

## Symbolism in Puritan Society in Hawthorne's *The House of The Seven Gables*

**Hernaini**

hernaini@teknokrat.ac.id

STBA Teknokrat

### Abstract

*This study focuses on symbolic story which serves as a disguised representation for meanings. This study is explored in one of Hawthorne's novels *The House of Seven Gables*. This analysis applies qualitative method in order to analyze the symbols used in the novel and what actually they represent to in Hawthorne's life, using sociological approach to deal with the data. The data presented in the novel might be in the form of words, phrases, sentences, paragraph, or discourses that deal with the symbols used by Hawthorne in the novel. To support the primary data, the using of some related textbooks and other written materials printed from internet are needed as the references. Hawthorne's novel clearly explores some symbolism which focuses on the description of the Puritan values in that era. The symbols can be seen from the house and garden which slightly criticized the reality of Puritan society. Some characters also explain some symbols of the people at that time. This novel finally gives some messages about Puritan people and their life in the United States in the colonial era.*

**Key Words:** garden, house, romanticism, symbol

### Introduction

In literature, symbolic story serves as a disguised representation for meanings other than those indicated on the surface. The characters often have no individual personality, but are embodiments of moral qualities and other abstractions. It is the unique way to deliver the messages in literature. In American Literature, old and modern authors communicate the meanings and lessons of their works directly and indirectly. The text itself plainly tells us a story, but an author also uses symbols to relay his message in a more subtle way. One of those authors is Nathaniel Hawthorne. He is also known as master of symbolism. He also has the important role in Romantic Movement. In each of the stories, he has used one symbol in particular to tell his story. His symbols can be in the forms of animals, settings or objects. Even, the name of his character can be symbolic. He does it well in his novel *The House of the Seven Gables*. It is his second novel that he prefers it to be a *romance* than a novel. It is something interesting coming out from the author himself.

It is set mainly in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, with glimpses into the history of the house, which was built in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The primary interest of this book is in the subtle and involved descriptions of character and motive, in which Hawthorne imply to strengthen the narrative. Hawthorne wrote this novel in 1851 – a year after the publishing of *The Scarlet Letter*. Although it is not as great as *The Scarlet Letter*, it is a considerably more companionable book, and it has more charm. It is also a tone poem in subtle manner. This novel mainly tells about the curse of the ancestors occurring gradually to the heritages. The crime and the false in the past keep occurring to the present, then the next generation should face those risks. It also examines the consequences of sin. Actually this novel was also influenced by the author's burdens of his ancestors in Salem Witchtrials, and the Puritans. And Hawthorne wonderfully portrayed it using the symbol as reminiscent to Hawthorne's real life. The use of symbols also function to reinforce the moral lesson of the narrative that Hawthorne tried to propose to the readers.

Moreover, *The House of the Seven Gables* is a Transcendental plus Gothic novel in one, built up of many expressive details in which creates the very figurative story. Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The House of the Seven Gables* reveals symbols through descriptive characterization of the many protagonists. These main characters are Hepzibah, Clifford, Colonel Pyncheon, Phoebe, Holgrave, and Matthew Maule. Once, the power of this novel is also in the moral value portrayed well by Hawthorne in this *The House of the Seven Gables*.

### Method

This analysis applies qualitative method in order to analyze the symbols used in the novel and what actually they represent to in Hawthorne's life, using sociological approach to deal with the data. The data presented in the novel might be in the form of words, phrases, sentences, paragraph, or discourses that deal with the symbols used by Hawthorne in the novel. To support the primary data, the using of some related textbooks and other written materials printed from internet are needed as the references. In addition, detailed reading, careful reading, and deep understanding are the most appropriate data collection techniques in this study. These techniques have both comprehensive and interpretative aspects since they are aimed at finding the characteristics and the elements of the novel based on the subject of the research. Then, those are explained and analyzed. The last step is drawing the conclusion and rechecking if the conclusion is appropriate enough to answer the stated problem.

### Discussion

*The House of the Seven Gables* begins with a preface in which Hawthorne makes a point to tell readers that the tale they are about to read is a 'Romance' rather than a traditional 'Novel.' The main difference, however, is on the matter of author's freedom to express the idea and to present it in such form of literary work. In addition, the propensity of novel toward giving to the imaginary the formal guarantee of the 'real,' the dependence on recognition, and the relative formal contingency are essential features, whereas Romance could be viewed increasingly as an imaginative and psychological projection of the 'real' world. It brings the writer's fancy pictures almost into positive contact with the realities of the moment. The main criticism of the Romance has been a moral one, while novel tends to have the features that led critics to see it as a basically referential, sometimes to doubt its critical respectability (Fowler, 1987: 162). Meanwhile, Hawthorne saw the essential difference between the two as lying in the imaginative freedom granted to the writer of a romance which enabled him to pursue psychological and mythical truth more single-mindedly (Fowler, 1987: 209). He proceeds to say that because the story is written as a Romance, it gives him creative license to present reader's with his selective understanding of the truth instead of binding him to being true to life. He notes that Romances give writers a creative and subjective license to "mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture." Hawthorne also tells readers that the moral purpose of his work is to convey the notion that "the wrong-doing of one generation lives into the successive ones" (Hawthorne, 1851: xvii). In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne connects a by-gone time with the very present that is flitting away from us – the readers (McMichael, 1974: 466).

The story written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, is a typical example of the story - an ancient tale of the dreaded curse. The story takes place in a simple time during the Puritan settlement in the New England area. With the Puritans, there is the classic case in which a man is accused of witchcraft and is killed. Well, this sort of thing occurs in the exact story. Meanwhile, the story exposes the dark and light imagery which emerge on the way how Hawthorne narrate the story through the elements of the story, such as characters, setting, even the unity of the story itself. Here, Hawthorne looked at the dark side of human heart. Afterwards, this analysis will investigate the symbols used greatly in this *The House of the Seven Gables*. Such as some characters and settings in order to reveal the dark (sense of decay) and light (hope) in the matter of connecting a by-gone time with the very present and to express the loving solitude and nature, also as the reminiscent of a way to escape from unpleasant realities.

In addition, *The House of the Seven Gables* is categorized as dark romantic work. Dark romanticism tends to present individuals as prone to sin and self-destruction, not as inherently possessing divinity and wisdom. For the Dark Romantics, the natural world is dark, decaying, and mysterious, when it does reveal truth to man, its revelations are evil and hellish. It also frequently shows individuals failing in their attempts to make changes for the better ([american romanticism overview.html](#)). Moreover, Dark Romanticism also contains of presenting gothic gloom and deals with the truth of human heart. *The House of the Seven Gables* actually had already fitted in with that statement. Hawthorne, who was known as one of the most representative authors of dark romanticism, had done it well in this novel.

In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne uses Romantic elements to make the moral of the story more believable. And the romantic elements of the novel also add suspicion to the truth of the moral. One of the romantic elements that add to the believability of the moral is the gurgling of blood in the throats of successive generations. It can be seen as the curse of a man named Matthew Maule who was accused of being a wizard so he was hanged. When before he was hung he blurted out this words, "God will give him blood to drink." (p.

8). Matthew yelled out this statement while he was pointing at a certain person, that person was Colonel Pyncheon. Who after this incident acquired the land that once was Maule's homestead. Near to where the wizard was put to rest was Maule's Well which soon after the incident became hard and brackish. The Colonel soon died in the House of Seven Gables and so the curse began on the house. That is how the story began and from there the story goes through a series of flashbacks to the past, and then comes to the present.

"The love of money is the root of all evil." This basic proverb is the foundation that Nathaniel Hawthorne builds upon in *The House of the Seven Gables*, principally. Like all of Hawthorne's works, he exploits the evils of the puritan heart in 1851 Romantic Fantasy. Hawthorne tells the story of the Pyncheon family's struggle to overcome the inherited problem caused by the sins of their ancestors. The Pyncheon family, however, thinks the problems come from an inherited curse that was placed on the family. *The House of the Seven Gables* shows Hawthorne's opinion of the puritan heart. He believed that their hearts were full of sin, and that they were blinded by the sin and evil so much that they could not even see that the problem lies within them. Hawthorne believed that the inherited evil of the heart could only be overcome by true love.

Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, uses many qualities of symbolism which help develop the novel's main ideas. Darkness is the emblematic color of the Pyncheon's. Contrasted with its opposite, light, it forms one of the major symbols of the novel: the opposition of dark and light. Hawthorne uses dark imagery throughout his novel to express a sense of decay, but he also uses light imagery to inject hope – the hope to get the burden off and to leave the tortuous condition. Here, he describes the character of Phoebe as an illuminating speck of light transforming the darkness of the house like the light of dawn (p. 92). This description of Phoebe, using light imagery, expresses that she is an innocent woman with an inner spirit to help break the Pyncheon's curse. The Proper Light and Shadow in the Major Romances that Phoebe is rather too obviously a little ray of sunshine...(p. 37). When Phoebe enters the house from the sunny daylight, and is almost blinded by the density of shadows lurking in the passages of the old house, the contrast between Phoebe's lighted presence against the dark gloomy house can be seen.

Inside of the house, the characters also participate in the contrast of light versus dark. The characters in *The House of the Seven Gables* "symbolize the spaces of human existence." Each one has a set role, and no one contradicts his or her character. They range from the stereotypical old spinster to the young, liberal democrat. Each of these characters marches to his or her own drum, but when all of the drums are played together, a magnificent novel is produced. Even when the characters are set alone, they are symbolic. Hepzibah and Clifford are the dark elements, and Phoebe, like the China, is the light. Holgrave is not light or dark; but rather, in the shadows.

In addition, the symbols in *The House of the Seven Gables* enhance the story by giving a deeper insight into Hawthorne's themes, such as the past haunting the present – the falsity and the wrongdoing occurred in the past are still emerged to the present, then the burdens and the sin haunt the generation. One of the first symbols introduced in the novel is the house itself. Through Hawthorne's description in the opening chapters, the house takes on a human-like character. It is described as "breathing through the spiracles of one great chimney" (p. 7). The descriptions make the house into a symbol of the lives that have been lived there. It has the "person of a living creature that exists and influences" the lives of everybody that even steps foot into it.

Class distinctions also permeate *The House of the Seven Gables*. The story commences with an immediate contrast between the wealthy Colonel Pyncheon and the farmer, Matthew Maule. Later, at Colonel Pyncheon's housewarming party, guests are either ushered into the kitchen or into the home's more stately rooms depending on "the high or low degree" of each person. Through these early images, readers have an immediate sense that issues of social class are one of Hawthorne's central themes. In that the novel is considered to reflect much of Hawthorne's own life, one must wonder to what degree his views about the aristocracy and the working classes are embedded.

Moreover, the settings, or environments, that surround Hawthorne's characters in his novel *The House of the Seven Gables* are not only as fully detailed as the people in the novel are, but they make up an integral part of the story itself. For example, Hawthorne uses the rooms in which his characters sleep, the houses in which they live, as well as the light and darkness that surround them as a way to further describe and define the people he has created in this story. By exploring these environments, readers gain a deeper understanding of his characters and appreciate more fully how Hawthorne uses the environments to enhance the story.

In *The House of the Seven Gables*, however, the literary term tone, is frequently used by the author, which adds to description of the Puritan values important to Hawthorne. He also uses tone to enhance descriptions using dialogue. Further, Hawthorne uses tone to describe the theme of maturation. First, Hawthorne uses tone as a way to explain Puritan values. For example, Hawthorne writes

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*“A man of sturdy understanding, like Judge Pyncheon, cares no more for twelve o’clock at night than for the corresponding hour of noon. However, just the parallel drawn, in some of the preceding pages between his Puritan ancestor and himself, it fails to this point. The Pyncheon of two centuries ago, in common with most of his contemporaries, professed his full belief in spiritual ministrations, although reckoning them chiefly of a malignant character.”* (p. 243)

However, symbols are an eloquent way for an author to create a more fully developed work of art. The stories themselves tell a tale; however, an author also uses symbols to relay his message in a more subtle manner. Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of the earliest authors to use symbols as an integral part of his plots. This is clearly seen in *The House of the Seven Gables*. The use of symbols causes an "association psychology" to enter into the story, making it more intriguing. In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s romance *The House of the Seven Gables*, symbolism is used eloquently to enhance the story being told by providing the reader with a deeper insight into the more complicated intentions in the story.

As told above that the novel begins by describing the most obvious symbol in the book, being the house itself. The exterior of the house is a “rusty wooden house, with seven acutely peaked gables, facing towards various points of the compass, and a huge, clustered chimney in the midst.” The house is almost organic because of its aura and the vines that cover it. It is significant that the house is made from wood because wood is a degradable material. A stone house’s beauty grows greater with age, and the interior can be redecorated, but a wooden house without good upkeep can only decay. The roof of the house is so rotted that there is mosses and other vegetation growing in between the gables. The house is truly the decaying yet proud spectacle of the neighborhood. Yet, though the house is the spectacle of the neighborhood, it is also the focus of young children’s imaginations. This is seen where the first customer of the shop appears asking for a cookie. It is clear that the young boy was very curious as to what is happening in the great mansion. The house is an old wooden building that is rotting away but still is a good enough quality to withstand some of the test of time.

The house is referred to as a prison by Hawthorne; he calls Hepzibah and Clifford inmates. The house is a prison because it prevents the inhabitants from truly enjoying any freedom. The inmates attempt an escape from their prison twice. Initially, as Phoebe and Clifford watch the parade of life in the street, Clifford realizes that his life has become meaningless, and he cannot help but try to join the masses below. This could mean the only way for Clifford to become truly reunited with mankind is through death. Unfortunately, Clifford fails to win his freedom and returns to the solace of his prison. The second attempt at escape is by Clifford and Hepzibah. They attempt to escape the clutches of the house, but it is too late for them. The house has affected them too much to stay away. This is apparent when Hepzibah and her brother made themselves ready- as ready as they could in the best of their old-fashioned garments, which had hung on pegs, or had been laid away in trunks, so long that the dampness and mouldy smell of the past was on them- made themselves ready in their faded bettermost, to go to church.

*“They descended the staircase together...pulled open the front door, and stepped across the threshold, and felt, both of them, as if they were standing in the presence of the whole world...”* Their hearts quaked within them, at the idea of taking one step further.

Hepzibah and Clifford are completely cut off from the outside world. They are like prisoners who, after being jailed for decades, return to find a world they do not know. Clifford realizes this and offers his insight,

*“We are ghosts! We have no right among human beings- no right anywhere, but in this old house.”*

The house has imprisoned their souls and trapped their lives; hence, the house symbolizes a prison for the characters. Although the most obvious of Hawthorne’s symbols is the house, many of the things in and around the house are also token items. The elm tree outside of the house is very large in stature. It is the symbol of nature and life. The elm tree began very small in comparison to the house, but over time has grown to so large that it overpowers the house with its immense presence. The tree

*“though now four score years of age, or perhaps nearer a hundred, was still in its strong and broad maturity, throwing its shadows from side to side of the street, overtopping the seven gables”*

is obviously prospering in this decaying scene. Because the tree continues to grow during and despite the generations of the Pyncheons, it show that regardless of bad circumstances in the house, life outside will continue to grow and prosper.

Several things inside the house are very important to the story. These things represent the history of the Pyncheon family dating back to the original Colonel Pyncheon who had been cursed by Matthew Maule for the evil way in which the Colonel had obtained land for the house. The house has collected many memories and many artifacts from the different residents over the decades. The house has an elaborate interior, but is mostly gloomy and grim. It can also be seen as a symbol of light verses dark. Most of the family items are old and dark,

except for the tea set. The tea set is very exquisite and expensive; it has been kept in mint condition throughout the years of use. Hepzibah introduces this item when she carries in

*“the old silver spoons, with the family crest upon them, and a China tea set...still unfaded, although the tea-pot and small cups were as old as the custom of tea-drinking.”*

This tea set is allowed to shine only because it was brought into the home by a wife of the Colonel, who was not a Pyncheon. Unfortunately, everyone and everything in the house is slowly decaying. This is obvious when Phoebe thinks Clifford is a ghost. Clifford's clothing is even used as a symbol of his imprisonment. His dressing gown is worn and faded and has been soiled over time by use. Even the Colonel's old room was once plush and shining, but is now worn, ragged, and old. All of the other things and people in the house contrast with the bright China and the cheerful street outside. Hawthorne shows the house to be the gloomy, dismal castle from a Gothic tale – it is characterized by a setting which consists of ruined house or picturesque surroundings, and by characters that are seen to be the quintessence of good or evil. It is known for its incorporation of many conventions that are also found in Dark Romantic works – it commonly aims to inspire terror, including through accounts of the haunted structures, and the search for identity; critics often note gothic tale's “overly melodramatic scenarios and utterly predictable plots”

Then, the garden is also very symbolic. Gardens are symbols of growth and renewal. It is not a coincidence that the only romantic scenes take place in the garden. Just as the house harbors decay, the garden induces romance and life into the story. The scenes in the garden are more realistic than the scenes in the house. The garden provides the characters with a sort of sanctuary. Phoebe goes there to be alone and to relax. She goes to be amongst the flowers and the trees. It is her escape from the bustle of the world and a sanctuary from the house. Clifford enjoys going to the garden because of the bees. He appreciates the bees buzzing by and the blossoms in the trees. The garden is a place to be alone, and a place of refuge for the characters.

The well in the garden symbolizes the past and tells the future of the Pyncheon family. The well was a “spring of soft and pleasant water- a rare treasure on the sea grit peninsula” when the land was first settled. It was a prized asset because it was one of the few freshwater wells in a salt-water area. It was soiled once Colonel Pyncheon took the land from the Maules and began living there. The well is like the land that the house now sets upon. It was once a very valuable piece of property, but now is tainted. The well soon shows the effects of the Pyncheon curse:

*“It was a curious, and some people thought, an ominous fact that, very soon after the workmen began their operations, the spring of water, above mentioned, lost its pristine quality.”*

This is because of the evil manner in which the property was obtained from the Maules. The well tells the future of the family for certain people. It gave the Maules their magical power, and has given Holgrave his power. The water also casts up a rainbow of colors onto the walls of the well. These colors represent the good future of the family. The well adds a mystical touch to the growing group of symbols. The outside symbols bring the house into a very realistic setting with an intriguing quality. The symbol of *the well* is emerged in order to reveal the connection of the past and the very present in the way of showing individuals failing in their attempts to make changes for the better – as the characteristics of Dark Romanticism.

Hawthorne wished for this book to be of a lighter spirit than his first *The Scarlet Letter*. To accomplish this, he used more normal characters. Phoebe is the symbol of good; Hawthorne describes her in one word: May. Like the month of May, she is blossoming into maturity. She is one of the few people that go to the garden. The act of going out in the sunshine to tend the flowers is reminiscent of the month of May. Hepzibah will not go to the garden because she prefers the shadows of the house.

Phoebe enjoys nature. She likes the feel of earth under her fingertips, and she is enraptured with the odd hens in the garden. The hens are mirrors of the Pyncheon family. The time-thinned blood of the chickens is similar to the family's. The hens were originally great birds, growing to be the size of a small turkey. However, because of inbreeding and generations of keeping the “great” blood unspotted, the hens now appear gaunt and ugly. The family with the genteel blood is now unattractive and ineffectual like the hens. The hens really like Phoebe and react to her in a similar manner as Hepzibah and Clifford react, they react as if in automatic approval of her regardless of her common strengths. Holgrave tells Phoebe, “*The chicken really treats you like an old acquaintance.*” He also tells her that the Pyncheon hens are not like common hens. The hens act as if they are better than other hens, a sort of aristocracy. Phoebe is compared to a ray of sunshine by Hawthorne. In her entering moment, she does not look like she belongs in the shadowy, weed-filled yard, yet Hepzibah cannot turn her away. Phoebe loves the garden, and it is one of the few places at the house where she can be herself. Hawthorne wrote, “The eye of heaven seemed to look down on it.” Phoebe is the perfect character to be in the viewing area of heaven and is very worthy of the garden.

Hepzibah is a true picture of “decayed gentility.” Her character is the opposite of Judge Jaffery in many ways. The judge appears to be a very nice and sincere man, but appearances can deceive. He is a horrible and cruel man, very similar to his ancestor Colonel Pyncheon. Hepzibah is dark on the outside. She is old and “a tall figure, clad in black silk... feeling her way towards the stairs like a near-sighted person.” She has a permanent scowl of wrinkles on her forehead because of her nearsighted condition. Her clothing is all dark shades of grey and black similar to the clothing worn while in mourning. This goes along with her ‘title’ November. She is in the November stage of her life, she is older and alone in the world. When Hepzibah takes Phoebe to see the harpsichord that looks like a coffin, Hepzibah recognizes that she is a dark and dismal old woman. She is comparative to the straight back chairs in the house. The chairs are very stiff, and uninviting; however, amongst the other chairs there is one that stands out. It is compelling. It is old, plain, roomy, and comfortable looking. These chairs are like her character. Hepzibah’s outward beauty is nearly non-existent, but her true character is seen in the way she treats Phoebe and Clifford. Hepzibah is ‘very humble at heart, but rigidly conscious of her pedigree.’ This is most noticeable when she attributes all of Phoebe’s common heritages. Phoebe’s mother was a lower class country-girl, so Phoebe is not a true lady. Despite these feelings she does have love and compassion for Phoebe. She is truly a November soul.

This novel also explores the daguerreotype. A daguerreotype is a picture of a person that when turned in a certain direction the negative can be seen. Thus when Hawthorne created the character Holgrave he used the daguerreotype as another name for him. Holgrave is symbolic of the young and prospering America. He is a psychologist and a daguerreotypist. He offers different characters insight on the symbols in the story, including the hens in the garden. One of the most important symbolic things about him is his being a daguerreotypist. To make a daguerreotype, light and dark must be combined. Making the daguerreotypes is symbolic of his insight to human nature. Like a daguerreotype Holgrave’s character contains light and dark, he is the most realistic and complete character in the book, regardless of his slight morbid outlook. His morbid outlook is seen when he makes a daguerreotype of the Judge after he dies. He also wants to show Phoebe to reassure her and himself that the Judge is actually dead. Though Holgrave is a young man with an attitude, he is a very good psychologist.

Since biblical times, the device of the allegory has been an effective way to convey moral messages. While many critics chastise Hawthorne for his reliance upon the device that is “constantly creeping in around the fringes,” replacing reality but remaining ‘insufficiently real’ the allegories that are identified in *The House of the Seven Gables* function effectively within the text and serve Hawthorne’s intended purpose. Had he set out to write a novel, such criticism may be warranted. The novel instructed readers about how to live by showing them how not to make irrevocable moral blunders that would bring shame upon themselves, destruction, and wrath upon their communities or society at large. However, Hawthorne stated clearly that his intention was not to write a novel, but to write a moral tale, and in *The House of the Seven Gables*, he has done just that.

### Conclusion

Hawthorne’s novel clearly explores some symbolism which focuses on the description of the Puritan values in that era. The symbols can be seen from the house and garden which slightly criticized the reality of Puritan society. Some characters also explain some symbols of the people at that time. This novel finally gives some messages about Puritan people and their life in the United States in the colonial era.

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