The Gothic Spatialization of Fear in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*

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Abstract

Starting with Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto, the first Gothic novel, the haunted house, in different forms (ruined castle, mansion, family home, abbey and so on) has functioned as a trope which problematizes issues of identity in relation to the (personal, collective or historical) past, and anxieties about the present and future. This paper compares Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables (1851) with a focus on the ways in which the two works re-articulate the Gothic convention of the haunted house.

Key Words: *Gothic, grotesque, arabesque, horror, terror*.

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), widely accepted as the prototype for Gothic fiction, can be credited for creating the now familiar Gothic trope of the haunted house (or mansion, or castle) as a locus, or manifestation of tortured identity, struggling between a cursed and barbaric past and an uncertain and potentially threatening future (a trope that is a familiar ingredient even today in most types of horror fiction and film). One is struck by this as soon as reading the preface of the novel, which declares it to be a translation of an Italian story from the time of the Crusades and printed in 1529, and the "medievalism" of the novel (to extrapolate Said's famous concept of "Orientalism" in the sense of exoticization and Otherization) is also made obvious by the omnipresence in the plot of superstition, strange rituals and extreme cruelty and depravity. In the same way that "dog whistle politics" works today by using verbal cues to elicit emotional reactions rooted in prejudice, Walpole's references to the Crusades and the Middle Ages are inseparable from Protestant, Enlightenment England's mythologization and Otherization of both southern Catholic Europe and its own pre-Reformation and pre-Enlightenment past. The myth of the Crusades as supposed manifestations of Catholic barbarism still functions as a powerful rhetorical device today, which shows the resilience and genius of Protestant political propaganda in both Western and non-Western contexts, so what better historical marker to horrify, terrify and fascinate 18th century British readers? As Fred Botting points out, "the historical distance" created by this faux antiquarianism "produces an uncomfortable interplay between past and present that both displaces and confronts contemporary aesthetic and social concerns" (Botting 32).

That said, while Walpole's novel "can be seen as a reinforcement eighteenth-century values, distinguishing the barbaric past from the enlightened present" (Botting 34), his work, and the Gothic trope of the haunted house in general, goes beyond simply demonizing the past and parroting the dominant political discourse of the day. Walpole himself was from the old aristocracy, and, as any aristocrat, pursued a "Grand Tour" of Catholic Continental Europe as a young man, which left him with a lifelong, obsessive interest in medieval art and architecture. The mansion he built, Strawberry Hill (which continues to be an inspiration even today in the gothic and horror genres), was an eclectic combination of the medieval monastic

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and military architectural styles, and contains many items of authentic medieval and Renaissance artefacts, stained glass in particular. His novel disturbed many contemporaries due to its lurid (for the time) content, and violent passions in the plot, running counter to the neo-classicist aesthetic values of his day. Similarly, the relationship with the past in the Gothic genre in general is fraught with ambiguities and conflict. The true horror of the haunted Gothic house is not just in the barbarity of the past, but in the ways in which the past cannot be overcome.

This paper transports this trope, first made famous in the British Gothic, to the 19th century "New World," at a critical juncture in American literary history, when writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne were beginning to articulate a distinct American literary voice, while at the same time heavily anchored both in British literary traditions and in their national and regional history. I examine the trope of the haunted house in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) and Hawthorne's novel *The House of Seven Gables* (1851) and its function in using the troubled relationship with the past for the narrativization of the Gothic and the spatialization of fear, horror and terror. And while Gothic fiction typically references a bloody and cruel past, the contemporary backdrop of both British and American Gothic was heavily inflected with violence. As Stephen Dougherty notes, the 'blood horrors turned into a staple of mass entertainment' are inseparable from the historical context where 'Americand and Europeans were entering a new era of blood – of blood spilled as never before in genocides around the globe, of blood seeping inexorably into the sacred and profane' (Dougherty 3).

A remarkable command of atmosphere and the use of the haunted house Gothic formula to create horror and terror is at work in Poe's most successful short story, 'The Fall of the House of Usher.' The epigraph already announces that heightened sensitivity will assume an important role in the rhetoric of the short story: 'Son Coeur est un luth suspendu; sitôt qu'on le touche, il résonne'(II: 397). The suspended violin is a heart which will easily resound to stimuli. Who does this heart belong to? Furthermore, as Dani Cavallaro notes, 'Poe's settings almost invariably mirror and replicate his characters' haunted psyches' (Cavallaro 87), since haunted locations are 'inseparable from their inhabitants' mental states' (ibid.).

The deliberate design meant to achieve the unity of effect becomes obvious from the beginning, when to the narrator's perception of 'a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens' are added the equally desolate landscape and the glimpse of what would be the setting of the final fall, already working together to create the sense of insufferable gloom on the beholder: 'I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was — but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit' (III:273).

Apart from the general impression, one particular detail will catch the narrator's eye: a fissure zig-zagging from the roof of the mansion to its foundations, finally lost in the water of the adjoining tarn, into which the 'cracked' building reflects itself. The reader is immediately prompted to make a connection between the cracked building and its 'cracked' inhabitant, Roderick Usher, who had written to the narrator, desperately asking him to join him for a while. Before he meets his former boon companion, whom he has not seen since his school days, the visitor follows the author himself in the general realization of the strange way in which all the elements of the environment 'conspire' (against the reader, of course) in the creation of a sinister atmosphere:

> I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their

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> immediate vicinity — an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn — a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued (III:276).

The same air of 'irredeemable gloom' pervades the interior of the house, with the expression and physical features of the owner of the place being in keeping with the scene. What strikes the narrator is a combination of delicate beauty, signs of extreme sensitivity and intimations of illness and impending death. The disease he suffers from, it will turn out, consists in a morbid acuteness of the senses, which has devastating effects on him, both physical and mental.

The adjectives 'grotesque' and 'arabesque' from the title of the Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (in which the story under discussion will find its place) have been interpreted in many ways. The context in which 'arabesque' is used in Roderick's portrayal has less to do with Oriental ornamental art, and more with a distinction between, and a correlation between, two concepts which have become since then central in horror narratives: horror and terror. Arabesque here seems to be linked to horror, describing the character's 'cadaverousness of complexion' and the 'ghastly pallor of the skin':

> A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity […] The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as, in its wild gossamer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity (278 – 279).

Horror and terror are added to arabesque to describe Roderick and his special condition. Thus, his eyesight is 'tortured' by almost any glimmer of light, few sounds do not inspire him with 'horror,' while one particular kind of 'terror' is his obsession, his anticipation of what permanent fear will lead to. This obviously corresponds to the author's professed statement that everything has been carefully planned to create the effect that the climactic scene will have on Roderick and on the character that will survive to tell the horror and terror tale. This is the owner of the House of Usher foreboding his own demise, thus heightening the sensitive readers' expectations:

> I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect — in terror. In this unnerved — in this pitiable condition — I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR. (II: 403).

It would be pathetic for Roderick to fall a victim to the most trivial incident which, he says, may be lethal for him. The narrative design is different. As soon as the guest has arrived and he has glimpsed the ghostly, passing apparition of a feminine figure, the readers and the narrator himself, who, as a good friend and intimate boon companion, is supposed to have

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known more about his friend's family, learn that the person in question is Madeline, Roderick's twin sister. The brother knows she is dying, which is bound to deal a devastating blow to him as well. She expires immediately afterward, or at least that is what the others think.

Verisimilitude is not to be expected in Gothic tales, and 'The Fall of the House of Usher' is no exception. Several days pass without the two friends ever mentioning Madeline and what is to be done about her. Roderick and the narrator paint and read together sinister books of 'forgotten lore,' the latter listening to the musical improvisations on the guitar of the former. The main point of it all is to alleviate the suffering of the very last descendant now of the Usher family.

The narrator (whom Ronald Bieganovski describes as a 'self-consuming narrator') remembers the lyrics accompanying one of these musical improvisations, the miseenabîme of one of Poe's own poems, 'The Haunted Palace,' the allegory of the representations of a mind having gone insane. The first four stanzas of it depict a 'fair and stately palace' protected by the angels, set in a 'happy valley,' with 'a troup of Echoes' praising in beautiful songs 'the wit and wisdom of their king.' The last two stanzas come up with the opposite scenario, contributing to the unity of effect of the short story as a whole. The first of these, in addition, introduces a key word in the subsequent unfolding of the gothic narrative ('entombed'):

> But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
> Assailed the monarch's high estate;
> (Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow
> Shall dawn upon him, desolate!)
> And, round about his home, the glory
> That blushed and bloomed
> Is but a dim-remembered story
> Of the old time entombed (II: 407).

Figuratively, 'the evil things in robes of sorrow' which ruin the monarch's estate appear to be 'vast forms that move fantastically,' a 'hideous throng' of spirits, not all too real inimical armies: the evil comes, most likely, from the monarch's deranged psyche. The final word in the above-quoted stanza, 'entombed,' foreshadows Roderick's next move. Aided by his friend, he encoffins his sister. One last look at the deceased reinforces the narrator's and the readers' impression: Madeline is a faithful reflection of her twin brother, thus playing one special in a Gothic doppelganger relationship, this mirroring effect completing the initial mirroring of the cracked building in the dark waters of the tarn outside. Had he been in a ruined, French, Catholic abbey or castle, the brother would have exclaimed, 'Madeline, c'est moi!' Apparently, he isn't, so the two central male characters, having by themselves carried the coffin in the mansion's one deep, underground vault, make sure the coffin's lid is properly screwed on and the heavy iron door to the vault is safely locked.

Another few days pass, the narrator carefully observing, with a clinical eye, unmistakable signs of his companion's ever increasing mental anguish. Roderick's condition appears to contaminate his friend as well, infecting him with terror (not unspeakable terror, though, since he is supposed to mediate Poe's narrative): 'I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions' (II: 411). However, it appears to the narrators that he himself notices strange developments going on, which become more noticeable a week from Madeline's entombment, particularly some faint, strange noises coming from somewhere below.

Before the far from trivial incident which Roderick intuitively, and superstitiously, expects, one more atmospheric phenomenon adds the last straw: a strange, unnatural glow

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outside 'enshrowds' the mansion. Terrified himself, the narrator wants to spare his oversensitive interlocutor, undoubtedly adding, through the visible signs of his own agitation, to the terrible effect, while he is trying, 'with gentle violence,' to drive Roderick away from the window and the atmospheric show outside:

> "You must not — you shall not behold this!" said I, shudderingly, to Usher, as I led him, with a gentle violence, from the window to a seat. "These appearances, which bewilder you, are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon — or it may be that they have their ghastly origin in the rank miasma of the tarn. Let us close this casement; — the air is chilling and dangerous to your frame. Here is one of your favorite romances. I will read, and you shall listen; — and so we will pass away this terrible night together"(II: 412-413).

To further contribute to the author's horror-terror design, the narrator, in order to distract his agitated friend, starts reading from the only book he has at hand. It happens to be an excerpt in which Ethelred, the protagonist, in stormy weather and dramatic circumstances, strikes with his heavy mace a locked door, the loud noise reverberating throughout the surrounding forest in the embedded story, as well as inside Roderick's and the narrator's sensitive minds. After each sentence describing the scene, the narrator believes he hears similar, but fainter and more distant sounds replicating the breaking of the door in the story he reads. As for Roderick, he hears the increasingly louder beating of someone's heart, and he knows full well whose heart it is.

Tension builds up until the door is thrown open by a violent gust of wind: it is not Ethelred in the embedded story, but Madeline, blood upon her white shroud, who has broken out of the vault, to be reunited with her twin brother. One last, apparently angry hug, brings both siblings to the floor, finally dead, this time. Horrified and terrified, the narrator has only one last paragraph to take French leave, while describing the twinning effect of the twin's simultaneous death on the House of Usher. The building, very much following Madeline's embrace of her double, cracks completely and disastrously, falling into the reflecting tarn below it, thus completing the fall of the Ushers and of their doomed estate. Was it the spectral house that had haunted its occupants, defining their identity in its own, Gothic terms? Is it an external presence or the externalization of the Ushers' consciousness? A number of questions might echo in the readers' minds, what matters in this tale more than its plot is the symbolism associated with the characters, the house and the environment going hand in hand with the creation of atmosphere, everything meant to create a strong unified effect on the reader

As it may have become obvious in the paraphrase above, the story as such might even look ridiculous to unsensitive, lucid minds reading 'The Fall of the House of Usher' in broad daylight. Arguably, this short story should be read as a very impressive poem, in which unlikely narrative elements and unconvincing motivation cannot prevent the creation of a strong poetic effect by the echoes of the text's words on sensitive 'luths suspendus,' resonating with Roderick's and the narrator's own violins. By comparison, what could have been a lyrical poem, expressing the speaker's haunting feelings of irredeemable loss and overwhelming sadness, 'The Raven,' was brilliantly couched in the shape of an almost credible narrative involving the interaction, not only the dialog, between two memorable characters. 'Almost credible' suggests that what the reader finds in the poem is only the speaker externalizing his thoughts and feelings, through the imagined, and imaginative creation of the 'Nevermore' bird of ill-omen, in a narrative poem that evinces the author's psychological insights. To sum up, one can argue that the poem 'The Raven' is an ingenious narrative, while the short story 'The Fall of the House of Usher' functions as an impressive

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prose poem, in which the spatialization of fear and terror uses setting, foreshadowing, atmosphere to create special poetic Gothic effects

Houses, both fictional and real habitations, both metaphorically haunting and haunted, would play important roles in Hawthorne's life and literary creation as well. First, the utopian Brook Farm, a Transcendentalist response to the rigors of Puritanism that the author would deal with in his two best-known novels. He would spend some time there, combining physical work and intellectual pursuits. It was there that he met Emerson, the central figure of Transcendentalism. After leaving Brook Farm, Hawthorne got married to Sophia Amelia Peabody, the young couple settling down in a famous haunted house: the Old Manse in Concord, where Emerson had written Nature, the most famous Transcendentalist manifesto. It is the ghosts of Transcendentalism haunting the Old Manse, as well as the ghosts of Puritanism, coming from Hawthorne's family's past, that the author would have to cope with.

The House of the Seven Gables would be written in the autumn following the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, finished by early January of the following year, 1851. Although Hawthorne and his growing family had moved to a house in Lenox, in Western Massachusetts, far from the Eastern Boston and Salem of his ancestors' Puritan stories, they will continue to haunt his new novel-as-romance; one particular seven-gabled building in Salem, his birthplace, as well as the burden of the Puritan involvement of his Puritan ancestors in the Salem witch trials of the 17th century, will provide the gloomy substance for the atmosphere and the plot uniting the 19th century present and the already remote past. This past, in the form of a prolonged curse, is coming with a vengeance, like Freud's return of the repressed. However, unlike *The Scarlet Letter*, the novel focuses more on the consequences in the present, also acknowledging some of the characters' determination to break with the past and start a new life away from the sinister inheritance of hatred, supernatural powers and revenge, once again providing the necessary stuff for a successful dark Gothic romance. The relative simplicity of Poe's plot in The Fall of the House of Usher goes hand in hand with the simplicity of the ominous building's exterior appearance: gloomy and cracked, while Hawthorne's novel, largely on account of its considerable length, exploits the spatialization of fear both by the the labyrinthine narrative threads of the plot and by symbolism and atmosphere.

The new narrative, largely because it came in the wake of the previous novel's (romance's?) success, enjoyed a favorable reception, apparently surpassing that of *The Scarlet Letter*. Today, apart from the Hawthorne scholars and those involved in the inclusion of the famous Salem house in the cultural tourist business, The House of the Seven Gables has apparently stepped aside, allowing its fictional predecessor to assume center stage. However, its famous Preface has remained a point of reference in the distinction between the forms of the novel and of the romance, as set forth by one of the prominent representatives of American Dark Romanticism. Hawthorne starts sketching the two subgenres in his introductory statements by contrasting the imaginative freedom the romance enables, in comparison with the realist constraints imposed by the novel:

> When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition 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 (351).

The romance might 'sin unpardonably' (like Hester one might think), while presenting or distorting 'the truth of the human heart' in ways that the author decides to choose, as absolute

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sovereign of the fictional world, enjoying the emancipatory privileges offered by the subgenre. The author wisely avoids clear-cut boundaries, defining chief characteristics of the two fictional modes, while admitting that authors will combine the two in reasonable proportions, sometimes only using a delicate flavor, rather than a strong Romantic overdose. Thus, the writer

> will be wise, no doubt, to make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and, especially, to mingle the Marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than a any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the Public. He can hardly be said, however, to commit a literary crime, even if he disregard this caution (Ibid.).

Hawthorne considers that the connection between the present and a by-gone time defines his book as coming in the Romantic tradition. He sees it as 'a Legend, prolonging itself, from an epoch now gray in the distance, down into our own broad daylight, and bringing along with it some of its legendary mist' (Ibid.).

Although, like *The Scarlet Letter*, this novel evokes the Puritan past of Salem and Boston, alluding to the terrible deeds associated with Hawthorne's ancestors, in its professed coordinates of a romance which, as the Preface famously states, has 'a great deal more to do with the clouds overhead than with any portion of the actual soil of the County of Essex'(353) it does not clearly refer to either of the two places, and the name of the Hathornes is kept out of the narrative or attending Preface.

The house around which the plot unfolds brings together one rich and illustrious Puritan family, the Pyncheons, and a less known one, the Maules, whose destinies are linked by great iniquity and the attending curse. From a mid-nineteenth century perspective, the building is first introduced as the most venerable building in the middle of Pyncheon Street. It appears to affect, like people, a 'human countenance,' with the implication that it has a mysterious story to tell. The house is currently inhabited by an elderly lady down on her luck, Miss Hepzibah Pyncheon, and the mansion's terrible story, like that of the Maules and Pyncheons, will gradually emerge.

In the 17th century, the place on which the house of the seven gables would be built is occupied by a modest cottage on a piece of land owned by Matthew Maule, a farmer who is unwilling to sell it to the far more affluent and influential Colonel Pyncheon. The place is becoming fashionable, its value is on the rise, a spring with excellent water comes out of it. Exploiting the Puritan mass hysteria of the time directed against the witches, Pyncheon uses his influence to have the farmer tried for sorcery and takes his land after the execution. Matthew Maule, like some of his descendants, as it will turn out, appears to have occult powers, whether he is a wizard or not. Before his execution, he curses his enemy, announcing that Pynchon will have a terrible death ('God will give him blood to drink'). Even in the context of the apparent disregard for ordinary human lives like Matthew Maule's, the people in the neighborhood disapprove of Colonel Pyncheon building his house on the site on which the executed man's cottage had stood, expressing the foreboding that a Gothic romance is bound to elicit:

> Without absolutely expressing a doubt whether the stalwart Puritan had acted as a man of conscience and integrity throughout the proceedings which have been sketched, they, nevertheless, hinted that he was about to build his house over an unquiet grave. His home would include the home of the dead and buried wizard, and would thus afford the ghost of the latter a kind of privilege to haunt its new apartments, and the chambers into which future bridegrooms were to lead their brides, and where children of the Pyncheon blood were to be

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> born. The terror and ugliness of Maule's crime, and the wretchedness of his punishment, would darken the freshly plastered walls, and infect them early with the scent of an old and melancholy house. Why, then, - while so much of the soil around him was bestrewn with the virgin forest leaves, - why should Colonel Pyncheon prefer a site that had already been accurst?(358).

The good drinking water from the spring will immediately turn sour. The guests to the housewarming party of the proud building that Colonel Pyncheon will – ironically – get Matthew Maule's son to erect for him will be in for a ghastly surprise: the body of the owner of the house of the seven gables will be found sitting in an armchair inside his study. There is blood around the colonel's mouth. The portrait of the colonel hanging on the wall near him will be allowed to stay there for generations after generations, as stipulated in his will, and is to witness a succession of horrible occurrences, in which Pyncheons and Maules appear to unwillingly keep alive the original enmity and curse. The Pyncheons grow weaker and weaker, while the Maules appear to preserve some of their ancestor's possibly supernatural psychic powers. One of the bones of contention will be the discovery of Colonel Pyncheon's missing deed – the legal document entitling the owner to the large estate in Maine, which was not found after the colonel's sudden death.

In the 19th century one Clifford Pyncheon was charged with the murder of his uncle, another Pyncheon, and served a thirty-year sentence. He returns a broken man to the fateful house currently inhabited by his sister, Hepzibah. He feels that he has become a victim, a prisoner of the accursed, haunted house. Holgrave is a young daguerreotypist who is Hepzibah's lodger, and who will ultimately turn out to be a descendant of the Maules, who appear to have disappeared from the never-ending story. Holgrave is a man who has tried his hand (and mind) at several jobs: in addition to having practiced dentistry, he has lectured on mesmerism which, in the first half of the 19th century, was still very much in the focus of public attention. Mesmerism and hypnosis might explain the apparently supernatural events from the past of the two families, originally attributed to witchcraft. Holgrave has done documentation work on the Pyncheons' troubled history, which features, in each generation, strange happenings that suggest the curse lives on. In each of these generations, there is at least one member who resembles the accursed ancestor, while a Maule appears to display occult, supernatural powers: was it animal magnetism or mesmerism?

Phoebe, a distant Pyncheon cousin, joins Hepzibah, Clifford, and Holgrave, bringing a ray of light to the gloomy, depressing atmosphere inside the haunted house. Holgrave takes to the young Pyncheon lady from the beginning. He tells her the story of Alice Pyncheon's death, one of the middle episodes of the sinister interaction between the two families, having taken place around a century before.

Determined to recover the missing deed of his ancestor, Gervayse Pyncheon questions the grandson of the hanged Matthew Maule, who is also the son of the Maule that turned his father's cottage into the Pyncheon's Mansion. The grandson's name, like his grandfather's, is Matthew Maule, and he is a carpenter. Unaware of the carpenter's psychic powers, Gervayse hopes that the carpenter must have learned from his father, the builder of the mansion, where the document might be hidden. Matthew Maule, Jr., does not know it, but, using his powers, hypnotizes Gervayse's daughter, beautiful Alice. Using the hypnotized young lady as a mediator, he gets in touch with the spirits of old Colonel Pyncheon, as well as with those of Matthew Maule, his grandfather, and of his father. The ghosts of the two Maules overpower the Colonel's, the latter being prevented from disclosing the location of the missing deed. However, the carpenter has noticed the power of his hypnotic gifts. He keeps the innocent Alice under his spell, getting her to act as servant to himself and his new bride, as a form of compensation for the great wrongs that the Maules had suffered at the hands of the

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Pyncheons. Alice recovers from the hypnosis in the Maules' house, where she has unwittingly served the carpenter and his bride on their wedding night. She rushes home through the piercing cold outside, catches pneumonia and dies. Guilt-ridden, Matthew Maule realizes that the blind curse of his grandfather has fallen on an innocent young woman, and Alice's death affects both the Pyncheons and the Maules.

All this is told, as it will soon turn out, by a Maule, who, until now, has been known under the name of Holgrave. When he finishes his story, Holgrave realizes that the Pyncheon vs. Maule story has taken a new, less violent turn: he has managed to hypnotize Phoebe. Not being driven by revenge against all the Pyncheons, the kind lecturer/daguerreotypist/ hypnotist releases the young woman from the spell. This is conclusive evidence, the reader is bound to expect, that both the Pyncheons and the Maules are undergoing a moral revival. Does that say anything about Hawthorne and his approach to solving inequities inherited from a somber past?

Is this to be seen as under the influence of Charles Grandison Finney, the father of modern revivalism, the leader of the Second Great Awakening at that time? If not, like mesmerism and hypnosis about the same time, these are important coordinates in the dynamics of public interaction in mid-19th century America, where by far the key issue will divide America in two camps, with an additional number of voices, like Hawthorne's, expressing more moderate views. The question of how slavery should be dealt with: by long negotiations and compromises or by violent means had more than two solutions, depending on what kind of compromises and what kind of violence was envisaged. This will be a very sensitive issue for Hawthorne and his friends, gradualists rather than radicals, as it will soon turn out.

Coming back to Hawthorne's 1851 narrative, one realizes that not every Pyncheon is mending his evil ways, while the curse may still be around. In Holgrave and Phoebe's absence, Judge Pyncheon, the typical villain of the family at the present time, comes to the fateful house. The judge is just as unscrupulous and greedy as his Puritan ancestor, to whom, judging by the painting on the wall, he also bears an uncanny resemblance. He would do anything to anyone, especially to Clifford, to ensure that he finds the legal papers that will make him the owner of the large stretch of valuable land in Maine. He is convinced that Clifford knows where the missing legal papers are and wants to blackmail Hepzibah: if her brother does not comply with his demand, he will have him sent to an asylum. The typical scene occurring once every generation occurs: Hepzibah goes to fetch Clifford, leaves the judge in the study, waiting in the chair next to the portrait of the ancestor. She fails to find her brother. When she returns, she finds Clifford standing near Judge Pyncheon, who has just died in his ancestor's chair, next to his ancestor's painting.

A number of coincidences and surprises follow: synchronicity? One may call it Hawthorne's determination to have a happy ending this time, with young Holgrave, the last known Maule falling in love and marrying the innocent and beautiful Phoebe Pyncheon. The centuries-old curse is pronounced to have run its course, and the idea that the evil of the past keeps haunting successive generations is given an optimistic representation: it haunts them up to a certain moment, then things change for the better. *The House of the Seven Gables*, while employing Gothic conventions more consistently than Hawthorne's best-known novel (and, arguably, more than Poe's most famous short story), ends with a twist in the terror and horror tail/tale. One might see this pattern as being more in keeping with the requirements of a progressive, democratic country, which were increasingly being aired and promoted in America at that time.

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