

Family history: hawthorne's genealogy of madness

[Family](#)



History, in demanding family history, is doubtfully Nathaniel Hawthorne's most important nature in *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Hawthorne focuses on his fatherly intimates in these novels for the reason that the Hawthorne name, notwithstanding its infamous suggestion in history, is an important name in early American history. Burdened by his male ancestors' infamous standing, Hawthorne recounts family history in his fiction often with a sense of guilt. Superficially, Hawthorne reveals a feeling of shame on behalf of his paternal ancestors' actions when he portrays Puritans in his fiction.

Yet, upon closer inspection, Hawthorne may have experienced mixed feelings of shame and pride when he recast these historical figures.

The Puritans, despite their severe dogma, were responsible for creating new colonies where they could practice their beliefs freely. Hawthorne's choice of the Pyncheon name in *The House of the Seven Gables* perhaps reveals his conflicting feelings of shame and pride toward his male ancestors. Unlike the Hawthornes, the historical Pynchons of the seventeenth-century were unconventional; they became problematic citizens among their Puritan community.

The accuracy of Hawthorne's portrayal of historical male figures, consequently, is questionable. He highlights both his sense of honor and shame in his depiction of father figures in his fiction. Hawthorne's fictional portrayal of the women in his family, in particular his mother, is anything but unfavorable. Elizabeth Hawthorne suffered the loss of a husband, and her confidence was forever shaken by this event.

When Hawthorne created Hester and other strong female heroines. When he portrays the women in his family, specifically his mother, he cannot judge them since they were relatively powerless; instead he sympathizes with feminine figures. Mrs. Hawthorne's insecure nature is transformed in Hawthorne's fiction as he reveals the life he wished for his mother. Elizabeth Hawthorne lost all hope for independence when she went back to her maternal family home, and she never attempted to become head of her own household.

Hawthorne takes historical figures such as the Puritans and builds a narrative surrounding their seventeenth - century communities to reveal certain themes about human nature: the corruption of Chillingworth's heart, Hester's isolation and the break from her community, and the burden of guilt evident in Dimmesdale's character. Instead of factual story turns out to be much a construction of the human mind as the narrator's first Gothic fictions.

Easton points out that the narrator in *The Custom House*, for instance, attempts to establish the story's historical authenticity when he finds the manuscript of the novel and remnants of a red cloth, perhaps part of Hester's scarlet A. This is a clear example of Hawthorne's ironic sense of humor in his fiction. Hawthorne's fiction reflects geographical shifts in his life, for example, as Easton notes, the time between the composition of *The Old Manse* and *The Custom House* represents two times in his life (167). *The Old Manse* is part of what Easton refers to as "the Concord-inspired artist".

Throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne is exploring human behavior through the Puritans of the past, as he transports the past to his present

audience. For Hawthorne, reexamining the past, “ gives him the necessary detachment to observe the operation of values in any particular society and make generalizations as seem appropriate” (Easton 194). His predicament is similar to Hester’s in the novel. She falls from her place within her community for not maintaining the moral values of those who are in power, the Puritan officials.

She sinned against God, an obviously higher official than a political party, she is judged by a more severe community: seventeenth - century Puritans rather than more liberal nineteenth - century politicians. Hawthorne, furthermore, uses Hester as an example of an extreme case of defiance to test his contemporary audience. Hawthorne was ashamed of how his paternal ancestors used their power because he may have suffered, as did Hester Prynne; they were both powerless victims in the midst of powerful figures within their communities.

Much of Hawthorne’s sense of identity comes from his fascination with the past. Although his “ sense of the past” is based on historical events, much of that past is Hawthorne’s artistic re-creation. He creates a grotesque image of his male ancestors to draw attention to the Hathorne family name. The Hathorne name, though notorious, held a notable place in America’s past. Hawthorne may have wanted to re - establish his family’s prominence in American history.

Hawthorne’s portrayal of his Puritan ancestors may be, Hawthorne’s approach to the past consists of diverse attitudes toward his ancestors, as revealed through his characters. During Hawthorne’s lifetime, he may also

have developed a romanticized sense of “pride” in his ancestry because his family's name had lost its luster by the nineteenth - century and his own family's fortune had dwindled after the death of his father. Elizabeth Hawthorne and her children became dependents of the Manning family, though they had no resources of their own. His mother abandoned her ties with the Hathornes and, consequently, their link to a notable past; thus Hawthorne may have looked to his past. In *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne goes back, perhaps with a hint of nostalgia, to a time when his family would have held powerful positions among the Puritan community. The Pyncheon family of *The House of the Seven Gables* may also allude to the Hathornes of the past because of Judge Pyncheon's wealth and prestige.

When Hawthorne's immediate family became dependents of his mother's family, the Hathorne name and fortune were at the lowest point they had been in the family's history. Hawthorne likely related to the “dependent male in his stories” as a dependent of the Mannings. However, his ambition may have been to become a successful “self-contained artist” and regain his family's honor.

Despite any sense of honor Hawthorne may have gained from recalling his ancestor's past, he was always conflicted by his family's actions.

Hawthorne's writing is a more internal, psychological cleansing process. The narrator's attitude toward Judge Pyncheon in *The House of the Seven Gables* is disapproving and ultimately cruel; Hawthorne's morbidity perhaps reveals some of his frustration with his male ancestors.

Judge Pyncheon represents a father figure that Hawthorne created to resolve his own psychological issues. One of the most outlandish examples of Hawthorne's brutal attitude toward his father figures is best illustrated in his portrayal of Judge Pyncheon's death in *The House of the Seven Gables*. Miller concludes that through Judge Pyncheon's character, "Hawthorne takes vengeance on iron-hearted fathers, including his two great ancestors, his father, and Robert Manning and Charles W. Upham, who unseated him in the Custom House fracas" (332). Hawthorne, however, is not simply out for revenge; he is not exclusively attacking dominant male figures in his past; but, more specifically, he is approaching a more universal theme: breaking free from dominant figures in general.

The author may have license for such outbursts, if they do not overtake the fundamental theme of the novel. *The House of the Seven Gables* is a novel more about absolution from the past than one about Hawthorne's unforgiving rage toward his male ancestors. Because of his vengefulness, Hawthorne is too involved with his narrator in *The House of the Seven Gables*; thus "objective characterization" fails, according to Crews (177). His fiction, however, may not have been as appealing to a universal audience if it was so internalized. At times, Hawthorne may be resolving his own internal conflicts, and this is most evident throughout his treatment of Judge Pyncheon's death; it does seem almost therapeutic for the author alone. Crews points to Hawthorne's "clogged passion" and "vindictive pleasure" as evidence of Hawthorne's treatment of a "father figure" (175).

In *The Gentle Boy*, Hawthorne offers a more accurate portrayal of the Quakers. In this story, Ibrahim is a young Quaker boy whose mother

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abandons her son to become a martyr for her cause. Puritans were clearly in power in *The Gentle Boy*, but Hawthorne does not sympathize with either religious group, for both are fanatical and over-zealous. Perhaps the ideas in these short stories were precursors for the conflict between the Maules and the Pyncheons in *The House of the Seven Gables*.

The Pyncheons are closely linked with Hawthorne's Puritan ancestors, but there is also a link between Hawthorne and his Quaker ancestors. Though the Pyncheons are wealthier and more powerful than the Maules, the Maules also have control over the Pyncheons. To understand how exactly the Maules are at fault for the turmoil between the two families, a reader needs to consider Hawthorne's use of the Pyncheon name and how it is linked to the historical Pynchons. It is difficult to determine exactly why Hawthorne began to reevaluate the male figures in his life at the time he was writing *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Perhaps Hawthorne's first task when composing *The House of the Seven Gables* was finding names for his characters that would capture his family's involvement in the history of New England. Hawthorne began to reexamine his male ancestors, and it is important to consider how Hawthorne uses historical figures to reveal his ideas about history. Peter Oliver's grandfather was named Judge Pyncheon, and he wrote a letter to Hawthorne in which he objects to Hawthorne's use of his family name because it served to discredit his grandfather William Pynchon (*The Letters*, 1843-1853, 427-28).

In his response to this letter, Hawthorne assures Oliver that he had no knowledge of his grandfather. He explains to Oliver that he was not living in

Salem at the time he was writing the novel, and therefore he did not have access to any records concerning the Pyncheon family history.

Hawthorne makes a convincing case for his defense in this letter. Yet, he may have only been attempting to pacify Judge Pyncheon's descendant. There is strong evidence to suggest that Hawthorne was aware of the Pyncheon family in Salem. Hawthorne thoroughly studied his family's history, and he likely knew that during the seventeenth - century the Pynchons lived only a few blocks away from his ancestors.

Also, in 1837 Hawthorne mentions the Pyncheon family in the American Notebooks (Madsen 310). Deborah L. Madsen traces the Pyncheon line and their relation to the Hawthornes back to the seventeenth-century, and she claims that "Hawthorne, in fact, knew the history of the Pyncheon family, in particular William Pyncheon, who was a fur trader, and his son John, of Springfield"(509). According to Madsen, William and John Hawthorne were more conservative than Pyncheon; John Hawthorne, for example, was known as a "hanging judge" after the Salem witch trials (509).

Hawthorne's ancestors were constantly struggling with colonists like the Pynchons. It appears as though he was attempting to alter history by basing his characters, the Pyncheons, on the Hawthorne family of Salem. One explanation for this alteration is that Hawthorne was attempting to shift his family's stigma as judgmental conservatives to the Pynchons of Salem.

In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne assigns a reputation for conservatism to a family who, historically speaking, does not deserve such a designation. In this novel, the historical figures of the Pynchons are more

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accurately reflected in the rebellious Maule family. Joel R. Kehler asserts that “ Holgrave, in his gabled hut, is a symbol of the continuing presence of the Maule - guilt in the Pyncheon mind and a continuing reminder of the anarchic Maule strain” (144).

A significant factor that must be considered when evaluating the time in which *The Scarlet Letter* was written is the death of Hawthorne's mother. The book itself may have been a tribute to his mother since much of Hester's character can be traced to his own mother's situation as a single woman who conceived a child out of wedlock. The Puritans, Nina Baym contends, may represent the Hathornes in *The Scarlet Letter* since they judged his mother for having a child only seven months after her marriage.

Elizabeth Hathorne would have been incapable of defending herself from the Hathorne family's attacks on her character because instead of the stoic qualities Hawthorne attributes to his mother in his writing, the dominating trait in Hawthorne's mother was perhaps her insecurity rather than introversion.

She married when she was twenty, lost her husband at twenty-eight, and had little life experience by the time she moved in with the Mannings. After her husband's death, she made the decision to move back with her family instead of attempting to live a more independent life. Such an independent lifestyle would have required a more aggressive spirit, and Elizabeth Hawthorne did not have the strength to live a less secure life. Erlich attributes her weakness “ to a lack of vitality and trust in her own competence” (Family Themes 63).

His reconstruction of her personage reveals a woman that is disconnected from the world around her, disheartened, and inaccessible; these traits make her appear as though she had little involvement with her family. Hawthorne's reason for creating such an image of a real life person is as intricate as his fiction. Elizabeth Hawthorne may have been private, but Hawthorne painted a grimmer picture when he described her as a recluse.