

ANALYSIS

The House of the Seven Gables (1851)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

While writing *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) Hawthorne read portions aloud to his wife Sophia and it gave her headaches. In that classic, as an artist he transcended himself, whereas *The House of the Seven Gables* seems written to please Sophia. He called this Romance “more characteristic of my mind, and more proper and natural for me to write.”

Gables is a domestic Romance, the most popular genre among Victorian women like Sophia, the best of the period due to its rich symbolism, allegorical dimension and mythic resonance. Of his four Romances, this is also the most comprehensive expression of his vision, as well as evoking his New England culture with colorful details, eloquence and charm. It is democratic and feminist. Yet this is the only one of his Romances that is unpopular with many readers today, currently or forever out of fashion because it affirms domesticity, family values, traditional gender roles, religious faith and Victorianism.

Most criticism of *Gables* has been distorted by the Realist bias of critics in the mid-20th century and by the political biases of critics since then. Hawthorne might compare them to the literal-minded critic in “Main Street” and to preachers like Parson Hooper, wearing veils of ideology. In his Preface, he says a Novel “is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience.” Novels are Realistic. Romance permits Expressionism. Most critics have refused to allow Hawthorne to write Romances and have condemned *Gables* as an insincere and unconvincing Novel.

In 1852 the nomination of Franklin Pierce for the Presidency drew Hawthorne into active propaganda work for his friend and former classmate at Bowdoin College, the candidate of the Democratic Party and of the radical “Young America” progressives. Hawthorne’s progressivism was more practical, like Phoebe, than the Romantic utopianism he encountered at Brook Farm. In *Gables* he prophesies, hopefully, that if they listen to women the radical faction of his party will become less extreme and that Pierce will run for President in agreement with the transformed Holgrave, who also leads a party to the country. Since he is an artist who tells stories and Phoebe was Hawthorne’s pet name for his wife, Holgrave is comparable to Hawthorne as a younger man, though he is more naive and radical than Hawthorne ever was, especially in his disposition to mesmerism and arson.

In *Gables* the old Pyncheon house is the aristocratic past and the future destination of Americans is a “country house”--the metaphor of a new democratic nation of laws. The slavery Compromise of 1850 had not yet solidified the foundation of the Union and in 1851 the United States still had a makeshift structure: “‘The country-house is certainly a very fine one, so far as the plan goes,’ observed Holgrave, as the party were discussing their future arrangements.” The country house should be a solid, permanent structure, within the framework of which alterations might be made as required, by succeeding generations of the family. Such a country house remained to be built under the leadership of a conservative democrat such as Franklin Pierce, who agreed with Hawthorne that slavery should be abolished gradually. Holgrave is only about twenty years old, but he has “gravity” and may “build a house for another generation.”

The house of the seven gables is compared to a human face and to a heart. The “very timbers were oozy, as with the moisture of a heart.” With its great chimney in the center, the house represents in particular the collective heart and soul of the Pyncheon family, the rotten values and dead system of colonial aristocracy. Maule’s Well originated as a “natural spring of soft and pleasant water,” a kind of fountain--an icon of the spirit in Hawthorne. After Colonel Pyncheon stole the land from the common man Matthew Maule, whose last name identifies him with carpentry--usually a Christ-evoking occupation--the well got polluted. During the American Revolution, the Pyncheons supported the enemy. Each inheritor of

the property, “conscious of wrong and failing to rectify it,” commits anew “the great guilt of his ancestor” and inherits a curse.

By now in the 1850s, the Pyncheon family is impoverished except for the wealthy Judge. Aristocrats like Hepzibah and Clifford now must face the “iron countenance of fate, recalling Maule’s curse.” Iron is Hawthorne’s iconic term describing puritans, hard fate and reality, as in “The Maypole of Merry Mount.” Poor old Hepzibah must humiliate herself by opening a shop: “the patrician lady is to be transformed into the plebian woman.” Holgrave says, “I will leave you to feel whether it is not better to be a true woman, than a lady.” At the time, the term “true woman” was Victorian, democratic and progressive. Sophia and Nathaniel preferred it to the aristocratic connotations of “lady.”

Before he is transformed from a “wild reformer” into a conservative democrat by Phoebe, Holgrave believes in the popular Utopian myth that “there are harbingers abroad of a golden era, to be accomplished in his own lifetime”: “As to the better centuries that are coming, the artist was surely right. His error lay in supposing that his age...is destined to see the tattered garments of antiquity exchanged for a new suit, instead of gradually renewing themselves by patchwork.” Uncle Venner, the humble representative of a democratic society, is a “man of patches.” The old Puritan culture is dead and the old aristocratic culture is almost dead, like the garden, its survival represented in grotesque attenuation by Hepzibah and Clifford Pyncheon. The new ideal order is embodied in Phoebe the improved puritan, the Victorian.

Like sunshine, Phoebe revives the garden and the spirits of the household, including the ghost of Alice. She is a schoolmistress from the countryside, not brought up a Pyncheon. Like Robin in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” who also has the name of a bird, Phoebe represents the best in the Puritan tradition--free of both aristocracy and Calvinist orthodoxy--surviving in the country. She is also called a “rosy girl” who blossoms. The rose is a motif of democracy growing naturally through time, out of the “deep heart of Nature.” Phoebe is patient and practical and works like an angel as both a housekeeper and a saleswoman. Holgrave is a former schoolmaster and salesman who now makes pictures out of sunshine, much as Hawthorne creates a portrait of Sophia in Phoebe. The two lovers are opposites in many ways, like the heart and the head, informing each other: She becomes “graver” and he undergoes a rebirth, becoming through spiritual union with her a more whole Holgrave. By deferring to her conservative wisdom of the heart, Holgrave becomes grave in the Latin sense of acquiring *gravitas*--authority and weight. Thanks to Phoebe, he becomes a true Young America, a mature Robin.

The transcendental mode of the romance is expressed by the interplay of opposites throughout--Phoebe/Holgrave, Phoebe/Hepzibah, Phoebe/Clifford, Jaffrey/Clifford--until through both Nature and Providence, evil expires and opposites are reconciled, as all the main characters unite on Main Street, heading for the country house to the west. Victorian feminism is affirmed as all the males defer to women in the domestic sphere of the heart and soul. Among his faults, Jaffrey Pyncheon is an old patriarch who acted like a “liege-lord and master” to his wife, whereas Holgrave, his opposite, individuates from a “wild” radical--from the wilderness--into a genteel conservative democrat through devotion to a Victorian angel--in a garden: “Holding her hand, you felt something; a tender something; a substance, and a warm one; and so long as you should feel its grasp, soft as it was, you might be certain that your place was good in the whole sympathetic chain of human nature.” Phoebe is his heart, his spiritual medium, his link to humanity and his salvation.

The love of Holgrave and Phoebe blossoms in the old garden when “the black rich soil had fed itself with the decay” of both Puritanism and aristocracy. Hawthorne implies that the new society should revitalize the best aspects of both traditions, especially Puritan moral realism and aristocratic aesthetic sensitivity epitomized in Alice and diseased in Clifford. In the young lovers, the hereditary evils of the New England past are purged: Phoebe is pure of aristocratic greed and Holgrave is pure of plebian vindictiveness. America required a revival of moral energy such as enabled the birth of the nation. Holgrave and Phoebe exude such energy when they weed and tend the old garden together as “fellow-laborers, somewhat on the community system,” as spiritual equals who will form an extended family rather than as Utopian socialists on ego trips like the radicals satirized in *The Blithedale Romance*.

Hawthorne expresses his view of cultural history as organic, in the Romantic tradition, with natural symbols and motifs such as the sun and the cold east wind. The garden revives with “plebian vegetables” and “aristocratic flowers,” as will the fortunes of their regenerated lines. Like the individual human heart, society needs moral “weeding.” Otherwise “the evil of these departed years would naturally have sprung up again, in such rank weeds (symbolic of the transmitted vices of society) as are always prone to root themselves about human dwellings.” As in “Main Street,” Hawthorne felt the need to explain his symbolism due to the lack of aesthetic sensitivity in his literal-minded audience and the loss of the allegorical mentality of the Puritans.

The old aristocrats Hepzibah and Clifford try to escape the past in “The Flight of Two Owls” by climbing aboard a railroad train, the popular symbol of rapid progress “onward and upward”—an illusion in Hawthorne’s view. He calls the railroad a “steam-devil.” In “The Celestial Railroad” (1843) he satirized Unitarians for railroading people into believing there is a fast and easy way to salvation: Just stow your sins out of sight in the baggage car and climb aboard. Next stop Vanity Fair. That train took passengers to Hell. Hepzibah and Clifford get “drawn into the great current of human life, and were swept away with it.” This train is “life itself” in a time of such rapid change the old aristocrats cannot adapt, becoming prisoners of the present “like children in their inexperience.” In Hawthorne’s Expressionistic vision of rapid change, “the spires of meeting houses seemed set adrift from their foundations,” everything is unfixated and “moving at whirlwind speed.”

Enchanted and happy to be free, the childish Clifford turns into a radical, actually regressing rather than progressing. Hepzibah thinks he is mad. Engaging a fellow passenger who disagrees with him “in the name of common sense,” Clifford begins spouting currently popular radical ideas that would alienate Victorian readers, especially women. He claims that the railroad “is destined to do away with those stale ideas of home and fireside, and substitute something better.” He declares his intention to live on railroad cars and charity. Sounding like Emerson in his essays “Circles” and *Nature*, he concludes that “the round globe is a vast head, a brain, instinct with intelligence.” He proceeds in a “liberal spirit” to advocate for bank-robbers and murderers—“who, after all, are about as honest as nine people in ten, except that they disregard certain formalities, and prefer to transact business at night.” In a reference to Emerson’s famous metaphor in *Nature* of being a “transparent eyeball,” Clifford calls himself “as transparent as the water of Maule’s Well”—which is polluted. When the old folks disembark from the train, the world stops and they are left alone with reality. Clifford’s radical dreams pop like his soap-bubbles. The church nearby is “in a dismal state of ruin and decay,” but Hepzibah remains faithful and prays for God’s mercy, which Hawthorne grants in the very next chapter.

Judge Pyncheon is modeled on Reverend Charles W. Upham, a Salem Whig responsible for removing Hawthorne from his position in the Salem Custom House when the national administration changed. According to Sophia Hawthorne, her husband thought Upham “the most satisfactory villain that ever was, for at every point he is consummate.” Hawthorne curses him with an hereditary medical affliction, makes him embody all social problems, delights in executing him and taunts his corpse: “Rise up, thou subtle, worldly, selfish, iron-hearted hypocrite.” The greedy materialist, an aristocrat of the present mocked by his ticking watch, is reduced to a mound of dead flesh with a fly crawling on his face.

The old garden east of the Pyncheon house contains a hencoop for the aristocratic inbred chickens. The new garden of the country house to the west is fertile and democratic and there the hens become productive “under better auspices than for a century past.” In that garden too there is a cottage for venerable Uncle Venner, who sounds like Benjamin Franklin but like many common men is rather “deficient in his wits” and must be saved from the poor farm. At the time, the mythic image of a bountiful Garden in the West, celebrated by advertising and popular culture, was drawing emigrants to wagon trains on the Oregon Trail. In the popular mind the future of the country lay to the west. In *Gables* the inherited fortune, like that inherited by Pearl, symbolizes spiritual good fortune and is represented by a mythic garden to the west. All of Hawthorne’s Romances end with movement to the west.

So bright and optimistic is the prophetic conclusion, most critics have dismissed it as empty convention and missed the historical allegory, the prefigurative dimension and the transcendental mode. Now that the long family feud is over, Maule’s well casts up bright images of the future. Everyone abandons the

aristocratic house for the democratic house. After the carriage has driven off into the future, the ghost of Alice Pyncheon, redeemed aristocratic spirit of the past, floats heavenward, a sky image in the transcendental mode. However, the carriage never reaches the end of Main Street, for the symbolic marriage, the perfect union, can only be prefigured in an opened future.

In Hawthorne's next Romance, his satirical allegory based on his experiences at Brook Farm, Coverdale hopes that he has reached Utopia simply by arriving at Blithedale. The Utopians set out to reform the world before they have reformed themselves. After he saves her from her radical sister, Priscilla saves Hollingsworth much as Phoebe saves Holgrave. Hollingsworth is somewhat like an older Holgrave who is redeemed later in life, except that he is too conservative at first, whereas Holgrave is too radical. All the *Gables* characters heading west have changed for the better, whereas none of the Blithedalers change for the better except Priscilla and Hollingsworth, who end up much like Phoebe and Holgrave, living in a country house of their own, not in a socialist utopia.

Michael Hollister (2015)