Hawthorne and the Horror of Inherited Sin

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Nathaniel Hawthorne’s undying romance *The House of the Seven Gables* centers on a theme of inherited sin. The wrongdoing of one generation greatly affects the next. The character Colonel Pyncheon displays many traits similar to the greed and betrayal of Puritan Society, passed down to the people of Hawthorne’s time. Hawthorne relates what he learns throughout his life in this romance to explain his understanding of life lessons that readers might not have realized. Hawthorne allows readers to travel back to the 1800s, a period when people would go to extremes for their own personal gain. He used the style of literature known as Gothic Romance to emphasize the mystery and terror of sin. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s undying romance *The House of the Seven Gables* reveals how inherited sin affects all people of all time.

*The House of the Seven Gables* took in place in a town much like Salem, Massachusetts in the 1840’s. Witchcraft had been practiced years earlier in Salem. Puritans in the late seventeenth century saw witchcraft as sinful worship and deserved the punishment of death. People who practiced witchcraft were sentenced to be hanged. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Matthew Maule owned property that is coveted by Colonel Pyncheon. Colonel Pyncheon accused Matthew Maule of practicing witchcraft, and he was sentenced to be hanged. Before he died, he cursed Colonel Pyncheon and his descendents. Colonel Pyncheon then took Maule’s land for his own.

The idea of the fictional Matthew Maule was created from a non-fictional person named Thomas Maule, “The Maule name was derived from Thomas Maule, a merchant living in Salem during the time of the witch trials. Maule was severely criticized…for
being out spoken against the Puritan attitude of the time. Maule’s…writings attacked the Puritans for executing witches” (Hefner). Hawthorne showed his disapproval of the Puritans in *The House of the Seven Gables*. He believed that most of the “witches” who were hanged were actually sentenced based on false accusations.

One of the main topics that Hawthorne chose to write about was inherited sin. He communicated this theme in *The House of the Seven Gables* with a description of Colonel Pyncheon.

A man will commit almost any wrong – he will heap up an immense pile of wickedness, as hard as granite, and which will weigh as heavily upon his soul, to eternal ages – only to build a great, gloomy, dark-chambered mansion, for himself to die in, and for his posterity to be miserable in. He lays his own dead corpse beneath the underpinning, as one may say, and hangs his frowning picture on the wall, and, after thus converting himself into an evil destiny, expects his remotest great-grandchildren to be happy there! (229)

Colonel Pyncheon’s descendants were put threw misery because of the greed and deception he displayed when he was alive. This shows that when a sin is prominent in a culture, the descendents of that culture will become guilty of the same sin and will be haunted by the consequences.

In addition to *The House of the Seven Gables*, inherited sin is also found in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*.

“Mother,” said little Pearl, “the sunshine does not love you. It runs away
and hides itself, because it is afraid of something on your bosom…It will not flee from me; for I wear nothing on my bosom yet!”

“Nor ever will, my child, I hope,” said Hester.

“And why not, mother?” asked Pearl…“Will not it come of its own accord, when I am a woman grown?” (187-188)

The mark on Hester’s bosom reflected her sin of adultery. Pearl assumed that the consequences of her mother’s sin, the mark on her bosom, would eventually be passed on to herself. This shows that Hawthorne found it necessary to explain how the sins of people will be passed on to the next generation. Hawthorne wanted his readers to be prepared when they are forced to deal with the consequences of sins of their ancestors.

Several of Hawthorne’s writings were affected by his family life and the way he was raised, “Both novels concentrate on what appears to be an obsession with Hawthorne, Sin, though his upbringing and family background may explain much…The House of the Seven Gables [deals] with family ancestral guilt” (Parkins). Nathaniel Hawthorne’s father died when Nathaniel was only four. His mother chose to live in seclusion, away from everybody. This explains why Hawthorne looked to his ancestors to see why he was faced with these consequences of the loss of his father, and his mother’s decision to live alone.

One of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ancestors was John Hathorne, a judge from the Salem witchcraft trials. Hawthorne’s ancestry is reflected in The House of the Seven Gables, “The House of the Seven Gables was published the following year. The story is based on the legend of a curse pronounced on Hawthorne's own family by a woman,
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who was condemned to death during the Salem witchcraft trials” (Liukkonen). This shows that Hawthorne believed this curse was the reason for his poor family life. He realized that he must live with the consequences of his ancestors’ sins.

In order to solve the disunity of his previous family life, Hawthorne created a new family. He fell in love with and married Sophia Peabody to fill the hole in his heart. He wrote to her about the unity he found in their marriage, “I am only myself when thou art within my reach” (qtd. in Dryden, 83). This reveals how Hawthorne filled the gap created after his parents were gone. This also reveals a message Hawthorne wanted people to be aware of; the unity created by love minimizes greed and deception. Hawthorne shows that it is better to look toward the needs of others than to be self-centered.

*The House of the Seven Gables* takes readers back to a time when Americans were greedy to get rich quick and would do anything to make their lives better than everyone else’s. Douglas T. Miller revealed Americans’ greed in the nineteenth century, “Given the passion for wealth that dominated most Americans, it is not surprising to find that this era gave rise to the cult of the ‘self-made man’…Examples of persons inspired to new aspirations of rags-to-riches philosophy are many” (37). This shows that Hawthorne lived in the time period where greed began to thrive as the most popular sin. Greed became the inherited sin that was passed down, forcing succeeding generations to live with the consequences of the sin.

Historians show that the nineteenth century was a time of major changes, “Manufacturing and the industrial spirit grew and set the stage for the Gilded Age
when huge fortunes were made from industry” (Whitley). This shows that the desire for huge fortunes was the philosophy that drove Americans. Americans threw away morals and values for their own personal gain. This also shows that the next generation during the Gilded Age continued to display the greed of their ancestors.

Nathaniel Hawthorne used a style known as Gothic romance in *The House of the Seven Gables*. Gothic romance was a genre of literature that sprung from English literature in the eighteenth century. Many novels that are classified as Gothic contain magic, mysterious crimes, and haunted houses. Hawthorne generated many pictures and symbols using Gothic romance. “Gothic romance is characterized by an overall atmosphere of dread, combining terror with horror and mystery as it emphasizes the mysterious, the supernatural, the despairing man adrift in a dark world” (Bloom 41).

In order to emphasize the terror of inherited sin, Hawthorne decided to add Gothic elements to *The House of the Seven Gables*. He used the portrait of Colonel Pyncheon in the Pyncheon house to show the horror of the eternal consequences of his sins of greed and deception. This dreadful disease was passed on through every generation that lived in the Pyncheon house. These elements not only show how sin is passed down through generations, but also paint an image of the immense guilt and consequences piled upon new generations because of mistakes made by previous generations.

Hawthorne wrote *The House of the Seven Gables* for the people of his time and age to see the mistakes their ancestors had made. He wanted them to eliminate the greed in their own lives so it would not be passed down to their children. These ideas still last
today, because the same problems are still in effect in today’s society. Greed is still evident in many Americans. Everyone wants to keep up with expensive new equipment and technology, so they can feed their hunger for materialism.

*The House of the Seven Gables* is universal to readers of any time, “For more than a century, despite changes in perspective and methodology, the verdict on Hawthorne’s stature has remained virtually constant...He wrote about his own society and its antecedents, but it turns out that he also wrote about ours” (Gollin). This shows how Hawthorne’s writings were made to last. Even though life has changed in so many ways since Hawthorne’s time, his ideas are still prominent and useful.

A romance was built to last when Hawthorne wrote *The House of the Seven Gables*. He felt inherited sin was important for everyone to understand. He used Colonel Pyncheon’s greed as the beginning of inherited sin which was passed down to every one of his descendents. Hawthorne saw inherited sin in his own life when his family fell apart. He revealed inherited sin in the 1800s, when greed and personal gain became the sins that would be passed down to succeeding generations. Inherited sin is relevant for today as greed is still evident in people’s lives. Just as sin is inherited into each new generation, Hawthorne’s lessons are inherited into each new generation of readers of the timeless romance, *The House of the Seven Gables*. 