



Cryptic Echoes and Eternal Shadows: Unveiling Profound Themes in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*

Ms. Nawal Nagi

Assistant Professor (English), Dept. of Extension Education, Faculty of Agriculture, Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat, Assam, India

Received: 13 Aug 2023; Received in revised form: 18 Sep 2023; Accepted: 28 Sep 2023; Available online: 06 Oct 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The House of the Seven Gables* is a masterpiece that looks into a myriad of enduring themes, offering to the readers a lush tapestry of human encounters and social commentary. By means of the Pyncheon family's dark past and the curse that haunts them, Hawthorne examines how the depravities of the past can engender an extensive shadow on future generations, causing moral deterioration and spiritual conflict. The paper attempts to dissect and analyze the themes that pervade the narrative, revealing some significant perceptions and social critiques rooted within the story. It also examines the gender and social expectations delicately woven into the structure of the narrative affording timeless insights into the human predicament and societal dynamics.



Keywords— Hawthorne, themes, fate, ancestral guilt, class status, gender role

I. INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* endures a timeless exploration of significant themes that resonate through the hallway of history and human experience. It deals with the repercussions of the actions of a generation confronted by the subsequent generations. The Pyncheon clan is cursed and it passes its afflicted blood down to succeeding generations which are presumed to be haunted by the same curse. However, Hawthorne without constraining himself within the frontiers of this notion uses it as his key dissertation while examining a variety of other perceptions in the novel.

This paper attempts to dissect and illuminate the fundamental themes that string through the novel's narrative fabric, irradiating the everlasting relevance of Hawthorne's investigation of ancestral guilt, class position, the interaction of appearances and reality, the idea of fate, and the undercurrents of gender roles. Via the lens of these premises, the novel rises above its historical context and offers a mirror reflecting the intricacies of the human predicament and societal constructs, eliciting contemplation on the persistent influence of the yesteryears on the current

state and the ineradicable print it leaves on the future. This analysis embarks on a captivating journey through the sinister halls of the Pyncheon mansion to peel back the layers of time and divulge the discernments buried within this literary treasure.

II. ANALYSIS OF THE THEMES

William B. Dillingham in his essay "Structure and Theme in *The House of the Seven Gables*" talks about the various discourses that Hawthorne explores in his narrative. He believes that the author has structured the novel into three major parts which contain the chief ideas dealt with in the novel. "The first six chapters stress the desirability of a democratic way of life over an aristocratic one. With the introduction of Clifford in chapter vii the theme of psychological isolation comes into the foreground The last seven chapters constantly reflect the main theme by pointing up the dichotomy between appearance and reality" (336).

2.1 Parable on the nature and effects of Original sin

The House of Seven Gables has for years been read as a parable on the nature and effects of Original sin. Hawthorne takes many opportunities to link the misdeeds of Colonel Pyncheon to the subsequent misfortunes of the Pyncheon family. He includes elements that constantly remind the reader of the curse of the old Mathew Maule, giving an impression that the curse has important linkages to the present situations and scenario. Old Jaffrey Pyncheon and his nephew, Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, are both found dead with blood coating their shirts and beards, linking their deaths to that of the Colonel and thereby fulfilling the curse on the Colonel: "God will give him blood to drink" (Hawthorne 7). It is interesting to note how the portrait of the Colonel has for years been ominously hung on the wall. It would, therefore, not be incorrect to say that the Colonel, who can be considered as the source of the trouble, has been a witness to the degeneration of the family and the mysterious deaths of many Pyncheons. Aware that the notion of an inherited curse is fantastic and perhaps inappropriate for an otherwise realistic novel, Hawthorne breaks literary convention just so that he can pursue the idea that the crimes of one generation can have awful repercussions for succeeding ones. In order to make space for the fantastical elements in his narrative, Hawthorne, in the Preface emphasizes that *The House of the Seven Gables* is a "Romance" rather than a "Novel". It is also possible that through the original sin, Hawthorne tries to point out that every human organism contains within itself the germs of corruption and death.

2.2 Reflection on class status

Hawthorne introduces the theme of class status in the first few pages of the novel. When the ancient House of the Seven Gables is first erected by Colonel Pyncheon, he has an open-house celebration to which he invites both the aristocratic and plebian classes, but each class receives different treatment as the servants lead both these types of guests to different rooms. Here starts the issue of class distinction in the novel. Thus we see pride in high social status become a part of the Pyncheon family very early in the history of the house. The interaction between the younger Matthew Maule and Gervayse Pyncheon makes this class distinction even more evident, for the young Maule first refuses to enter the house of the seven gables from the back, as would befit a member of the working class, and then is disturbed by Alice Pyncheon's apparent disdain for his workman's status. This pride is further highlighted in the succeeding generations when Hepzibah hesitates to open the store and finally does so very reluctantly. It is this status which the Pyncheons strive to maintain throughout the novel. The original sin was also

committed by Colonel Pyncheon to establish a position in society which was higher than the general folk. Richard H. Fogle states in his essay "The House of the Seven Gables", "The Pyncheons are fighting to maintain a state of isolated superiority over their fellows, an endeavor against which the society of The House of the Seven Gables has set its face. The original sin was committed with this end in view, and is perpetuated by the Pyncheon line for the same reason until there is no longer a Pyncheon who will renew the struggle" (347). It is ironic that the Pyncheons, more particularly Hepzibah, struggles to maintain a class even when she has no resources at hand to meet even her basic needs. When she runs out of means of livelihood, she is reluctant and hesitant to open the store as she deems that it does not befit her status to run an ordinary shop. This status and position which she tries to maintain does nothing for her. She is most unhappy. Her class and position in society do not give her the comforts of life. They do not serve to reduce her grief in any way. The narrator seems to be critiquing nineteenth-century New England society's preoccupation with class status and suggesting that not only does Hepzibah have nothing much to be proud of in being a Pyncheon, but the whole idea of 'gentlemen' and 'ladies' belongs to an aristocratic class system that should have died out with the American Revolution. Holgrave rightly remarks that this class position rather than being a privilege is more like a 'burden' for poor Hepzibah, which she had to carry throughout her life.

2.3 Appearance vs. reality in the novel

Through the novel, Hawthorne also endeavors to underline the fact that appearances can in many ways be deceptive, and the novel contains ample examples to demonstrate this fact. In the novel, Judge Pyncheon's brilliant smile is contrasted with Hepzibah's scowl. Even as the Judge's cruelty becomes apparent in the novel, his smile does not fade. However, in Hepzibah's case her scowl, which is essentially due to a myopic disorder, gives her an extremely repulsive appearance, so much that it was considered that her scowl would serve to scare and drive her customers away. Her own brother, Clifford, does not wish to behold her face even as Hepzibah makes him the center of her universe and devotes herself entirely to his service. Dillingham writes in "The Structure and Theme in *The House of the Seven Gables*", "The very title of chapter xv ("The Scowl and the Smile") hints at Hawthorne's concerns with the deceptiveness of outward appearance as typified in Hepzibah and the Judge" (343). That Hawthorne chooses to put these features on such prominent display, and then to contrast them so sharply with the personalities behind them, seems to illustrate that he is making a point about how easily a person's appearance informs judgments about them. Other examples, such as the popular opinion that the wise Uncle

Venner is actually a simpleton, further demonstrate Hawthorne's view that outward appearances are often misleading. The climax of the novel is also brought about by the Judge's reliance on false judgment made from appearance for Clifford did not have any knowledge of wealth and gold.

2.4 Fate in the novel

The question of fate becomes extremely important in the novel. The Pyncheons are cursed and the curse of the family is believed to pass down the generations. The seven gabled house is indeed a queer place with its dull and mystic atmosphere, which even the gay Phoebe was not able to resist and gave in to the dismal surrounding. The house had also seen the mysterious deaths of many Pyncheons. It is generally implied in the novel that this extraordinary environment of the house and the enigmatic deaths bear a direct connection with the curse of the Maule. It is indeed questionable here that does the author want to imply that everything that happens to the Pyncheons, every misfortune they have to suffer or every wrong that they do is a result of their fate? The stance that the author takes on this issue is very ambiguous. If Judge Pyncheon is considered to inherit the cruel genes of his forefathers, can he be held responsible for his pitiless behaviour? If we choose to excuse him on the grounds of his cursed fate and his genes, we are unable to provide a suitable explanation for the good Pyncheons – Alice, Clifford, Phoebe, and Hepzibah, to name a few. Thus, the occurrence of chance events and accidents in *The House of the Seven Gables* makes it impossible to explain everything that happens to the Pyncheon family strictly according to their cursed fates.

The idea of fate also finds an echo in the ideology of the Puritans. The Puritans believed in fate, predestination and the Calvinist idea that God has already chosen who is saved and who is damned. Colonel Pyncheon, as is mentioned in the novel, was a strict Puritan, thus reinforcing the idea of fate and bringing home the fact that the novel repeatedly harps on the concept of fate, attributing the misfortune to fate. Moreover, this doctrine laid importance on wealth and physical possessions and believed that the richer one was on earth, the more likely he was to be saved. Hawthorne is drawing on the Puritan religious idea of the 'elect' in his depiction of Judge Pyncheon's notion that his economic success and public respectability prove his moral virtue. Judge Pyncheon is also mentioned in the novel as a regular church person. Thus, we see the concept of fate interlinked with that of religion. Religion and church also becomes an indicator of the social participation of the characters. Phoebe's regular churchgoing demonstrates her participation in the larger social context of the town, while Hepzibah and Clifford's lack of interest in religious

observance underlines their general isolation from the rest of town life.

2.5 Gender roles in the novel

Gender remains an important theme in the novel and Hawthorne places more value on the private lives and conversations of Phoebe and Hepzibah, than he does on Judge Pyncheon. He also compliments "the woman's, the private and domestic, view of a public man" (Hawthorne 100) as more indicative of a man's actual character. Using Hepzibah's chastity and her aloofness from the world, Hawthorne draws a variety of ideas. Her chastity serves as a symbol for the larger withdrawal of the Pyncheon family from worldly transactions. She remains associated with only the family emblems: the Pyncheon family house and the Pyncheon chickens. The race of the chickens, like the Pyncheon clan has degenerated as a result of "too strict a watchfulness to keep it pure" (Hawthorne 73). Teresa Goddu writes in her essay "The circulation of Women in The House of the Seven Gables", "The house, which is personified as a body, refuses admittance as Hepzibah's virginal body does. Barred from intrusion, no one may enter the house except members of the family" (120). Hepzibah also symbolizes the family's incestuous mode. Like Chanticleer who mates both with his wife and sister, Hepzibah's passion is not for a lover, but for her brother. Goddu writes, "By retreating from the public marketplace to take up the private roles of sister, mother, and wife to Clifford, Hepzibah remains not only unsullied but also unproductive" (121). The story of Alice Pyncheon is also another example where Hawthorne uses the female gender to highlight the role women play as a commodity to be traded between men in the economic relations of society. In taking both Alice and another wife, Mathew Maule upsets the normal rules of alliance. Further, Phoebe's meetings with both Judge Pyncheon and Clifford have sexual overtones. When Judge Pyncheon tries to kiss Phoebe, she immediately draws back. Moreover when Clifford notices her blooming womanhood, "the ripeness of her lips, and the virginal development of her bosom" (Hawthorne 114), the sexual connotations become distinctly vivid. However she refuses to acknowledge this attraction, ignoring "whatever was morbid in his mind" (Hawthorne 116).

III. CONCLUSION

Hawthorne, thus, reviews a diversity of themes in the novel, which persist throughout the narrative. He culminates the narrative with a marriage alliance between Phoebe and Holgrave, hence in a way culminating the long scuffle between the families. Several details like the death of the Judge and the whereabouts of the lost document are

elucidated in the closing chapters and thus the story climaxes with no questions unanswered.

REFERENCES

- [1] Dillingham, William B. (2014). "Structure and Theme in *The House of the Seven Gables*". *The House of the Seven Gables*(Nita N. Kumar, Ed.) (pp. 335-346). Worldview Publications.
- [2] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables* (Nita N. Kumar, Ed.). Worldview Publications.
- [3] Fogle, Richard H.. "*The House of the Seven Gables*". *The House of the Seven Gables* (Nita N. Kumar, Ed.) (pp. 347-359). Worldview Publications.
- [4] Goddu, T. (1991). The Circulation of Women in "The House Of The Seven Gables." *Studies in the Novel*, 23(1), 119–127. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29532770>