

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Waxwork effigies of notorious killers, displayed in dime museums and traveling exhibitions, were a popular attraction in 19th-century America. That Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) would be drawn to such lurid fare is not surprising in light of his lifelong fascination with true crime. Scholar David Reynolds writes that one of Hawthorne’s favorite childhood books was the 17th-century crime collection *The Triumph of God’s Revenge Against the Crying and Execrable Sin of Murther*, a volume he read so often that he damaged its binding. Later he drew inspiration for his fiction from the 1834 anthology *The Record of Crimes in the United States*. One of the last memories Hawthorne’s son Julian had of his father was of the ailing man “sedulously leafing through an enormous volume of trial reports.”

Of the crimes Hawthorne refers to in this journal entry, the Helen Jewett murder remains the best known. The others have faded from public memory, though they were equally infamous in Hawthorne’s day. Charles Gibbs was an American pirate who prowled the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico in the 1820s. On one occasion, he and his cohorts captured a Dutch ship and slaughtered all its passengers and crew, except for a 17-year-old girl who, as Gibbs later recounted, “was kept on board for some time” before being killed. After a trip to North Africa to join the Barbary corsairs, Gibbs returned to the United States and, in 1830, signed on as a seaman aboard a brig bound from New Orleans to Philadelphia. Learning that the ship held a cargo of silver coins, Gibbs and other crewmembers, including the steward Thomas Wansley, staged a mutiny. After killing the captain and the mate, they steered the vessel for Long Island, scuttled it and set it ablaze, then took to the boats and made for the beach. A number of mutineers drowned in the rough sea. Gibbs and Wansley made it ashore but were eventually convicted and hanged.

Ephraim K. Avery, another figure represented in the waxworks exhibit, was a Methodist minister from Bristol, Rhode Island. A married man with several children, he was accused of hanging his pregnant mistress, a factory girl named Sarah Cornell, and staging the death to look like a suicide. Despite the mass of circumstantial evidence against him, he was acquitted at his 1833 trial.

The “Strang” mentioned by Hawthorne was Jesse Strang, the duped lover of the murderous Mrs. Elsie Whipple.

“A show of wax-figures”

Friday, July 13th, 1838

A show of wax-figures, consisting almost wholly of murderers and their victims,—Gibbs and Wansley, the pirates, and the Dutch girl whom Gibbs murdered. Gibbs and Wansley were admirably done, as natural as life; and many people who had known Gibbs would not, according to the showman, be convinced that this wax-figure was not his skin stuffed. The two pirates were represented with halters round their necks, just ready to be turned off; and the sheriff stood behind them, with his watch, waiting for the moment. The clothes, halter, and Gibbs’s hair were authentic. E. K. Avery and Cornell,—the former a figure in black, leaning on the back of a chair, in the attitude of a clergyman about to pray; an ugly devil, said to be a good likeness. Ellen Jewett and R. P. Robinson, she dressed richly, in extreme fashion, and very pretty; he awkward and stiff, it being difficult to stuff a figure to look like a gentleman. The showman seemed very proud of Ellen Jewett, and spoke of her somewhat as if this wax-figure were a real creation. Strang and Mrs. Whipple, who together murdered the husband of the latter. Lastly the Siamese twins. The showman is careful to call his exhibition the “Statuary.” He walks to and fro before the figures, talking of the history of the persons, the moral lessons to be drawn therefrom, and especially of the excellence of the wax-work. He has for sale printed histories of the personages. He is a friendly, easy-mannered sort of a half-genteel character, whose talk has been moulded by the persons who most frequent such a show; an air of superiority of information, a moral instructor, with a great deal of real knowledge of the world. He invites his departing guests to call again and bring their friends, desiring to know whether they are pleased;

telling that he had a thousand people on the 4th of July, and that they were all perfectly satisfied. He talks with the female visitors, remarking on Ellen Jewett's person and dress to them, he having “spared no expense in dressing her; and all the ladies say that a dress never set better, and he thinks he never knew a handsomer female.” He goes to and fro, snuffing the candles, and now and then holding one to the face of a favorite figure. Ever and anon, hearing steps upon the staircase, he goes to admit a new visitor. The visitors,—a half bumpkin, half country-squirelike man, who has something of a knowing air, and yet looks and listens with a good deal of simplicity and faith, smiling between whiles; a mechanic of the town; several decent-looking girls and women, who eye Ellen herself with more interest than the other figures,—women having much curiosity about such ladies; a gentlemanly sort of person, who looks somewhat ashamed of himself for being there, and glances at me knowingly, as if to intimate that he was conscious of being out of place; a boy or two, and myself, who examine wax faces and faces of flesh with equal interest. A political or other satire might be made by describing a show of wax-figures of the prominent public men; and, by the remarks of the showman and the spectators, their characters and public standing might be expressed. And the incident of Judge Tyler as related by E—— might be introduced.

Notebook entry, July 13, 1838