

# Sins and Redemption: Traumatic Narrative in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*

Mingxia Hu<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of foreign languages, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing 210009, China

## Abstract

**Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of the most outstanding American romanticist writers in the nineteenth century, whose works are full of criticism and reflection on humanity, evils and social problems in his era. As Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* has attracted most scholar's attention, while his second romance *The House of the Seven Gables* is less noticed or studied. It tells a story that the wrongdoing of Pyncheon family lives into its descendants, leaving them the traumatic memory. The feud between the Pyncheons and Maules is dissolved by labor and mutual love. This paper attempts to study the novel from the perspective of trauma, with a view to explore the symbolic meaning of the house and the traumatic effects of family sins and curses on its residents, and also how labor and love as redemption can free Pyncheon's off-springs Hephzibah and Clifford from traumatic memories.**

## Keywords

**The House of the Seven Gables; Sin; Redemption; Trauma.**

## 1. Introduction

The *House of the Seven Gables* is Hawthorne's second romance after the surprise success of *The Scarlet Letter*, in which he tells the story that Colonel Pyncheon used his power to accuse Old Matthew Maule of committing crime of witchcraft and sent him to the scaffold due to land dispute, after obtaining illegitimately the land of Old Maule, Colonel Pyncheon established the house of the seven gables on it while he suddenly died since Old Maule uttered a curse: "God will give him blood to drink!" "In this romance Hawthorne anticipates the description of post-traumatic psychic states and the multi-modal process of recovery which psychological science has taken a century to deduce systematically, and the exposition of these trauma and efforts toward recovery generate the narrative and thematic core of the novel". [2] The concept of psychic trauma holds a pivotal place in the evolution of psychoanalysis. According to Sigmund Freud, when external circumstances overwhelm the ego's defensive and adaptive capacities, a trauma to the ego has occurred. If one is exposed to such states for a long time, his psychic equilibrium will be greatly destroyed. This Freudian concept of trauma and memory emphasizes the necessity to recreate or abreact through narrative recall of the experience. The traumatic theory provides us with a new perspective to interpret *The House of the Seven Gables*.

## 2. Hawthorne's Traumatic Narrative

Hawthorne's narrative in the novel spans nearly two centuries from past to present. In "The Custom-House" of his first romance *Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne portrays his ancestors Major William Hathorne, who was known for his persecution of Quakers, and John Hathorne, the son of Major William, one of the three judges at the Salem Witchcraft trials in 1692. The dark history of family makes Hawthorne feel tremendously guilty and his preoccupation with sin and evil may stem from his reflection on family history. This similar theme of the detrimental effects of

crime and curse towards offspring is further explained in Hawthorne's literary creation especially in *The House of the Seven Gables*. At the end of the story, Hepzibah takes her courage to open the cent-shop although she has dwelt in strict seclusion and taken no business of life for a long time. Through labor, she can afford the life of Clifford and even gain a new understanding of her aristocratic identity. It is Phoebe, another offspring of Pyncheon, who has saved Clifford from numbness and mere isolation, her marriage with the daguerreotypist Holgrave makes the curse and feud between two families disappear. The spiritual forces of good—in particular, the frankness and rejuvenating sunshine of Phoebe triumphs over the forces of evil.[3] Hawthorne's traumatic writing is of great practical significance, revealing the subjective initiative of human beings in the face of traumatic memories and the importance of critically inheriting history.

### 3. Labor as the Redemption

In the preface of the novel, Hawthorne wrote: "the wrongdoing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief; and he would feel it a singular gratification if this romance might effectually convince mankind—or, indeed, any one man—of the folly of tumbling down an avalanche of ill-gotten gold, or real estate, on the heads of an unfortunate posterity, thereby to maim and crush them, until the accumulated mass shall be scattered abroad in its original atoms."(6) Old Maule's curse "God will give him blood to drink" towards Colonel Pyncheon operates dark sides on his descendants Hepzibah and Clifford, inflicting anguish and torment on them physically and mentally. They both live in the house of the seven gables which is symbolic of evil history and traumatic memory, Hepzibah is forced to open the little shop to better take care of his brother who was released from jail recently, but the "dark-arrayed, pale-faced, ladylike, old figure" can not adapt herself to the new mode of capitalist system, unable to serve customers, her aristocratic pretension, which is another spiritual bequest of the Pynchon family, also accounts for her failure to be a good shopkeeper. With the economic construct changing from agrarian to capitalist one, the so-called title "lady" has become a bondage rather than a honor. While through labor behind the counter of shop, Hepzibah gradually breaks away from her previous gentility to realize that "healthy and natural effort for a purpose is the top priority". Holgrave, the descendant of Maule, considers Hepzibah's setting up the shop as a "heroic deed", and he said that: "I look upon this as one of the fortunate days of life. It ends an epoch and begins one." She herself also admits that "I was going to say a lady, but I consider that as past." It is typically said that the author uses her to represent the victory of plebeian values while satirizing outdated gentility. [7]

When Phoebe comes into the old house from the countryside, she brings "a gleam of sunshine" towards the house and plays a vital role in helping Hepzibah's reconstruction of identity. Hawthorne's characterization of Phoebe as a "little country-girl", who can efficiently cook, clean, and nurture, largely conforms to this idea of a girl as a miniaturized woman. [4] Phoebe's versatility of cooking and home-making takes on new value within the nineteenth-century structure of norms. The Cult of Domesticity became a pervasive ideology and women were relegated to the "sphere" of home and piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness were the standards to measure woman's value in Hawthorne's era. [1] The old spinster Hepzibah takes the responsibility to take care of her brother and Phoebe's gift for management and practical skills is proof of Hawthorne's acknowledgement of women's beneficial influence on men.

### 4. Love as the Redemption

Referring to Clifford, Hawthorne employs a metaphor of physical trauma: "Indeed, his life seemed to be standing still at a period little in advance of his childhood . . . just as, after the

torpor of a heavy blow. Clifford's heavy blow is not the blow on the head but his seclusion in the physical environment—the house. Although there are no psychotic symptoms, there is marked liability of mood with prominent depression, accompanied by amotivation, psychomotor retardation and hypersomnia. [2] Clifford can not accept anything new and the arched window is the only thing that connects him to the world. While Hepzibah is all too aware of her brother's fragile mental condition. "You can do nothing," she tells Jaffrey who threw Clifford into jail for nearly twenty years. "I devote myself to Clifford. He has every comfort which his situation admits of". As her brother's valiant protector, she dares to fight against Jaffrey and she also selflessly enlists her young cousin, Phoebe as his agent and accompany. "The half-torpid man would be full of harmonious life, just as a long-silent harp is full of sound, when the musician's fingers sweep across it." [6] Phoebe's love brings about Clifford's rejuvenation and his interior energy is fully released in the train ride when he comes into a nearly manic state. He said: "yes, my youth, my youth!—the more does it come back to me. No longer ago than this morning I was old...It was too soon! I could not bear it! Age has no right to come! I had not lived!" [6] Mourning for what has been lost is integral to recovering from trauma. [2] The return of Phoebe and her union with Holgrave promote the transformation of the latter to become a conservative reformist with mature mentality. At first, Holgrave is a radical fourierist who advocates that public edifices should crumble to ruin once in twenty years while at the end of the story he thought that a piece of architecture in stone is better than one in wood since every generation can change the interior according to his own taste and convenience. At last, Phoebe and Holgrave, Hepzibah, Clifford and Uncle Venner decide to go to county house together. Love can transcend class and become a salvation for all evils and sins in the story.

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