

Social sciences and
psychology in the
house of the seven
gables and the
blithedal...



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Hawthorne's science fiction short stories, such as 'The Birthmark' and 'Rappaccini's Daughter,' are set in the seventeenth century. His novels, however, *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Blithedale Romance*, are set in the nineteenth century, his own era. The progression of science from alchemy to psychological and social sciences occurs in reality, and is evident as a shift in Hawthorne's fiction. Science in the nineteenth century was no longer a crude physical chemistry, but evolved into psychology, a science based on the human mind and its behavior. With the American industrial revolution beginning in the eighteenth century, this scientific progress occurred quickly; therefore, a large element still resides in stages of experimentation in nineteenth century science. Experimentation is a key component in Hawthorne's seventeenth century stories, and the fear of alchemy is still present in later contexts. Yet Hawthorne's nineteenth century set fiction also exhibits a rationalization of science, as the experiments progress from using people as physical reactants, to instead social subjects. This transition to a rationalized modernity is also reflected in genre. The Gothic motifs in 'Rappaccini's Daughter' and 'The Birthmark' such as the 'mad scientist' become less prominent. Hawthorne's fiction instead evolves according to a Utopian tradition, where social science exists as a method of reform. However, this transition of genre does not occur readily. Motifs from the Gothic tradition, such as the decaying setting and virginal maiden, still feature in Hawthorne's novels. Therefore, progress within Hawthorne's fiction, specifically scientific, is challenging to achieve without the past acting as an inhibitor.

The House of the Seven Gables is a novel centered on how the past influences future action, and intent. Hawthorne's symbolism moves beyond the inanimate to exist in people, Hepzibah and Clifford Pyncheon. Hepzibah's reaction to Mr Holgrave, the lodger, and his art of daguerreotypy, an early form of photography, suggests the difficulty with progression derives not only from procedure, but people. This suspicion of Holgrave is specific to the older generation. Hepzibah ' had reason to believe he studied animal magnetism, and [...] the Black [Arts].' Hepzibah's ' reason' is based on past fears. Just as Brown is suspicious of the intentions of his seemingly innocent townspeople in ' Young Goodman Brown,' Hepzibah in her skepticism also belongs to a seventeenth century context. For the elders, the practice of science is still synonymous with alchemy, the devil, and the ' Black Arts'. This belief suggests that science continues to be associated with the dangers of uncertainty in the nineteenth century, despite the increasing amount of knowledge collected in the field. Hepzibah's ' reason to believe' sorcery of Holgrave is based entirely on suspicion. Her position is emphasized by Phoebe, the Pyncheon's young and hopeful cousin, who trusts, and eventually loves, Holgrave with only a few questions. Hawthorne therefore presents a self-conscious transition beyond the ' mad scientist' motif. In this novel, Holgrave could be aligned with the stereotype through his unfamiliar practice. As belief transitions, science is accepted as progressive, and, daguerreotypy is presented as harmless. Instead, Hepzibah is aligned with the hysteric figure in her suspicions, as one who has been inadvertently affected by a seventeenth century version of the ' mad scientist', Matthew Maule. The focus is therefore on ' belief' and not ' reason.' Hepzibah's suspicion originates in her mind, and is not based on fact. Charles Poyen

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suggests that many in the nineteenth century found the authority of witchcraft easier to believe than pseudoscience. Hawthorne inverts this concept. With the introduction of Phoebe and Holgrave as a new, rationalized generation, witchcraft becomes the absurd suspicions of an old woman. Hepzibah is a necessary, stock character in this novel, representative of a generation that struggles to progress as the new generation can.

The inability to progress from the past in *The House of the Seven Gables* is based on the failure to acquire necessary knowledge of how to break the curse of earlier times. The Pyncheons, especially Clifford, cannot escape the 'curse' of their family through their ignorance of Jaffrey Pyncheon's true nature. Holgrave uses his daguerreotypes to psychoanalyze people, suggesting the Pyncheons need to also seek truth from living people, as opposed to their ancient ancestral history. Holgrave's daguerreotype allows a recognition of Judge Pyncheon's false benevolence, a key aspect in the remaining plot: 'Would you like to be at its mercy? At that mouth? Could it ever smile?' Daguerreotypy, as an early form of photography, should replicate the subject. However, Holgrave instead constructs a physical appearance that reflect the Judge's true character, the character that framed Clifford for the murder of their uncle. Social science therefore extends to physiognomy, the ability to attribute temperament to outer appearance. In identifying the 'mouth' as incapable of smiling, Hawthorne implies the Judge's internal character is incapable of good also. Hawthorne perhaps self-consciously uses daguerreotypy in 'The Birthmark' also to display the scientific progress made. Aylmer's attempted image is 'blurred and indefinable', suggesting an inability to perceive and therefore imitate

Georgiana's true character, that is more than merely external. Whilst Holgrave's image is more accurate, his psychoanalysis is still evidently primitive. However, he cannot be identified as the 'mad scientist' as his procedure is accurate, moderated and does not sacrifice human life. Furthermore, his appearance refuses to fit the expected convention. Both scientists in 'Rappaccini's Daughter' and 'The Birthmark' physically embody their evil nature. As Hawthorne's fiction transitions in setting to the nineteenth century, the scientists cannot and need not be identified by appearance alone, as their science is less threatening.

Seventeenth and nineteenth century science are extremely different in procedure. Yet, they are aligned in their insistence on progress. Aylmer and Rappaccini endanger human lives to 'find a perfect future in the present.' The social science of reform evokes the same persistence, an impatience that Hawthorne suggests will lead to inevitable failure. To scientifically, and socially, progress to this 'perfect future' requires patience and time, and without such qualities comes harm. In the nineteenth century, reform movements swept New England to encourage the 'restoration of a human togetherness.' In *The Blithedale Romance*, the characters seek beyond this restoration to a complete reform to a 'Paradisiacal System.' Yet as the skeptical protagonist, Miles Coverdale refers to the system as 'Arcadian'. The importance of this concept is emphasized through Hawthorne's consideration of the title *The Arcadian Summer* for the novel. This concept differs from 'paradise' as it infers a lack of sustainability in their planned utopia, or perhaps a completely imaginary aspect altogether. The Blithedale project aims to 'restore' human togetherness through abolishing artificial

social boundaries that restrict this. In striving for this 'paradise,' it implies the ultimate restoration to the beginning of mankind in the Garden of Eden, an impossibly high standard for the reformers to attain. Taylor Stoehr argues it is dangerous to completely abandon social boundaries, as one loses contact with traditional laws of social conduct, such as gender relations. This idea is established in the novel. Without the introduction of revised rules for a bettered society, the original boundaries of social hierarchy could be readily re-established. However, it is this complete abolition of boundaries that allows the characters to commit human mistakes, and for individual reform to stem from this. For reform to occur on a larger, societal scale, the Blithedale residents need a more structured, specific idea of the conditions they desire.

As previously established, scientific progression was met with resistance, especially in light of the introduction of new procedures. While Hawthorne was skeptical that people were capable of immediate social reform, he was also skeptical of mesmerism as a process capable of spiritual elevation and reform. Benjamin Storey presents mesmerism as reducing 'the passions we most deeply experience as our own' to 'reverberations of underlying magnetic forces.' This suggests that any emotion one feels is unoriginal, caused by an external source and not based on emotional idiosyncrasies. Hawthorne inverts this measured, nineteenth century concept – in 1845, a Boston mesmerist Dr. Robert H. Collyer, claimed to discover phrenomagnetism, the ability to excite the brain by magnetic action – through a flashback in the chapter 'Alice Pyncheon'. Through regressing to an earlier era where mesmerism was considered a spiritual phenomenon, it

re-introduces fear as a reaction. It also re-affirms the action as a sin that infiltrates 'thy holy of holies', and not just a scientific process. Alice Pyncheon, the great granddaughter of Colonel Pyncheon, has 'a power, that she little dreamed of [...] [lay] its grasp upon her maiden soul.' The mesmerist, Matthew Maule, is aligned again with the 'mad scientist.' Hawthorne's use of the motif outside his science fiction suggests that categorization does not depend upon specific scientific procedure, but an inherent greed for power. Matthew Maule asserts a patriarchal dominance in laying his 'grasp' upon Alice's 'soul.' As a 'maiden,' and presumably a virgin, Alice is vulnerable through her naivety. Maule's 'will' is assumed to extend to the sexual, and her purity is tarnished. Psychological manipulation is thus arguably more abhorrent than physical bondage. As psychological control was considered only achievable through sorcery, it is suggested that the average mortal cannot be freed from such bondage through traditional methods. In indicating abuses of this power, Hawthorne suggests an authority behind the fears of scientific progression. The 'mad scientist' stereotype, therefore, still exists beyond the Gothic tradition. However, in the nineteenth century, the abilities of these scientists are more threatening, as they extend to manipulation of the psychological.

The majority of concepts that are explored in *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Blithedale Romance* are centered on advancement. Despite featuring Gothic concepts, both novels exist partially in the Utopian genre in this element of evolution. Often, Utopian novels have construed reform as a universal ideal; Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* requires an absolute genesis. Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* does encourage reform, but

only partially, in the return to traditional labor and ideally traditional relationships between men. However, searching for answers to a modern problem in ancient practices inevitably fails. The protagonist 'reluctantly concedes' that 'clods of earth [...] can never be etherealized into thought.' Coverdale is a poet, typically concerned with the metaphorical, yet seeks for intellectual inspiration in physical 'clods of earth.' This Wordsworthian concept of poetical, superior thought is rejected by these 'clods of earth,' which is such a base vision that even a poet cannot 'etherealize' the experience. Individual failure is emphasized by the definitive adverb 'never', which suggests inspiration cannot be found in any endeavor at Blithedale. It is these individual goals that complicate the entire project which claims to restore 'togetherness.' All the residents are gathered to reform, yet each has singular, ulterior motives. As each character exposes individual goals, it becomes clear that the members of the social experiment are pre-emptive in their aspirations of reform. The project must first identify the flaws of both society and the individual, such as self-indulgence and manipulation, before it can seek to change them.

Therefore, Hawthorne's fiction set in the nineteenth century seemingly suggests that progression is threatening, especially when demanded instantaneously. Yet, this implication is not completely accurate. His fiction actively encourages reform, if the past has first been addressed. This means that the reformers, whether the revolutionary scientists or the social progressives, must learn to wield their power responsibly. Hawthorne executes this through rationalizing Matthew Maule's curse, and stripping Westervelt of his assumed mesmeric control. Robert S. Levine argues that

reformers, whether social or not ‘ have no heart, no sympathy [...] no conscience.’ However, Hawthorne’s fiction rejects this notion. The sinners – Matthew Maule, Colonel Pyncheon, Zenobia and Hollingworth – initially have none of these traits. Yet, *The Blithedale Romance* presents a character development that allows Hollingworth’s conscience to evolve. If the sinner is now dead, Hawthorne repeats history in the current generation, yet this time introducing both ‘ heart’ and ‘ sympathy’. Thus, he reconciles the current generation with past sin. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Holgrave’s slight ‘ gesture upwards’ prevents Phoebe from being subjected to her ancestor’s fate, and acts as a penance for Alice Pyncheon. In a sense, every novel Hawthorne sets in the nineteenth century is subject to a curse. Social or ancestral mistakes continue to haunt his characters until these individuals have acknowledged and reconciled with their moral failure. It is only through developing either a ‘ heart’ or ‘ conscience’ that the characters emotionally, and then socially, progress.

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