth-century claim that the colonies and the new nation represented a healthy alternative to the degeneracy of Europe. Benjamin Rush (physician, abolitionist, and signer of the Declaration of Independence) was the most prominent advocate of this theory. In a particularly revealing speech to the American Philosophical Society on February 4, 1774 – on the eve of the Revolutionary War – Rush voices what would become one of the most enduring tropes in Western psychology. After dispensing with the diseases endemic to Native Americans (fever and dysentery), Rush turns to the more “complex” and provoking nervous illnesses racking the health of Europeans, represented in his argument by the British. Yet when Rush shifts to these disorders he does not leave Native Americans behind. As he describes the vulnerability of the “civilized” mind to the nervous disorders of hypochondria and hysteria, he asserts, “[i]n like manner the author of nature hath furnished the body with powers to preserve itself