

Chapter 15

“God Will Give Him Blood to Drink”: Unholy Dying in *The House of the Seven Gables*

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Although Hawthorne considered *The House of the Seven Gables* to be a more “natural,” “healthy,” and “cheerful” product of his pen than *The Scarlet Letter*, it is still notable for its grotesque depiction of the deaths of two exemplary hypocrites and villains, the late seventeenth-century Puritan Colonel Pyncheon and his mid-nineteenth-century descendent and counterpart, Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon. In the cycle of hubris and nemesis that governs the novel’s plot, the deaths of the two Pyncheon patriarchs initiate and terminate the curse on the family, which had been pronounced by the dying Matthew Maule on the Puritan usurper and is finally resolved by the judge’s providential death. Given the Christian moralism that informs the narrative of *The House of the Seven Gables*, the bloody expirations of Colonel and Judge Pyncheon are graphic illustrations of what I call *unholy dying*, a notion based on a variety of contemporary religious and cultural practices as well as older Christian traditions. And while the extended portrait of Judge Pyncheon provides a striking example of a class of characters whom David S. Reynolds calls “oxymoronic oppressors,” or pious hypocrites, found in antebellum popular fiction, his distinctive death, highlighted by the narrator’s extraordinary verbal assault on his dead body in chapter 18, demonstrates Hawthorne’s strategic adaptation of a broad range of Christian homiletics. *The House of the Seven Gables* may thus be said to qualify as an example of pre-Civil War American religious fiction—a genre for which Reynolds has provided the most complete guide—not because of any sectarian or tendentious aims but through its covert incorporation of key religious paradigms and biblical allusions.¹

Largely set in the mid-nineteenth century, the novel draws on the American cultural traditions of death and dying influential at this time. An awareness of death was pervasive in antebellum America, where high childhood mortality, epidemic diseases, and antiquated medical practices limited average life expectancy to about age forty. In keeping with the ubiquitous culture of sentimentality that marked the era, death was idealized and sanitized to disguise its potential horrors, and a substantial literature of consolation emerged to assist the grieving. Evangelical models of a good or even beautiful death, which entailed loving family members surrounding the suitably prepared dying individual, were widely promulgated; and the deathbed scene was made to serve a didactic function, with special attention to the dying individual’s last words, which might hint at a future state. Widespread theological speculation on the physical properties of

heaven and the nature of reunion with loved ones went hand in hand with the so-called domestication of death, or the erasure of boundaries between earthly and heavenly homes. This was illustrated by the rural cemetery movement, beginning with the opening of Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the early 1830s, and by the séances of the spiritualist movement, starting in the later 1840s.²

Even as death and dying were widely sentimentalized, their older moral associations with the terrifying potential for hell and damnation remained present for many individuals. Despite the emergence of liberal Protestant denominations such as the Unitarians and the Universalists, who denied the doctrine of eternal punishment, the evangelical revivalism of the Second Great Awakening continued to rely on the stark alternatives of damnation and salvation for persons undergoing the conversion experience. Representative here were the so-called “new measures” initiated by the Presbyterian-Congregational preacher Charles Grandison Finney, which included the use of an “anxious seat” for those under conviction of sin. And while threats of hellfire and damnation were not as pervasive as they had been a century earlier, many preachers like Finney still resorted to them as the ultimate rationale for spiritual regeneration. The Congregational church that dominated New England culture well into the nineteenth century officially maintained the Calvinist doctrines of innate depravity and predestination, and orthodox tradition going back to the church fathers highlighted the awful inevitability of death, judgment, heaven, and hell—the perennial “Four Last Things.”³

By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, religious publishers and benevolent societies were circulating a massive number of Bibles, moral tracts, sermons, newspapers, periodicals, spiritual autobiographies, missionary memoirs, and older English devotional classics. Advances in print technologies facilitated the explosion of popular literature of all levels of sophistication and orthodoxy. The pervasive middle-class sentimental print culture of the era largely aimed at religious edification, and the many fictional, poetic, and homiletic descriptions of death and dying similarly reinforced the moral economies of Protestant Christianity. The vast corpus of sentimental literature for the grieving helped promote the Christian promise of spiritual immortality, just as popular religious classics such as John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Richard Baxter’s *Call to the Unconverted*, and Philip Doddridge’s *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* taught contemporary Americans how to deal with the traditional challenges of both holy living and holy dying.⁴

As a product of this evangelical and homiletic middle-class culture, Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* inherited a complex array of religious influences. The motif of unholy dying in the novel begins with the shocking and suspicious death of Colonel Pyncheon in apparent fulfillment of Matthew Maule’s dying curse on him: “God will give him blood to drink!” The colonel had punished the plebian Maule, sentencing him to death for alleged wizardry in order to obtain Maule’s desirable property following years of unresolved legal dispute. After obtaining the land, the colonel builds a capacious mansion on the site in order to found a family dynasty, unpersuaded by the idea that a retributive evil spirit might haunt the house. Indeed, he is so convinced of the righteousness of his actions that he even hires his victim’s son, Thomas, to build the residence. The colonel’s death occurs on the day the new house is finished, when a “ceremony of consecration, festive, as well as religious, was now to be performed,” along

with a prayer and a sermon from the Reverend Higginson and a psalm sung by the community.⁵

Yet the colonel's manner of death manifestly negates and pollutes any attempt to consecrate the new house. For instead of experiencing a good death, with friends and family in attendance at the bedside, a conscience at rest, and the sharing of last words or signs indicating redemption in the afterlife, the colonel dies alone, except for the presence of a grandchild, "the only human being that ever dared to be familiar with him," who is the first to realize that the colonel is dead in his chair. Significantly, the dead man wears a look of dismay and shows signs of physical violence on his person. Earlier in the scene, the unexpected death of the colonel had inadvertently made his guests, including the lieutenant governor of the colony, rudely wait for his appearance; and when that eminent dignitary finally opens the door to the study, the crowd of guests discovers a scene of Gothic horror: the colonel with "a frown on his dark and massive countenance" and blood on his ruff, with his "hoary beard saturated with it." The narrator duly notes a local tradition holding that a voice resembling Matthew Maule's now repeats the wizard's dying words, with the verb changed from future to perfect tense: "God hath given him blood to drink!"⁶

Local doctors, after disputing over the cause of death, finally settle for apoplexy, a term then used to describe any effusion of blood, including pulmonary hemorrhage, as is likely the case here. Yet the primal horror of the colonel's bloody countenance seems to offer a deeper truth about his death, which includes rumors of retribution from Maule or his son. The signs of this were the alleged "marks of fingers on his throat, and the print of a bloody hand on his plaited ruff; and that his peaked beard was dishevelled, as if it had been fiercely clutched and pulled." To pull a man's beard at this time was, of course, the ultimate sign of disrespect. The narrator may dismiss these claims as rumors, along with another vague report of an open lattice window and a man "clambering over the garden-fence," but the grotesque circumstances show all the signs of an unredeemed, probably hell-bound sinner's egregiously unholy death.⁷ Reinforcing this aura of moral corruption is the colonel's resemblance to an Old Testament prototype. As critics have noted, in his oppressive treatment of Matthew Maule and his retributive, blood-soaked death, the colonel reprises the tale of the irreligious King Ahab, who coveted the commoner Naboth's vineyard, contrived his execution to gain the property, and eventually died from a bloody wound during battle with the Syrians. Throughout his unholy reign, Ahab had been opposed by the prophet Elijah, whose role in Hawthorne's novel is implicitly assumed by the mesmeric seer and moral commentator Holgrave.⁸

The first chapter of *The House of the Seven Gables* thus initiates a cycle of hubris and nemesis that will characterize the Pyncheon line as the events of the present-day narrative play themselves out. In addition to chronicling the origins of the historic Maule-Pyncheon feud, it sets the stage for the rest of the narrative in its mention of the "violent death—for so it was adjudged—of one member of the family, by a criminal act of another," which took place about three decades before the present time of the narrative.⁹ Only at the end of the story do we learn the exact details of the putative "murder" of Jaffrey Pyncheon, for which his nephew Clifford was convicted and served thirty years in prison. In fact, the death (from an apoplectic attack, hastened by a fractured skull from a fall) was really the accidental result of the older Jaffrey's enraged discovery of the younger Jaffrey's attempt to rob him after the latter stole into his uncle's private

chambers. Hawthorne loosely based this scene on a sensational 1830 Salem murder in which the enormously wealthy elderly shipping magnate Joseph White was killed by Richard Crowninshield. Like the younger Jaffrey, Crowninshield was the degenerate scion of a prominent family and had been hired by White's grandnephews, Frank and Joseph Knapp, who hoped to inherit part of their great uncle's fortune.¹⁰

In Hawthorne's novel, the narrator notes that the older Jaffrey, a wealthy bachelor and antiquarian, had become convinced of the injustice of Colonel Pyncheon's actions, and he was on the verge of giving up the family mansion to a surviving Maule before his family stopped him. These details set the stage for the main plot of the novel involving Clifford's return home to live with his devoted elderly sister, Hepzibah, after three decades in prison and his ensuing persecution by the modern avatar of the iron-willed colonel, Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, whose insensate greed likewise brings about his own demise. The secret Maule descendent Holgrave is a tenant in the house, and his daguerreotypist profession can be seen as a modern adaptation of the family's traditional mesmeric powers. Yet his inherited desire for the Pyncheon family's extinction is ultimately overcome by his love for the redemptive figure of Phoebe, whose name suggests the blessings of both sunlight and Christianity, based on Saint Paul's reference in Romans to "Phebe our sister" who is a "servant of the church" and "succourer of many."¹¹ Early in their acquaintance, Holgrave shows Phoebe a daguerreotype of the judge, which she mistakes for the portrait of the Puritan colonel in the parlor and which he himself sees as visible proof of the outwardly benignant judge's hypocrisy: "Here we have the man, sly, subtle, hard, imperious, and, withal, cold as ice." The psychological burden of his ancestral feud prompts Holgrave to denounce, in outspoken Jeffersonian and Emersonian terms, the dead weight of the past that "lies upon the Present like a giant's dead body" and controls its legal, cultural, medical, and religious traditions.¹²

The judge makes his first appearance in chapter 8, where his chief vices are immediately displayed to the reader. Especially notable are his inordinate greed and his strong fleshly desires, as indicated by his striking physical bulk and his oversexed attempt to kiss Phoebe: "The man, the sex, somehow or other, was entirely too prominent in the Judge's demonstrations of that sort."¹³ As the chief villain of the narrative, he embodies the immorality that began with the colonel's selfish act of dispossession, but now the attempt to dispossess is directed at his cousin Clifford, whom the judge thinks has some knowledge of the large portion of the older Jaffrey's estate that he believes was never passed down to him as his uncle's sole heir. His gratuitous and delusive desire for an increase in his already substantial wealth is equivalent to the colonel's desire for the vast property in Maine that he was on the verge of obtaining before his death. Indeed, the legendary wealth that the judge believes is missing from his uncle's estate is that identical tract of land. (Holgrave later reveals the obsolete deed to the property moldering behind the picture of the original Pyncheon patriarch, hidden there by Thomas Maule.) As the judge tells Hepzibah in chapter 17, he had arranged Clifford's release from imprisonment solely to ferret out this information—an act of supreme hypocrisy and moral depravity because, as we discover in the last chapter, the judge himself was responsible for sending Clifford to prison to cover up his own crime.

In this meeting with Hepzibah, which takes place during the judge's second and last visit to the house, Phoebe is no longer present to act as a moderating influence on his behavior, and the judge becomes more intimidating, threatening to have Clifford

institutionalized as revenge for withholding information about their uncle's estate, and revealing to Hepzibah that he has suborned a number of spies to report back about his cousin's eccentric behavior. Although she vigorously scolds him for desiring more money when he is already inordinately rich and for his ancestral "hard and grasping spirit," he insists on interviewing Clifford and goes to wait for him in the parlor chair where his ancestor was discovered with his bloody beard and ruff.¹⁴ Here he falls victim to the hereditary apoplexy, suffering the same darkening of countenance and lethal hemorrhage as his Puritan ancestor did and thereby fulfilling the curse of the original Maule acting in the role of divine nemesis.

Chapter 18 of *The House of the Seven Gables*, in which the narrator relentlessly taunts the seated corpse of Judge Pyncheon, may invite contradictory responses from the reader. On one level, we relish the narrator's relentless exposure and verbal punishment of the novel's chief villain, whose ominous shadow has loomed over the Pyncheon residence from early in the narrative. On the other hand, the virtuosity of the narrator's detailed survey of the judge's worldly sins seems to be literary and moral overkill. What has been missing from analyses of the chapter, however, is awareness of the rich theological, homiletic, and moral texture of the narrator's scathing portrait of the dead judge.¹⁵ For it is a virtuosic display of moralized rhetoric from the contemporary convention of the didactic death mixed with traditions of Puritan and evangelical sermonizing and a host of biblical proof texts and literary allusions. The chapter performs a scathing dissection of Judge Pyncheon's soul while celebrating the providential extinction of the novel's chief villain through an implied act of divine retribution.

The most striking fact here is that the judge's manner of death violates all of the desired features of the contemporary evangelical idea of a good or beautiful death. For he makes no preparation for mortality, has no family immediately present, receives no visit from the ministry, offers no confession of sins or preparation for the afterlife, and shares no memorably consolatory words or actions. His closest living relatives, Hepzibah and Clifford, flee from his hateful presence once they discover his body; in fact, the only living creatures that eventually appear are a mouse that momentarily "seems to meditate a journey of exploration over this great, black bulk" and a fly that "is creeping over the bridge of his nose, towards the would-be chief-magistrate's wide-open eyes!"¹⁶ Instead of being surrounded by devoted family members or friends, his body is violated by common household pests—a graphic reminder of the traditional idea of death as the great leveler.

The judge's unholy death clearly invites us to picture his damnation, for the whole chapter is devoted to an elaborate demonstration that he has failed to do anything in his life to merit salvation. With his varied rhetorical devices, the narrator is implicitly simulating the role of a contemporary evangelical preacher attempting to convert a seasoned sinner who is sitting on the "anxious seat," except that this corpse will never rise from his ancestral chair to accept Christ into his life and avoid damnation. In addition, the narrator's tactical obliviousness to the truth of the judge's lifeless condition potentially parodies the era's sentimental denial of the ugly facts of human mortality, even as the traditional pious vigil over the corpse is replaced by a ghost-filled ritual of humiliation.

The narrator begins his remarks by assuming that the judge is merely asleep, an ironic strategy with a biblical prototype that allows the narrator to address the judge as a

living individual. For a comparable insult to a hated enemy is evident in the story of the prophet Elijah's contest with King Ahab's 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, in which the Hebrew prophet challenges the prophets of the foreign to god to send fire down from heaven to consume a sacrificed bullock. The Israelite prophet then taunts the inert foreign god who fails to respond to his prophets' appeal: "And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awakened.¹⁷

As we read through the list of the various appointments that the judge is missing by sleeping in his chair, we increasingly understand that the narrator is tracking the ironic distance between the judge's moral laxity and the corrupt state of his soul. Many features of the narrator's exhortations recall key aspects of Christian tradition, especially its admonitions about the brevity and vanity of mortal life and its encouragement for Christians to shun the triple temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil.¹⁸ For instance, the narrator reports on the judge's confident projection of living for another two or three decades: "With his firm health, and the little inroad that age has made upon him, fifteen years, or twenty—yes, or perhaps five-and-twenty!—are no more than he may fairly call his own." The judge, according to the narrator, has assured himself that his recent signs of ill health are nothing to worry about: "A mere dimness of sight and dizziness of brain, was it?—or a disagreeable choking, or stifling, or gurgling, or bubbling, in the region of the thorax, as the anatomists say?" The judge would presumably merely laugh over "such trifles" with his doctor, but such dismissal fails to anticipate the mortal "crimson stain upon his shirt-bosom" that now marks his sinful inert body. The narrator also considers the well-known Christian theme of the vanity of life, as evident in the gradual disappearance of the dead man's face and body into the shades of night as the light fades from the window: "The features are all gone; there is only the paleness of them left. And how looks it now? There is no window! There is no face!"¹⁹ The judge thus literally and figuratively has vanished into nothingness.

Resisting the varied powers of the "world" forms an integral part of evangelical Christian tradition, but here the narrator's representation of the deceased Judge Pyncheon exhibits not their resistance but their active promotion in his life.²⁰ Thus, we hear of the many appointments and activities that he had planned for the day, including a visit to an insurance office, a bank directors' meeting, a meeting with a State Street broker, a real estate auction, the purchase of a new horse, the meeting of a charitable society, the arrangement for an order of fruit trees, his donation to a political committee, and finally attendance at an elaborate political dinner that might lead to his nomination for governor. Making the judge into almost a caricature of Mammon, the narrator advises him to attend his bank directors' meeting: "Let him go thither, and loll at ease upon his money-bags! He has lounged long enough in the old chair."²¹ The comment is a sardonic confirmation of what Christ taught in the Sermon on the Mount: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."²²

In Christian tradition, the believer is taught to mortify the desires of the flesh and live in the spirit.²³ But rather than fighting against carnal appetites, Judge Pyncheon seems to embody them: "It was he, you know, of whom it used to be said, in reference to his ogre-like appetite, that his Creator made him a great animal, but that the dinner-hour made him a great beast. Persons of his large sensual endowments must claim indulgence, at their feeding-time." As the narrator notes, by lingering in his chair, the judge is going

to miss an important political dinner that will offer a host of delicious viands: “Real turtle, we understand, and salmon, tautog, canvass-backs, pig, English mutton, good roast-beef, or dainties of that serious kind, fit for substantial country-gentlemen, as these honorable persons mostly are.” The word *substantial* here does double-duty, indicating both personal wealth and physical bulk. At the dinner, too, will be “a brand of old Madeira” that is “a glorious wine, fragrant, and full of gentle might; a bottled-up happiness, put by for use, a golden liquid, worth more than liquid gold; so rare and admirable, that veteran wine-bibbers count it among their epochs to have tasted it!” The wine is depicted as a kind of sacred elixir of life, as the narrator ironically implies: “It would all but revive a dead man! Would you like to sip it now, Judge Pyncheon?”²⁴

The last of the trio of Christian moral prohibitions relates to the devil, an ironic figure in this case because the judge, being a “subtile, worldly, selfish, iron-hearted hypocrite,” would seem to be already in the devil’s grip.²⁵ The hellish Dantean atmosphere of the house, as the night darkens to blackness and the wind shrieks like the damned, clearly evokes the devil’s domain, while the corpse seems to be under the influence of malign enchantment. Significantly, after the judge has declined to get out of his oaken chair, and after a parade of his ancestors has emerged in the moonlight before the portrait of the colonel, a mouse at the foot of his chair is scared away by the sudden appearance of a cat in the window: “This Grimalkin has a very ugly look. Is it a cat watching for a mouse, or the Devil for a human soul?” The ambiguity of the question hints that both possibilities may be true. Grimalkin was the nickname for an evil-looking female cat, often considered to be the demonic familiar of witches, a tradition originating in Scottish folklore. The name is invoked by one of the three witches in the first scene of *Macbeth*, and a few other traces of Shakespeare’s Scottish tragedy relating to damnation can also be found in chapter 18 of Hawthorne’s novel, as when the narrator says to the judge’s body, echoing Macbeth’s final despairing soliloquy on the meaningless of life: “You have lost a day. But tomorrow will be her anon. Will you rise, betimes, and make the most of it? Tomorrow! Tomorrow! Tomorrow!”²⁶ The ghostly procession of Judge Pyncheon’s ancestors, with the ironic and mocking peripheral presence of the ghost of Thomas Maule, is also comparable to the ironic procession of eight kings, presented by the weird sisters and negating Macbeth’s claim to the crown of Scotland. The judge’s ancestors are associated with “the looking-glass, which, you are aware, is always a kind of window or door-way into the spiritual world”; likewise, in the “show” of eight kings, Banquo appears with a looking glass in his hand, a sign of his long and secure line of descent.²⁷ And just as Macbeth’s overweening ambition to rule Scotland is now shown to be futile, so will Judge Pyncheon’s family dynasty end with the death overseas of his only son, Jaffrey. Hence the judge’s wealth will ironically revert to Clifford, Hepzibah, and Phoebe—another illustration of the traditional biblical theme, expounded by Ecclesiastes, of the vanity of human wishes.

It is thus appropriate that the narrator’s earlier injunctions for the judge to get up out of his chair include a timely reminder of the Last Judgment: “We, that are alive, may rise betimes tomorrow. As for him that has died to-day, his tomorrow will be the resurrection-morn.” The narrator in fact hints at the judge’s hellish future: “An infinite, inscrutable blackness has annihilated sight! Where is our universe? All crumbled away from us; and we, adrift in chaos, may hearken to the gusts of homeless wind, that go sighing and murmuring about, in quest of what was once a world!” In this Dantean

universe of chaotic wind and infernal night, as in the windy upper reaches of the *Inferno*, the soul and body of the judge seem to be entering “the blackness of darkness forever,” as the text of Jude describes damnation. In the meantime, the subversive ticking of the judge’s watch—“this little, quiet, never-ceasing throb of Time’s pulse”—adds a Poe-like note of terror to the scene of gathering night.²⁸

Before he has finished criticizing the judge and just as the morning sun enters the room, the narrator, in a series of pointed questions, makes a final appeal to the illustrious figure in the chair, asking, for example, whether he will “go forth a humbled and repentant man, sorrowful, gentle, seeking no profit, shrinking from worldly honor, hardly daring to love God, but bold to love his fellow-man, and to do him what good he may?”²⁹ The narrator’s eloquent exhortations duplicate Saint Paul’s well-known teachings in Romans to the early Christian community: “Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.”³⁰ Such an ideal of Christian behavior is obviously impossible in this case, and therefore the narrator’s final injunction has a harsher, more aggressive tone: “Rise up, Judge Pyncheon! The morning sunshine glimmers through the foliage, and, beautiful and holy as it is, shuns not to kindle up your face. Rise up, thou subtle, worldly, selfish, iron-hearted hypocrite, and make thy choice, whether still to be subtle, worldly, selfish, iron-hearted, and hypocritical, or to tear these sins out of thy nature, though they bring the life-blood with them! The Avenger is upon thee! Rise up, before it be too late!”³¹

The narrator’s sermonic appeal for a final deathbed conversion offers a stark choice between redemption and damnation, the latter hinted by the narrator’s association of the word *subtile* with the judge, for it recalls the serpent of Eden, which “was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made.”³² The verbal parallel confirms earlier diabolical associations with the judge, such as those found in chapter 8. He can hardly be expected to tear out the sins from his nature because he has shown no sign of repentance in his life and is obviously beyond hope. He has thus merited the avenging spirit of Christ as judge, as evoked by Saint Paul, who urged that “no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such.”³³ Judge Pyncheon has defrauded his cousin Clifford of thirty years of freedom and can expect the worst from Christ the avenger. Significantly, in the passage in Ephesians that originated the Christian idea of the need to oppose the unholy trinity of the world, the flesh, and the devil, Saint Paul similarly claimed that God’s love enabled those who were “dead in sins” to be “quickened” and “raised” by Christ.³⁴ Judge Pyncheon, however, is both figuratively and literally “dead in sins” and will never be raised.

Following their discovery of the judge’s death, Hepzibah and Clifford flee the house, for the latter is desperate to get away from the monstrous presence of the cousin who ruined his life. On the morning after they leave, readers witness the puzzlement of various members of the community as they discover that the house is empty and Hepzibah’s cent shop is closed. In a passage worthy of Flaubert, the narrator notes the ironic contrast between the mundane nature of the town’s daily social and commercial activities and the terrifying existential abyss of death: “Had any observer of these proceedings been aware of the fearful secret, hidden within the house, it would have

affected him with a singular shape and modification of horror, to see the current of human life making this small eddy hereabouts;—whirling sticks, straws, and all such trifles, round and round, right over the black depth where a dead corpse lay unseen.”³⁵ Just as the local community was mystified and disturbed by the dead colonel’s absence at the celebration of his new mansion (in chapter 1), their descendants—young Ned Higgins, the local butcher, and others—are bewildered and frustrated by the closed house. But when Phoebe returns that day from her summer sojourn with her family, a semblance of normal life returns to the mansion. After earlier taking a daguerreotype of the judge’s corpse in the morning light of the parlor, Holgrave then shows her the image in order to apprise her of her relative’s decease while clarifying for her the natural cause of death.

In the judge’s constitutionally inherited apoplexy and its resemblance to his uncle’s death three decades earlier, Holgrave sees indelible proof of Clifford’s retroactive innocence. Morally, Holgrave is now free of the desire for revenge against the Pyncheon patriarch whose criminal family history has marginalized and then extinguished the rest of the Maule lineage, and he proposes to Phoebe, only later revealing his secret family identity in the final chapter. With her acceptance and the safe return of Hepzibah and Clifford, a new and redeemed Pyncheon family is now possible. The ancestral curse is lifted through the judge’s grotesque and punitive death and Holgrave’s spiritual redemption. The newly constituted family of four will remove itself from the ancestral house as an act of reparation to the ghost of Matthew Maule, and they will inherit the rest of Judge’s Pyncheon’s fortune (minus the delusive land claim in Maine), which represents legal restitution to Clifford as the original heir of the bachelor uncle and to Holgrave (via Phoebe) as the last living descendent of the legally oppressed Maules. The much-criticized conclusion of the novel is thus controlled by the logic of poetic justice and the conventions of comic reconciliation. Hence, the common critical predictions of inevitable troubles for the newly united Pyncheon-Maule family are needlessly churlish, notwithstanding the obligatory moralizing of Hawthorne’s preface.³⁶

In the novel’s dénouement, Holgrave reveals the full truth behind the façade of the judge’s reputation and his responsibility for inadvertently causing his uncle’s death and then arranging matters so that Clifford took the blame. This truth then filters into the community, along with the ugly reality of the judge’s manner of dying: “It is very singular, how the fact of a man’s death often seems to give people a truer idea of his character, whether for good or evil, than they have ever possessed while he was living and acting among them.”³⁷ The revelations bring out the truth of the judge’s greed and hypocrisy, as in the antebellum tradition of the didactic death, which points to the individual’s authentic moral nature and likely postmortem fate. From the perspective of the final chapter, we now know that the judge has richly merited the rhetorical assault he received in chapter 18, which has acted as the narrator’s condign moral punishment and serves as a counterpart to the earlier exposure of the colonel’s damnable sins. Part of our enjoyment of reading *The House of the Seven Gables* henceforth should be an appreciation of the author’s employment of relevant biblical texts and Christian homiletic traditions manifested in the novel’s two memorable scenes of unholy dying.

1 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Letters, 1843–1853*, ed. Thomas Woodson, L. Neal Smith, and Norman Holmes Pearson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985), 421; David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York:

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- Knopf, 1988), 86–88, 126, 269–70; David S. Reynolds, *Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981). For overviews of the literary, historical, and biographical backgrounds of *The House of the Seven Gables*, see Peter Buitenhuis, “*The House of the Seven Gables*”: Severing Family and Colonial Ties (Boston: Hall, 1991); Bernard Rosenthal, ed., *Critical Essays on “The House of the Seven Gables”* (Boston: Hall, 1995); and Jonathan A. Cook, ““The Most Satisfactory Villain That Ever Was”: Charles W. Upham and *The House of the Seven Gables*,” *New England Quarterly* 88 (June 2015): 252–85.
- 2 See David E. Stannard, ed., *Death in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974); James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); and Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799–1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
- 3 See Kathryn Gin Lum, *Damned Nation: Hell in America from the Revolution to Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), especially chap. 2; and Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), especially chap. 5. On the “new measures” and “anxious seat,” see Hambrick-Stowe, *Finney*, 38–39, 108–09. On the Four Last Things, see Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- 4 See David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789–1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
- 5 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, ed. Robert S. Levine (New York: Norton, 2006), 7, 8, 9.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 1 Kings 17–22. Here and throughout, all biblical quotations refer to the King James Version. On *The House of the Seven Gables* and King Ahab, see Robert Clark, *History, Ideology, and Myth in American Fiction, 1823–1852* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 124–31; and Buitenhuis, *House of the Seven Gables*, 61.
- 9 Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 18.
- 10 On the Salem murder, see Robert Booth, *Death of an Empire: The Rise and Murderous Fall of Salem, America’s Richest City* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2011), chaps. 12–17. Also see John Cyril Barton, *Literary Executions: Capital Punishment and American Culture, 1820–1925* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), chap. 4. Barton has analyzed Hawthorne’s novel in relation to contemporary debates over the nature of evidence for the conviction of capital crimes, as illustrated by the Salem murder as well as the equally notorious 1850 Webster murder case in Boston. For more on Hawthorne’s fictional use of the Salem murder, see Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 250–52; and Cook, “Most Satisfactory Villain,” 279–80.
- 11 Romans 16:1–2.
- 12 Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 67, 130. On the role of the daguerreotype in the novel, see Alan Trachtenberg, “Seeing and Believing: Hawthorne’s Reflections on the Daguerreotype in *The House of the Seven Gables*,” *American Literary History* 9 (October 1997): 460–81; Michael C. Frank, “Photographing Ghosts: Ancestral Reproduction and Daguerreotypic Mimesis in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*,” *Literaria Pragensia* 17 (January 2007): 34–57; Stuart Burrows, *A Familiar Strangeness: American Fiction and the Language of Photography, 1839–1945* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), chap. 1; and Marcy J. Dinius, *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), chap. 2.
- 13 Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 85.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 168.

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- 15 See, for example, Peter J. Bellis, *Writing Revolution: Aesthetics and Politics in Hawthorne, Whitman, and Thoreau* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 39–41; Roberta Weldon, *Hawthorne, Gender, and Death: Christianity and Its Discontents* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 74–78; Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 267–69; Barton, *Literary Executions*, 170–72; and Dinius, *Camera and Press*, 51–61.
- 16 Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 198, 200.
- 17 1 Kings 18:27. Following Elijah’s invocation to the Hebrew god, a divine fire consumes the sacrifice and the prophets of Baal are all slain for their immoral imposture.
- 18 Psalms 39:5–16, 49:6–20, 90; Ecclesiastes 1, 2, 12; Ephesians 2:1–6; 1 John 2:15–16. For background, see Patrick Cullen, *Infernal Triad: The Flesh, the World, and the Devil in Spenser and Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).
- 19 Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 190, 192, 194, 195.
- 20 John 17; Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 2:6–8; 1 Timothy 6:17–19; 1 John 2:15, 5:19.
- 21 Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 190.
- 22 Matthew 6:21.
- 23 Romans 8:5–13; Galatians 5:24–25; 1 Peter 1:24.
- 24 Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 194, 192–93.
- 25 Matthew 4:1–11; 2 Corinthians 2:11; Ephesians 6:12–17; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8–9; Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 199.
- 26 Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 198, 194.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 198; William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 4.1.119–20, in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
- 28 Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 194, 195.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 199.
- 30 Romans 13:10–12.
- 31 Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 199.
- 32 Genesis 3:1.
- 33 1 Thessalonians 4:6.
- 34 Ephesians 2:1–6.
- 35 Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 205.
- 36 For older but still relevant defenses of the artistic integrity of the novel and its conclusion, see Francis Joseph Battaglia, “*The House of the Seven Gables*: New Light on Old Problems,” *PMLA* 82 (December 1967): 579–90; and Edwin G. Eigner, *The Metaphysical Novel in England and America: Dickens, Bulwer, Hawthorne, Melville* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 99–109.
- 37 Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 218.