

## Home-making in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*

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Among the literary works published in the miraculous decade of the 1850s is Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). Set in Hawthorne's present, the novel concerns itself in part with the family, an institution undergoing great change in Hawthorne's day. Not surprisingly, Hawthorne is also concerned with the past and its continuing influence, a concern that manifests most clearly in terms of family heritage, particularly of ancestral houses, such as the seven-gabled mansion of the title. Hawthorne's exploration of family is two-fold. First, he examines the strengths and weaknesses of the differing models of family available in his day along with the individualism reacting against them. Second, using the family as an analogue for society, he examines each model of the family as a possible pattern for society and the individual's relationship to it. Ultimately, he affirms a model of family, and thus, of society, that avoids the dangers of oppression and isolation, meets the needs of the individual, and provides true community.

As is the case in many Hawthorne works, the cast of *House* is small and the external action slight. Events occur primarily in the Pyncheon family's ancestral home, a seven-gabled house built by their Puritan forebear, Colonel Pyncheon. The small cast includes the house's current occupant, Hepzibah, an elderly woman characterized by her scowl, who has inherited the family's aristocratic pretensions but not its former wealth. As the novel opens, she is faced with the shameful necessity of having to open a cent-shop. She is moved to this drastic step by the imminent return of her brother, Clifford, who has been in prison thirty years having been convicted of murdering his uncle, the former owner. Hepzibah has also taken in a boarder, a young man named Holgrave, who, it is eventually revealed, has a mysterious connection to the

house. They are joined by Phoebe, a distant cousin of Hepzibah's, who arrives from the country unexpectedly. The main antagonist is Judge Pyncheon (another cousin), and the action centers around his efforts to "help" Hepzibah and Clifford. Despite the Judge's alleged good intentions, Hepzibah distrusts him, rightly fearing that he has ulterior motives for getting at Clifford. These pressures are relieved by the unexpected death of the Judge, which not only frees Hepzibah and Clifford from him but makes them heirs to his wealth, thus relieving Hepzibah's financial woes. Finally, and perhaps not unsurprisingly, as Phoebe and Holgrave participate in this drama of inheritance, they fall in love and plan to be married.

### **A House Doesn't Make a Home: Family as Trap**

In his elaborate portrait of the house, Hawthorne emphasizes its age, its dilapidated state, its dust, mold, and gloom, and its acquaintance with human suffering. A fit emblem of the past, specifically of the Pyncheon, it represents their family heritage, both literally and figuratively. For Hepzibah and Clifford it provides a place to live and a prison they cannot leave. Though they try to leave the house, they are so weak and so cut off from human life that they fail, and indeed, seem like ghosts condemned to haunt the house. Another part of the inheritance is the family legend concerning a deed to vast tracts of land in Maine; if the deed were found and validated those lands would, so the legend goes, make the Pyncheons tremendously wealthy. Though the deed has been missing since the Colonel's day, successive generations have been obsessed in varying degrees with recovering it. Even Hepzibah dreams of finding the deed as the solution to her financial woes. A more troubling aspect of the family inheritance is a curse. According to legend, the house is built on land that had once belonged to Matthew Maule and which the Colonel was able to purchase only after accusing Maule of witchcraft for which he was condemned and hanged. On his way to his death, Maule cursed the Colonel, saying, "God will

give him blood to drink.’”<sup>1</sup> Not long afterward, on the day of the mansion’s house-warming party, the Colonel was found dead, with blood staining his shirt front. Thus, the Pyncheon inheritance includes not only the house but a family curse.

Another aspect of the Pyncheon heritage is the continued influence of Colonel Pyncheon, who presides over the house and his descendants. His portrait remains “affixed to the wall of the room in which he died.”<sup>2</sup> In it he appears as a large, imposing figure, a Bible in one hand and sword in the other, though the sword is more prominent, suggesting the prominence of power and authority in his character. Clearly one of Hawthorne’s grim-visaged Puritans, a powerful man capable of exerting his will with a crushing strength, the Colonel exerts that will down to the present having forbidden by a provision in his will the portrait’s removal. Hepzibah both venerates and fears the Colonel (and his portrait); whereas Clifford finds the portrait so oppressive he cannot bear to be in the same room with it. In many respects the Colonel still presides over (or, perhaps, haunts) the family.

In many respects, the Pyncheon family resembles a model of family that had been widespread since colonial times. Though modified somewhat in the early Republic—the time of Hawthorne’s youth in the early 1800s—by mid-century it was finally giving way to a new model. Patriarchal and hierarchical in its authority structure, it often included multiple generations and could incorporate other members of the society (servants, apprentices, etc.). The workplace (whether farm, trade, or shop) was generally located in the home, and the father’s power resided, in part, in his control of the inheritance.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: New American Library, 2010), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> See Stephanie Coontz, *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families 1600-1900* (New York: Verso, 1988), especially chapters 4 and 5; and Mary P. Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother* (New York: The Haworth, 1982), chapter 1.

If the Colonel seems a relic of the past, his kind of patriarchal authority lives on in Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, who resembles him in looks and personality. While the Judge has learned to present a façade of sunny benevolence, he is no less powerful in his ability to impose his will. His ruthlessness with family members is clear in the way he crushed his wife's spirit; according to fable, she "got her deathblow in the honeymoon and never smiled again, because her husband compelled her to serve him with coffee every morning at his bedside, in token of fealty to her liege lord and master."<sup>4</sup> In addition, it appears, as Holgrave maintains, that the Judge arranged the scene of his uncle's death to frame Clifford for murder.<sup>5</sup> When their uncle died, the secret of much of his great wealth died with him. Convinced that Clifford knows that secret, the Judge is willing to apply every possible pressure to get him to divulge it. He tells Hepzibah that if Clifford refuses to reveal the secret, the Judge will have him committed to a mental institution.<sup>6</sup>

Like the Colonel, behind the façade of respectability, the Judge is concealing a criminal soul. As the narrator explains, the external accomplishments of men such as the Judge build up "as it were, a tall and stately edifice" which many, including the individual, may "take as the man's character, or the man himself. Behold, therefore, a palace!"<sup>7</sup> But in some nook of this palace, hidden behind locked doors and beneath a floor, "may lie a corpse," and the narrator concludes: "Here, then, we are to seek the true emblem of the man's character, and of the deed that gives whatever reality it possesses to his life. And, beneath the show of a marble palace, that pool of stagnant water, foul with many impurities, and, perhaps, tinged with blood—that secret abomination, above which, possibly, he may say his prayers, without remembering it—is

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<sup>4</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 111.

<sup>5</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 275.

<sup>6</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 212-213.

<sup>7</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 207.

this man's miserable soul!"<sup>8</sup> Before the novel's end, the Judge dies in a manner similar to that of the Colonel. While his death links him to the family curse, it is likely due to some kind of hereditary heart disease. For Hepzibah, the curse he has inherited is not Maule's curse but the family tendency by which someone in each generation re-commits the sin (or one like it) of the founding father. As she says to the Judge, "This hard and grasping spirit has run in our blood these two hundred years. You are but doing over again, in another shape, what your ancestor before you did, and sending down to your posterity the curse inherited from him!"<sup>9</sup>

For Hawthorne, such a past and such a family are more of a burden than a blessing. As a model for society, this family is a model of oppression. Based on power rather than love, and hostile to the needs of the individual, it offers an inheritance (and house) worth escaping, if at all possible. Indeed, one of the driving questions in the novel is whether Hepzibah and Clifford can escape the house and the family it symbolizes.

### **Homeless Wanderer**

Given such a family inheritance, one in which the family, like society itself, imprisons individuals, curtailing their freedom, it is no wonder that individuals would want to escape it. In Hawthorne's day one group that emphasized the individual over and against society was the Transcendentalists. These writers and thinkers, clustered around Boston, shared an emphasis on the individual, especially the need for spiritual development, a suspicion of the past, and, often, a desire for social change. Hawthorne knew many Transcendentalists personally, counting among his friends such people as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and Ellery Channing. For a brief time, Hawthorne even joined Brook Farm, a Transcendentalist utopian

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<sup>8</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 207.

<sup>9</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 213.

community founded by George Ripley. During the early years of his marriage while living in Salem, he was neighbors with Emerson and rented the Emerson ancestral home, known as the Old Manse. Despite these associations, Hawthorne never considered himself a Transcendentalist. Though sympathetic and friendly to Emerson, he refused to become a satellite. As he wrote in the Preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846), “For myself, there had been epochs of my life, when I, too, might have asked of this prophet the master-word, that should solve me the riddle of the universe; but now, being happy, I felt as if there were no question to be put, and therefore admired Emerson as a poet of deep beauty and austere tenderness, but sought nothing from him as a philosopher.”<sup>10</sup> Despite being familiar with, and sometimes sympathetic toward Transcendentalism, Hawthorne is ultimately critical of its belief that the past could be easily escaped and of its potential to isolate individuals.

In *House*, the figure who most resembles the Transcendentalists in ideas and outlook is Holgrave. He seems like Emerson’s self-reliant individual and he shares a similar desire to escape the past. When first introduced, Holgrave appears rootless, without family connection or past, a mobile young man who has done a bit of everything. He dresses like, and associates with, radical reformers, he has written for the magazines, and he is, currently, a daguerreotypist. To a large degree he matches the kind of young man that Emerson describes in “Self-Reliance,” a “sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who *teams it, farms it, peddles*, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet [...]”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Joel Porte and Sandra Morris, eds., *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 607.

<sup>11</sup> Porte and Morris, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 132.

Despite his varied external circumstances, Holgrave has “never lost his identity,” has “never violated the innermost man” but has “carried his conscience along with him.”<sup>12</sup>

While such Transcendentalist self-reliance is not necessarily hostile to the family, it does set the individual’s needs above those of the family. As Emerson also wrote in “Self-Reliance,” the individual must be ready to say to family members, “O father, O mother, O wife, O brother, O friend, I have lived with you after appearances hitherto. Henceforward I am truths. [...] I shall endeavor to nourish my parents, to support my family, to be the chaste husband of one wife,—but the relations I must fulfill after a new and unprecedented way. I appeal from your customs. I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer to you, or you.”<sup>13</sup>

In addition to being self-reliant, Holgrave is suspicious of, if not outright hostile toward, the past. In *Nature* (1836) Emerson complains that “our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers.”<sup>14</sup> Holgrave goes one better seeing the past, particularly an inheritance, as an intolerable burden. ““Shall we never, never get rid of this Past?”” he asks Phoebe and complains that it ““lies upon the Present like a giant’s dead body! In fact, the case is just as if a young giant were compelled to waste all his strength in carrying about the corpse of the old giant [...].””<sup>15</sup> He continues with this tirade against the dead:

“A dead man, if he happen to have made a will, disposes of wealth no longer his own; or, if he die intestate, it is distributed in accordance with the notions of men much longer dead than he. A dead man sits on all our judgment seats; and living judges do but search out and repeat his decisions. We read in dead men’s books! We laugh at dead men’s jokes, and cry at dead men’s pathos! We are sick of dead men’s diseases, physical and moral, and die of the same remedies with which dead doctors killed their patients! We worship the living Deity according to dead men’s forms and creeds. Whatever we seek to do, of our own free motion, a dead man’s icy hand obstructs us! [...] I ought to have said, too, that we live in dead men’s houses; as, for instance, in this of the Seven Gables!”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 159-160.

<sup>13</sup> Porte and Morris, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 130-31.

<sup>14</sup> Porte and Morris, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 164.

<sup>16</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 165.

For Holgrave, the past—its laws, religion, wills, inheritance, and houses—are a burden. And it is clear by the way he mixes private matters—will and house—with public—the judicial system, medical profession, and religion—that he sees family and society to operate in parallel fashion in the way they chain individuals to the past.

With a reformer's zeal, Holgrave is willing to tear down the structures of the past and have each generation build anew to meet its needs. As he explains to Phoebe,

“If each generation were allowed and expected to build its own houses, that single change, comparatively unimportant in itself, would imply every reform which society is now suffering for. I doubt whether even our public edifices—our capitols, state houses, courthouses, city halls, and churches—ought to be built of such permanent materials as stone or brick. It were better that they should crumble to ruin once in twenty years, or thereabouts, as a hint to the people to examine into and reform the institutions which they symbolize.”<sup>17</sup>

Holgrave wants society in a state of becoming, of continual flux rather than stasis.

While Phoebe may grow “dizzy” at the thought of “such a shifting world,”<sup>18</sup> Hawthorne sympathizes, at least to a degree, with Holgrave's view of the past as a burden and with his desire to be rid of it. And yet, Hawthorne remains skeptical about our ability to escape the past and fearful of the way reformist zeal may isolate individuals. Those limitations are evident in Holgrave's attitude toward events unfolding in the house, particularly the relationship among Clifford, Hepzibah, and Judge Pyncheon. First, we learn that Holgrave is not quite the rootless individual he at first appeared to be; rather, he is a Maule and, as such, has inherited something of the family grudge, along with the family's claim to the Pyncheon land, the secret of the missing deed, and the power of mesmerism.

Second, Holgrave's desire to see how events play out could turn him into a cold-hearted spectator of life. Phoebe finds him “too calm and cool an observer,” and, while she feels “his eye

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<sup>17</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 165-166.

<sup>18</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 166.



often,” she feels “his heart, seldom or never.” He is interested in Hepzibah and Clifford, studies them “attentively” and while ready to help, gives no evidence he is growing to love them; instead he seems to be “in quest of mental food not heart sustenance.”<sup>19</sup> In this way, he resembles other Hawthorne villains, cold-hearted men, whose analytic detachment has separated them from their fellow human beings. One senses that like the titular character in the story “Ethan Brand,” Holgrave could become a man who has “let go of the magnetic chain of humanity,” a man who is “no longer a brother man, opening the chambers or the dungeons of our common nature with the key of holy sympathy” but who has become “a cold observer, looking on mankind as the subject of his experiment, and, at length, converting man and woman to be his puppets.”<sup>20</sup> When Holgrave expresses his interest in watching events unfold, Phoebe is “perplexed and displeased,” and she wishes that he ““would feel more like a Christian and human being.”” Instead, she tells him, “You talk as if this old house were a theater; and you seem to look at Hepzibah’s and Clifford’s misfortunes, and those of generations before them, as a tragedy, such as I have seen acted in the hall of a country hotel, only the present one appears to be played exclusively for your amusement. I do not like this. The play costs the performers too much, and the audience is too coldhearted.”<sup>21</sup> Clearly Holgrave’s cold-hearted detachment contrasts with Phoebe’s warm and loving concern.

If this self-reliance and detachment could turn him into a Hawthorne villain, Holgrave avoids that fate partly by relinquishing the power over Phoebe that he could have exercised. That relinquishing occurs during a scene in which he reads one of his stories to Phoebe. The story is about Alice Pyncheon, who lived a generation or two after the Colonel. A young aristocratic woman, she is cultured and proud. Her father, still bent on finding the lost deed, believes that the

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<sup>19</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 160.

<sup>20</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 311.

<sup>21</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 195.

Maules know the secret of its whereabouts, so he invites Matthew Maule (grandson of the original Maule) to the house to bargain for the deed. When Alice sees him, she admires the “remarkable comeliness, energy, and strength of Maule’s figure.” Maule, however, takes her “artistic approval” as an insult, believing that she looks at him as if he were a “brute beast” and determines to prove to her that he has a “human spirit.”<sup>22</sup> His pride stung, he agrees to tell the father the secret but only if he is allowed a private interview with Alice. In his greed the father allows the interview during which Maule mesmerizes Alice, enslaving her spirit to his own. Though she seems to return to normal life, at any moment Maule can issue a command and she will obey it in a puppet-like fashion. On the night that Maule marries, he issues such a command, forcing Alice to come and serve him and his bride. She walks home in a cold rain, catches a fever, and dies. Clearly, he is a Hawthorne villain, the kind who violates the sanctity of another person’s heart in order to possess, control, and ultimately destroy that person.

When Holgrave finishes reading his story, he discovers that he has an opportunity similar to his ancestor’s. His story appears to have put Phoebe to sleep, but actually he has half hypnotized her. He realizes that “with but one wave of his hand and a corresponding effort of his will, he could complete his mastery over Phoebe’s yet free and virgin spirit.”<sup>23</sup> Holgrave finds the prospect quite attractive: “To a disposition like Holgrave’s, at once speculative and active, there is no temptation so great as the opportunity of acquiring empire over the human spirit; nor any idea more seductive to a young man than to become the arbiter of a young girl’s destiny.”<sup>24</sup> But Holgrave resists the temptation to dominate and wakes Phoebe, dismissing the situation with a joke about the soporific effect of his writing. It is, though, one of his finest moments. As the narrator affirms, “whatever his defects of nature and education, and in spite of his scorn for

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<sup>22</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 182.

<sup>23</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 190.

<sup>24</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 191.

creeds and institutions,” we should “concede to the daguerreotypist the rare and high quality of reverence for another’s individuality.”<sup>25</sup>

In *Holgrave* then, Hawthorne presents a character who expresses much of his disdain for the past and sense of it as a burden. At the same time, given *Holgrave*’s affinities to the Transcendentalists, Hawthorne uses him to show the shortcomings of Transcendentalism. Hawthorne is not convinced it is so easy to escape the past; he is more distrustful of the human heart; he fears reformist zeal may warp the reformer into a monomania that turns him from being a brother-man to a user of others; and he worries that the isolating tendencies of self-reliance might encourage individuals to let go of the magnetic chain of humanity.

### **Phoebe as Homemaker**

As an alternative both to the old model of family, an oppressive institution, and to a cold-hearted, isolating individualism, Phoebe offers a kind of home-making that fashions the family (broadly conceived) into a community of warmth and affection, free from competition and class division. She accomplishes this task through her personal qualities and domestic abilities.

Arriving unannounced at the House of the Seven Gables, this cousin brings with her the fresh air and sunshine of the country, along with her innocence, purity, and sunny disposition. She is “blooming, and very cheerful of face.” “Fresh” and “unconventional” and “yet so orderly and obedient to common roles,” she is like a “ray of sunshine” that, no matter where it falls “instantly creates” a “propriety for being there.”<sup>26</sup> She quickly makes herself at home and, just as quickly, begins to make her room in the old house a home. “Little Phoebe” possesses the “gift of practical arrangement,” which is a “kind of natural magic that enables the favored ones to bring out the hidden capabilities of things around them; and particularly to give a look of comfort and

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<sup>25</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 191.

<sup>26</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 63.

habitableness to any place which, for however brief a period, may happen to be their home.”<sup>27</sup>

Like the fire, she is “bright, cheerful, and efficient,” and everything she does “betoken[s] the cheeriness of an active temperament finding joy in its activity, and, therefore, rendering it beautiful.”<sup>28</sup> As Hepzibah eventually remarks, ““I never knew a human creature do her work so much like one of God’s angels as this child Phoebe does!””<sup>29</sup>

This combination of qualities helps her create a “family” out of Hepzibah, Clifford, and Holgrave, as well as Uncle Venner, an impoverished old man who ekes out an existence by doing odd jobs in the neighborhood and begging kitchen scraps with which he feeds his pig. Within a few weeks of her arrival, Phoebe has turned this collection of individuals into a domestic circle. Her pretty cheerfulness and artistic touch are the only things that the hyper-sensitive and shattered Clifford can stand; she softens and draws out the scowling and reclusive Hepzibah; she warms the reserve of Holgrave; and she welcomes Uncle Venner with a kindness that is without condescension or pity.

While not literally a wife and mother, Phoebe functions as a kind of angel in the house, and thus, reflects the qualities of the ideal woman found in the cult of domesticity. The term refers to a model of the family that by mid-century had replaced the earlier patriarchal model, in theory if not always in practice. These ideals for family life, particularly the woman’s role, developed in the advice literature to women and by the 1850s had become a dominant ideal in society, not only in the advice literature but also and in much fiction written by, about, and for women. Thus, as Mary Ryan explains, the “cult of domesticity had developed a consensus about the functions of the family in an industrial society. The family was a specialized, isolated, child-

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<sup>27</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 66.

<sup>28</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 71

<sup>29</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 76.

centered, mother-governed institution, saturated with love.”<sup>30</sup> This view, as numerous historians have pointed out, represents a major shift in understandings of the family: “To put it simply, the patriarchal rankings according to age and sex which were so basic to early American conceptions of social order slowly dissolved and, in the process, social energy was rechanneled into the emotional and domestic bonds between women and children.”<sup>31</sup>

Many historians see the cult of domesticity developing as a response to the changes taking place in society in the first half of the nineteenth century. Urbanization, industrialization, and the shift to a market economy affected the workplace and family life. Increasingly the workplace and the home were separate; the family was often more contracted in scope (the cult of domesticity focuses on the nuclear family); and the father’s authority was weakened since sons were less likely to look to him for inheritance than to the marketplace for employment. Furthermore, as Stephanie Coontz argues, the “insistence on the separation of home and family from market and state represented an attempt to limit the transformation of personal relations into commodity relations, to reserve one arena of life free from the competition, conflicts, and insecurities of an expanding capitalist democracy.”<sup>32</sup>

With this shifted conception of home and family came a shifted conception of the wife’s role. Given the widening rift between the workplace and home, the home was increasingly viewed “as a private sanctuary from the world of money-making.”<sup>33</sup> After struggling for a livelihood in the public realm, a man would return to the private realm of the home. There the wife provided a domestic haven where he could be refreshed from his labors. As Coontz points out, “Domesticity offered the man a temporary escape from competition, a ‘sanctuary of

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<sup>30</sup> Mary P. Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother* (New York: Haworth, 1982), 115.

<sup>31</sup> Ryan, *Empire*, 17-18.

<sup>32</sup> Coontz, *Social Origins*, 210.

<sup>33</sup> Alison Easton, “Hawthorne and the Question of Women,” *The Cambridge Companion to Hawthorne* (New York: Cambridge U P, 2004), 80.

domestic love,' 'a quiet refuge from the storms of life,' 'a hallowed place' to 'sweeten his labors.'"<sup>34</sup>

In addition to providing a haven, the wife-mother was also responsible for raising the children, particularly for their moral and spiritual upbringing. These duties fell to her, in part, because men were spending more time in the workplace than at home, which as Coontz explains, provided women with the "opportunity and duty to take over some of the moral, religious, and educational tasks that many men could no longer combine with their work life."<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the mother was deemed especially suited for this task since women were viewed as a "uniquely sensitive and home-loving species."<sup>36</sup> As Ryan points out, "The feminization of child-rearing, in literature and in practice, dovetailed neatly with the gender system enshrined in the cult of domesticity. The true woman was the perfect candidate for the role of child nurturer. She was loving, giving, moral, pure, and consigned to the hearth."<sup>37</sup> This arrangement, Coontz suggests, was in part a reaction against, and critique of, changes taking place in society: "Women were put in charge of social and moral obligations that had once been male as well as female concerns, and the sentiment now poured over such obligations implied a critique of competition and economic individualism."<sup>38</sup> Such is the case with Phoebe and the "family" she establishes.

In raising the children, the mother also employed different methods than those used in the past, molding them not so much by appeals to reason as to emotion: "The concept of moral education, directed to the emotions and not to the reason of the child, came to dominate child-rearing literature of the era."<sup>39</sup> Rather than a Colonel Pyncheon-like imposing of will, mothers,

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<sup>34</sup> Coontz, *Social Origins*, 213.

<sup>35</sup> Coontz, *Social Origins*, 175.

<sup>36</sup> Ryan, *Empire*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Ryan, *Empire*, 56.

<sup>38</sup> Coontz, *Social Origins*, 211.

<sup>39</sup> Ryan, *Empire*, 50.

according to Coontz, used “the powerful lever of their self-sacrifice to inspire filial obedience that had once flowed automatically, if not necessarily lovingly, from the simple fact of parental control over property.”<sup>40</sup>

Child-rearing also provided women with power and influence. Though the wife-mother appeared to be confined to the home, and thus, without influence in the public realm, proponents of the cult of domesticity alleged that her power and influence were great. In the 1850s, the writer, Henry C. Wright, “coined the term ‘empire of the mother’ and enthroned the domesticated and retiring female as the monarch of American culture and society.”<sup>41</sup> Not only did she govern the home, but also, by educating the next generation of business and political leaders, she influenced (theoretically at least) the world far beyond the home, a view expressed in the saying, “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.”

While such views of family, marriage, and motherhood were widely accepted in Hawthorne’s day, they were not without their critics. His Transcendentalist friend, Margaret Fuller, for example, offered several criticisms in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). One was that much of the domestic advice literature treated women as functions rather than as individuals who needed to develop their full, spiritual selves; such books, she complained, seemed more concerned to fit women “to please, or, at least, not to disturb a husband” rather than “to fit woman for heaven.”<sup>42</sup> She also criticized the division of labor along sexual lines and argued that women (and men) should be free to pursue the work for which they were fitted: “But if you ask me what offices they [women] may fill, I reply—any. I do not care what case you put;

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<sup>40</sup> Coontz, *Social Origins*, 215.

<sup>41</sup> Ryan, *Empire*, 97.

<sup>42</sup> Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Dover, 1999), 86.

let them be sea-captains, if you will. I do not doubt there are women well fitted for such an office, and, if so, I should be glad to see them in it.”<sup>43</sup>

In *House* it is Phoebe with her innocence, purity, and domestic skills, along with her sweet temperament who creates a family of sorts and who by marrying Holgrave tames his radicalism. If Hawthorne is affirming aspects of the cult of domesticity via Phoebe, he also makes it clear that she (and consequently, the model of womanhood she represents) has some limitations. One is her need for the conventional. Rarely “attracted by what is strange and exceptional in human character,” she is best suited by the “well-worn track of ordinary life.”<sup>44</sup> Likewise, since part of her “essence” is “to keep within the limits of the law,” she worries that Holgrave may be lawless.<sup>45</sup> When he shares his radical idea about each generation building its own houses, Phoebe is disturbed, in large part by the newness of the ideas, claiming that it makes her ““dizzy to think of such a shifting world!””<sup>46</sup> A second limitation is the slightness of her character. While innocent and pure, Phoebe is a moral and intellectual lightweight; as much as she is preferable to the scowling Hepzibah, it is clear that Hepzibah’s is the deeper character. A third limitation is her innocence, a lack of the kind of experience necessary to full maturity. If at first Phoebe seems untouched by the gloom of the house and the tragic past of Clifford, it is because she has been sheltered. It is both positive and a sign of limitation. When after a few weeks she returns to the country for a brief visit, Hepzibah is glad that she can go since she fears that the house’s gloom has begun to darken Phoebe’s features: ““Ah, Phoebe!” remarked Hepzibah. ‘You do not smile so naturally as when you came to us! Then, the smile chose to shine out; now, you choose it should. It is well that you are going back, for a little while, into your

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<sup>43</sup> Fuller, *Woman*, 95.

<sup>44</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 128.

<sup>45</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 78.

<sup>46</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 166.



native air. There has been too much weight on your spirits. The house is too gloomy and lonesome.”<sup>47</sup>

Despite her limitations of sensibility and experience, Phoebe is capable of growth. Clifford, for example, believes that the grief and suffering Phoebe has observed have matured her: ““When I first saw you,”” he says, ““you were the prettiest little maiden in the world; and now you have deepened into beauty! Girlhood has passed into womanhood; the bud is a bloom!””<sup>48</sup> That Phoebe can, and indeed must, grow shows that Hawthorne, while affirming aspects of the cult of domesticity, does not fully endorse its view of womanhood.

### **Holgrave as Homeowner**

In Phoebe Hawthorne embodies aspects of the new model of family and womanhood as defined in the cult of domesticity. Much as this vision provides an attractive alternative to patriarchal oppression and radical individualism, Hawthorne does not embrace it wholeheartedly. Instead, in an ending that seems surprisingly happy, especially for Hawthorne, he offers a picture of a family (of sorts) that is affectionate and communal (along the lines of the cult of domesticity) and yet is multi-generational, open to outsiders, and indifferent to class. In effect, this “family” offers a model of society based on affection, sympathy, and democratic principles.

The happiness of the novel’s ending rests on the way it resolves several plot problems. First, the Judge’s death by natural causes frees Clifford and Hepzibah from his pressure and from financial need. By inheriting the Judge’s country estate and his wealth, Hepzibah is relieved of the poverty that induced her to open the cent-shop and can return to her life of aristocratic seclusion.

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<sup>47</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 198.

<sup>48</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 198.

Second, the ending frees Clifford and Hepzibah from the ancestral home and with it the Colonel's looming presence. As a Maule, Holgrave is privy to the hiding place of the missing deed. Concealed by the Maule who had originally built the house, the deed lies in a secret compartment behind the Colonel's portrait. Once Holgrave springs the secret latch, the compartment opens and, at the same time, the portrait crashes to the floor. While this dusty parchment is meaningless as a legal deed, the crash of the picture suggests that the house has been exorcised of the ghostly ancestor. Though Clifford and Hepzibah had tried to flee the house before and had failed, now they can escape it (and the past?) and live elsewhere. They opt to move to the Judge's country house. Third, the marriage of Holgrave and Phoebe unites the Maule and Pyncheon families, resolving the enmity between them and restoring the allegedly stolen Maule land to a Maule descendent. Thus, the family curse is overcome.

A fourth seemingly happy element resulting from the marriage is that Holgrave, now a property owner, gives up his radicalism, a change most clearly seen in his new view of house-building. No longer believing each generation should destroy the houses of the previous and build their own, Holgrave now believes houses should be built of stone so that "every generation of the family might" alter "the interior, to suit its own taste and convenience; while the exterior, through the lapse of years, might have been adding venerableness to permanence," which Holgrave considers "essential to the happiness of any one moment."<sup>49</sup> This conservative philosophy provides inter-generational continuity and responsiveness to the needs of each new time. Fifth, once married Phoebe and Holgrave will establish a happy family at the Judge's estate, sharing the house with Clifford and Hepzibah (their multi-generational extended family) and with Uncle Venner, representative of society's poor.

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<sup>49</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 285.

Happy as this turn of events seems, its very happiness raises many critics' suspicions. For example, Brenda Wineapple, one of Hawthorne's biographers, sees the ending as entirely satiric.<sup>50</sup> While extreme, this view certainly acknowledges the ways in which the ending's seeming happiness is open to criticism. In the first place, the move to the Judge's estate, the marriage of Phoebe and Holgrave, and the new family arrangement rather than being a fresh start may simply begin the Pyncheon cycle again, turning Phoebe and Holgrave into another set of founding parents who will bequeath a burdensome legacy. Second, the house where they will re-settle is suspect. While it is not the ancestral mansion, it is an inherited house, one just as likely (especially knowing the Judge) to have been built on the site of a crime and with ill-gotten gain. Rather than escaping the past by escaping the House of the Seven Gables, the characters may merely be replicating the past on shifted ground. And third, Holgrave's abandoning his radicalism is disappointing, perhaps, and is certainly so sudden as to strain credulity.

While these aspects are troubling, several things about the ending are promising. First, Holgrave's new vision of house-building, where the exterior remains the same while the interior is changed to suit the needs and tastes of each generation, provides a model of the family (symbolized by the house) and of society that differs from the Pyncheon patriarchal past and from Holgrave's early Transcendentalism. In this model, individuals are not bound by the fixities of the past nor are they naively trying to escape it. Furthermore, they are neither indifferent to the changing needs of the present nor so committed to change that the result is a dizzying flux. Neither reactionary nor radical, Holgrave wants to conserve what is best from the past while remaining open to similar (though new) qualities in the present.

Second, the new family that Phoebe and Holgrave are establishing offers a model of family that combines positive aspects of the older patriarchal model and of the cult of

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<sup>50</sup> Brenda Wineapple, *Hawthorne: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 365.

domesticity. Like the family as depicted in the cult of domesticity, their household is characterized by affection, love, and nurture of the individual, rather than by the imposition of will. Unlike the cult of domesticity, it is not confined to the nuclear family; rather, it maintains the more open approach of the earlier model, since it is multi-generational and open to society (in the form of Uncle Venner), and it eschews class divisions. As a model for society, then, it avoids an isolating individualism (Holgrave is married) as well as an imposing hierarchy in favor of a community of fellowship and sympathy.

Love, sympathy, respect for individuals—these are qualities Hawthorne affirmed throughout his work. If they are closely associated with the view of family found in the cult of domesticity, he can with some reservations accept that view. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, he offers a moderately affirmative vision of the family and society, one in which people need not be trapped in the house of the past nor wander homelessly in the present but in which a house can become a home.