

THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES

by Nathaniel Hawthorne



THE AUTHOR

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was the scion of an old New England family, the first of whom had arrived in Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630; his son (and the author's great-grandfather) William Hathorne was one of the judges at the Salem Witch Trials in 1692 - an embarrassment that haunted the author and significantly influenced the ideas expressed in his most famous novel. Hawthorne was born in Salem, and from age four was cared for by his uncle following his father's death. As a result of a childhood injury he became a voracious reader and began to dabble in writing. After graduating from Bowdoin College, he devoted his time to writing, mostly short stories. He had trouble publishing them until a collection called *Twice-Told Tales* came out in 1838, to great public acclaim. After working briefly in the Custom House in Boston and living for seven months at the Brook Farm utopian community, he married Sophia Peabody in 1842. He again had trouble selling his writings and took a job at the Salem Custom House from 1846-1849. When the Democratic Party lost the 1848 election he lost his patronage job and turned again to writing, this time completing *The Scarlet Letter* in about six months and publishing it in 1850. The work received immediate public recognition and was considered by many the greatest work of American fiction yet written. In the two years that followed he produced *The House of the Seven Gables* among other works. In 1852, his old friend and classmate Franklin Pierce was elected President, and Hawthorne was made U.S. consul in Liverpool, which ended his financial woes. He continued to write until his death in 1864.

The House of the Seven Gables (1851) was inspired by an actual mansion in Salem, Massachusetts. Even the curse at the center of the story is derived from historical precedent; Sarah Good, one of the first women condemned for witchcraft in the seventeenth-century trials in Salem, is said to have cursed the preacher who testified against her by saying that "God would give him blood to drink." The novel, published one year after *The Scarlet Letter*, was actually more popular at the time than its predecessor. *The House of the Seven Gables* is very different stylistically from *The Scarlet Letter* - so much so that the author referred to it as a romance rather than a novel, largely because of the supernatural elements in the story. Despite the considerable

differences, however, the two share Hawthorne's deep-seated hatred of the Puritans and the witch trials that he saw as the greatest blot on his own family history.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel begins with the narrator describing an old mansion, the Pyncheon House, also known as the House of the Seven Gables. Pyncheon Street, the road on which the mansion is located, used to be called Maule's Lane in the days of the Puritan settlement in Massachusetts, after Matthew Maule, the inhabitant of a cottage along the cowpath. Colonel Pyncheon, a wealthy landowner, coveted Maule's land, which the simple farmer was unwilling to cede to him. Pyncheon finally gained control of the property when Maule was hanged for witchcraft. From the scaffold, Maule had pronounced a curse on Pyncheon, whom he believed had persecuted him in order to obtain his land, by crying out, "God will give him blood to drink!" After Maule's death, Pyncheon demolished his log cabin and built his mansion on the site, which included the purported wizard's grave. Shortly after workmen dug the foundation, the well on the property turned bitter and brackish. Oddly enough, Thomas Maule, the son of the dead man, served as the chief architect for the mansion. When the work was completed, the Colonel invited the whole town to a feast to celebrate the occasion, but he himself was nowhere to be found, failing even to greet the Lieutenant Governor at his arrival. When that august personage searched the house for his host, he found him dead, his beard and ruff covered with blood. The coroner ruled Pyncheon's death a case of apoplexy, but rumors of supernatural goings-on could not be quelled.

The Colonel's death left his heirs very well-off, though a land deed to an enormous remote section of Maine could never be verified despite efforts of later generations of Pyncheons to lay claim to it. The House of the Seven Gables remained in the family, though the questionable means by which the property had been obtained plagued many of them with guilt; they did nothing to remedy the situation, however, and consequently took upon themselves the misdeeds of their ancient ancestor. Tragedy dogged the family in the years that followed, including the death of one patriarch in a manner similar to that of the Colonel and the murder of a later Pyncheon by his own nephew in an attempt to gain the property. Rumor had it that the dead man had planned to pass on the land and mansion to the Maules, but he died before carrying out his purpose. The next heir in line was a rather dissipated young man who quickly reformed his life and went on to become a judge in a minor court before serving in Congress and the state legislature. Many considered him to be the only scion of the family who could hope to challenge the Colonel as a true representative of the Pyncheon name.

Judge Pyncheon is the owner of the House of the Seven Gables when the story begins. His only living relatives are his cousin, still in prison for killing the previous owner of the estate, his sister, who lives in the mansion as a result of the Judge's charity while refusing all efforts on his part to make her more comfortable, a son, estranged from the Judge and traveling somewhere in Europe, and a young girl of seventeen, the daughter of a deceased cousin of the Judge. The Maule family, however, after generations of continuing to live in the town in hardworking poverty, was now believed to be extinct, though rumors of mysterious powers, particularly over the dreams of others, had followed them in the gossip of the town.

The House of the Seven Gables has one unlikely characteristic – a shop door cut into the wall beneath one of the gables. This had been made by an earlier Pyncheon who, desperate for means of support, had actually opened a general store on the first floor of the mansion. This has

been shuttered for many years, though the design remains unaltered and the furnishings are decaying and covered with dust. Hepzibah Pyncheon, the elderly and impoverished cousin of the Judge who lives in the mansion, has decided, however, to clean up and reopen the store in order to give herself something to do and as a means of relieving her poverty. The first person to enter the shop is Mr. Holgrave, a young man who has taken lodgings in a remote part of the mansion. He is a daguerreotypist, and stops in merely to see if he might render assistance with her preparations. She pours out her frustrations and he attempts to encourage and reassure her. She bemoans the depth to which a lady has fallen, but he cheerfully offers to be her first customer, asking to purchase half a dozen biscuits. She declines, arguing that she could not possibly take money from her only friend for a bit of food to sustain him. After Holgrave leaves, Hepzibah hears two laborers talking outside the door of the shop. They remark on how the mighty have fallen and opine that the shop will never succeed, both because so many other similar shops populate the town and because Hepzibah wears such a menacing scowl on her countenance. She is now convinced that no customer will ever darken her door, but soon a little street urchin comes in and buys a gingerbread man, though she again refuses to take his penny. He quickly devours the cookie, then reenters and asks for another. This time she takes his money, but feels as if her entire world has been destroyed; she is no longer a gentlewoman, but a lowly shopkeeper. Soon, however, her mood changes because of the stimulus of actually doing something to assist herself after sixty years as an idle recluse. The first half of the day is discouraging, both because of the rudeness of the poor and the airs of the rich who either patronize or haughtily walk past her little shop.

At noon the little boy returns to buy a gingerbread elephant, and soon Hepzibah's cousin, Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, walks past. He smiles pleasantly, but the old woman discerns in his eyes the same look staring out from the portrait of Colonel Pyncheon, the old Puritan and founder of the house. Later an old man known as Uncle Venner enters the shop. He is poor, somewhat lacking in wit, and lives in the workhouse, but has become a familiar figure in the neighborhood because of the services he renders as a handyman. He remarks proudly that the Judge had smiled at him in the street, but wonders why he allows his cousin to debase herself by opening a shop. She spends the rest of the afternoon daydreaming about receiving an inheritance from an unknown source, meanwhile mistaking customer orders and giving wrong change so that, by the end of the day, she has little more than a few pennies in the till. Soon after Hepzibah closes the shop she sees an omnibus stop in front of the mansion. A teenage girl alights; she is Phoebe, the young country cousin of the Pyncheon clan.

When Phoebe awakes in the morning, she picks some white roses that grow outside her window and subtly rearranges the room's décor to bring to it new vitality and beauty where none had existed for many years. She soon encounters Hepzibah, and the two discuss Phoebe's future. The young girl has been forced to leave home by her mother's remarriage to a man who does not welcome her, so she has sought refuge at the home of her distant cousins. She intends only to visit for a brief time to discover whether a longer arrangement might be mutually beneficial. Hepzibah doubts that Pyncheon House will be suitable for her because it is so dismal and dreary; furthermore, Hepzibah lacks the means to feed her. Phoebe insists that she is cheerful enough for any environment and intends to earn her own bread. Hepzibah also says that the final decision is not hers to make, since the master of the house is soon to return; here she alludes to Clifford Pyncheon, a relative of whom Phoebe has never heard. In any case, she agrees that Phoebe can remain for the time being. In the days that follow, Phoebe assumes many of the household chores

and brings good cheer everywhere she goes. She soon takes over the shop as well, doing far better than Hepzibah could ever do. This causes the old lady to remark that Phoebe clearly has inherited much from her mother's side of the family, for she bears little evidence of Pyncheon blood. Hepzibah and Phoebe soon grow close, and the old woman acquaints her young cousin with the history and legends of the house. Of particular interest is Alice Pyncheon, who died a century earlier under mysterious circumstances. She, like Phoebe, was a delight to all around her, an artist and harpsichord player, and was said to haunt the old mansion still. She also tells Phoebe about Holgrave, whom she suspects of being some kind of political radical or practitioner of mesmerism, though he is quiet enough when he is inside the mansion.

One day after tea Phoebe ventures into the garden. She finds it somewhat run-down, like the house itself, but also showing evidence of some loving care. As she is feeding the chickens she encounters Holgrave, who carries a hoe and is obviously the one who has been caring for the garden. He offers to show her some of his daguerreotypes and brings out one of Judge Pyncheon. He looks singularly unpleasant, but Holgrave notes that he normally wears a pleasant countenance; he then argues that his photography is capable of displaying the true character of a man beneath the surface of external appearance. He also expresses a desire to take Phoebe's picture in order to test whether the technique can also display genuine goodness. He also proposes that they share the care of the garden, with Phoebe attending to the birds and flowers and Holgrave caring for the vegetables. Before leaving, he warns Phoebe not to drink from or wash in the water of Maule's well, a ruined fountain in the middle of the garden, because it is supposedly bewitched. When Phoebe retires to the parlor to be with Hepzibah, she senses a presence in the room and thinks she hears breathing and a faint voice, though the old woman professes to be alone. When they embrace before retiring, she senses love welling up from Hepzibah's heart.

When Phoebe comes downstairs the next morning she finds Hepzibah with her nose buried in a cookbook. She is disappointed when Phoebe finds no eggs in the chicken coop, but purchases the finest wares of the fishmonger when he passes on the street. Cognizant that Hepzibah is expecting a special guest, Phoebe offers to bake a breakfast cake using her mother's special recipe. Soon the guest comes down the stairs and ambles slowly into the parlor; he is Clifford, Hepzibah's brother, recently released from prison after a thirty-year sentence for murdering his uncle. Phoebe is immediately impressed with the air of sadness and unjust suffering about the old man and senses that in his heart dwells all that is kind and beautiful, which has been tragically suppressed by the hardships of his life. When the food is presented, Clifford ignores those around him and devours it like a starving man. His attraction to beauty leads him to ignore his poor sister despite all she has done to prepare for his coming, however. When his eye falls on the picture of Colonel Pyncheon, he angrily demands that it be covered and claims it was the cause of his evil deeds. He tells her that they should leave the house and live abroad, but Hepzibah shamefacedly tells him that they are poor – so poor, in fact, that she has opened a shop.

When the shop bell rings, Phoebe goes to answer it and finds Ned Higgins, the little boy who had come so often before seeking cookies. This time he is buying food for his mother, but Phoebe rewards him with a cookie anyway. As he leaves, Judge Pyncheon enters the shop. He asks who Phoebe is and introduces himself, but when he tries to kiss her she involuntarily pulls away, after which a brief expression of harshness flashes across his face. At this point Phoebe recognizes him as the subject of the daguerreotype she had seen in the garden and is startled by the resemblance between the Judge and his distant ancestor, the Colonel. At this point the narrator provides a list of similarities between the two, not only with regard to their physical appearance, but also by comparing the tradition about the one with the rumors about the other. When Phoebe

appears to be disconcerted, the Judge ascribes her behavior to the presence of Clifford in the house. She responds that he is a harmless and childlike old man, but he speaks of him much more harshly and insists on seeing him immediately, pushing Phoebe aside in the process. Hepzibah appears to protect her brother, and the Judge kindly offers to provide anything the feeble old man may need. Hepzibah, however, knows that his kindness is merely a façade. When the Judge offers to move Hepzibah and Clifford to his country home, she flatly refuses. The commotion wakes Clifford, who begs Hepzibah to keep the Judge from seeing him. The Judge responds with a brief but fiery glare in which the real man within becomes visible. He collects himself quickly, however, and resumes his usual benign air, benevolently stating that he willingly forgives Hepzibah and Clifford for their ungracious response to his generous offer of hospitality. All of this puzzles Phoebe exceedingly; she knows nothing of the family history and cannot imagine the reason for the negative response to the Judge's overtures.

Hepzibah had been waiting for many years to care for her beloved and unfortunate brother in his declining days, and now she had the opportunity. She reads his favorite books to him, but his mind has been so damaged and her voice is so harsh that he shows no positive response. She considers playing the harpsichord, but quickly realizes that neither her skill nor her voice is up to the task. Furthermore, Clifford, that former lover of beauty, cannot bring himself to look at his sister, who has grown ugly with age. Hepzibah therefore turns to Phoebe to entertain her brother, a task that she takes up gladly. She thus becomes a ray of sunshine in the midst of long-standing darkness.

Each afternoon Phoebe takes Clifford out to the garden, now beginning to flourish under her care and that of Holgrave. She reads to him in the summer house, though he cares little for the actual content of the books, content instead to hear the young girl's mellifluous voice. He much prefers to hear her speak of the daily occurrences in the garden, describing what flowers are blooming and speaking of the bees and hummingbirds drawn to them, then telling him all about the hens, who had been given the run of the garden, and their peculiar activities. After church each Sunday, the denizens of the house – Hepzibah, Phoebe, Clifford, and Holgrave – gather for a simple party, often joined by Uncle Venner. During these quiet times together, Holgrave makes a special effort to engage and cheer up Clifford and the others.

In order to bring some variety into Clifford's daily routine, Phoebe occasionally brings him upstairs so he can watch people passing on the street below through a large arched window. He is alternately fascinated with and oblivious to the scene before him, never remembering from one day to the next what he had seen before. At one point he moves to jump out the window, but Phoebe and Hepzibah grab his coat and pull him back. One day Hepzibah and Clifford watch from the window as Phoebe goes to church, and Clifford asks his sister if she ever goes anymore. She says she hasn't been to church in many years, and he expresses his desire to go, believing that he might be able to pray if he is among others who are praying also. Hepzibah realizes that, in cutting herself off from humankind, she has cut herself off from God as well and agrees to accompany him. They get ready and prepare to leave the house, but Clifford shrinks back at the last minute, arguing that the two of them are doomed forever to haunt the cursed house in which they live and have no place in a house of worship. Later Clifford expresses a desire to blow soap bubbles – a pleasure remembered from his childhood. One particularly large bubble floats downward and bursts on the nose of Judge Pyncheon as he passes by. The Judge makes a sarcastic comment, leaving Clifford trembling in fear.

Phoebe's responsibilities in the shop and watching over Clifford occupy her only until late afternoon, after which she is free to pursue her own interests. She takes long walks, attends concerts and lectures, and reads her Bible – anything to escape the depressing atmosphere of Pyncheon House. Her time with Clifford and Hepzibah brings depth and maturity to her character along with a tinge of sadness to her personality. For all of these reasons, Phoebe is more and more frequently drawn to spend time with Holgrave, the only person in the house anywhere near her age, despite the differences that divide the two. Though only twenty-two, Holgrave had been in turn a country schoolmaster, a salesman, a newspaper editor, and a dentist, all the while traveling extensively throughout New England. He had traveled abroad as a sailor, lived in a Fourierist community, and given public lectures on Mesmerism. Thus his present work as a daguerreotypist is nothing more than another brief period in his adventures. His lack of a sound foundation for his life troubles Phoebe, but she enjoys his company nonetheless, though he seems to engage her more with his mind than with his heart. He seems particularly curious about Clifford, asking about him constantly though he rarely sees him in person. More than anything else, Holgrave is an optimist, one who is convinced that the world is about to change for the better and that he can play a significant role in that change. As he grows more comfortable with Phoebe, he begins to pour out to her his life's ambitions with an earnestness that could easily be mistaken for love. One day he shares with her a lengthy discourse about the baleful influence of the Past, arguing that buildings should be merely temporary and people should forget their ancestors. For him, the Pyncheons and the House of the Seven Gables exemplify his desire to destroy and forget the past. He then reveals to Phoebe that he is also a writer, producing short stories for magazines, and offers to read one of his stories to her – an elaborated version of a Pyncheon family legend.

The story involves Alice Pyncheon, the Colonel's granddaughter and the harpsichordist who represents one of the few bright lights in the Pyncheon family line, and Matthew Maule, a humble carpenter and the grandson of the executed wizard of the same name. Both of the old enemies are thought to haunt the House of the Seven Gables. The younger Maule, according to the gossip of the town, has inherited some of his grandsire's unusual abilities – rumors believed more readily because he is not a churchgoer. One day Matthew is called to the Pyncheon house by Alice's father. The young carpenter is entranced by Alice's beauty and by the loveliness of the music she coaxes from her harpsichord. Alice's father is interested in a document proving the Pyncheon claim to a vast tract of land in Maine; village legend says that the old wizard had been buried with the document in his grasp, though an exhumation revealed nothing except that the skeleton's right hand was missing. Gervayse Pyncheon, in short, believes that Matthew's father stole the document from the Colonel's study on the morning of his untimely demise, which Matthew vehemently denies. Pyncheon offers large sums of money for information about the document, which Matthew repeatedly refuses. Finally, the young carpenter asks Gervayse if he would be willing to make over to him the House of the Seven Gables and the land on which it stands in return for the document. According to the legend, the portrait of the Colonel on the wall had shown signs of dismay and then furor as the conversation progressed. Gervayse refuses Matthew's offer, arguing that the Colonel would never rest quietly in his grave if the house were sold, but Matthew insists that he will consider no other bargain. After further thought, Gervayse agrees, having no great liking for the old mansion in the first place. When Matthew begs the privilege of a conversation with Alice before producing the document, however, Pyncheon loses his temper but finally succumbs and summons his daughter. Alice's initial reaction on seeing Matthew is admiration, but he mistakes her stare for pride. He then asks her to sit down and look deeply into his eyes. Pyncheon has doubts about the wisdom of this, remembering the legend that

the Maules could read people's minds, but Alice is fearless and demands that the experiment proceed. Soon Alice falls into a trance and Matthew questions her at length about the missing document. In her trance she becomes a medium through whom the three bearers of the secret speak - Colonel Pyncheon, the old wizard Matthew Maule, and his son. The Maules prevent the Colonel from revealing the secret, so Matthew breaks the trance and announces that the deal is off; Pyncheon can keep the House of the Seven Gables, but the document is not to be retrieved. When Alice emerges from the trance, she has no memory of the experience, but is forever after the slave of Matthew Maule. He humiliates her repeatedly, and when he finally releases her from his iron grip, she sickens and dies.

As Phoebe listens to the tale, she becomes drowsy and is close to falling into a trance like the one that enslaved the unfortunate Alice. Though sorely tempted to complete his mastery over the innocent girl, Holgrave resists and speaks to her as if he is insulted that she fell asleep during his reading, which of course wakes her immediately, though she doesn't remember falling asleep. As they continue to talk, Phoebe tells him that she intends to go home for a short visit and then return. Holgrave says that Hepzibah and Clifford have become totally dependent on her and will lapse into their former living death after she leaves. He also speaks of his conviction that the long tale of the Pyncheon family and its doomed house is soon to come to a close. The two wish each other farewell, and two days later Phoebe boards the train for home after saying goodbye to Hepzibah, Clifford, and Uncle Venner.

A storm makes the house dark and dreary for the next four days; Hepzibah falls into a deep depression, while Clifford stays upstairs and occasionally attempts to play the harpsichord. On the fifth morning, Judge Pyncheon enters the shop. He asks after their health with a bright smile that soon turns into a thundercloud of anger when Hepzibah denies him permission to see Clifford. The Judge rebukes her for continuing to hold a grudge against him, arguing that he had no choice but to reveal Clifford as the killer of his uncle and insisting that he had suffered greatly as a result and wishes Clifford nothing but good now. She responds by accusing him of undying hatred that he simply masks behind a façade of kindness. At this point the narrator discourses on the depth of the Judge's hypocrisy by contrasting the public perception of his character with the inner man hidden from most but revealed by certain evil deeds. Pyncheon now sets the mask aside and speaks directly to Hepzibah. He tells her that he is responsible for Clifford's release from prison, that he had a specific purpose for doing so, that he refuses to leave the house without seeing him immediately, and that he has it in his power to deprive him of his freedom once more if he does not get his way. He then explains his reason - the dead uncle had left an estate far smaller than anyone expected, and the Judge is convinced that Clifford, in his troubled mind, holds the secret to retrieving the remainder undoubtedly concealed by their crafty forebear; he had said as much to Jaffrey weeks before the murder. If the Judge can unlock that secret and thus gain the rest of his inheritance, he is willing to leave Clifford in peace; if not, he will have Clifford committed to an asylum. Hepzibah rails at him for his greed, since he already has more money than he can possibly use, but lacks the strength to resist. As she goes to fetch Clifford, the Judge sits down in the parlor in the very chair in which his ancestor the Colonel had been found dead many years before.

Hepzibah climbs toward Clifford's room with a deep sense of foreboding, convinced that a horrifying new episode is about to be added to the annals of the Pyncheon family. She believes that an encounter with the Judge will surely kill Clifford in his weakened condition. She longs for help from any source, but Phoebe is gone and Holgrave is at work, and when she tries to pray,

she finds that she cannot. When Hepzibah knocks on Clifford's door and calls him, she receives no answer. When she enters the room she finds it empty, nor is her brother in the garden below. Fearing that he has wandered into the town and could come to some harm, Hepzibah flies down the steps calling to Judge Pyncheon for help in finding her brother. When she enters the parlor, however, the old man does not respond; he is dead in the same chair where the Colonel had died. Clifford himself soon enters, happier than he has been in many a year, and insists that he and Hepzibah must flee the doomed house at once.

Hepzibah and Clifford, so long confined to the dreary House of the Seven Gables, make their way toward town in inhospitable weather. Clifford moves with some sense of purpose toward the train station, where they board a train about to depart. Hepzibah is filled with fear, but Clifford is more alive than he has been in many years, so that their positions are reversed, with him serving as her caretaker rather than the other way around. During the ride, Clifford engages the train conductor in conversation, during which he speaks of the beauties of the outdoors and the confining nature of human edifices, particularly the horrible House of the Seven Gables. He sees Spiritism and electricity as the forerunners of a new age of humanity, and to some extent equates the two. The conductor concludes that Clifford is strange indeed, and soon he and Hepzibah leave the train at a deserted station in the middle of nowhere.

Meanwhile, Judge Pyncheon still sits in the chair in which both he and his notorious ancestor died in the House of the Seven Gables. The narrator describes in some detail the Judge's plans for the day, thus giving insight into the old man's priorities and life's concerns. The schedule is highlighted by a meeting of influential men to name the Judge as their candidate for governor of Massachusetts in the coming election. Next the narrator imagines the gathering of the spirits of Pyncheons through the ages that is reputed to occur at the stroke of midnight, describing each in turn, from the old Colonel to the recently-deceased Judge himself.

Uncle Venner arrives at daybreak to collect table scraps to feed his pig and in the process awakens Holgrave in his upper chamber. The day is brilliant, the flowers known as Alice's Posies bloom in the crevice between two of the gables, but both men are surprised to find the house so silent. Holgrave even thinks that he heard ghosts in the parlor during the night. When a woman comes to buy breakfast for her husband in the shop, no one answers the bell. Finally, a neighbor tells her that Hepzibah and Clifford had left the previous day. Ned Higgins arrives for his customary cookie, but has no more success than the woman. The butcher and the organ grinder do no better. Soon rumors begin to spread to the effect that Judge Pyncheon has been murdered, and suspicion immediately falls on Clifford because of his prior conviction. About a half hour later, Phoebe arrives at the old house in a cab. She, too, fails to gain entrance, but circles around back to the garden, which is in considerable disarray. When she knocks on the garden door, it is opened, but by Holgrave rather than by Hepzibah as she anticipates.

After admitting Phoebe to the house, Holgrave draws her by the hand into the long-deserted grand reception room of the mansion. She finds his hand strangely comforting and feels that some momentous change has occurred in her family. He tells her that Hepzibah and Clifford have left without revealing their destination and warns her that she will need to call on all her reserves of strength – that in fact he needs her advice to deal with the situation that confronts them. He then shows her a newly-made daguerreotype – a picture of the dead Judge Pyncheon – and tells her how he came to find the body and discover the flight of the two elderly siblings. Holgrave's concern is with Hepzibah and Clifford; he fears that Clifford in particular will be blamed for a death so similar to that of his uncle thirty years earlier. Holgrave does not believe

in the curse placed on the family by Matthew Maule; he argues that some physical weakness gave the male members of the family a predisposition toward the unusual death that had afflicted a number of them over the centuries. Similarly, he doubts that Clifford was responsible for his uncle's death, but thinks that Judge Pyncheon had used the incident to gain access to the family inheritance. The problem is how to publicize the news of the Judge's death without causing suspicion to fall on Clifford. Holgrave wants to conceal the death until Clifford can be found and brought back, but Phoebe insists that they must reveal the Judge's death immediately and entrust Clifford to the hand of God. Holgrave is reluctant to do so because he enjoys the intimacy that the shared secret creates between him and Phoebe. He soon professes his love for Phoebe, but she is afraid, believing herself to be too simple a girl to satisfy the sophisticated and deep thinker that Holgrave has become. He argues that her stability is what he needs to settle down and make a useful contribution to society and to future generations, and that he can never change without her in his life. Phoebe then admits that she loves him as well. When they turn to address themselves to the problem at hand, they hear footsteps in the corridor; Hepzibah and Clifford have returned.

After the Judge's death the truth about the death of his uncle thirty years before comes out. The old man had died of the family ailment and had not been murdered. The Judge, however, had ransacked the apartment and destroyed a will leaving everything to Clifford, retaining an older will in his favor. He then arranged the room to place the blame on his cousin, though he hardly had a charge of murder in mind, with the result that Clifford spent thirty years in prison and the Judge gained wealth and respectability. Because the Judge died with no surviving offspring, the estate fell to Hepzibah, Clifford, and Phoebe, leaving them all wealthy beyond their wildest dreams. Clifford, a great burden lifted from his shoulders, is now happy and free, and the three make plans to leave the House of the Seven Gables and move to the Judge's country estate. Before they go, Clifford stares at the picture of the old Colonel, struggling to retrieve something long buried in his memory. Holgrave touches the edge of the picture frame and the portrait crashes to the floor, revealing a hidden niche in which is concealed the long-sought document confirming the vast Pyncheon holdings in the eastern part of New England. The document that had been the cause of so much suffering is now worthless. Holgrave then reveals that his real name is Maule, and that he knew that his ancestor had taken possession of the document and hidden it behind the portrait while building the house. The marriage of Phoebe Pyncheon and the scion of the Maule family finally lifts the curse, and Uncle Venner, who is invited to live in a cottage on the country estate, is convinced that he hears the ghost of Alice Pyncheon strike one final note on the harpsichord before her spirit ascends to heavenly bliss.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Matthew Maule (the elder) – The original owner of the land on which the House of the Seven Gables stood, he had been hanged for witchcraft at the instigation of Colonel Pyncheon and had cursed him with his last breath.
- Thomas Maule - The son of the executed wizard, he was hired to build the House of the Seven Gables.

- Matthew Maule (the younger) - He falls in love with Alice Pyncheon, but misuses his hypnotic powers in a way that first enslaves her and then causes her death.
- Colonel Pyncheon – A wealthy landowner who coveted and finally obtained Matthew Maule’s small landholding, on which he built the mansion known as the House of the Seven Gables. He died mysteriously on the day he first opened the house for public viewing.
- Alice Pyncheon - The great-granddaughter of Colonel Pyncheon, she is both beautiful and haughty. She falls under the spell of Matthew Maule because she believes her spiritual strength to be greater than his. The sound of her harpsichord is said to haunt the mansion after her death.
- Jaffrey Pyncheon - The uncle of Clifford and the Judge, he dies from the family curse when he sees his nephew Jaffrey searching through his papers to find the will granting them the estate in Maine. The younger Jaffrey frames Clifford for murder.
- Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon - The current owner of the House of the Seven Gables, he shares the qualities of his famous forbear the Colonel, both in his sterling public reputation and his inner greed and selfishness. He is obsessed with finding a document proving his family’s claim to an enormous estate in Maine.
- Hepzibah Pyncheon – The cousin of Judge Pyncheon and Clifford’s sister, she is an old maid who lives in seclusion in the mansion, a kindly woman whose hardened exterior reflects the sorrows of her life.
- Phoebe Pyncheon – The seventeen-year-old country cousin of the Pyncheons, she is sweet and good-hearted, the very antithesis of the scion of the clan. She eventually falls in love with and marries Holgrave.
- Clifford Pyncheon - The Judge’s cousin, he spent thirty years in prison for murdering his uncle and returns home a broken man, showing only brief glimpses of the love of beauty that had characterized his youth. Phoebe is the only one who is able to reach into his ruined interior.
- Mr. Holgrave – A young daguerreotypist who has taken lodgings in the House of the Seven Gables, he is a descendant of Matthew Maule. With his marriage to Phoebe, the curse on the family is lifted.
- Uncle Venner – An elderly handyman and good friend of Hepzibah, he lives in a workhouse and earns a few pennies by doing odd jobs in the neighborhood despite the general belief that his wits are deficient.
- Ned Higgins – A small boy who frequents Hepzibah’s shop in search of cookies.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“The wrongdoing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and, divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief.” (Preface, p.10)

“God will give him blood to drink!” (Matthew Maule, ch.1, p.15)

“It was itself like a great human heart, with a life of its own, and full of rich and somber reminiscences.” (ch.1, p.30)

“If we look through all the heroic fortunes of mankind, we shall find this same entanglement of something mean and trivial with whatever is noblest in joy or sorrow. Life is made up of marble and mud.” (ch.2, p.41)

“The little schoolboy, aided by the impish figure of the Negro dancer, had wrought an irreparable ruin. The structure of ancient aristocracy had been demolished by him, even as if his childish gripe had torn down the seven-gabled mansion.” (ch.3, p.49)

“The weaknesses and defects, the bad passions, the mean tendencies, and the moral diseases which lead to crime are handed down from one generation to another, by a far surer process of transmission than human law has been able to establish in respect to the riches and honors which it seeks to entail upon posterity.” (ch.8, p.101)

“It was the Eden of a thundersmitten Adam, who had fled for refuge thither out of the same dreary and perilous wilderness into which the original Adam was expelled.” (ch.10, p.124)

“It does seem to me that men make a wonderful mistake in trying to heap up property upon property. If I had done so, I should feel as if Providence was not bound to take care of me; and, at all events, the city wouldn't be! I'm one of those people who think that infinity is big enough for us all – and eternity long enough.” (Uncle Venner, ch.10, p.129)

“I want my happiness! Many, many years have I waited for it! It is late! It is late! I want my happiness!” (Clifford, ch.10, p.130)

“What other dungeon is so dark as one's own heart! What jailer so inexorable as one's self!” (ch.11, p.139)

“It seemed to Holgrave – as doubtless it has seemed to the hopeful of every century since the epoch of Adam's grandchildren – that in this age, more than ever before, the moss-grown and rotten Past is to be torn down, and lifeless institutions to be thrust out of the way, and their dead corpses buried, and everything to begin anew.” (ch.12, p.147)

“Just think a moment, and it will startle you to see what slaves we are to bygone times – to Death, if we give the matter the right word!” (Holgrave, ch.12, p.149-150)

“This hard and grasping spirit has run in our blood these two hundred years. You are but doing again, in another shape, what your ancestor before you did, and sending down to your posterity the curse inherited from him!” (Hepzibah, ch.15, p.191)

“Men of his strength of purpose, and customary sagacity, if they chance to adopt a mistaken opinion in practical matters, so wedge it and fasten it among things known to be true, that to wrench it out of their minds is hardly less difficult than pulling up an oak.” (ch.16, p.195)

“In her grief and wounded pride, Hepzibah had spent her life in divesting herself of friends; she had willfully cast off the support which God had ordained his creatures to need from one another; and it was now her punishment that Clifford and herself would fall the easier victims to their kindred enemy.” (ch.16, p.197)

“What we call real estate – the solid ground to build a house on – is the broad foundation on which nearly all the guilt of this world rests.” (Clifford, ch.17, p.211)

“Will he, after the tomblike seclusion of the past day and night, go forth a humbled and repentant man, sorrowful, gentle, seeking no profit, shrinking from worldly honor, hardly daring to love God, but bold to love his fellow man, and to do him what good he may?” (ch.18, p.225)

“And it was in this hour, so full of doubt and awe, that the one miracle was wrought without which every human existence is a blank. The bliss which makes all things true, beautiful, and holy shone around this youth and maiden. They were conscious of nothing sad or old. They transfigured the earth, and made it Eden again, and themselves the two first dwellers in it. The dead man, so close beside them, was forgotten. At such a crisis, there is no death; for immortality is revealed anew, and embraces everything in its hallowed atmosphere.” (ch.20, p.245)

“Death is so genuine a fact that it excludes falsehood or betrays its emptiness; it is a touchstone that proves the gold, and dishonors the baser metal.” (ch.21, p.247)

“Wise Uncle Venner, passing slowly from the ruinous porch, seemed to hear a strain of music, and fancied that sweet Alice Pyncheon – after witnessing these deeds, this bygone woe and this present happiness, of her kindred mortals – had given one farewell touch of a spirit’s joy upon her harpsichord, as she floated heavenward from the House of the Seven Gables!” (ch.21, p.254)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In chapter fifteen of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*, the narrator contrasts Judge Pyncheon’s true character with the public perception of the man, yet implies without actually revealing the actions for which he is to be judged so harshly. Discuss the use of irony in this description. How does the author use language in a way that implies precisely the opposite of what he is saying in his characterization of the Judge? Why is such an approach more effective than simply enumerating the man’s faults?

2. In chapter fifteen of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, the narrator contrasts Judge Pyncheon's true character with the public perception of the man, yet implies without actually revealing the actions for which he is to be judged so harshly. Discuss Hawthorne's understanding of hypocrisy. Does it match the one found in Scripture? To what extent may Judge Pyncheon be described as a Pharisee?
3. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* was written during the Romantic era. Discuss ways in which the worldview of the era is evident in the narrative. Consider things like the description of Clifford's character and the place of the garden in the story. Be sure to include the Romantic view of man as well as the view of nature prevalent at the time.
4. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, both Clifford and Holgrave rail against permanent human edifices, and in fact against private property itself. Do these lengthy discourses indicate Socialist leanings on the part of the author? Why or why not? Be sure to support your conclusion with specifics from the novel. Do not ignore the historical context, i.e., the forms of socialism that had emerged by 1851, the year the novel was written.
5. In the Second Commandment in Exodus 20:5-6, God says, "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments." Nathaniel Hawthorne, in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, said that he intended the moral of the story to be "that the wrongdoing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and, divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief." Could one rightly argue that the novel is an extended commentary on the threat and promise contained in the Decalogue? Does Hawthorne's view of the long-term consequences of wrongdoing correspond to that found in Scripture? Why or why not?
6. Critic David Pitt argued that, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, "Hawthorne the Romantic greatly overshadows Hawthorne the Moralist and Allegorist." Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not? Be sure to discuss the relative centrality of the moral of the story enunciated by Hawthorne himself and the Romantic sensibility reflected in both its descriptions and sometimes-rambling dissertations by various characters.
7. Nathaniel Hawthorne was descended from one of the judges involved in the infamous Salem Witch Trials and always resented what he considered to be a blot on the family name. His hatred for the Puritans appears in many of his works, including both *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*. The two novels, however, express the author's bitterness in very different ways. Compare and contrast the views of the Puritans presented in the two works. Which do you consider to be the more harmful critique of Hawthorne's forebears, and why?

8. Nathaniel Hawthorne described *The House of the Seven Gables* as a romance because of the supernatural elements he included in the narrative. What role do plot devices like the Maule curse on the Pyncheon family, the accompanying mysterious deaths, and the hypnotic powers of the Maules play in developing the central themes of the novel?
9. Throughout Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, the boarder Holgrave is pictured as a political radical with unsavory companions, but near the end, once he and Phoebe have declared their love for one another, his views abruptly alter. Is this change credible? Why or why not? Which set of values is the author promoting? Support your answer from the trajectory of the novel as a whole as well as from the discourses spoken by Holgrave.
10. Throughout Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, Clifford is portrayed as an aesthete, whether in descriptions of him as a youth or in the remnants of a man that have survived his lengthy prison term. When he and Hepzibah flee the House of the Seven Gables, however, he suddenly begins talking like a utopian radical. What is the significance of this change, and how does it help to communicate the themes of the novel?
11. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, the author states that the moral of the story involves the sins of one generation adversely affecting the generations that follow. Give particular consideration of the application of this moral to Judge Pyncheon. Does he suffer for the sins of his ancestor the Colonel or does he suffer for his own sins? What is being passed down from one generation to the next – a curse or a character? Consider in your answer that Hawthorne had in his own family tree one of the judges at the Salem Witch Trials, a possible model for the character of Colonel Pyncheon.
12. The ending of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* suggests that the curse on the Pyncheon family will finally come to an end with the marriage of Holgrave and Phoebe. On what basis does the redemption with which the story ends occur? Is Hawthorne suggesting that love conquers evil, or does he have something more sophisticated in mind? Support your answer with details from the novel.
13. I Samuel 16:7 tells us that “man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” Discuss the difference between outward appearances and the reality of the heart in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. Compare and contrast Judge Pyncheon and his cousin Hepzibah, showing how outward appearance masks inner reality in both cases, but in very different ways. What does this contrast say about hypocrisy and about the danger of judging others?
14. Mesmerism appears on several occasions in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. How do this particular practice and the ideas behind it reflect the mindset of the Romantic era? In what ways does it become a vehicle for expressing that mindset in the novel?

15. Discuss the parallel between physical decay and moral and spiritual rot portrayed in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. To what extent is the mansion at the center of the story a symbol for the lives of the main characters?
16. The theme of external uprightness accompanied by internal corruption appears often in the nineteenth century. Two examples are Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Compare and contrast the treatment of this theme in the two novels. Do both authors treat the causes and consequences of inner corruption in the same way? What conclusions may be drawn from the differences? Remember that the first book was written thirty-five years before the second one.
17. The theme of external uprightness accompanied by internal corruption appears often in the nineteenth century. Two examples are Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Compare and contrast the treatment of this theme in the two novels. Do both authors treat the causes and consequences of inner corruption in the same way? What conclusions may be drawn from the differences? Remember that the first book was written forty years before the second one.
18. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist, speaking of his uncle Claudius, says, "That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain." Compare the villain of Shakespeare's famous tragedy to the antagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, Judge Pyncheon, particularly with regard to the false front they use to deceive those around them regarding their true selves. What role do these smiles play in the successes of the characters in question?
19. Discuss the use of symbolism in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. How do the house itself, the chickens in the garden, and Maule's well help to communicate the central themes of the novel? Be specific, including quotations from the book.
20. Nathaniel Hawthorne was strongly influenced by the Transcendentalist movement, being acquainted with some of its central figures. Discuss the influence of Transcendentalism on *The House of the Seven Gables*. Give special attention to the expositions of his personal philosophy that come from the mouth of Holgrave. Do you believe him to be the author's mouthpiece in these speeches? Why or why not?
21. Discuss the significance of the story of Matthew Maule the younger and Alice Pyncheon written and read by Holgrave in chapter thirteen of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. Why does the author include this story in the novel? What does it contribute to the plot? To the themes?
22. Some critics have suggested that the central conflict in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* concerns social classes, leading to the conclusion that the novel portrays the triumph of democracy over aristocracy. Do you agree or disagree? Support your conclusion with specifics from the novel.

23. Does Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* communicate a positive or negative view of human nature? Consider both the characters and the ending in shaping your answer and evaluate the author's view in the light of Scripture.
24. Discuss the symbolism of light and darkness as it is used in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. What does the author use the images of light and darkness to communicate about good and evil, hope and despair, and redemption and condemnation? Support your analysis with specifics from the novel.
25. Discuss the author's use of foreshadowing in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. Choose three specific examples and explain why he would choose to hint at future events in order to direct the reader's attention and advance his chosen themes.
26. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, which character undergoes the greatest change in the course of the story? What is the significance of the changes in the character you choose? In choosing one character from the novel, be sure to indicate why that character is a better choice than some other potential candidates.
27. Discuss the role of art and the artist in society as revealed in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. Concentrate especially on the characters of Holgrave and Clifford in your analysis, being sure to make use of specific incidents and quotations from the book.
28. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, the house in question is described in the first chapter in the following words: "It was itself like a great human heart, with a life of its own, and full of rich and somber reminiscences." To what extent is the titular edifice a character in the story? How does it "act" with respect to the plot and human characters? Support your analysis with specifics from the novel.
29. The Salem Witch Trials play a significant role in both Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Compare and contrast the treatment of the trials in the two works, giving special attention to the role played by greed for land and the way in which the Puritans are portrayed. Do the two authors share the same aims in their negative portrayal of Puritanism? Why or why not?