

**Violence, Sex and Loss of Identity in Nathaniel Hawthorne's
*The House of the Seven Gables***

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Abstract

American gothic romances depict the violence that constitutes the story of America. In the gothic, psychological, sexual and social relations reflect the repression of the society and the patriarchal family. The gothic deals with class struggle and the tyranny of the haunting past. The relationship between man and woman is seen in terms of domination and submission: sex is related to violence and transgression. Family and social violence results in the disintegration of personal identity.

The ultimate source of violence in *The House of the Seven Gables* is an act of injustice, whose ensuing consequence is guilt. The Pyncheons' guilt generates a never-ending violence represented by two typical gothic stories, in which a wicked villain threatens the sexuality of an innocent maiden. They depict the class struggle between the aristocratic Pyncheons and the plebeian Maules and women's vulnerable position in a patriarchal society. In the gothic the relationship between man and woman reproduces the paternal incest tale and is defined through a process of domination and subordination in which the identity of the woman is eliminated.

Another important aspect of the violence can be found in the Pyncheon family itself, whose problems are mainly due to the tyrannical paternal figure, who exerts despotic control over his 'weak' relatives. As a result, they suffer from disembodiment and impotence. Sterility is associated with familial sexual transgression, incest, which is the essential erotic theme of gothic fiction. As a consequence of repression, the menaced members of the family want to kill symbolically the "father" figure, whose death will make retribution possible.

The House of the Seven Gables, one for each deadly sin, may be no unmeet adumbration of the corrupted soul of man. It is a ghostly, mouldy abode, built in some eclipse of the sun, and rafted with curses dark; founded on a grave, and sending its turrets heavenward, as the lightning rod transcends its summit, to invite the wrath supernatural. Every darker shadow of human life lingers in and about its melancholy shelter. There all the passions allied to crime,—pride in its intensity, avarice with its steely gripe, and unrelenting conscience, are to be expiated in the house built on injustice.

EVERT AUGUSTUS DUYCKINCK, "The House of the Seven Gables: Marble and Mud"

American gothic fiction represents what Leslie Fiedler calls "the dark vision of the American" and "the hidden blackness of the human soul and society" (27). Gothic romances depict the violence that disturbs, but also constitutes the story of America. We cannot comment on many gothic romances without talking about villains, threatened maidens, mysterious crimes, hinted rapes. The centrality of violence in the American gothic romance is unquestionable.

The reason for violence and evil in American gothic fiction can be found in the return of what is unsuccessfully repressed. As Eric Savoy points out the entire tradition of the gothic in America is predicated upon the failure of repression and forgetting (4). At the heart of the gothic romance, there is the world of our dreams where our hidden fears and repressed guilt dwell. The gothic exposes the violent repression that is hidden behind the rationality and orderliness of the Enlightenment, "Enlightenment ideals of social control, hygiene, and discipline produced the gothic, whose dungeons, whips, chains,

López, Violence, Sex, 91-121

incarcerations, and physical abuse hark back to the lurid forms of repression characteristic of earlier modes of discipline.”¹

In the gothic the past is a heavy burden and the source of repression and guilt, since the very location of crime and disorder is thrust back into the past. As Fiedler notes, “the past, even dead, *especially* dead, could continue to work harm” (131). Ian Watt claims that the gothic “presents the individual [. . .] as essentially imprisoned by the tyranny of an omnipotent but unseen past” (1986: 167), past which is embodied by the paternal. Gothic narratives are marked by Oedipal fears, “The revolt against God and King established by the American and French revolutions triggered tremendous repressive fears about the Father’s power, and the exhilaration at overthrowing patriarchal figures met with an equally intense sense of fear, shame, and guilt at such revolt.”²

As a result, guilt is the ultimate consequence of repression. The gothic romance communicates a sense of inherited historical guilt that stems from the past. That is why one of the most prevalent themes in gothic fiction is the revisiting of the sins of the fathers upon their children, which was the main theme in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, the first gothic novel. The usurper broke the natural line of descent when he seized possessions that did not rightfully belong to him. This act of injustice will be the source of violence and madness in the present time of Walpole’s story.

David Punter claims that American gothic is intensely preoccupied with the pathology of guilt (165). Fiedler highlights the connection between guilt and the gothic,

The guilt which underlies the gothic and motivates its plots is the guilt of the revolutionary haunted by the (paternal) past which he has been striving to destroy; and the fear that possesses the gothic and motivates its tone is the fear that in destroying the old ego-ideals of Church and State, the West has opened a way for the irruption of darkness: for insanity and the disintegration of the self. Through the pages of the gothic romance, the soul of Europe flees its own darker impulses. (129)

¹ NOBLE, Marianne, p. 171.

² GROSS, Louis S., p.29.

In the gothic the Nation is an “oedipalized territory;” a social order characterized by tyranny and repression. The gothic villain, representative of a feudal system, is a figure of antisocial power laden with primal crime. He is the cause of violence and repression, a threat that comes from the past and the atrophying “aristocracy.”³ Thus gothic narratives give evidence of a view of feudalism and aristocracy as well as a view of history. Like Europe the nineteenth-century Puritan society of New England has feudal institutions, a decadent “aristocracy,” tyranny and oppression. Gothic novels deal with the struggle between the colonial inheritance of the old genteel class and the democratic impulse of the new generation. They depict a feudal society in which the influential class exercises its power and oppression over the plebeian class. This despotic power of the ruling class rests upon its ownership of the land.

The gothic also deals with other “oedipalized territories” like the family. The emergence of the repressive and hermetic patriarchal family under the “Law of the Father” is a feature of eighteenth-century social development that strongly influenced the appearance of the gothic mode. The nuclearization of the family is at the core of the literary preoccupation with the family as a unit of patriarchal repression. The American gothic romance is usually a family romance. Jodey Castricano claims that, in the gothic, “psycho/socio/sexual relations appear to be modeled upon the family, legitimized by the (word of the) father” (206). It is in the family that the individual is taught what Deleuze and Guattari call “resignation to Oedipus.” In the gothic narrative the reassertion of the “law of the father” implies a process of violence. Elizabeth MacAndrew argues that in the seminal gothic fiction novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, “the problem of evil is already presented as a psychological problem created in the ambience of the family” (12). The nuclear family is structurally problematic and the gothic form exposes its shortcomings. The gothic reproduces the repressive basis of the institution of family and the psychological violence that characterizes it. Castricano believes that words such as “‘taboo,’ ‘horror,’ ‘transgression,’ and ‘guilt’ seem to be grounded in terms

³ In fact the genteel class is considered “aristocratic” because the Puritan society of New England was in its way as aristocratic as the feudal society of Europe, even though they really belonged to the upper middle class.

of the family,” which she considers as an “oedipalized territory” (as well as the Church, School, Nation, and Party) and a stronghold of identity (206).

Both the family and the nation are based on power relations, social regulation and control of sexuality. The gothic deals with the social and psychological vulnerability of women in a patriarchal society. According to Jeffrey Steele, Hawthorne’s particular historical construction of the self can be seen as a “critique of patriarchal psychology and its attitudes toward women and nature” (156). In the gothic the relationship between woman and man is seen in terms of domination and submission and sex is linked to aggression and violence. Rape and incest are major themes of gothic fiction. It is in the family realm that “abnormal” sexuality is generated out of the social control (as taboo) under the tyranny of the father figure. Thus the gothic mode deals with the transgression of ideologically sanctioned notions of the family, breaking family taboos through acts such as patricide and incest. Besides, the family and the Puritan society are the breeding ground for sexual hypocrisy, “a universe where the calm surface of repressive convention and ingrown hypocrisy is momentarily—but only momentarily—threatened by the irruption of the secret violences which it provokes but conceals.”⁴

American gothic narrative is primarily concerned with exploring personal identity through both family and national history. The nuclear family as a colonized institutional system based on repression is depicted as a hindrance for the individual’s self-developing and the source of many identity disorders. Family violence results in the eradication and disintegration of the individual’s personality. The gothic romance destabilizes notions of identity, “[it] exploits [. . .] the fear of losing one’s sense of self as a human being in relation to the family, the state, and God.”⁵ The gothic portrays mental states and characters’ emotions exploring the distressed mind: aberrant psychological states and the divided consciousness.

The transformation of identity and madness are primary fears of the gothic narrative. Gothic fiction depicts a darkened world of fear, oppression and madness where the individual struggles for self-definition. The gothic deals with states of mind in extreme and even grotesque form. Gross calls it a demonic quest narrative because it ends up with “the shattering of the

⁴ WATT, Ian, 1957, p. 240.

⁵ GROSS, Louis S., p. 8.

protagonists' image of his/her social/sexual roles and legacy of, at best, numbing unease or, at worst, emotional paralysis and death" (1). Maggie Kilgour believes that the gothic reveals the dark truth that the individual is not a unified whole, "but fragmented and dismembered, internally ruptured so that it is alienated not only from nature and other but from itself" (41). That is why gothic fiction is frequently about complex identities. Like Frankenstein and his Creature, good and evil, innocence and guilt, detective and criminal, villain and victim are complex doubles of each other.

The ultimate source of violence in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* is an act of injustice, a primal crime, which involves its characters in guilt. Social injustice is frequently the cause of individual violence. Colonel Pyncheon's unrighteous acquisition of poor Mathew Maule's soil engenders evil consequences, Maule's hanging. Colonel Pyncheon wickedly sought the condemnation of the old wizard under the pretence of purging the land from witchcraft. Ever since the tragic death of the wizard, sin and guilt surround Colonel's life and his progeny generating devilish intrigues, mysterious deaths and vengeful retributions.

As a consequence of the unjust appropriation of land, guilt is the most important inheritance of the Pyncheon family and "the inevitability of this legacy [plays] itself out in ever-widening circles of violence."⁶ Thus the moral of this story is also the visiting upon the sons of the sins of their fathers, which is stated at the beginning of the book, "the act of the previous generation is the germ which produces *an evil fruit in a far-distant time*" (My emphasis) (6).⁷

Seven Gables is a version of the myth of the Fortunate Fall,⁸ the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Hawthorne explores in this romance the Calvinistic doctrine of Original Sin. Once a sin is committed, this will burden both the sinner and his offspring.⁹ It is in Jonathan Edwards'¹⁰ *The Great*

⁶ Ibid, p. 13.

⁷ HAWTHORNE, Nathaniel, *The House of the Seven Gables*, Critical Edition, GROSS, Seymour L. (ed.), New York and London, Norton & Company, 1967, p. 3 (all subsequent quotations from this edition will be identified by the page number included in parentheses in the text.)

⁸ The Fortunate Fall or doctrine of *felix culpa* considers that the sinner's fall may give rise to positive consequences, among them the spiritual growth of the human soul.

⁹ HANSEN, Klaus P., p. 19

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards was a very important and original 18th-century American philosophical theologian who committed himself to vindicate Calvinism in a new and vital way. He emphasized

Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended that we can find a clear antecedent of the inheritance of guilt and sin as “an evil taint on any individual soul, in consequence of a crime committed twenty or forty years ago, remaining still, and even to the end of the world and for ever” (66). The inheritors of the property, the Pyncheons, knew of the wrong inflicted on the Maules and have failed to rectify it. This way they have also inherited their ancestor’s guilt, which has been transmitted from generation to generation in the Pyncheon family. The wizard Matthew Maule has not been simply executed; he has been incorporated into the subsequent life of the Pyncheons’ progeny as the guilt they experience. The Maules, in their symbolic connection with the unconscious, become “the primitive, anti-civilized urges in the individual and collective psyche, repressed and consigned to the realm of dreams, fantasies, and guilts.”¹¹

The Americans’ approach to the Calvinistic doctrine of inherited guilt, “the imputation to the living individual of the disempowering effects of a sin ‘originally’ committed by the first man in the first hours of the race’s history,”¹² is ambivalent. In the nineteenth century, according to R. W. B. Lewis, there was a dualism in American culture, a split between two polarized parties: the party of Hope and the party of Memory. According to the hopeful creed, America had no past, but only a present and a future; “innocence” was its key word. On the other hand, the party of Memory, “the nostalgic,” believed in the Calvinist doctrine of inherited sin. Ralph Waldo Emerson¹³ was one of the main representatives of the hopeful. Emerson becomes a herald of optimism, who thinks that in America one can make life anew. Lewis defines Hawthorne’s ambiguous attitude saying that “the characteristic situation in [Hawthorne’s] fiction is that of the Emersonian figure, the man of hope, who by some frightful mischance has stumbled into the time-burdened world of Jonathan Edwards”

the sovereignty of God, the depravity of humankind, the reality of hell and the necessity of a “New Birth” conversion. For more information www.yale.edu/wje/html/life_of_edwards.htm

¹¹ KEHLER, Joel R., 143.

¹² LEWIS, R. W. B., p. 28.

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was a Unitarian minister, who resigned to pursue a career in writing and public speaking. He became the center of the American transcendental movement, setting most of its ideas and values in his book, *Nature* (1836). For more information www.transcendentalists.com/1emerson.html. (Guide to Resources on Transcendentalism and Emerson).

(113). Hawthorne does not reject the Calvinist doctrine of inherited guilt as the party of Hope did. The great question, in *The House of the Seven Gables*, is whether there is an escape from the guilt of the past or not.

The Original Sin taints the Colonel's offspring and perpetuates through generations, "The wrong-doing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and, divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes *a pure and uncontrollable mischief*" (My emphasis) (2). The transmission of evil has its magical and romantic expression in Maule's curse, which represents the haunting presence of the past. According to the legend, at the moment of his execution, the old wizard uttered a prophecy: God would give him (Colonel Pyncheon) blood to drink, that haunts ever since the Pyncheon house and everyone who dwells in it. The old Pyncheon mansion "is stained with blood, the blood of the persecuted, and nothing can clean it."¹⁴ The first effect of the old wizard's malediction is Colonel Pyncheon's sudden death that initiates the beginning of the Pyncheon family's turbulent history. The Pyncheon house has inherited a curse that cannot be broken until retribution is fulfilled. It takes two centuries for the Maules and Pyncheons to defeat sin and gain redemption.

Hawthorne also resorts to the legend of Cain and Abel to exemplify the highest expression of wickedness and violence as a result of the tainted human soul. Thirty years before the beginning of the present story of the Pyncheons, Clifford (descendant of Colonel Pyncheon) goes to jail for a crime he did not commit. This crime is a fake. Judge Pyncheon, Clifford's cousin, framed him for their uncle's natural death in order to receive his relative's inheritance. So it is Jaffrey Pyncheon who sins against one of his kin and thus he stands for Cain. Now the Pyncheons drink one another's blood, "The Curse combines the repetition of a Remarkable Judgement with the legend of Cain and Abel."¹⁵

It is through guilt that the past exerts violence on the present. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, as Wesley Britton says, "*Slavery to the past* was Hawthorne's great theme, particularly the shackling influence of hereditary sin and guilt" (My emphasis) (7). Hawthorne's characters remain locked in their circles of guilt. Like Melmoth, "Gothic characters [are] doomed to live with the consciousness of extreme guilt in a world from which forgiveness has been

¹⁴ PUNTER, David, p. 176.

¹⁵ HOFFMAN, Daniel G., p. 476.

vanished.”¹⁶ Past events cling to the minds of the characters with an oppressive force, involving them in violence and madness. As a punishment, they are sometimes doomed to replicate the lives of their wicked ancestors: Judge Pyncheon is the reincarnation of his ancestor, Colonel Pyncheon.

Evil and its visible manifestation sin are part of the environment that surrounds and threatens the characters’ lives. According to Castricano, gothic narratives are constructed around familiar topoi: dungeons, old ruined mansions, cellars, crypts (202). All these places function as coded spaces, “dark areas” that are contrasted to “the notions of transparency” and the “full visibility of things, men and truths,”¹⁷ which the Enlightenment claimed. The most popular of these places is the haunted house, which incorporates the presence of the past: “The psychic ‘house’ turns toward the gothic only when it is ‘haunted’ by the return of the repressed, a return that impels spectacular figures.”¹⁸

For Bruce Michelson, the popular tradition of the haunted house is linked to the loss of the self (164). It is a sort of womb from which the ego first existed and to which it must return. He calls it “the maternal blackness” that is beneath the paternal authority, a prison or torture chamber, “from which the cries of the kidnapped *anima* cannot even be heard.” He continues to develop his idea,

The upper and the lower levels of the ruined castle or abbey represent the contradictory fears at the heart of gothic terror: the dread of the super-ego, whose splendid battlements have been battered but not quite cast down—and of the id, whose buried darkness abounds in dark visions no sterner of the castle had even touched. (132)

The House of the Seven Gables itself has been considered as a symbol of the corrupted soul of man, “the night-time impulses of the psyche.”¹⁹ The gothic building, old, mysterious and associated with the “Dark Ages,”

¹⁶ PUNTER, David, p. 42.

¹⁷ FOUCAULT, Michell, pp. 153-154.

¹⁸ SAVOY, Eric, p. 10.

¹⁹ FIEDLER, Leslie A., p. 140.

dominates the narrative both as a physical as well as a psychological threatening presence. In fact the gothic story is an extension of the mood evoked by the setting. The haunted house creates an atmosphere of oppression, which emphasizes the powerlessness and vulnerability of the characters. It points at the fact that they are in the hands of forces that they cannot comprehend.

Mary Chapman argues that the domestic enclosure of the gothic is the inversion of the ideal home of the nuclear family that was proclaimed in the late eighteenth century: a place of imprisonment, torture, threatened rape or death for the female heroine (190). The cult of domesticity characterized the home as a safe place with benign maternal figures and controlled by the paternal law. The absence of protective mothers in gothic fiction is related to the powerlessness of women to control the domestic sphere, which is under the male rule.

The old Pyncheon haunted mansion is peopled with specters. Since it is built over an unquiet grave, the Pyncheon dwelling also becomes the home of the dead and buried wizard. His ghost has the privilege of haunting it. The beautiful Alice Pyncheon haunts the house and her harpsichord is heard from time to time: her “ghostly harmonies, prelusive of death in the family” (225). There is also the ghostly parade of all the dead Pyncheons that, according to ghost stories, seem to assemble in the parlor of the old mansion. In the chapter “Governor Pyncheon,” Jaffrey sits dead in front of the portrait of Colonel Pyncheon while the specters of his ancestors step up to touch the painting. In a corner Matthew Maule’s ghost, the builder of the house, mocks them. An eighteenth member of the family who first opened a shop in the basement is also said to haunt the place and “it appeared to be his doom to spend eternity in a vain effort to make his accounts balance” (29).

On the other hand, *The House of the Seven Gables* explores, through the feud between the Pyncheons and the Maules, the violent class confrontation in the nineteenth-century American society. The genteel house of Pyncheon represents the colonial past, whereas the plebeian Maules—who have been dispossessed by the colonial power—stand for democracy. Thus, this romance deals with the waning of “aristocracy” with its old values, and the increasing growth of democracy, with its power of renewal. This novel, in Lawrence Sargent Hall’s words, “has to do with inherited sin, the sin of aristocratic pretensions against a moral order which in the judgement of an

López, *Violence, Sex*, 91-121

equalitarian like Hawthorne, calls for a truer and higher evaluation of man. For the inheritance of the Pyncheon family proves to be no more than the antagonism of the old Colonel and his world toward things democratic" (376).

The guilt and violence originated by the curse have one of their manifestations in the relationship between Maule-male and Pyncheon-female, which is also a reflection of the class struggle depicted by this gothic romance. This is the violence which arises out of the inequalities built into the social structure. Hawthorne represents it by means of the typical plot of the early gothic stories in which a wicked villain threatens the innocent maiden's sexuality. This plot illustrates, not only the struggle between "aristocratic" and democratic classes, but also "the terrifying aspects of life for women in a patriarchal culture."²⁰ Hawthorne chooses to link class-based violence to gender-based violence and thus he shows the dynamics of sexual power relationship as part of a more general discourse of power, which regulates the western patriarchal society.

In *Seven Gables* there are two examples of this typical gothic story. First the chapter of "Alice Pyncheon," in which Holgrave tells Phoebe the legend of Alice, one of her ancestors. In this tale Gervayse Pyncheon, the Colonel's son, tries to persuade Matthew Maule to reveal to him the whereabouts of the missing deed to the lands in Maine, the unrealized possessions of the Pyncheons. Gervayse sells his daughter, as if she were a slave, to get from the young carpenter this secret. Matthew Maule, descendant of the old wizard, uses evil powers in the exercise of personal vengeance. He hypnotizes the young Alice and she becomes a servant of his will (his mesmeric power is a symbolic substitute for sexual activity). As in *Seven Gables*, injustice usually makes the gothic narrative a quest for revenge.

The main characters of the gothic narrative are the evil villain, "the persecuting principle of damnation," and the innocent maiden, "the persecuted principle of salvation."²¹ The villain-hero is probably the most developed symbol of the gothic romance. Since he represents evil, novelists use him to explore heartlessness as well as guilt. He is the main source of violence in the gothic romance. Matthew Maule is one of Hawthorne's satanic figures, who

²⁰ WINTER, Kari J., p. 13.

²¹ In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Fiedler defines in these terms the villain and heroine of the Gothic romance, p. 128.

has inherited the evil powers that characterize his family. We cannot really say whether the older Matthew Maule is a wizard or not when he is executed. But it seems that his ghost and his posterity clearly become witches. They are invested with malignant powers because of the wrong they have suffered and they seek revenge upon the Pyncheons. Consequently, they get involved in the original sin. In Alice's intercourse with the spiritual world, she describes three figures who possess the valued secret of the missing document. One of them is Mathew Maule, the carpenter. Like the Colonel Pyncheon of Alice's visions, Mathew Maule has a bloodstain on his band.²²

On the other hand, the second example of gothic plot is the Holgrave-Phoebe counterpoint. In the chapter "Alice Pyncheon," when Holgrave is telling Phoebe his tale, the young author induces in her a hypnotic state similar to that induced in the proud Alice by Matthew Maule. Holgrave also possesses mesmeric powers as his ancestors, the Maules. In fact he had been a public lecturer on Mesmerism. Even though Phoebe is in a vulnerable state, he does not take advantage of the situation. The young man has the rare and high quality of reverence for another's individuality. He does not use his inherited evil powers over Phoebe but sets her free out of his respect and love for her. Thus he breaks the long chain of evil and "his links with the past and decadence and opens a door for renewal."²³

Both stories exemplify the relationship between the tyrannical villain who exerts control over the 'weak' female character. They depict women's powerless situation and their vulnerable position in a patriarchal society. For Hawthorne the fact that someone tries to impose his will on others is a terrible sin. He treats this imposition extensively in the Matthew Maule-Alice Pyncheon and the Holgrave-Phoebe affairs. Hawthorne relates the malign possession of another's soul to witchcraft, the evil powers by which a wizard can control humans' will. Through mesmerism the Maules enslave the Pyncheon women and make them their victims. As Robert Martin says: "To be mesmerized is to lose one's self, that is, to be appropriated or dispossessed by a form of possession, much as the slave lost his fundamental property—himself—by being enslaved" (137). Mesmerism replicates the dynamics of the Western

²² Blood has a remarkable symbolic role in gothic romances, since it was regarded by the people of the time as a sign of the murderous kind.

²³ BUITENHUIS, Peter, p. 68.

capitalist economy and slavery, “by turning people into slaves, magnetism reveals that everything and everyone is subject to commodification.”²⁴ Male domination makes women disembodied spirits, which do not have more reality than their images in a looking glass.

Since gothic narratives depict tyrannical power and the abuse of innocent women, the view of sexuality in the gothic plot is related to the desire for domination, which frequently goes hand in hand with the heroine’s masochistic desire for a lover who dominates her. In fact, according to James Carson, the subjective distortions of the heroine’s vision are due to the fact that she feels dread of, but also attracted to the villainous paternal figure (271). As Hawthorne reminds us, Alice Pyncheon is not exactly Mathew Maule’s victim because she is “conscious of a power—the combination of beauty, high, unsullied purity, and the preservative force of womanhood—that could make her sphere impenetrable, unless *betrayed by treachery within*” (My emphasis) (203). From the first moment her eyes fall upon the carpenter, she is struck with admiration for Matthew Maule’s strength and energy.

The gothic reproduces the tension inherent in society through relations of oppression, repression and submission, while linking them to erotic pleasure. The relationship between man and woman is defined by way of a process of domination and subordination in which the identity of the woman is eliminated, becoming a servant of the male’s will. Thus the gothic story usually reproduces the struggle between a young woman and a ‘paternal’ figure, as represented in the paternal incest tale. Gothic heroines often desire the “father” while simultaneously fearing him. In *Dreadful Pleasures*, James Twitchell writes, “The early gothic usually tells the story of a single and specific family romance run amok: ‘father’ has become monstrous to ‘daughter.’ It seems to make little difference if the father role is shunted to uncle, priest, duke landlord, or devil, as long as his relationship with the young female is one of paternal dominance” (42). Mary Chapman claims that even though in American gothic there are few scenes of paternal incest, many American gothic texts “gesture toward this taboo without being able to represent it openly” (184).

In “Three Essays on Theories of Sexuality” (1905), Sigmund Freud considers the female’s desire for domination, her masochism, and her erotic

²⁴ GODDU, Teresa A., p. 107.

attachment to the father as part of her sexual development. When the pre-Oedipal girl realizes that her mother does not possess the Phallus, she gives her up as libidinal object and turns to the Father for recognition and approval. This shift implies the transformation of the girl from an active, "masculine" child, to a passive, "feminine" adolescent. She must renounce her autonomy to achieve her father's love. Thus Freud claims that the girl's desire for subordination is a natural instinct.

Paternal incest, usually symbolic, and the erotics of domination are "grounded in a family structure particularly prominent in the nineteenth-century Western culture, characterized in part by the ideology of separate spheres which renders the home a site of patriarchal lawlessness and structures female erotic desire as determined by the father-daughter relationship."²⁵ Marianne Noble points at the fact that many feminist and queer theorists have considered the gothic as a site in which the repressive construction of normative gender roles is produced: "Gothic implements of torture, they suggest, represent the terror tactics of gender construction, and the genre's characteristically perverse cravings and anxieties represent identifications and desires whose repression is essential for appropriate genders" (165). Michelle Massé, for example, argues that the gothic exposes the traumatic destruction of women's independent identity. It shows the terror that is used to force women to be dependent and powerless. The gothic expresses the traumatic destruction of female autonomy and personality during the construction of "true womanhood." Mathew Maule converts Alice's mind into a kind of telescopic medium, through which he can obtain a glimpse into the spiritual world. Symbolically mesmerism transforms Alice into a sort of spirit, no longer a true human being. She is on the brink of nonbeing.

On the other hand, when Phoebe begins to show clear signs of her hypnotized state, she is depicted as a veiled lady, "A veil was beginning to be muffled about her, in which she could hold only him [Holgrave], and live only in his thoughts and emotions" (211). Phoebe's veil points, in a metaphorical way, to her imprisoned spirit. According to Teresa Goddu, in mid-nineteenth century America, the veiled lady functioned as a dominant image of womanhood (97). The true Victorian woman in America was seen as a disembodied self, which took his proper position in a sort of spiritual sphere, the role of domestic angel

²⁵ CHAPMAN, Mary, p. 186.

away from the market's demons. As Punter claims "there is a strong connection, which we will come across time and time again, between the Gothic novel in general and the evolution of perceptions about the subjection of women and the covert social purposes of marriage and marital fidelity" (83).

Matthew Maule's "possession" of Alice Pyncheon upsets the necessary balance between man and woman. The equilibrium is "regained through the alliance of Holgrave and Phoebe."²⁶ Hawthorne uses two parallel stories to highlight the progress towards retribution. Both Holgrave and Phoebe are clearly associated with their ancestors, however they have experienced improvement. On the one hand, Holgrave is a model of self-restraint from the morbid oppression of defenseless women that is so tempting for Hawthornian males generally. The reformer's honesty differentiates him from his forebears; all of them damned by the use of their powers. Holgrave is saved because he refuses to violate Phoebe's soul. His refusal is a rejection of the past and an anticipation of retribution. This is one of the first steps in a renewal process that will finally lead to the happy outcome of the story. On the other hand, Phoebe is also associated with her ancestor, Alice Pyncheon. Phoebe is, in some ways, a kind of reincarnation of her great-great-grand-aunt, but she has the angelical qualities of her relative without her aristocratic pride. Alice comes from Europe and has brought with her aristocratic delusions, whereas the young maid comes from a village in New England, representing the new democratic woman. Phoebe is a daughter of the Puritans but she repudiates their sternness. She has a gift for reviving the people around her. She restores "the lost innocence of Eden to the rotting old house."²⁷

These two stories about the feud between the aristocratic and democratic families confirm the gothic devotion to violence. They depict the hostility and even brutality inherent in the patriarchal social system. The emphasis on stolen land makes of *Seven Gables* a narrative which deals with national guilt. However national guilt has its origins in family guilt, due to the family's participation in a primal crime. Thus the real and most important locus of fear and violence is the Pyncheon family itself. According to Punter, many gothic romances share anxieties regarding some social institutions such as the family (73). Louis Gross claims that what he calls the "inappropriate" family

²⁶ HORNE, Lewis B., p. 465.

²⁷ LEVY, Alfred J., p. 470.

serves as the breeding ground for much of the madness and violence one finds in tales (7). The unbalanced family is a theme that can be found in virtually every gothic tale and it has a great importance in American gothic.

The problems inside the family are, at least in part, due to the paternal figure that is usually portrayed as a gothic villain. The true gothic villain of *Seven Gables* is Jaffrey Pyncheon, the vivid image of his ancestor, his reincarnation. He is a greedy man, whose only goal in life is to expand his riches; his only realities are wealth and property. He "assumes the role of the usurping feudal lord, confiscating property and thwarting incipient democracy in the New World."²⁸ The Judge is a true satanic figure, who is involved in his uncle's death and the illegal destruction of his will. He conspires against his cousin, Clifford, and accuses him of their uncle's apparent murder and thus Jaffrey becomes the only heir.

Jaffrey Pyncheon's blackness is associated with the evil and dark figure, Satan. He is dressed in black, except for his white neckcloth. Like the devil in gothic romances, he is portrayed as an aged man with a benevolent appearance that hides his true evil nature. Besides, one of his main characteristics is that he behaves like a gentleman, the devil's traditional disguise. But, on certain occasions, his black soul is shown. Phoebe compares him with a serpent, one of the typical representations of Satan in the Bible. When Judge Pyncheon attempts to kiss his young cousin, she says that he looks "very much like a serpent, which, as a preliminary to fascination, is said to fill the air with his peculiar odor" (119). Jaffrey's smell as well as his benign outward aspect are used to deceive people.

In gothic fiction the villain is especially merged with the image of Faust (or Don Juan), Promethean or Satanic figures. Faust is the black magician, the scientist who seeks to control life. Jaffrey Pyncheon, as a demonic presence, is related to a physical Faustian emblem that is shown when he is angry: "a *red fire kindled in his eyes* [. . .] with something inexpressibly fierce and grim darkening forth [. . .]" (My emphasis) (129). The crime of the Faustian character is to sell his soul to the Devil. But the pact with the Devil is a very complex symbol. According to Fiedler, it can be summarized in a single phrase "*to choose to be damned*" (133). However damnation itself is also changeable according to man's beliefs. In Fiedler's words,

²⁸ KEHLER, Joel R., p. 143.

A commitment to the vagaries of the unconscious; an abandonment of the comforts of social life—of marriage and family, wealth and recognition; a rejection of all bonds of love and sympathy, of humanity itself; a deliberate plunge into insanity; and acceptance of eternal torment for the soul. [. . .] Anyone who, in full consciousness, surrenders the hope of heaven (what everyone says heaven is) for the endurance of hell (what everyone knows hell to be) has entered into a pact with Satan; and the very act, therefore, of writing a gothic novel rather than a sentimental one, of devoting a long fiction to terror rather than love, is itself a Faustian commitment. (133)

All the members of the gothic family may suffer from mental or identity disorders. As Punter points out villains are also martyrs “to the inadequately repressed parts of their own psyche” (72). Jaffrey Pyncheon, as the father figure, faces a disintegration of the self produced by too much public life and too much attention to temporal ideas and matters. He is the “masculine figure” of the world of business and power of the Western society. As the “masculine,” he represents the active dominating aggression of modern America. He shares the hypocrisy of many important men who show a false appearance to gain public favor. Michelson considers him as a special sort of ghost, known as the shape-shifter, which is very common in colonial mythology, “Like the traditional shapeshifter²⁹ in the American folk tradition, the repulsive true form can be only glimpsed by mortals, and only when the dissembling spirit is caught off its guard” (171). Jaffrey is always changing his shape and showing a different image not just to his family, but to everyone in town. When he is dead, Hawthorne exposes the essential misery of the shapeshifting ghost. His constitutive hollowness and invisibility are not new

²⁹ For more information about shapeshifting and its presence in the folk tradition see LEACH, Maria (ed.), *Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, 2 vols. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1950), 2: 1004-1005. Also see the chapter “Cases of Conscience Concerning Witchcraft,” in Increase Mather’s *A Further Account of the Tryals of the New England Witches* (1693; reprinted, London: J. R. Smith, 1862), a chapter predominantly about the shapeshifting of Satan and his legions in colonial New England.

qualities in Jaffrey, but old ones made clear by his death; he is not much different from the live one.

Hawthorne applies ironically certain terms in order to depict the identity of his characters. Judge Pyncheon is associated with "*substance*," whereas Clifford is related to shadows and dreams. The "Governor Pyncheon" chapter tries to show us how Jaffrey's realities, his power and ambitions, are in fact illusions or fancies. The only true reality is the inevitable death to which all of us are condemned. Houses, wealth, power, ambition are just delusions and chimeras, "solid unrealities," compared to death.

According to Frederick Crews, Jaffrey is a tyrannical "father," and the other characters are symbolically his children (175). In this symbolic family the paternal figure exerts control over his 'weak' relatives and establishes the repressive status quo within the context of the gothic family. He is the dominant force threatening his cousins' lives, Hepzibah and Clifford. Judge Pyncheon inspires Oedipal feelings in them (even the author handles him with a mixture of awe and hatred) and his presence is always seen as an unspecified menace. Power and violence are the key factors of their relationship. Clifford and Hepzibah's ghostliness, their death-in-life condition, is due, at least in part, to the terrorizing presence of the "father," who shatters their identity. They are the true haunters of the Pyncheon mansion.

Once Clifford is released from prison where he has unjustly spent twenty years of his life, Jaffrey Pyncheon wants to get from him the secret of the hidden map of the eastern territory. He believes that his weak cousin knows where to find the concealed document and he is determined to force this information out of him. On several occasions the Judge attempts to see Clifford, moved by the same greed of his ancestors. He will not stop tormenting both Hepzibah and Clifford until he gets the secret of the missing property. However neither is Hepzibah nor is her brother rival for their wicked relative. They are too weak. Confronting Clifford with his kindred is "like flinging a porcelain vase, with already a crack in it, against a granite column" (242).

At the beginning of the story, Hepzibah is very concerned with Jaffrey's opinion about the opening of the cent shop. When she observes him inspecting the shop, she thinks: "What does he think of it, I wonder? Does it please him?" (57-58). She asks herself whether Jaffrey accepts the cent shop held up in the family mansion. Later on when Judge Pyncheon wants to enquire Clifford about the whereabouts of the parchment, he goes to the house of the

López, Violence, Sex, 91-121

seven gables and demands Clifford's presence. Hepzibah seems reluctant and the Judge exhibits again his domination over her. He threatens her with removing her brother and confining him to a public asylum.

However, Clifford is the true victim of his cousin's aggressiveness and violent power. Clifford is portrayed in various subtle ways as a type of Christ, who has endured the iniquities of this world. The old bachelor pays for the sins of the Pyncheons with his suffering of thirty years in jail (approximately the lifetime of Christ). In his role as a tormented man, Clifford, like Christ, is "despised and rejected."³⁰ His face is described as a "record of infinite sorrow;" Isaiah also portrays Christ as "a man of sorrows."³¹ We can also find a connection between Christ's crown of thorns at his crucifixion, and Clifford's desire to pinch a rose thorn to feel pain and prove himself awake. Clifford has suffered so much that he will never recover completely, "after the torpor of a heavy blow, the sufferer's reviving consciousness goes back to a moment considerably behind the accident that stupefied him" (170). Now he is like Rip Van Winkle or any other victim of time, the victim of the tyranny of the haunting past. That is why he sees the world with the eyes of a child.

Seven Gables is about disembodiment as a result of evil and violence. Clifford has been reduced to a ghostlike condition as a consequence of his long seclusion and the emotional and psychological abuse he has suffered from the "father." He is the ultimate expression of the gothic self shattered. Modern psychology has considered Clifford as a schizophrenic. He suffers a radical disjunction of personality. He alternates between frenzied activity and absolute lethargy. Sometimes he masochistically wants to suffer so that he can know that he is alive, for instance when he asks Phoebe for a rose to press its thorns into his flesh. Martin Karlow believes that Clifford's desire to feel pain and to throw himself into the current of humanity are characteristic of the schizophrenic's wish to be born again as an ordinary human being (115).

Clifford has become a ghost who is doomed to haunt the house. He is in such a state of disembodiment and dehumanization that his self is, in large measure, unreal. He lives in a torpor that contaminates all his modes of being. Everything about him reflects his ghostly condition: his mysteriously reluctant step, his filmy eyes, his voice, his forgetfulness of purpose, how his mind and

³⁰ Isa. 53: 3.

³¹ Isa. 53: 31.

consciousness continually take departure and leave a substantial emptiness in their place. The old bachelor is characterized as a “poor, forlorn voyager from the Islands of the Blest” (142).³² Thus Clifford is in a state of consciousness which is between death and life, dream and reality, “His return from prison is rendered as a return of the dead to life and as a movement from invisibility.”³³ Sometimes he would like to escape from his unearthly state and get into the world of reality. He feels the regenerative desire to break his inner prison and emerge into the stream of life, like when he is watching from a window a political parade or when both Clifford and Hepzibah try to go to church. But, in the end, he always gets back to the safety of his dreamy life.

Clifford’s insubstantial condition is best exemplified by the bubble image, which relates him to an unreal world. One day he is blowing bubbles from the window, a favorite amusement of his childhood, which drift down to the street below: “Little, impalpable worlds, were those soap-bubbles, with the big world depicted, in hues bright as imagination, on the nothing of their surface” (171). Clifford is enjoying this game until a bubble bursts against Judge Pyncheon’s nose while he is just passing below the window. This token of reality puts an end to both the bubble and Clifford’s happiness. He is terrified at the Judge’s presence.

Clifford’s dysfunction of personality is also seen in his ambiguous sexual identity. Robert K. Martin considers him “androgynous” (139) and Leland Person calls him “Hawthorne’s most feminine male character” (95). The old bachelor has got a feminine face and gentle manners. He is so delicate that he is helpless contrasted with the Judge’s ruthless energy. Clifford’s remarkable femininity is mentioned on several occasions. The lover of the Beautiful has a face “almost too soft and gentle for a man’s” (92). The old bachelor is an extremely delicate being with “Feminine traits, moulded inseparably with those of the other sex!” (60). Clifford also loves and feels a strong emotion towards flowers, which, according to Hawthorne, “is almost exclusively a woman’s trait” (147).

Gothic novels not only meditate on the individual’s selfhood, but, through it, they also explore the meaning of national identity. American

³² The Islands of the Blest were a mythical place where those who had died, but had been exempted from death, were taken by the gods.

³³ KARLOW, Martin, p. 117.

mythology presents America as the new Eden and the American as Adam in this garden. This myth was especially popular during the Romantic period when America was unspoiled virgin land and the Indians were idealized as noble savages living in that paradise. Clifford as the “Adam” of *Seven Gables*, is a direct negation of this ideal. In fact he is the childish representation of innocence that confronts the evil and violence of a corrupted world. Clifford is “a thunder-smitten Adam, who had fled for refuge thither out of the same dreary and perilous wilderness, into which the original Adam was expelled” (My emphasis) (150). With Clifford, Hawthorne develops the Adamic fable. Like many other American writers, Hawthorne also saw in the American experience a re-creation of the story of Adam and exploited the metaphor of the individual as Adam.

With Hawthorne the Adamic fable darkens. The isolated hero confronts a hostile world and terrible trials. Both Clifford and Hepzibah experience extreme hardship due to their sinful inheritance and the psychological tyranny of their relative. They are always in a state of intimidation. They have internalized a sense of persecution. As a result, they suffer from impotence in both social and sexual sense. Clifford and Hepzibah’s incapacity is associated with the castration complex that the child experiences when he/she comes face to face with the laws and conventions of society through the father’s authority.³⁴ Hawthorne probably refers to the Pyncheons’ sexual powerlessness when he tells us about the Maules’ secret privileges to “haunt [. . .] the [Pyncheons’] chambers into which future bridegrooms were to lead their brides” (9). This is a clear allusion to the wizards’ interference with the Pyncheons’ normal sexuality.

The impotence of the Pyncheons may derive from inbreeding. In *The House of Seven Gables*, the possibility of an incestuous relationship between the Pyncheon family members (in the present generation between Hepzibah and Clifford) is suggested in many details. Both Clifford and Hepzibah are

³⁴ The castration complex was first formulated by Freud. Freud believes that the castration anxiety is the result of the boy’s fear that his father may intervene in his relationship with his mother by cutting off his penis, which he associates with his desire for his mother. On the other hand, Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst, considers the castration complex as part of the psychosexual development of both boy and girl as a reaction to the threat that the father may put an end to their early sexual activities. It is the first time that the individual faces authority, the father, as a menace to his/her sexuality and, through him; he/she is confronted to the conventions and laws of society.

single; they have always lived together, except for the years that Clifford had been imprisoned. Hepzibah professes “suspicious” love and devotion for her brother, “the only substance for her heart to feed upon” (32). In addition, the incestuous Pyncheon chickens, which are a reflection of their owners, have degenerated because they have been kept too pure a species, because of inbreeding.³⁵

Besides, in gothic fiction, sterility is associated with the consequences of familial sexual transgression. In fact Jaffrey is “The Oedipal villain [. . .] an embodied idea of paternal punishment for thoughts of incest, and the form actually taken by such punishment is impotence.”³⁶ The nuclear family seeks to banish taboo sexual desires through the use of “repressive” mechanisms. “Abnormal” sexuality is the aftermath of sexual oppression. As Fiedler points out incest is the essential erotic theme of gothic fiction (414). However, the social repression of this sexual desire surrounds it with a great sense of mystery. Adult brother-sister incest is the most remarkable incestuous relationship in American gothic fiction, which rarely involves children or parents and children (*Psycho* (1960) can be considered an exception). Chapman claims that being the home the safe site of affect, its inevitable result is inbreeding (191).

Gross argues that, due to the influence of Romanticism, incest is frequently spiritual, “Characters who have a sense of fragmentation or incompleteness seek an image to complete themselves” (54). In fact Hepzibah and Clifford may not actually engage in a sexual relationship, but they experience the consequences of a morbid dread of incest. In gothic narratives incest is not always consummated and it is frequently replaced by violence, as in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*.³⁷

Gothic fiction is about paternal authority and tyranny in social and psychological terms. The gothic view of society and family is metaphorically Oedipal. The members of the family, who suffer from despotism and oppression, want to kill symbolically the “father” figure. Thus the themes of

³⁵ The analogy between the chickens and the Pyncheons is evident: one of these chickens has a funny tuft on its head that can be easily compared with Hepzibah’s turban.

³⁶ CREWS, Frederick, p. 182.

³⁷ In *Wieland*, Theodore (referred to mostly as Wieland) goes insane, murders his own family and then he also tries to kill his sister Clara, to whom he has always been emotionally attached.

filial hatred and patricidal guilt are at the core of the gothic story. Patricide is the uppermost act of violence in the gothic romance. In *Seven Gables* the Oedipal desire of killing the authoritarian figure comes true with Judge Pyncheon's death, which takes a central position in the plot. His death makes retribution possible. Clifford and Hepzibah can finally escape their ghost-like condition and the loss of the self, the impotence that their cousin's threat had imposed on them. McPherson claims that Hawthorne's statement about the self is that individuals must supplant and re-integrate the forces of the parents. Instead of overthrowing the father, he must be superseded (144).

According to the elder Henry James, in order to enter the ranks of manhood, the individual has to fall and pass beyond childhood in an encounter with the evil and the violence of the world.³⁸ In confronting evil, our conscience is developed and this moral conflict is necessary for the growth of the self: "the soul's realization of itself under the impact of and by engagement with evil—the tragic rise born of the fortunate fall [. . .] It is what has to happen to 'golden youth' if it is to mature."³⁹ Once Judge Pyncheon is dead, Clifford is freed from a haunting past; he can grow up and attain, at least partially, adult identity. For James there is a deeper happiness that we can find after the fall and that we can get just through suffering. In Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*, Miriam offers the clue to this mystery: "Was that very sin—into which Adam precipitated himself and all his race—was it the destined means by which, over a long pathway of toil and sorrow, we are to attain a higher, brighter, and profounder happiness, than our lost birthright gave?" (434). From James' point of view, Clifford's fall is, in some aspects, an upward step and an entrance into a truer reality.

Donald Junkins believes that *The House of the Seven Gables* is "a universal prototype of the process of individualization itself [. . .] it is also symbolic of a universal truth about the nature and processes of man's mind and its struggles to grow and be free. *The House of the Seven Gables* is the story [. . .] of the ultimate freeing of the human spirit" (209). Clifford and Hepzibah are finally freed from Judge Pyncheon and the house of the Seven Gables, their literal dungeon; and, consequently, freed from the dungeon of the heart.

³⁸ Qtd. in LEWIS, R. W. B., p. 60.

³⁹ LEWIS, R. W. B., p. 122.

It seems that evil influence lasts in the House of the Seven Gables until Jaffrey Pyncheon's death. His decease lifts the curse and retribution is finally fulfilled. Clifford and Hepzibah have finally been relieved from their long agony; their torturer has died. This suffering has proved to be redemptive for the Pyncheons and, also, for the Maules. The knowledge of the Judge's death binds Holgrave and Phoebe mysteriously together and makes their love possible. They can marry and start a new life without the dark shadow of Judge Pyncheon. According to Buitenhuis, "This is unmistakably the doctrine of *felix culpa*, the fortunate fall, by which mankind, through knowledge of sin and death, through love and by Christ's redemption, regains access to paradise" (118). Holgrave and Phoebe's love transfigures the earth and makes it Eden again. With their marriage, the colonial separation of classes, plebeians and aristocrats, Maules and Pyncheons, disappears and national and family guilt are expiated. Hawthorne seems to have found a way out of the Pyncheons' nightmare of murder and hatred.

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