

ABSTRACT

WILLIAM H. LAVELLE. *The Fall of a House Divided: The Recurrence of Architectural Apocalypse in American Literature in the 1830s and 1840s.* (Under the direction of Professor Michael Grimwood.)

When Abraham Lincoln warned that a “house divided against itself will not stand” in his 1858 address to the Illinois Republican Convention, he was contributing to a larger pattern of utilizing architectural metaphors of social apocalypse in American literature in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century. In the 1830s and 1840s, in particular, the prevalence of millennialist groups--most prominently the Millerites led by William Miller--and the architectural “cult of domesticity” exemplified by Andrew Jackson Downing exhibit both a fear of national apocalypse and an association between good morals and a well designed home. Taken together, these parallel discourses inform the differing images of architectural collapse in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “The Warning” (1842) and “The Luck of Edenhall” (1842), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Ambitious Guest” (1842), and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). All of these authors implicitly draw from the parallel discourses exemplified by Miller and Downing to express anxiety regarding national unity and the possibility of disintegration. In “The Warning” and “Edenhall,” Longfellow fears that a martial uprising--either by slaves or by the slaveholding South--would destroy the structure of State and all within it. In “Guest,” Hawthorne envisions a providential apocalypse that would smite those who might abandon the structure of American government. Southerner Poe dreads a vampiric apocalypse in which the merging of two sides spurs “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Each of these works, in addition to Lincoln’s speech, is part of a more general tendency of writers of the period to map their anxieties and desires for the American State not only onto architecture but onto other structures, such as ships, as well.