

The Theme of Curse in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*

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The research examines the theme of curse as a prevalent theme in *The House of the Seven Gables* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The issue of curse investigates herein the idea of miseries, misfortunes, obstacles, and hard work that have faced the characters in the novel. The research falls in two sections: the first part deals as a prevailing theme, how Maule's curse has inflicted the family of the Pyncheons, past and present, as a result of 'The seven gables', while the second part deals with the concepts of society and class as relevant topics to the main theme.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in 1804, in Massachusetts to a reputable family in New England which is considered the destination of Puritans. later on he left England to settle in America. It is also a place that witnessed many new practices and strange trials associated with the Puritans. Surprisingly enough, Hawthorne's forefathers had a role to play in the Puritans' Salem witch trials and the Quaker persecution(Emanuel Gottlieb 5).

It is a well-known fact that:

“the great-grandfather of Nathaniel Hawthorne, was a magistrate at Salem in the latter part of the seventeenth century, and officiated at the famous trials for witchcraft held there”(*The House of the Seven Gables*, Introduction 4).

He was a judge named William Hawthorne. During the Quaker persecution, he ordered the flogging of a Quaker woman in Boston Streets. Moreover, William Hawthorne's son happened to be a presiding judge during the infamous Salem witch trials as well. He was reported to have sentenced a woman to death. Assumingly, the death of that woman inflicted the Hawthorne's family with a permanent curse. Still, in the ensuing years, the Hawthorne family apparently suffered no consequences of that alleged curse. However, it is worth mentioning that Nathaniel Hawthorne had always been attentive to that supposed curse for his writings—most particularly in *The House of the Seven Gables*—have constantly brought that issue up (Norman JR Farmer 224)

Hawthorne started writing *The House of the Seven Gables* on January 12, 1851, and the novel was completed and published in the same year. The events of the novel revolve around the traditional story of the terrorizing curse. The story of the novel was set out in New England locale at some point in time while the Puritans were settling there. During those troubling times, the Puritans were notoriously known for establishing the common practice of accusing a certain man of witchcraft and condemning them to death. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne presents, by and large, a projecting reproduction of that time and its accompanying ghostly circumstances. From the story elements and unity; to characters and setting, everything in the novel collaborates to creatively impart that atmosphere with more emphasis laid on “at the dark side of human heart,” (Hernaini 10).

Family, in *The House of the Seven Gables*, does occupy a special place of interest as well. Hawthorne directs a considerable amount of attention to the family. Most writers, theorists, and philosophers across history have been concerned with family. Nathaniel Hawthorne follows that lead, and his attitude is unsurprisingly comprehensible as family is commonly believed to be the “future,” and that “doing a good job with family members builds the base for it,”(Nazmi AL-Shalabi 14).

In the novel, Hawthorne introduces his readers to different forms of families, and their distinctive frailties and perfections. Besides, for Hawthorne a family is a miniature representational reflection of society. Accordingly, perceiving family as such presents the possibility of exploring it as a “possible pattern for society and the individual’s relationship to it,” (Eric Potter 1). Hawthorne in his novel, and fiction writers in general, employ “this sentimental formula to teach faith in natural virtue and in virtuous simplicity while emphasizing the joys of family life as the highest value,” (Shitsuyo Masui 60). They suggest that preserving a good family would arguably bring about the establishment of a good society.

The novel does as well offer many other themes such as Class-system, and religion which are some of the big events raised in the novel. As an example of that, the characters' mistakes and sins who have committed at the past affected the upcoming generation as they have blamed for their actions in the present situations. It is clearly stated in the Pyncheon's family because the curse was passed from one generation to the next. Moreover, the story begins with a prologue designing the narration of Pyncheon’s family and the old house, for instance.

Hawthorne deals with society in the novel employing some symbolic devices. He well delineates the established classes and the growing class-related sensitivities. Although society and class in the novel most probably point to the Puritan society and classes established with it, the novel can still be perceived as a symbolic exploration of the American society in its totality. In that order—besides communicating “some messages about Puritan people and their life in the United States in the colonial era,” (Hernaini 9), the novel could be deemed as a narrative description of the life and values of the American society of the time as well.

Furthermore, the novel invites the attention of its readers to some social changes of the time. Besides the mounting clash between classes, the novel addresses other issues such as the waning of nobles, the rise of democracy, and the significance of individuality and gender difference (James F. Pagan 115).

Curse as a Prevalent Theme in *The House of the Seven Gables*

The House of the Seven Gables is perceived by many critics not just as a work of fiction, but also as a document of history. The reason is that the novel was written at a time of dramatic transitions. It was the time of the Puritans settlement and the American Revolution. Therefore, the novel presumably records the different transformations when New England was undergoing with a lot of changes in society and politics (Nazmi AL-Shalabi 141). In that order, the story of the novel provides an account of two diverging eras: a longed for history, and a gloomy present. They relate the story of the celebrated past of the Pyncheon family who are presently inflicted with a permanent curse nonetheless. Establishing a cause-effect link between the past deeds and the present happenings is emphasized in the novel. The curse or bad deeds of a past generation persists “into the successive ones, divesting itself of every temporary advantage,” (*The House of the seven Gables* 9).

As mentioned earlier, the novel has a historic dimension to it. Therefore, the theme of curse in the novel is not minimally a fictional account of a cursed family. The historic roots of reference for the topic of curse in the novel could be traced back to the times of the Puritans’ settlement in New England. The impact of those times continued for centuries persistently shaping the face of the new democracy (Shitsuyo Masui 67).

Although the story of the novel is an exploration of the lives of two families—the Maules and the Pyncheons- it stretches through a time span of around two hundred years. Because of the supposed curse of the Maules upon the Pyncheons, the novel story deals with the possible consequences of that curse on a line of many consecutive generations of these two families. In that order, the concern of the current study is the theme of curse as an ad infinitum interminable evil inflicting many generations in a row. In the novel, that curse is obviously presented to have “become a part of the Pyncheon inheritance,” (*The House of the Seven Gables*, Introduction 23).

In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne provides an endless number of associations between family and curse. That connection is so significant because the two issues in the novel are closely related and share indispensable relevance. The story of the novel assumes that Maule’s curse upon Colonel Pyncheon is an undeniably ugly fact. That assumption is consolidated after the unpredictably sudden death of Pyncheon “with blood on his ruff,” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 20). Hawthorne proposes in the novel, implicitly though, that “a curse can have a real effect on family,” (Kendra Paitz 7). What happened in the past still overshadows the present’s occurrences in the life of the Pyncheons. And they recognize that assumption for they believe that the curse is caused by what their ancestors did and was “inherited from him!” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 197).

Through showing the effects of the Maules’ curse upon the Pyncheon’s family, Hawthorne recalls history into the scene as an influential force on the present and what happens in it. The emphasis on the history of these two families is obviously and abundantly delineated in the novel. It is stated in the story of the novel that the Pyncheon’s house is located on a land that originally belonged to the forefathers of the Maules. The Pyncheons— taking advantage of their position of power and authority—are reported in the story to have acquired and owned that land by illegal and dubious manipulation as the Maules were unwilling to give up their land and tried to resist the

Pyncheon's way, "the wealthy and powerful Colonel Pyncheon contrived to implicate Maule in sin of religious heresy," (Iqbal 112). Consequently, the Maule was sentenced to death and hanged, and Colonel Pyncheon put his hand on the land and seized it. That terribly unjust act when the Maules left the Pyncheons with a permanent evil curse.

Respectively, the awful transgression on the Maules effected an evil curse that not only had an effect on Colonel Pyncheon, but also continued to have ghostly consequences on all the later Pyncheon generations. Hawthorne throughout the sequence of events in the novel deliberated on the workings of that curse on the Pyncheon's family through providing a chronology of its history. Stressing the concept of history might as well be an indication to the historic fact that Hawthorne's grandfather was a head judge during the Salem witchcraft trials in the 17th century. The chronology of history occurrences and their effect on the present "shows that time keeps marching on from the past, through the present, to the future, and not in a reverse way," (Nazmi AL-Shalabi 141).

Correspondingly, curse, family, and history, are closely connected to each other in the novel. The condemned Maule while the rope was around his neck pleaded to God to punish Colonel Pyncheon. His supplication to God was more than a plea; it was a curse and a prophecy that history devotedly preserved and fulfilled. In view of that, even though Colonel Pyncheon seizes the Maule's land and builds a magnificently huge mansion on it, he dies on the day of its opening party. The Maule's curse on the family of the Pyncheon's is also supposed to have over time imposed a kind of bodily debility on the Pyncheons causing them to have bizarre death and the curse continually persisted on the Pyncheons for many successive generations (Shitsuyo Masui 50).

Almost all the events in the novel are closely related to one another “by the theme of an inherited curse,” (Anda Stefanovici 71). In the story of the novel, Hawthorne records the permanence of the curse by dexterously demonstrating through events and characters alike how past occurrences encroach upon the present. Characters-wise, Holgrave raises the oft-avoided question: “Shall we never, ever get rid of this past?” that “lies upon the present like a giant’s dead body!” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 161). It is also clearly delineated in the novel that despite the Pyncheons relentless endeavors to establish a break with the past and attend to the future, all their efforts end in vain. For one thing, all the surrounding objects such as the portrait, the map, the elm tree, and the house which, for the sake of illustration, is “a container of the memories of the Pyncheons of the past and today’s Pyncheons,” (Nazmi AL-Shalabi 141).

However, all events in the novel put much emphasis on “the curse of the ancestors occurring gradually to the heritages,” (Hernaini 9). Thus the theme of curse persists to be interestingly appealing to many characters in the novel. It investigates the consequences of the current curse on the present generations, and assumes that even wrongdoings of the past keep haunting the present, (Nazmi AL-Shalabi 141). The descendants of the Pyncheons recognize the lasting effects of the curse on them as they too are “doomed to haunt!” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 142). In a different strand, curse inflicting the Pyncheons presumably bears historic resemblance to the assumed curse on the author’s family. Hawthorne by bringing to light such evocative bearings in the novel, which proved to have no ground, might have intended to propose a certain moral lesson, (James R. Mellow 293).

To effectively and convincingly communicate his moral point, Hawthorne uses some romantic elements with a great finesse. One credible romantic element Hawthorne skillfully employs is blood. As a symbol of evil, death, and suffering, the story of the novel brings in ample examples of Pyncheon family members, from past and present alike, experiencing this blood distress. To that effect, it is argued that

the “the romanticization and sentimentalization of death” characterize the nineteenth-century American attitude,” (David Stannard 16). These instances include “blood to drink”, “a single original House of the Seven Gables, framed by flesh-and-blood carpenters”, “blood on his ruff”, “with the black stain of blood”, “God would give them blood to drink”, “with a great bloodstain on his richly wrought band”, “with an ugly flow of blood upon his shirt-bosom!”, and “he seemed to choke with blood”, to name only some, (*The House of the Seven Gables* 4,5,20,26,110,182,227,271). In the novel, Colonel Pyncheon is unequivocally portrayed with “blood on his ruff” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 20) when he breathes his last breath. Likewise, the succeeding generations of the Pyncheons have been depicted in the novel to undergo a permanent symptom of blood problem as blood keeps sloshing in their throats. The blood symptoms—which have escorted all Pyncheon generations, past and present—could presupposed to be reflected upon as repercussions to the curse of the accused and then unjustly hanged Mathew Maule. Fulfilling his prophecy, the accused Maule, an instant before being hanged, implored God to give Colonel Pyncheon “blood to drink”. Colonel Pyncheon dies on the house built on Maule’s land indicating the realization of Maule’s curse not only on Colonel Pyncheon but also on many Pyncheon generations yet to come. Or in the least, that is what the Pyncheons thought. Miss Hepzibah, a descendant of the Pyncheons, confirms:

If old Maule's ghost, or a descendant of his, could see me behind the counter to-day, he would call it the fulfillment of his worst wishes. But I thank you for your kindness, Mr. Holgrave, and will do my utmost to be a good shop-keeper."

(The House of the Seven Gables , 43)

Society and Class

The House of the Seven Gables does as well deal with the issue of class and society. Through the study and presentation of the succeeding generations of the Maules and the Pyncheons, the novel attempts to establish a link between the 17th century feudal culture and the 19th century classless society in America. The events of the novel offer a contrasting picture between the aristocracy and the plebeian. Aristocracy in the novel is presented to have a deep attachment to England, not America. Its members are depicted to be inclined to reproduce “the beliefs and way of life of English gentry” (Henry Bamford Parkes 61). The Pyncheons represent the aristocracy and the Maules stand for the plebeian. The novel also investigates American society on the thresholds of democracy; a democracy demonstrated in the characters of Holgrave, Uncle Veneer, and Phoebe in the novel. It is thus mostly assumed that in the 19th century America, the elaboration of Plebeian classes almost put an end to the model of social ladder. In addition, the novel reflects a constant concern of Hawthorne with “the colonial past of New England and its unvarying sway on his characters grounded in pre- revolutionary ideals of English nobility along with the social and political turmoil of the 19th century,” (Iqbal 86).

Aristocracy in the novel is advanced forward through one of its major characters; that of Hepzibah. Hepzibah works as a huckster and is residing alone in the house of the Pyncheons’ ancestors. It is currently argued that the mansion of the Pyncheons indicates the past with all its glory, values, and traditions. However, this overvalued past is constantly made vulnerable by the present and its established structures. Despite of Hepzibah’s state of spinsterhood and recurring difficulties, she is presented as an aristocrat who is adamant to sustain and preserve her obligations towards the extension of her family line with pride. Bur Hepzibah’s “pride is undemocratic,” with “an aristocratic arrogance,” (Iqbal 94). In that order, it is made obvious in the novel that since the time of the former Pyncheon, all Pyncheon members have sustained the tradition of taking pride in their high class affiliation. At the opening of the novel,

Colonel Pyncheon invites all people to the opening party of his house including those belonging to the lower stratum of society; yet, split doors are assigned to low class people to separate them from upper classes. During the party, invited guests are guided into different divisions of the house on the basis of the “high or low degree of each,” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 17). The story of classes’ sensitivities and differences observably pervades the novel. So, it is through these instances that the readers get introduced to the themes of society and class in the novel. The lives of both aristocratic as well as working plebeian classes are interwoven and entrenched together, (Hernaini 11).

Assumingly, Hawthorne in his novel has positioned himself with the masses. It is argued that he “ignored the more aristocratic society of Salem in favor of limited companionship with the less literate,” (Alexander Cowie 330). The landed gentry are apparently portrayed giving way for the less literate. This clash between classes is deemed significant as a “latent force of civil society,” (Henry T. Tuckerman 341). So, through the character of Hephzibah, it gets explicit that the high class of the society is on the way out and waning. She represents an era of collapse and losing ground for the aristocracy. Hephzibah is faced with numerous obstacles and hardships due to her imprudent persistence to sustain the values and traditions of gentle breeding. The time and circumstances have thrown into her way the harsh truths of equality and classless future society. Hephzibah’s chimera gets her into thinking that she should keep up her house traditions, and model her life into good mannerism, etiquette, modesty, and decorum. Too much concerned with the past and its glory, she abandons her social locality at Salem and picks a life of solitude.

Moreover, Clifford, Hephzibah’s brother, wandering into an unsure present, and restrained by restiveness, he as a result decides to leave his family mansion and set on an expedition “by train,” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 222). On his way of loss and wandering, he runs into some people, and exchanges little chats with them on railways deeming them “the greatest blessing that the ages have wrought out for us,” as they, according to him, “spiritualize travel,” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 236).

On their way, Hepzibah and her brother both “stand on the platform, raise their hands to the sky, and ask God to take mercy on them,” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 242). All these painful experiences and reflections show the spiritual as well as societal disorientation members of the gentility have to endure. Democracy, revolution, and other transitions of that era resulted in “a changed social order, in which hereditary wealth and privilege counted for less, and human equality for more,” (Allan Nevins Commager 111). For that reason, readers of the novel would probably show a great amount of sympathy with the character of Hepzibah. Readers get sympathetic reflecting the attitude of Chanticleer and his two wives towards Hepzibah. They set their dealings “out of sympathy for Hepzibah, their lady-patroness,” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 134). She might arguably appear to be familiar with many people who are forced to go through undesirable changes in their life. Hepzibah is really a miserable human being who can neither give up on her pedigree and do blue collar jobs for a living, nor accept help and acts of charity from others. Hepzibah undergoes various hardships on all levels. Besides being socially troubled, she goes through financial as well as psychological difficulties. Therefore, the lifestyle she leads points to the fading upshot of the social superciliousness, embodied in the aristocracy. Against her will and pride, Hepzibah is forced to open a cent shop to feed herself and her brother, Clifford, after his discharge from jail. It is highly significant for the Pyncheons and thus for the nobility as “they face a new phase in their family history,” (Shitsuyo Masui). The cent-shop is more than simply a shop. It is a symbol of a demarcation line to the end of an era and the beginning of another. Assumably, the cent-shop and Hepzibah working as a low class woman is an indication of a vanishing gentility and a rising equality of class. That new transition, though painful for Hepzibah, is positively welcomed by members of the supposedly rising class. As an emblem of that rising class, Holgrave states:

I look upon this as one of the fortunate days of your life. It ends an epoch, and begins one. Hitherto, the life-blood has been gradually chilling in your veins, as you sat aloof, within your circle of gentility, while the rest of the world was fighting out its battle with one kind of necessity or another. Henceforth, you will at least have the sense of healthy and natural effort for a purpose, and of lending your strength-be it great or small-to the united struggle of mankind. This is success –all the success that anybody meets with!

(The House of the Seven Gables 43-44).

By contrast, the character of Uncle Veneer offers a realistic appreciation of life, society, and class changes. He is neither a zealous fan of the new democracy, nor is he breeding a reflective pine for the past. Uncle Veneer has witnessed dramatic changes of former monarchies, empires, and states. Thus he revealingly tells Hepzibah that almost nothing is as it seems:

Those old gentlemen that grew up before the Revolution used to put on grand airs. In my young days, the great man of the town was commonly called king; and his wife, not queen, to be sure, but lady. Now –a-days, a man would not dare to be called king, if he feels himself a little above common folks; he only stoops so much the lower to them.

(The House of the Seven Gables 57).

To that end, the novel offers ample delineations of bitterness and rebuff demonstrated by these characters towards those changes in society and class. Those who used to be members of a high class, represented by Hepzibah, show resentment and grudge to those changes. The reason for that is that “the revolution weakened the old aristocracy and laid the basis for readjustment of classes,” (Nelson Manfred Blake 124). Hepzibah might have invited our sympathy and understanding because she is presented as a decent aristocratic lady; one who “had fed herself from childhood with the shadowy food of aristocratic reminiscences and whose religion it was that a lady’s hand soils itself irremediably by doing aught for its bread-this born lady,” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 38).

Nevertheless, Hepzibah is still an aristocratic woman. She is obviously an upper class member. The members of the upper classes had long been privileged by both law and tradition in which “early colonial laws forbade any but upper class men to wear silver buttons and any but upper class women and daughters to wear silk dresses,” (Henry W. Cutchen, 23). In that vein, Hepzibah takes pride in sustaining such traditions, and in the fact that she still possesses some old Chinese items including tea cups which “were almost the first tea-cups ever seen in the colony,” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 68). Hepzibah keeps dreaming of imaginative unrealistic visions of being rescued and raised above her current misery. Respectively, it is further argued that assigning much significance in the novel to the Eastern Land Claim “translates the Hawthornes’ never realized right to nine thousand acres in Maine deeded to their ancestor, in 1666, by an Indian Sagamore,” (Austen. Warren 89).

In that order, Hepzibah is presented as a rebel or rather a nonconformist with the new social order. She neither enjoys the concessions of the nobility, nor does she take in the new societal establishment. Both Hepzibah and her brother retain “an ancestral aloofness, unable to give themselves to the democratic social discourse of the growing city,” (Shitsuyo Masui 50). Yet, Hepzibah is now faced with harsh truths leaving her with no option but to embrace the new reality. Hence, her disturbed state is a miniature projection of the state of gentility in its totality. Superseded by a new social establishment, the fading of the nobility has effected defining modifications and amendments to the society. Through her new business, Hepzibah gets little familiarity with the life of the commons. Starting her own business by opening the cent shop “furnishes her with an opportunity to surrender her condescending approach to commonalty,” (Iqbal 89). Nonetheless, through her intense anxiety, it could easily be observed that she is still unwilling or unable to fully blend in principle, Hepzibah cannot accept “the idea of personal contact with the world,” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 146). Deep down, she is brooding a relentless craving for her forefathers’ lifestyle. She sends an outcry of longing and reminiscence affirming that she was “born a lady, and have always lived one –no matter in what narrowness of means, always a lady!” and yearning to “be a lady a little longer,” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 44). What is more, she even wishes to conclude her life and get buried in the family tomb of her ancestry so that she might meet them again. This new life, according to her, is “too chill and hard,” and she is “too old, too feeble, and too hopeless!” (*The House of the Seven Gables*43).

Accordingly, the fading of nobility and trading them for commonality has led to the ostensible ostracism of its members. As soon as Clifford is introduced in chapter VII, the “theme of psychological isolation comes to the foreground and is emphasized through chapter XIV,” (Anda Stefanovici 72). Hepzibah—who is deemed to be the archetype character of the excluded nobility—has persistently preserved her condescending attitude towards “commonality,” (Iqbal 89). Hepzibah’s attitude of looking down on the people of “the lower class,” has caused her to be detached from common people. Moreover, sustaining “a permanent scowl of wrinkles on her forehead,” has further distanced her even from her customers. Heeding this fact, Uncle Veneer offers his counsel to Hepzibah telling her to “put on a bright face...., and smile pleasantly,” because “a stale article, if you dip it in a good, warm, sunny smile, will go off better than fresh one that you’ve scowled upon!” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 59).

Finally, *The House of the Seven Gables* too tempting to be offering a sole theme. It may on the face of it be perceived as the sole story of the curse inflicted on the Pyncheons by the Maules. In addition, it could be argued to be the story of a Pyncheons celebrated past and the inherited curse imposed on their present. It is also argued that the novel is a document of history which records the dramatic transitions of the American society of the mid-19th century. Correspondingly, it has been shown through critical analysis that the novel entails all the themes mentioned earlier. However, the theme of curse has been examined as prevalently running theme throughout the novel. Additionally, the current paper has explored the issues of class, society, history, and family as closely relevant concepts to the theme of curse.

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