

Evils of Inheritance

Nathaniel Hawthorne is an American author who is best known for writing novels and short stories in the nineteenth century. His most famous works are *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, which were both published in the mid-1800s. Hawthorne lived a block away from the real House of Seven Gables in Salem, Massachusetts, inspiring his Gothic romance about the haunting history of the house. The story begins with Matthew Maule building a house on desirable land—so desirable that the wealthy Colonel Pyncheon wants to take it for himself. After several years, the Colonel is rumored to have been involved in the conviction of Maule for witchcraft, referencing the real-life event of the Salem Witch Trials of the late seventeenth century. Maule curses the Colonel, leading to the lasting curse on the Pyncheon family through the generations. In the preface of his work, Hawthorne explicitly tells the reader that his story is not a novel, but a romance. He also comes right out and tells the reader the theme of the story is the evils of inheritance: “the wrong-doing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and, divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief.” (x). Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* uses its imagery to show the lasting bad luck on the Pyncheon family, ultimately illustrating the theme of the evils of inheritance.

By looking at the image of the house, the reader can see that Hawthorne is personifying it as its own character. This image of the house is important because it shows that the house is an inherited prison in the eyes of the Pyncheon family. In the preface of the novel, Hawthorne describes the house as having a “human heart.” (x). Hawthorne also describes the house as a mansion with a “human countenance,” literally telling his readers that the house has a human facial expression, establishing the personification of the house in the first few pages. (Hawthorne

1). In the days of Matthew Maule and Colonel Pyncheon, the narrator tells his readers that Colonel Pyncheon intended to build on the land—after Matthew Maule’s death—a “family mansion-spacious...framed with oaken timber.” (Hawthorne 3). These passages show that the house is personified as a living thing, specifically human, with luxurious structures and “unworn” wood. However, when the narrator is describing the house in the present day, he describes it was “rusty” and “weather-beaten,” revealing not only the house’s age, but also the decaying of the family throughout the generations. The personification of the house continues in chapter 11 as Clifford and Hepzibah are walking out of the door to go to church. They are on their way to leave the house when, suddenly, they cannot leave. “...said Clifford, with deep sadness. ‘We are ghosts! We have no right among human beings, - no right anywhere but in this old house, which has a curse on it and which, therefore, we are doomed to haunt!’” (Hawthorne 117). This depressing statement by Clifford tells the reader that the current Pyncheon family members feel stuck in the house and cannot escape their past. They feel like “ghosts” as they are trapped on the property that their ancestor Colonel Pyncheon stole due to his wrongful greediness. Ghosts typically have a connotation that they are damned to haunt the same place for eternity, usually their place of death. With this connotation, they are also believed to relive their lives on a continuous loop. The house is a reminder that they will commit the same actions as their ancestors on a continuous loop, caused by not only the curse from Matthew Maule, but also by Colonel Pyncheon’s own wrongdoings. The house is locking them there inside its hold, as a psychological punishment to remind them of their family’s misfortune. Not only is the house haunting the Pyncheons, but the Pyncheons are haunting the house as a cyclical punishment. This punishment is the consequence of the Pyncheon family’s ancestors as each generation inherits the previous generations toxicity. This personification of the house keeps the Pyncheon’s tied to

the house, creating the urgency for its characters to escape its deathly grip. Without this personification, the novel would lose the effect of urgency for the characters to escape the house and their family's inherited curse.

By looking at the image of the chickens in *The House of the Seven Gables*, the reader can see the dwindling fortune of the Pyncheon family, revealing the consequences of greediness in inheritance. In chapter 10, Phoebe and Clifford are in the Pyncheon garden, observing the chickens as they roam freely, as suggested by Clifford. One of the chickens "looked small enough to be still in the egg, and, at the same time, sufficiently old, withered, wizened, and experienced, to have been the founder of the antiquated race." (Hawthorne 104). The image of the chickens differs from the image of the house, as the chickens are actually alive and breathing. However, both the chickens and the house become damaged throughout the generations. Chickens are often associated with community and social status. If they are well fed, it typically means you will be granted wealth and prosperity. This symbolism is apparent in *The House of the Seven Gables*, as the chickens used to be "the size of turkeys" and "fit for a prince's table" (Hawthorne 61). The well-fed chickens are a symbol for how prosperous the Pyncheon family was in the past; they were also in their "prime." However, throughout the years, the size of the chickens has diminished, along with the Pyncheon family's fortune. Now, the chickens are "small enough to be still in the egg" without the appearance of youth. The chickens are small but not young, much like the Pyncheon family. The misfortune of the Pyncheon family is mirrored by the degeneration of the chickens; they have been confined in their chicken coops (until Clifford insists on their freedom) and inbred to the point that they have diminished in size. The mention of breeding the chickens also follows the theme of inheritance, as each new generation of chickens becomes smaller through genetics. The house has the same effect on the Pyncheons

as the chicken coop has on the chickens. The house imprisons the Pyncheons, furthering their misfortunes, mirroring the diminishing size of the chickens as they were imprisoned in their coop. If the chickens were exposed to the world and roamed freely, they would remain “the size of turkeys” and maintain their health, much like the Pyncheon family.

By looking at the portrait of the Colonel Pyncheon, the reader can see the curse is inherited to the next generation of the Pyncheon family, which is important because it shows the past generation is still looming over the next generations. In chapter 13, Gervaise Pyncheon, Colonel Pyncheon’s grandson and the current owner of the house, is conversing with the grandson of Matthew Maule of the same name. Matthew Maule II is sent to speak with Mr. Pyncheon regarding the lost deed. In exchange for the deed, Maule propositions Mr. Pyncheon to hand over the land and the house. The narrator tells the reader that Colonel Pyncheon’s portrait “had been frowning, clenching its fist...And finally, at Matthew Maule's audacious suggestion of a transfer of the seven-gabled structure, the ghostly portrait is averred to have lost all patience, and to have shown itself on the point of descending bodily from its frame. (Hawthorne 137). Unlike the image of the chickens, the portrait of the Colonel remains the same over time. However, this image of the Colonel’s portrait is showing emotion towards the conversation between his grandson and Matthew Maule’s grandson. This lingering greed from the Colonel almost disallows Gervaise Pyncheon to make the transaction and shows that even after thirty-seven years, the house must remain in the Pyncheon family. The reaction of the portrait gives a sense of anger, and the two men can feel the tension. Gervaise Pyncheon, or Mr. Pyncheon, has no personal attachment to the house; however, he knows that Colonel Pyncheon would disapprove. Even after his death, Colonel Pyncheon is still trying to keep the house in the Pyncheon family and maintain its inheritance. The haunting portrait shows that Colonel

Pyncheon's greed is stronger than the laws of physics, as his ghost animates the supposed frozen moment in time.

In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Nathaniel Hawthorne is giving commentary on the consequences of greediness in inheritance by using the images of the personification of the house, the declining size of the chickens, and the haunted portrait of Colonel Pyncheon. These specific images are vital to fully understanding the theme, evils of inheritance, as the images personify and embody the toxicity in the Pyncheon family. The images of the house, the chickens, and the portrait are combined together to illustrate the idea that the Pyncheon family is diminishing over time. While the portrait remains the same, the house and the chickens change throughout the years. However, the portrait reminds the Pyncheon family of their ancestry and allows Colonel Pyncheon to maintain his control over his descendants. The curse and the greediness of the Pyncheon family's ancestors cause the family to be damned and poor. The bad luck of the Pyncheon family is not solely due to the curse, but in addition to the evils of inheritance. Hawthorne is telling his reader to be wary of greed and entitlement as he recalls the Colonel's wrongful actions as a cause to the inevitable effect of the hardship of the Pyncheon family.

Works Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables*. Boston, Massachusetts, Ticknor and Fields, 1851.