STRUCTURE AND THEME

IN THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES

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Rezumat

În ciuda unor opinii critice care susţin inexistenţa unui tipar structural, The House of the Seven Gables, aparţinând autorului american Nathaniel Hawthorne, are părţi structurate atât cantitativ cât şi calitativ. Romanul se compune dintr-un şir de antiteze cu 3 (trei) contraste dominante: democratic - aristocratic, personaje izolate social - personaje integrate social, respectiv aparenţă - realitate.

Tema majoră, cea a necesităţii comuniunii umane, rezultă din lupta acestor contrarii care în final conduc spre un "ansamblu unificator".

The House of the Seven Gables has a most interesting pattern if we start and look into the meaning of the number *seven*, which is a mystic or sacred number; it is composed of four and three, considered to be lucky numbers. Examples of its use since memorial times can be given a lot: seven sacred planets among the Babylonians, Egyptians and other ancient peoples, there are seven days in creation, seven days in the week, seven virtues, seven ages in the life of man, The Seven Hills of Rome, The Seven Sciences, The Seven Seas, The Seven Senses, The Seven Gifts of the Spirit, or Holy Ghost, The Seven Wonders of the World, etc.

In Hawthorne's novel, there are seven principal characters: Hepzibah, Clifford, Jaffray, Phoebe, Holgrave, Uncle Venner, and Ned Wiggins. There are seven characters from the past whose influence over the present is strong: the original Maule, the builder Maule, the carpenter Maule, Alice, Colonel Pyncheon, the storekeeper Pyncheon, and Gervayse Pyncheon. The twenty-one chapters of the novel can be divided structurally into three parts of seven chapters each. Part A opens with the historical background; introduces Hepzibah, Holgrave, Uncle Venner, and Ned; brings in Phoebe; gives us a mere glimpse of Jaffray; and brings in Clifford. Part B opens with Jaffray's appearance and his offer to help and take care of Clifford; shows the care given to Clifford, and his recuperation; includes Holgrave's narrative of the hypnotism of Alice; and concludes with Phoebe's departure. Part C opens with Jaffray (as part B did) and his demands to see Clifford; narrates the death of Jaffray; describes the flight of Hepzibah and Clifford; pictures the dead Jaffray; brings back Phoebe; winds up the love-story; brings Hepzibah and Clifford back; and rounds off the whole story in conclusion. We find that part A is essentially introductory; part B is a quiet middle section; and part C is the intense final section with the three most exciting chapters in the book, "Clifford's Chamber", "The Flight of Two Owls", and "Governor Pyncheon".

If we divide the twenty-one chapters into seven groups of three, we find that each group has its own function in the story. The first group is introductory and presents the permanent residents of Pyncheon Street: Hepzibah, Holgrave, and the gingerbread-eating Ned. The second group deals principally with Phoebe and her arrival. The third group is devoted chiefly to Clifford. The fourth, and middle group is static and descriptive, being concerned with daily life in the house. The fifth group, after the interlude of chapter twelve,

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which is Holgrave's story of Alice, deals with Phoebe's departure. The sixth group includes the intensive activity of chapters sixteen, seventeen and eighteen, mentioned above: the group is really the climax of the story. The seventh, and last group describes Phoebe's return and unties the knots. The seven-fold division is less tight and less significant than the better-organised three-part division, but its presence justifies mentioning it. Interlaced, as it is, through the three parts of the novel, it undoubtedly helps to tie it all together.

> Thus, we can see that there is a flow and balance to the structure of the novel. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and these parts are not only quantitatively balanced but they are also, we might say, qualitatively balanced. They are functionally as well as structurally equal. The novel has structure, an elaborate pattern, and from that point of view, at least, it is artistically conceived.

However, many critics fail to discover any structural pattern in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. They conclude that the book consists of a series of episodes tied loosely together by the theme of an inherited curse.

For **Herbert Gorman**, the work is "no more than a series of tales relating to one family. As a novel the book falls to pieces and the reader is confronted with varying ingredients that do not, by any manner of reasoning, form a unified ensemble" (Hawthorne: A Study in Solitude: 1927: 95-96).

Austin Warren (Rage for Order: 1948) thinks that the plot is frequently interrupted by long character delineations, flights into the past, musings over matters that are irrelevant to the action of the story.

Darrel Abel feels that the romance is a five-act dramatisation. The drama revolves around the symbol of the House which, according to Abel, is representative of "Tradition". The first act of the drama establishes this symbolic frame of reference. The second act describes the building of the House "and the defining of human relationships involved in its building". ("Hawthorne's House of Tradition": 1953: 571). The third act concerns itself with the House after the Pyncheons have built it, with it "in apparent prosperity still, but actually in incipient decay" (571). Act four brings us to the "present " of the story, with the house in an advanced state of decline; and act five, the climactic one, shows the fall of the House, the collapse of the "tradition" and its replacement by a new one. The Pyncheons, symbolically, are replaced by the Maules, and the often-discussed "happy ending" is actually a new beginning.

Anyway, despite the superficial motif of an inherited curse invoked by critics, the real theme concerns the necessity of man's participation in what Holgrave terms "the united struggle of mankind". Hawthorne projects his theme in a series of **antitheses**. Poverty is contrasted with riches, the present with the past, aristocracy with democracy, youth with age, greed with unselfishness, the complex with the simple, appearance with reality, pride with humbleness, the isolated with the unisolated. Moreover, each contrast throws light on the theme. For instance, the scene in chapter XVIII that pictures the dead Judge alone in the House of the Seven Gables offers a contrast between the real and the apparent, between the real Judge Pyncheon and the Judge, as the deceived people of his town see him. It is a dramatic representation of the hypocrisy that results from Judge Pyncheon's psychological isolation from the "united struggle of mankind".

Thus, the "varying ingredients", although not all contributing to the plot, do contribute to the theme, the most unifying element. Of the various contrasts that pervade the entire novel, *three* are especially dominant in three different parts, and to these principal contrasts the novel owes its major theme. The first six chapters stress the desirability of a *democratic way of life over an aristocratic one*. With the introduction of Clifford in chapter VII, the theme of psychological *isolation* comes into the foreground and is emphasised through chapter XIV,

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mainly in contrasts of Clifford, Hepzibah, and the Judge with *unisolated* characters. The last seven chapters constantly reflect the main theme by pointing up the dichotomy between *appearance and reality*. To illustrate the structural pattern and theme, and how each contrast mentioned above throws light on the theme, a further consideration of the three contrasts (aristocracy / democracy, isolated / unisolated, appearance / reality), as they appear in the chapters of the book, is necessary.

In chapter I, the conflict between the *aristocratic* and the *plebeian* forces is set forth, the former represented by Colonel Pyncheon, while the latter by Matthew Maule. Early in the history of the house, a pride in high social degree becomes a part of the Pyncheon tradition. Colonel Pyncheon has an open-house celebration to which he invites both the aristocratic and the plebeian classes, but when they reach the entrance door, they are invited in through separate doors to separate rooms inside, respectively.

The decline of the Pyncheon family is indicated through the person of Hepzibah who has to open a cent-shop in order to earn a livelihood. She must step down from her proud and isolated pedestal of aristocracy and become a part of the populace. Hepzibah is described sympathetically, at the same time, Hawthorne having in view the revealing of her emptiness and the necessity for her coming out of her proud shell of tradition. By becoming the poorest member of her family, Hepzibah inherits a kind of nobility which makes the reader sympathise with her and her destiny.

Hepzibah's defeat is the first triumph over aristocracy. Then, a strong representative of the democratic forces is introduced in the person of Holgrave, the descendant of Matthew Maule. Speaking to Holgrave of her "gentility", Hepzibah says: "But I was born a lady, and have always lived one; no matter in what narrowness of means, always a lady!" (63). But Holgrave sees through the superficiality of these faded and meaningless titles of "lady" and "gentleman". Rather than conferring any special privileges, they restrict the holder of the titles to an artificial code of behaviour that renders him useless to himself and to society. To Hepzibah's statement, Holgrave answers:

> "But I was not born a gentleman; neither have I lived like one ... so ... you will hardly expect me to sympathize with sensibilities of this kind; though ... I have some imperfect comprehension of them. These names of gentleman and lady had a meaning, in the past history of the world, and conferred privileges, desirable or otherwise, on those entitled to bear them. In the present - and still more in the future condition of society - they imply, not privilege, but restriction!" (63-64).

Phoebe comes to live in Hepzibah's ancient house and to work in the cent-shop. She is described by Hepzibah as a young girl, unconventional, an excellent shopkeeper, but not a "lady". In direct contrast with Phoebe, Hawthorne pictures Hepzibah, who is a lady, but far from having Phoebe's feminine grace which makes her less desirable in every way.

Thus, the explicit superiority of a state of social equality represents the main theme of the first six chapters. The centre of part I is Hepzibah, the major symbol of a fallen aristocracy. Within this part, Hawthorne arranges each scene so that there are never more than two characters together - usually one plebeian and one aristocrat.

In Part II (chapters VII-XIV), the isolated characters, Clifford, Hepzibah, and the Judge are studied in contrast to those who are part of the brotherhood. Hepzibah, Clifford, and the Judge represent three distinct ways in which man is isolated from his fellows. Hepzibah is isolated through pride in tradition and an aristocratic way of life; Clifford through his extreme love of only the beautiful; and Judge Pyncheon through greed. All three have only a partial

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view of reality. They cannot see life as it is because they are blinded by their characteristic weakness of pride, extreme aesthetic sensibility, and greed.

Hepzibah is the chief figure of a degraded aristocracy in Part I; alike, Clifford is the main figure of isolation in Part II. Like Hepzibah, Clifford has always been outside the realm of reality; he has been in a realm where there is no sorrow, no strife whatsoever, being able to accept only the beautiful. However, there is a difference in Clifford's nature that isolates him, and makes him not feel even the closeness of kinship and love for Hepzibah that she feels for him.

The third character, Judge Pyncheon, seems kindly and philanthropic to the world. Actually, however, he is separated from mankind. In chapter VIII, he attempts to bestow his affection upon Phoebe in the cent-shop. He offers to kiss her as a symbol of "acknowledged kindred" (245), but Phoebe draws away and refuses the kiss. Despite the ties of blood between them, she realises that he is a stranger to her world.

The comparison between Judge Pyncheon and the Colonel indicates the reason for the isolation of both these characters: greed. For, "tradition affirmed that the Puritan had been greedy of wealth; the Judge, too, with all the show of liberal expenditure, was said to be as closefisted as if his grip were of iron" (150). Not only is he selfish with what he already has, but also he is ruthless in obtaining more, as is indicated in his first attempted interview with Clifford. This incident establishes the Judge as the villain and reveals the growing conflict between him and his poorer relations, which is the central action of the plot. Like Roger Chillingworth, Ethan Brand, and Rappaccini, Judge Pyncheon follows one major ambition to his doom.

In chapter IX, Clifford is contrasted with the bright little Phoebe. She is the only one who can make Clifford accept reality partially, although the world has never wanted him. Hawthorne describes the:

> "pale, gray, childish, aged, melancholy, yet often simply cheerful, and sometimes delicately intelligent aspect of Clifford, peering from behind the faded crimson of the curtain, watching the monotony of every-day occurrences with a kind of inconsequential interest and earnestness, and, at every petty throb of his sensibility, turning for sympathy to the eyes of the bright young girl!" (192-193).

In the middle chapter, XI, the theme of isolation reaches its peak of intensity in Clifford's actions. As he and Phoebe watch the parade march with all its pomp past the House of the Seven Gables, he realises his state of isolation, and he cannot resist an actual physical attempt to plunge down into the "surging stream of human sympathy":

> "He shuddered; he grew pale.... At last, with tremulous limbs, he started up, set his foot on the window-sill, and in an instant more would have been in the unguarded balcony .... [He was] a wild, haggard figure, his gray locks floating in the wind that waved their banners; a lonely being, estranged from his race ..." (200)

Then, Hawthorne clearly describes Clifford's great need to become reunited with the world and hints that this reunion can be accomplished only by death:

> "He needed a shock; or perhaps he required to take a deep, deep plunge into the ocean of human life, and to sink down and be covered by its profoundness, and then to emerge, sobered, invigorated, restored to the world and to himself.

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Perhaps, again, he required nothing less than the great final remedy - death". (201)

The conclusion Hepzibah and Clifford reach when they attempt to follow Phoebe to church is most desperate: they have lived for too long a time in solitude to be able to be accepted by the outside world. There is no returning for them, their only choice is to get back to their old house and go on living within its walls.

The last three chapters of Part II are concerned mainly with Holgrave, with the story he reads to Phoebe, and with Phoebe's departure. In spite of the immaturity of Holgrave's notions about reform, he does possess some wisdom in matters relating to the isolating effect of the past on the present: "It [the past] lies upon the Present like a giant's dead body!" (192), he tells Phoebe.

Except for the judge, all of the main characters are brought together in chapter XIV as Phoebe leaves the old mansion. The contrast between the hopelessly isolated Clifford and Phoebe as she says good-bye to him is striking. Her departure takes him even further into the world of solitude. His parting remark to her is: "Go, now! - I feel lonelier than I did" (263). Phoebe's departure ends the second part of the novel. Holgrave sets the scene for the climax, which comes at the beginning of Part III, when he says to Phoebe before she leaves: "I cannot help fancying that Destiny is arranging its fifth act for a catastrophe" (260). From Judge Pyncheon's attempted interview with Clifford in chapter VIII to Holgrave's prophetic remarks at the end of Part II, there is a general movement of the plot, a building up of the major conflict among Hepzibah, Clifford, and the Judge toward the climactic scene, which occurs in chapter XIV and ends in the Judge's death. *The theme of isolation* is thus predominant in Part II, and is stressed by the study of the *isolated* in contrast to the *unisolated*. As the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that the isolated figures cannot become reconciled with the world.

Chapter XV, "The Scowl and the Smile" indicates Hawthorne's concern with the deceptiveness of outward appearance as typified in Hepzibah and the Judge. The townspeople think Hepzibah's scowl reflects her inward nature. Although she is, in reality, warm and kind, her myopic frown stamps her as sour and bitter. In contrast, the Judge seems benevolent but is really a villain of the first order. To the world, he is:

> "a man of eminent respectability. The church acknowledged it; the state acknowledged it. It was denied by nobody. In all the very extensive sphere of those who knew him ... there was not an individual - except Hepzibah, and ... the daguerreotypist ... who would have dreamed of seriously disputing his claim to a high and honorable place in the world's regard ." (272).

He is like a marvellously well built palace with a "deadly hole under the pavement" that contains, unseen from the outside, some secret decay. For, "beneath the show of a marble palace ... is this man's miserable soul!" (274)

The growing conflict between the avaricious Judge and his relatives in the House of the Seven Gables reaches a climax in chapter XVI, when the Judge demands to see Clifford. In his twisted mind, he is sure that Clifford knows the location of a long-lost Pyncheon treasure. The climax of the novel is thus brought about by the Judge's reliance on false judgement made from *appearance*. Appearance then leads to several misunderstandings. Clifford has no gold. Hepzibah finds the Judge dead, and Clifford urges her to flee with him from the house. Everything points to the conclusion that Clifford has murdered the Judge and thus ended the constant threat to his well being.

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Chapter XVIII is entitled "Governor Pyncheon". The labels "Governor", "Colonel", and "Judge" which to the world should signify integrity and honour, in the case of the Judge and his ancestors, denote a marked dishonesty. Hawthorne pictures the dead Judge sitting alone in the House of the Seven Gables while a storm rages outside; and by describing all his scheduled activities for the day in which he dies, reveals the dichotomy between *appearance and reality* in the Judge's life.

The last three chapters add extra plot details, which reveal the natural causes of previous events. The Judge's death is a natural one of the same type that overcame the Colonel, not murder, as it has seemed to be. The daguerreotypist is shown in his true identity as a descendant of Matthew Maule. Many other details, such as the location of the missing document, are explained and the story ends with no questions unanswered.

Hepzibah and Clifford inherit the Judge's fortune through his death. This seems a bliss, but it is only an appearance. Hepzibah was really fortunate when she was forced to open a cent-shop to earn a living. Thus, she became a member of the society, she was in a way accepted by it. However, her contact with human race and struggle was short. With her inheritance of the Judge's fortune, she can step back upon her pedestal of gentility, there to remain isolated and lost. She will again be a "lady", but forced to live isolated from the "united struggle".

Clifford has the same fate. Through the Judge's death he gets rid of his threat, he will have a home to live in. He, together with Hepzibah, Holgrave, and Phoebe leave the ancient house to live in the Judge's country home. Nevertheless, he is not happier, on the contrary; the moment he has lost Phoebe, his only representative of womanhood, he will not be forced to see life as it is; he can now view only the beautiful. Thus, what happens in fact, is a catastrophe, and not a blessing. It is an echo of the statement Hawthorne recorded in his notebooks: "To inherit a great fortune. To inherit a great misfortune". (**Stewart**: *The American Notebooks*: 1932: 130)

Structurally, then, *The House of the Seven Gables* is composed of a series of antitheses with three particular contrasts dominating the book: democratic and aristocratic, isolated versus unisolated characters, appearance and reality. To these dominant contrasts, the work owes its **major theme**: the necessity of man's close communion with his fellow beings. It is not considered Hawthorne's best work as far as its structure and theme are concerned, but it is definitely a well-organised one, with a pervading theme and in which the seemingly diverse elements of the romance can be said to form a "unified ensemble".

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