



## EXPLORATION OF SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS IN 'THE HOUSE OF SEVEN GABLES'

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### Abstract

Hawthorne has yoked together fantasy with some elements of realism. This novel has similar intensity of grimness which *The Scarlet Letter* had. The plot of the novel is not very simple it is little bit complex to understand. Hawthorne has developed few vital ideas and concepts while formulating this novel. Some of these ideas are very noteworthy like the everlasting consequences of an evil deed and the deplorable nature of the family pride. Hawthorne is a kind of writer who feels very comfortable in dealing with the topics like evil lineage or heredity. It seems that the author cannot forget his own evil lineage. Readers are aware that Hawthorne is trying to write about himself. So many critics have said that there is something autobiographical in almost every work of Hawthorne. The outline of the plot is very powerful. The origination of the story lies in an act of evil done by Colonel Pyncheon to Matthew Maule in seventeenth century.

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Nathaniel Hawthorne was a kind of writer who was much ahead of his time. This present novel is another masterpiece which clearly reveals this fact. In this novel Hawthorne has again tried to yolk together his fantasy with some elements of realism. This novel has similar intensity of grimness which *The Scarlet Letter* had. The plot of the novel is not very simple it is little bit complex to understand. Hawthorne has developed few vital ideas and concepts while formulating this novel. Some of these ideas are very noteworthy like the everlasting consequences of an evil deed and the deplorable nature of the family pride. Hawthorne is a kind of writer who feels very comfortable in dealing with the topics like evil lineage or heredity. It seems that the author cannot forget his own evil lineage. Readers are aware that Hawthorne is trying to write about himself. So many critics have said that there is something autobiographical in almost every work of Hawthorne. The outline of the plot is very powerful. The origination of the story lies in an act of evil done

by Colonel Pyncheon to Matthew Maule in seventeenth century. He was made guilty of witchcraft and was hanged. The penalty was paid by the Pyncheon family. It persuaded them through the decades. The family members of the Pyncheons whose appearance and conduct was similar to colonel Pyncheon die similarly. It seems that the whole family was under a curse. The intensity of the curse has been minimized and dissipated by an affair between Holgrave and Phoebe, the youngest of the Maule and the Pyncheons. It seems that their affair and marriage dilutes the sin. It is very noteworthy to see that the fundamental base of the United States has been established through gunshots, insurrection, violence, revolution, riots and destruction. These realities have always provoked the young writers of America to write deliberately on the socio-political issues. In the writings of Hawthorne it is very noteworthy that he often deviates from ancestral plot. He wants to create something very new and fresh from the old stories

and themes. This is one of the reasons that Holgrave says in this present novel that:

“... a family should be merged into the great obscure mass of humanity, and forget all about its ancestors. Human blood, in order to keep its freshness, should run in hidden streams.”<sup>1</sup>

Tracing the facts from the Salem ancestors of Hawthorne we will notice that John Hathorne and his father William Hathorne were very harsh towards the Quakers. One of the fellow judges of John Hathorne had sentenced Thomas Maule, a Quaker to imprisonment in the year 1695. Three years earlier than this incident, there was an active role played by Judge Hawthorne in Salem witch trials. It is supposed traditionally that he might have been cursed by some victims. There is a big confusion that if there are some autobiographical references present in the novels of Hawthorne then how he can put himself or his personality detached from the plot of those novels. It is true that there is some essence of impersonality theory present in Hawthorne but we can also not deny that his stories have some autobiographical references. It can be seen in almost all the works of Hawthorne. It is a genuine question but readers are surprised to find that Hawthorne has not personalized the situation but he has generalized the problems of the society. Thus even the personal elements have been generalized by the author. During that period many problems faced by the people were common and Hawthorne has raised several social issues in almost all of his writings. Between this generalization and personalization there lies some duality which often brings horror. This horror has been felt by the author in his sub conscious mind and readers are surprised in seeing this change in Hawthorne. This horror image can be seen in “Endicott and the Red Cross”. It has been presented as:-

“But among the crowd were several whose punishment would be life-long; some, whose ears had been cropped, like those of puppy –dogs; others, whose chicks had been branded with the initials of their misdemeanors; one, with his nostrils slit and seared.”<sup>2</sup>

It is the horror which comes through violence and this kind of horror is very general which has been adopted by most of the writers including Hawthorne. The typicality of Hawthorne can be felt by the horror associated with religion. The concept of sin associated with the sinners provokes horror. This horror can be felt by the sinners in form of sleeplessness, nightmares, hallucinations, acute madness and several others. Hawthorne himself felt guilty because of his forefather’s violent act. It is very noteworthy that Hawthorne added ‘w’ to his name after his degree of graduation. This was an act performed to show some differences from his ancestors. He remembered one such persecution of Ann Coleman who had been put on trial under William Hathorne: “Naked from the waist upward, and bound to the tail of a cart, she is dragged through the main-street at the pace of a brisk wall, while the constable follows with a whip of knotted cords. A strong –armed fellow is that constable; and each time he flourishes his lash in the air, you see a frown wrinkling and twisting his brow, and, at the same instant, a smile upon his lips. He loves his business, faithful officer that he is, and puts his soul into every stroke, zealous to fulfill the injunction of Major warrant...”<sup>3</sup>

One of the very famous houses of Salem, The English House might have served as a model house for *The House of The Seven Gables* passed to a Hathorne. It was empty and decaying so in 1833 it was finally pulled down. Several other elements of this novel lie very close to the heritage of Hawthorne. The claim of Pyncheon in Waldo County runs parallel to one of the legendary family story of the author. Ebenezer Hathorne one of the great uncles of the novelist had several theories in his mind. Ebenezer believes that:-

“Nobody ought to possess wealth longer than his own lifetime, and that it should return to the people.”<sup>4</sup>

The author himself is very skeptical about radical proposals but at the same time he was very much interested in them. These views are very great and it marks the real motive of the author himself that the thinking of the society should not be limited. The orthodox and limited thinking of the characters

and the society brings a great sin to the society. Hawthorne was a kind of writer who was very critical of the society. His characters also are very neatly chosen. The arrant view of the great uncle and the author himself appears in the text also where Holgrave remarks to phoebe Pyncheon:-

"Shall we never, never get rid of this Past?... It lies upon the Present like a giant's dead body! In fact, the case is just as if a young giant were compelled to waste all his strength in carrying about the corpse of the old giant, his grandfather, who died a long while ago, and only needs to be decently buried.. ."5

The character Phoebe represents cheerfulness, purity and beauty. She has all the characteristic features of feminine charms. It seems that Hawthorne has pictured Sophia Peabody, his own bride, while drawing this character. The present novel *The House of the Seven Gables* is an album of conceptions and images which is very significant for the author. Several critics have found this novel parallel to *The Scarlet Letter* as both of these novels is in episodic form and both of them have some similarities. Each of the character is very special and important. They play a very crucial role in the plot construction. Apart from the railroad excursion of Hepzibah and Clifford the whole action of the novel has a central setting. Colonel Pyncheon built The House of The Seven Gables on the land of the Maules. The setting of this novel is middle of the nineteenth century. The author has used the flash back technique to peep inside the history of the house which was built in the seventeenth century. The house is gloomy and haunted because of its disputed construction. Hepzibah Pyncheon is the current resident of the house. She is poor and she supports her brother Clifford who has completed thirty years in jail. He has been sentenced because of a murder. She has a cousin who is wealthy but unpleasant. She has refused all the assistance from this wealthy cousin judge Jaffrey Pyncheon. A pretty and lively young and beautiful Phoebe who is a distant relative arrives there. A romantic affair grows between Holgrave, the mysterious attic lodger and Phoebe. Holgrave the mysterious attic lodger is busy in writing the history of the Pyncheons. It has been

mentioned earlier that the house has been built wrongfully by Colonel Pyncheon from a rightful owner Matthew Maule. The rightful owner Matthew Maule had been executed for practicing Witchcraft. It seems that at the time of his death Maule might have cursed the Pyncheon family. At the time of housewarming festivities colonel Pyncheon was found lying dead in his armchair. It is not clear that whether he died from some congenital disease or from the curse of Maule. The house bears his portrait as a symbol of a dark history. The plot of the novel further advances when Phoebe decides to visit her country home. She has a planning to return early. Clifford is disappointed and frustrated because of the unused and lost youth which he has spent in prison. He feels isolated from the society. He stands above the stairs at a large window which is arched. He has a strong sudden desire to jump from the window. There is a sense of realism associated with the novel because there was an actual existence of the Pyncheon family. Apart from these facts we cannot deny that there is a sense of moral justice in almost all the novels written by Nathaniel Hawthorne. There is a strong theme of sin running in this novel. Sin is like a genetic disorder which has its effect even on the next generation. That is to say, sin committed by a generation can be visited and repented by the next generation. Repentance of the next generation does not normally occur but it has a chance to nullify the sin committed in the previous generation. It is not a theory but it is actually a belief which Hawthorne has carried out in this novel. This theme is actually the moral behind *The House of the Seven Gables*. Hawthorne has tried to link the misdeeds performed by colonel Pyncheon with the sufferings of other members of Pyncheon family. The portrait of the colonel looms with the action of the story. Death of the family members of Pyncheons clearly hints over the curse of Matthew Maule. Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon as well as the old Jaffrey Pyncheon his uncle both is found dead with blood on their beards and shirts. These deaths are identical to the death of colonel Pyncheon. Hawthorne clearly pictures the idea that a committed sin is indelible and even centuries cannot wash the stains of a sinner. One must has to pay the price of a sin. Hawthorne

personally never believed on curses even this novel cannot suggest that simply a curse can punish the whole family. It can also be seen as a reaction of their own action. They were full of lust and their greed has engulfed them. Colonel Pyncheon brings the curse home while trying to snatch a piece of land from the rightful owner. The life of Gervayse Pyncheon was very quiet and peaceful but it takes a tragic turn when he tries to recover a missing land deed. It results in the death of Alice, his daughter and old Jaffrey Pyncheon also dies by his own grief. The demise of the family is an outcome of the greed of the family. In the present novel Hawthorne has also criticized the New England society of the nineteenth century in terms of class structure. The difference between Pyncheons and Maules is an outcome of the class conflict. One is very rich where as the other is very poor. There is a feud between the elite puritan followers of the Church, the army, the law and the poor peasantry of the society of the New England. Matthew Maule represents the poor class of the society. He is a farmer who is sent to the gallows very easily by Colonel Pyncheon who is a wealthy landowner. The interaction between Gervayse Pyncheon and younger Maule broadens this class distinction. Even heredity and environments fails to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. Hepzibah knows the fact that the personality and status of the judge will succeed in sending Clifford to the asylum. The opening of a shop by Hepzibah is seen like a humorous mockery of the aristocratic class. This division of class has been set according to the division of wealth. For characters like Matthew Maule it is not a mockery that he is a subject of suffering. He is a victim but his situation is actually perceived normal in the society because it is the outcome of the class division. One of the other prominent themes of the novel is the appearances of the characters which are often deceptive. The judge often gives an infectious smile only to mask his original individuality and truth. Even his cruelty is covered under his brilliant smile and this is actually an art of deceptiveness. The Scowl of Hepzibah which is a physical problem keeps the customers away from her store and even Clifford her beloved brother feels repulsed by her. Hawthorne has tried to focus on the physicality of his characters. The

physical characteristics of the individuals have been contrasted with their inner personalities. These prominent features have been displayed by the author successfully. By doing this the author tries to say that how easily the appearance of people contributes in passing judgment about them. It demonstrates the views of the author that the physical looks of a character are often misleading. To talk of the motive of Hawthorne designed for this novel we can find a lot of motives. One of the prominent motifs is mesmerism. *The House of the Seven Gables* effectively deals with trances and reveries. It can be best seen in the novel when Phoebe is told a story by Holgrave about the mesmerism of Alice Pyncheon by the younger Matthew Maule. After listening to this story Phoebe also goes into a state of trance. Critics have correlated this mesmerism effect with the smile of Colonel Pyncheon which we have discussed as deceptive. His smile too has a narcotic effect which acts like a magnet and people are drawn against their will. Thus we can say that he has a magnetic personality. His smile is deceptive but fearful and attractive. This motif of mesmerism allows the author to fulfill his objective according to his own choice. He has successfully introduced a fantastic element of mesmerism into his plot. The presence of mesmerism can also be seen in the novel when Hepzibah is found alone in the room by Phoebe hearing different voices murmuring together. This is another science of mesmerism which cannot be explained in words. In the hypnosis of Phoebe by Holgrave it can be felt that if realism is mixed with fiction it can generate an affect of mesmerism which can put the audience in a state of trance. This is magic of fiction where the mind is hypnotized. This novel has several images and symbols to interpret. One of the prominent symbols which have been used successfully by the author is the symbol of decay. Physical decay stands like a mirror where individual and character can see their spiritual decay. One should not be confused between deformities and decay. The suffering of the Pyncheon family can be seen in this regard as they decay both from outside as well as inside. Even the house on which the novel has been modeled has been decayed and corroded. The garden of the

house is full of unwanted plants and weeds. It is better to say that the garden of the house is unfit and damaged. The summer house has also been crushed and covered with vines. Even the neighborhood of the house has become unappealing and outmoded. The external description of the atmosphere has been depicted as gloomy. It is interesting to see that the external form and appearance of the nature matches with the appearance of the residents of the house. Hawthorne has depicted a sense of realism while depicting his characters. His sense of perception is no doubt perfect. As the house becomes unattractive and unpleasant the residents of the house also look the same. It is perfect blending of characters with their atmosphere and environment. It can be seen in the personality of penniless and scowling Hepzibah. She is a sharp contrast to Alice Pyncheon. Holgrave and Phoebe try to nurture the garden with their extra care. They also care for the summer house and with their efforts the chickens of the house begin to return to health. It clearly reflects the healing power of love and care. The author has also tried to present the magic of care and love that decay can be arrested and growth can be implemented even on a barren soil. *The House of the Seven Gables* is a symbol of the declining fortunes of the Pyncheon family. The connection between property and family is repudiated by the explanation of Holgrave. He explains that every coming generation should modify the design of the property according to their needs. The old order should be replaced by the new order.

This novel clearly serves and stands on the beliefs of the author and in spite of several flaws the readers are really amused in finding the underlying message of the author. Several themes, images and symbolism are present in this novel and are discussed in detail. Thus the current novel *The House of the Seven Gables* is a fine blend of human values and moralities and the readers as well as different critics can find this work of Hawthorne very interesting.

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