Hawthorne is said to have preferred *The House of the Seven Gables* to its immediate predecessor, *The Scarlet Letter*. Though not many would agree with him, his satisfaction is understandable. *The Scarlet Letter* was a "hell-fired" story with a crushing sense of fatality; it was, as Hawthorne said in the novel's final words, a somber legend, relieved like the escutcheon on Hester Prynne's tomb "only by one everglowing point of light gloomier than the shadow." *The Seven Gables*
has a similar initial effect of grimness. Yet Hawthorne was able to bring the book to "a prosperous close"—to cross the gap he had established in his writing, and yet was always seeking to bridge, between the imaginary and the actual, the haunted gray New England past and "our own broad daylight."

He was entitled to feel that he had accomplished this and more in The Seven Gables. While the detail and the implications of the plot are complex, the essential outline is simple. It is a "powerful" story, originating in the wrong done to Matthew Maule by Colonel Pyncheon, somewhere near the end of the seventeenth century, in having him hanged for witchcraft. The consequences reverberate down through the decades. The Pyncheon family, persisting in pride and greed, is persistently punished. Moral and physical heredity march together. The Pyncheons whose conduct and appearance resemble those of Colonel Pyncheon die in the same hideous manner, as if under the same curse as that pronounced on the Colonel by the condemned "wizard"—"God will give him blood to drink!" The scheme likewise enables Hawthorne to trace the decline of the Pyncheons; for those members of the family who are not hard and covetous become increasingly ineffectual and impoverished. The curse is dissipated when Holgrave and Phoebe, the youngest representatives of the Maule and Pyncheon families, fall in love and marry. One other subsidiary problem is solved: Holgrave reveals to the Pyncheons the secret hiding-place of title deeds to an immense tract of land secured long ago by Colonel Pyncheon—papers missing ever since his death. They are quite worthless, and have been for at least a century. But it is important for the symmetry of the story that the family—as represented by the dreamy Clifford Pyncheon and his crabbed but harmless sister Hepzibah—should face this fact. All is now reconciled. Evil plans, vain illusions are dispelled; the past is past.
The drama of the Maules and Pyncheons allows Hawthorne to develop three wider ideas about family and heredity, which can be summarized as follows:

1. An evil deed may have far-reaching consequences.
2. Family pride and acquisitiveness are deplorable, whether or not they involve wrongdoing.
3. Family pride, even where not actively harmful, is absurdly out of place in the American context of rapid social change.

These notions, which for convenience may be labeled Evil, Lineage, and Impermanence, matter a good deal to Hawthorne. In *The Seven Gables* each is stated more than once, as for instance in the following quotations (taken respectively from the Preface, from comments by Holgrave, and from an interpolated observation by the author):

1. Evil: "... The wrongdoing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and ... becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief. . . ."
2. Lineage: "To plant a family! The idea is at the bottom of most of the wrong and mischief which men do."
3. Impermanence: "In this republican country, amid the fluctuating waves of our social life, somebody is always at the drowning point. The tragedy is enacted with as continual a repetition as that of a popular drama on a holiday."

It is not surprising that such dicta should figure in Hawthorne's work since they were aspects of the history of his own family. "The Fall of the House of Pyncheon," says Austin Warren, "was the Hawthornes' fall." The first of Hawthorne's Salem ancestors, William Hathorne, and his son, John Hathorne, were dynasts of dubious renown. As magistrates, they had handed out harsh justice against the Quakers. A fellow judge of John
Hawthorne, indeed, had sentenced a Quaker named Thomas Maule to imprisonment in 1695. Three years earlier, Judge Hathorne had played an active part in the Salem witch trials. According to tradition, he had been cursed by one of the victims, though in fact the curse had been aimed at his colleague Nicholas Noyes, to whom the accused woman said, "I am no more a witch, than you are a wizard;—and if you take away my life, God will give you blood to drink." In the introductory section of The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne wrote of John Hathorne:

[He] made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him. . . . I know not whether these ancestors of mine bethought themselves to repent, and ask pardon of Heaven for their cruelties; or whether they are now groaning under the heavy consequences of them, in another state of being. At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them—as I have heard, and as the dreary and unpromising condition of the race, for many a long year back, would argue to exist—may be now and henceforth removed.

During the trials of 1692, John Hathorne and another judge had arrested John English and his wife on charges of witchcraft. The bad feeling that resulted between the two families was patched over many years later through the marriage of a grandson of Judge Hathorne with a great-granddaughter of John English. The English house, one of several substantial old homes in Salem that may have served as a model for the House of the Seven Gables, passed into the possession of a Hathorne. Grand but decaying, it stood empty in Hawthorne's youth, and was finally pulled down in 1833.

Other elements in the novel lie close to Hawthorne's heritage. The Pyncheon claim to the huge Indian tract in Waldo County,
Maine, had its counterpart in Hawthorne family legend. From his great-uncle Ebenezer Hathorne, the novelist heard a curiously mixed stock of anecdotes and theories: a combination of pride in family genealogy and of “the most arrant democracy.” Like the reformer Thomas Skidmore, Ebenezer believed that “nobody ought to possess wealth longer than his own lifetime, and that it should return to the people.” Hawthorne himself, though skeptical of radical proposals, was equivocally involved in them. “Brook Farmer,” brother-in-law of the transcendentalist bluestocking Elizabeth Peabody, contributor to the Democratic Review, avowed Democrat who owed his appointment as “loco­foco Surveyor” of the Port of Salem to party favor—Hawthorne was well versed in all the current arguments about privilege and egalitarianism. Great-uncle Hathorne’s “arrant” views, and to some extent those of Nathaniel himself, appear in Holgrave’s outburst to Phoebe Pyncheon:

“Shall we never, never get rid of this Past? . . . It lies upon the Present like a giant’s dead body! In fact, the case is just as if a young giant were compelled to waste all his strength in carrying about the corpse of the old giant, his grandfather, who died a long while ago, and only needs to be decently buried. . . .

“The truth is, that, once in every half century, at longest, a family should be merged into the great, obscure mass of humanity, and forget all about its ancestors. . . .”

Events in family history probably account for some of the details in “Peter Goldthwaite’s Treasure” (1838), the short story in which Hawthorne lightly anticipates The Seven Gables and, in particular, the novel’s third theme, Impermanence, i.e., the absurdity of delusions of grandeur. As for Phoebe, she is a version of the purity, femininity, and cheerfulness that Hawthorne found in his own bride, Sophia Peabody, whom he
had nicknamed “Phoebe” in the early years of their marriage. 

The Seven Gables, then, was an exercise in the arrangement of a cluster of conceptions which had an intimate significance for Hawthorne. Some critics have found it—in comparison with The Scarlet Letter—a rather straggling, episodic novel. Hawthorne himself might properly have shared the view of more enthusiastic students that the book is economical, ingenious, and structurally sound. Though a far longer span of time is covered than in The Scarlet Letter, the historical preliminaries are swiftly despatched. True, the tale of Alice Pyncheon, which is supposed to have been written by Holgrave, takes the narrative back again into the past. But unlike many of the plots within plots casually inserted in the novels of Hawthorne’s day, this one can be defended as a deliberate device: it reveals the intensity of Holgrave’s interest in the Maule-Pyncheon history and points the contrast between Holgrave’s magnanimity and the wickedness, under a similar temptation, of his necromantic ancestor, Maule the carpenter. If it is hard to say who is the main character of the novel, at any rate Hawthorne makes do with a very small cast. Each character, except perhaps for Holgrave, “stands” for something distinct. Apart from the brief railroad excursion of Clifford and Hepzibah, the whole action is confined to the central setting: the House of the Seven Gables built by Colonel Pyncheon on the land he has wrested from the Maules. Here the Colonel dies, seated in his high-backed chair in the parlor, under his own portrait. The scene is re-enacted near the end of the novel, in the almost identical death of Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon. Battered, fading, increasingly irrelevant to and estranged from the life of the street outside, the House symbolizes the fate of its owners. It nicely accommodates various subordinate symbols: Alice Pyncheon’s harpsichord, unused and out of tune; Alice’s exotic flowers, surviving in a neglected crevice; the ruined garden; the ludicrous inbred
fowls that wander there; the brackish well that was once pure.

Yet though the House is a witness of terrible events, Hawthorne does not avail himself of the opportunity to endow it with sinister properties. There are no ghosts, or none whose presence is intrusive. Despite the wild words of Holgrave and Clifford—on the need to tear down, to cleanse by fire, and so on—Hawthorne avoids the melodramatic and lurid finale he could have contrived. There is no collapse, no conflagration. The House remains. It matters to the story, as the Mississippi matters in Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. But like the Mississippi, it is ultimately no more than a witness, a physical fact. Human beings are the determinant. Holgrave and Phoebe can bring brightness to the House; Alice Pyncheon's flowers can still come to bloom. In the logic of the story, we must assume that the House will no longer be lived in. It can be left to disintegrate, slowly and naturally, like the actual Salem house of the English family.

This is Hawthorne's "prosperous close." Some critics think the last chapter of *The Seven Gables* as inappropriately jolly as the closing section of *Huckleberry Finn*. The denouement reminds one exasperated commentator of Artemus Ward's account of the "Osowatomie Brown" show:

Tabloo—Old Brown on a platform, pintin upards, the staige lited up with red fire. Goddiss of Liberty also on platform, pintin upards. A dutchman in the orkestry warbles on a base drum. Curtin falls. Moosic by the band. 1

Hawthorne's final chapter may indeed be considered too "stagey." But whatever one's reservations about his last few pages, we may agree that the general effect was intended. Twain—to continue with the comparison, now that it has been introduced—interrupted the composition of *Huckleberry Finn* for a period of several years: Hawthorne wrote *The Seven
Gables in a single undistracted five-month spell. Twain often improvised from one sequence to the next: Hawthorne traced the ramifications of his germinal idea with scrupulous care. We never feel that he has taken himself by surprise, any more than he expects or attempts to surprise the reader. Where everything is so contrived, so fore-known, we do not even ask that the characters should express astonishment. Nor do they: when Holgrave discloses to Phoebe, his betrothed, that he is really named Maule, she reacts as though she has known this all along. In Henry James's phrase, "Hawthorne always knew perfectly what he was about."

True, there is the famous Hawthorne ambiguity, or what Yvor Winters has called his "formula of alternative possibilities." This may lead him into, or help to conceal, certain dilemmas; I will deal with these later. But in intent and in effect, the formula does not lead to mystification. On the contrary, it codifies and clarifies. Broadly speaking, Hawthorne's method is to provide two main sets of explanations, a natural and a supernatural. Thus, in The House of the Seven Gables, the supernatural explanation is that Maule's curse accounts for the death of no less than four Pyncheons, from the Colonel down to the Judge, and brings about subsidiary phenomena such as the tainting of Maule's well. The alternative, "natural" possibility is that the Pyncheons have a hereditary tendency to death by apoplexy, heightened, perhaps, by fits of guilty conscience: a belief in the validity of the legendary curse may reinforce their congenital weakness. Affairs seem to be shrouded in mystery; statements are qualified by a host of "perhapses" and "possibllys." Yet the main alternatives are clear. Hawthorne is at pains to supply each set with adequate supporting evidence, so that each is self-contained and self-consistent. The reader may, of course, complain that the result is irritating if not bewildering. Each alternative is alluded to often enough to
acquire status. If one must be discarded, is this not a wasteful technique? The answer, I think, is that Hawthorne wishes us to entertain both sets of explanations, so far as we can. They are meant to support rather than clash with one another. They are not so much alternative as complementary possibilities.

In Hawthorne's eyes, *The House of the Seven Gables* would meet such a test: indeed, would be admirably suited to his characteristic formula. Fact and fancy overlap. As Holgrave tells Phoebe, he shares Hepzibah's conviction that all the calamities of the Pyncheons began with the quarrel with the "wizard" Matthew Maule. He believes it "not as a superstition, however, but as proved by unquestionable facts." Holgrave and Phoebe represent modernity. They are almost free from the operations of the curse. Perhaps Phoebe is entirely free; she asks Holgrave how he can believe "what is so very absurd." But though he lives in a more rational and optimistic moral climate than his forebears, Holgrave is linked to them by possessing a mesmeric gift akin to their talent for necromancy. Mesmerism is both a new discovery (described by Clifford, in his hectic conversation with the old gentleman in the train, as one of the "harbingers of a better era") and an ancient potency. A neat double explanation, then, for Hawthorne; and with the additional advantage of enabling him to introduce one of his favorite parallels—that of the artist and the necromancer. Art, Hawthorne likes to hint, frequently has a tinge of the black art; there is something wicked, or at the very least something deficient, in the cold scrutinizing detachment of the artist-intellectual. It is a quality which mars Holgrave: a quality for which Hawthorne supplies a genealogy, so to speak, in Holgrave's Maule ancestry. In becoming a normal, happy, married man, thanks to Phoebe, he can leave behind a heritage of chilly separateness.

The framework of *The Seven Gables* allows Hawthorne to
explore two human types that held a particular fascination for him. They might be called the impotent and the overweening. For the one, typified by Clifford and Hepzibah Pyncheon, he expresses a remarkably sensitive sympathy. For the other, typified by Jaffrey Pyncheon, he conveys an almost ferocious scorn. In these character-studies, Hawthorne ranges far beyond the mechanisms of the plot. He is a connoisseur of the broken spirit, the vain regret, the self-indulgence, and all the other subterfuges of failure. It has often been pointed out that he is more interested in adversity than in prosperity. The metaphor he employs to describe social change is of drowning. Its effect is to exclude those who are rising in the social scale; for in water, the best one can hope for is merely to stay afloat. A robuster sense of the beneficent features of change invades his argument. He is whimsical, even jocular, in depicting Hepzibah's transformation from patrician lady to plebeian woman. The situation is, he suggests, somewhat ludicrous. Nevertheless it is a "tragedy" of the everyday. We are much more sorry for Hepzibah than amused by her; and there is a genuine pathos in poor, bemused, ineffectual Clifford. The shock of their exposure to the outside world is beautifully conveyed in their railroad excursion—half flight, half liberation, and hopeless in either case.

Jaffrey Pyncheon is a more solid, more memorable portrait, belonging firmly to the province of the novelist, where Clifford and Hepzibah suggest the essayist side of Hawthorne. Pyncheon is a classic type. He is the kind of man we are warned against in the Bible (Luke 20:46):

Beware of the scribes, which desire to walk in long robes, and love greetings in the markets, and the highest seats in the synagogues, and chief rooms at feasts.

Hawthorne may feel uncertain whether to lament or to welcome
the American social flux: he is quite certain that the busy, pompous, carnal, office-seeking Pyncheons are detestable, like all such persons, whether or not they have been actively wicked. Note the animus in Hawthorne's assessments of the Judge:

He had built himself a country seat within a few miles of his native town, and there spent such portions of his time as could be spared from public service in the display of every grace and virtue—as a newspaper phrased it, on the eve of an election—befitting the Christian, the good citizen, the horticulturist, and the gentleman.

As is customary with the rich, when they aim at the honors of a republic, he apologized, as it were, to the people, for his wealth, prosperity, and elevated station, by a free and hearty manner towards those who knew him; putting off the more of his dignity in due proportion with the humbleness of the man whom he saluted, and thereby proving a haughty consciousness of his advantages as irrefragably as if he had marched forth preceded by a troop of lackeys to clear the way.

The sudden death of so prominent a member of the social world as the Honorable Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon created a sensation (at least, in the circles more immediately connected with the deceased), which had hardly quite subsided in a fortnight.

These comments reveal a passion of distaste and a choleric mocking precision which are unusual in Hawthorne. No doubt they owe something to his own painful experience in being ousted from the surveyorship of Salem through the unsavory maneuvers of the Whig politician Charles Upham; and perhaps they throw light upon Hawthorne's complicated private defenses against worldly success. Whatever the origins of his feeling, he establishes and then destroys Judge Pyncheon with an expert relish. Villainous, vainglorious, and ultimately unimportant, Jaffrey Pyncheon embodies Hawthorne's three principal themes—Evil, Lineage, Impermanence—associated with family and
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There is a glittering, sardonic eloquence in the justly celebrated chapter which enumerates the various engagements that are being missed by Jaffrey, struck dead in the parlor of the old House. It is the revenge of the impotent against the overweening.

The House of the Seven Gables is remarkable, too, for a group of insights relating to the ideas of time and reality. Hawthorne endeavors to bring his story out into the daylight of the present day—or "an epoch not very remote from the present day": the era of railroads, daguerreotypes, "temperance lecturers," and "community men." Ned Higgins, the child with the passion for gingerbread, and Old Uncle Venner are firmly located in the now of Hawthorne's narrative, at the most commonplace level. The contemporariness of Holgrave and Phoebe is insisted upon (though it is a little hard to imagine this unaffected country girl obeying "the impulse of Nature," as Hawthorne drily says she does, "by attending a metaphysical or philosophical lecture"; here she sounds more like Sophia Peabody). Yet the character whose responses to now are most acutely analyzed is Clifford; and Clifford, like Rip Van Winkle or some victim of a time machine, is a person from another generation. Unjustly imprisoned for a crime he did not commit, Clifford has been in jail so long that he has missed half a lifetime. Returned to living after thirty years, he sees the world with the eyes of a boy: "his life seemed to be standing still at a period little in advance of childhood"; and in his dreams "he invariably played the part of a child, or a very young man." When he gazes from the arched window of the House of the Seven Gables, everything that has changed in the thirty-year interval startles him. Each time he hears the train approach and catches a glimpse of it, "flashing a brief transit across the extremity of the street," he is taken by surprise. The "terrible energy" it implies—so novel, and in such
contrast to his own passivity—alarms and defeats him. Clifford cannot cope with the present. For Hawthorne, too, in this novel, despite the jolly emphasis upon nowness, the present is either rather gross and cruel—witness the callous gossip of the street—or else, and above all, unreal. Hawthorne is wonderfully perceptive in his handling of Clifford, and brilliant in suggesting what the railroad signifies, not merely to Clifford. It symbolizes velocity, disturbance, dislocation. Other contemporaries were struck by the oddity of the new mode of travel: they could hardly fail to be. Emerson noted in his journal:

Dreamlike travelling on the railroad. The towns through which I pass . . . make no distinct impression. They are like pictures on a wall. The more, that you can read all the way in the car a French novel.¹⁰

Hawthorne makes a train journey serve as a more astonishing confrontation with the present; for Clifford and Hepzibah:

Everything was unfixed from its agelong rest, and moving at whirlwind speed in a direction opposite to their own.

The journey stimulates Clifford to a wild flight of fancy: a glimpse of a future in which life has become completely nomadic. This is an extreme revulsion from the past-haunted torpor of the House of the Seven Gables. It is only a momentary vision. The future is blank to him. But the present is equally unreal. To Clifford—and to the rest of us, Hawthorne seems to say—"this visionary and impalpable Now, . . . if you look closely at it, is nothing."

In other words, The House of the Seven Gables is a rich and closely textured epitome of themes that preoccupied Hawthorne. Even if one does not care for the general texture of Hawthorne’s prose, or for some of the elaborate figures and set-piece passages, one should add that there are many incidental
remarks which remind us how acute his novelist's intelligence could be. Here is an example:

A recluse, like Hepzibah, usually displays remarkable frankness, and at least temporary affability, on being absolutely cornered, and brought to the point of personal intercourse; like the angel whom Jacob wrestled with, she is ready to bless you when once overcome.

*The Seven Gables*, then, is a work of high interest, of which Hawthorne might justifiably have been proud.

But it raises questions that deserve a closer investigation. The qualities that have been listed are formidable. The crucial question is this: do they form a satisfactory whole? Or do they weaken one another? Does Hawthorne's formula provide an essential structure, or does it lead him into absurdities? Do we, in the final analysis, admire him for partial or oblique perceptions which, though no doubt envisaged in his structural scheme, remain somewhat extraneous, or which could better have been stated by other means? In his interweaving of natural and supernatural, environment and heredity, present and past, does he display a wise refusal to commit himself, or a rather sluggish reluctance to think clearly?

Let us consider the interior logic of Maule's curse. Colonel Pyncheon's motives are certainly mixed: he covets the property of the alleged wizard. But there is no indication that he feels he has sent an innocent man to his death. At the moment of being cursed, Pyncheon's countenance is "undismayed." A recent critic contends that Matthew Maule was entirely innocent of the charge of witchcraft: it is his ghost and his posterity who become witches.\(^{11}\) This is a way round an awkwardness in the plot. But even if conceivable, the theory accepts the existence of sinister forces: forces quite as evil as those typified by the covetous Colonel Pyncheon. If so, the Pyncheon de-
scendants are as much victims as aggressors; and their sins begin
to seem correspondingly less black. Is it not plausible to assume,
though, that the first Maule did have temperamental oddities
which, in the fevered atmosphere of the time, laid him open
to the accusation of wizardry? And that Pyncheon, not the only
one to suspect him, may have believed the accusation? Or that,
indeed, Maule was a witch, who reveals his diabolical gift by
encompassing Pyncheon’s death in the manner prophesied?
Hawthorne mentions the remote possibility that Pyncheon might
have been strangled. If so, presumably by Matthew Maule’s
son? But whether by family vengeance or by necromancy, was
Colonel Pyncheon’s death not enough to end the curse, which
as spoken by Matthew Maule seems directed only at the
Colonel—God will give him blood to drink—on the principle of
a life for a life? No: we learn later from the tale of Alice
Pyncheon, which Holgrave has written, that the curse will not
be lifted until the claim to the House of the Seven Gables has
been surrendered by the Pyncheons, even if the malediction
has to last a thousand years. We learn also from Holgrave
that the Maules have developed quite unmistakable necromantic
powers. The grandson and namesake of the “wizard” casts a
spell of “sinister or evil potency” upon the blameless Alice
Pyncheon and brings about her death through his own malev­
olence. The wizard’s carpenter son, whom Colonel Pyncheon
has engaged to build the new House of the Seven Gables upon
Maule’s plot of ground, exacts another revenge. He manages to
get hold of and conceal within the House the parchment deed
entitling the Pyncheons to their huge tract of Indian land.
Whether or not the title was honestly secured, they are deprived
of it by the Maules. Old Matthew’s vengeance would seem
dreadfully complete—indeed, excessively so.

What of the complementary, “natural” set of explanations?
Suppose that Hawthorne claims nothing more than the heredi-
tary transmission of certain characteristics, notably a hypnotic talent among the Maules and an apoplectic tendency among the Pyncheons (possibly intensified, as we have said, by accumulated superstitious anxieties). This view is offered near the end of the novel by Holgrave in reassuring Phoebe that Jaffrey Pyncheon has died a "natural" death:

"This mode of death has been an idiosyncrasy with his family, for generations past; not often occurring, indeed, but, when it does occur, usually attacking individuals about the Judge's time of life, and generally in the tension of some mental crisis, or, perhaps, in an access of wrath. Old Maule's prophecy was probably founded on a knowledge of this physical predisposition in the Pyncheon race."

It represents an ingenious interpretative modulation. And, as Daniel Hoffman points out, we may fall back upon the theory that the Maules have ceased to count: the curse has turned inward, so that the Pyncheons destroy themselves. Even so, some doubts linger, at any rate for me. It does not matter much whether aptitudes such as those of the Maules and disabilities such as those of the Pyncheons are in fact transmissible, or whether hypnotists can actually exercise so formidable an influence over their subjects. In Hawthorne's day these were plausible suppositions; and some years later, the "medicated" novels of Oliver Wendell Holmes were to place quite as great a strain upon the reader's credulity. But Holmes's aim is to raise an issue that Hawthorne passes over: namely, whether people ought to be held responsible for traits they have inherited. In what "natural" sense can the repeated deaths of the Pyncheons be regarded as a proof of their iniquity? And if Holgrave's final explanation is acceptable to him as well as to us, ought he and Phoebe not to consider the chance that their children may inherit the Pyncheon weakness?
One may answer that such conjectures make heavy going of Hawthorne's romance, with its deprecating, half-sober, half-magical mood; and that it was against just this sort of quibbling that he claimed immunity in designating his story as a romance, not a novel. But then, his alternatives are so carefully documented that he positively invites inspection, with something of the candor of a stage magician anxious that there be no deception. His elaborate scheme seems to raise as many difficulties as it solves, and to raise them unavoidably even if one would like to dismiss them. To me, the alternatives weaken instead of reinforcing one another.

This is partly a consequence of the interfusion of the three themes—Evil, Lineage, and Impermanence. The trouble is that the first two conflict with the third. Nor do the first two, Evil and Lineage, co-exist altogether comfortably. Evil, for Hawthorne, is an abstract force, working "inevitably," wreaking "uncontrollable" mischief. It is stylized, impersonal: something asserted, to be received without demonstration as a "truth." Abstractness is not necessarily an inappropriate mode for a certain kind of fiction; and indeed Hawthorne's story seeks to demonstrate its operation circumstantially. But he proceeds as if not wholly sure what to do with it. One clue is provided by Holgrave's statement, halfway through the story, that in the House of the Seven Gables, "through a portion of three centuries, there has been perpetual remorse of conscience, a constantly defeated hope, strife amongst kindred, various misery, a strange form of death, dark suspicion, unspeakable disgrace. . . ."

A portion of three centuries. What this means, strictly, is that the woes of the Pyncheons embrace a few years of the seventeenth century, the whole of the eighteenth, and about half of the nineteenth. If Holgrave spoke of this span as "a century and a half," it would have a less awesome effect. Hawthorne is anxious to dwell upon the enormity of the
Pyncheons' iniquities and misfortunes: they must entail prolonged duration—more prolonged, ideally, than the evidence of his own plot allows, and much more prolonged and catastrophic than the actual family history upon which he draws. The notion of Evil is meant to confer solemnity upon the less abstract notion of Lineage. To some extent it does, as when Hepzibah implores Jaffrey Pyncheon not to torment her enfeebled brother:

"Then, why, should you do this cruel, cruel thing? So mad a thing, that I know not whether to call it wicked! Alas, Cousin Jaffrey, this hard and grasping spirit has run in our blood these two hundred years [note again the slight stretching of duration]. You are but doing over again, in another shape, what your ancestor before you did, and sending down to your posterity the curse inherited from him!"

Here we are ready to believe that Hepzibah, at any rate, believes in the curse; just as we see nothing odd in Clifford’s allusion, when he and his sister are running away from their hateful kinsman, to Christian and Hopeful escaping from Giant Despair. Such attributions grow out of the fiber of the story. Too often, however, Evil operates as a didactic distortion. Hawthorne then is in danger of lapsing into copybook morality.

He is also in danger of bringing in too much solemnity, too much direness. Lineage itself tends to become an abstract notion, a subject for sermonizing language. We are assured in the Preface, for example, of “the folly of tumbling down an avalanche of ill-gotten gold, or real estate, on the heads of an unfortunate posterity, thereby to maim and crush them, until the accumulated mass shall be scattered abroad in its original atoms.” Pulpit talk of this kind denies us the understanding we need of why men strive to plant a family, and of the mixture of good with bad in their motives. In harping upon the past, posterity is left out of the picture. The future may be blank:
men nevertheless try to chart it, if only in narrow and self-regarding ways by ensuring the perpetuation of their own name through the prosperity of their family. In emphasizing the harm done by Lineage, Hawthorne fails to make any distinction between reasonable and inordinate family pride. He writes lyrically of the redeeming power of love; and though there is no mention of a marriage ceremony between Holgrave and Phoebe, we must presume that they do marry and are likely to produce children.

This brings us again to the problem of the conclusion of The House of the Seven Gables, which critics have fastened upon as the book’s chief weakness. Holgrave, the despiser of Lineage, becomes wealthy along with the surviving Pyncheons. The Judge’s handsome fortune passes to Clifford, Hepzibah, and Phoebe (and thence to Holgrave) through the sudden death, at almost the same moment as his father, of the Judge’s son, who has been traveling abroad. None of the heirs expresses dismay at the tainted inheritance. Even before it comes their way, Holgrave, in declaring his love for Phoebe, tells her:

“I have a presentiment that, hereafter, it will be my lot to set out trees, to make fences—perhaps, even, in due time, to build a house for another generation. . . .”

Shortly afterward, when the inhabitants of the House of the Seven Gables are discussing their new-found happiness and wealth and are about to remove to the Judge’s “elegant country seat,” Holgrave speaks so much like a propertied conservative that Phoebe teases him for so sudden a change of face.

In defense of Hawthorne, it can be said that he too is teasing Holgrave. He has already indicated that Holgrave’s radical opinions, though generous in impulse, are unsound. Holgrave now makes the discovery for himself. Moreover, he does so not because his bride has come into money but simply
because he has fallen in love. Love laughs at doctrinaires no less than locksmiths. The situation has a wry quality reminiscent of the ending of Henry James's *The Bostonians*. Holgrave's explanation for his presentiment that he will build a house for another generation is: "The world owes all its onward impulses to men ill at ease. The happy man inevitably confines himself within ancient limits."

The defense is inadequate. It forces us to reconsider the total picture of Holgrave and to see that he is a mere Identi-Kit of Hawthornian types. Their disparate aspects—artist-necromancer, transcendentalist come-outer, resilient Yankee—are shrewdly observed but do not merge into a recognizable human being. His retreat into conservatism follows the dictates of a particular Hawthorne theorem (and perhaps corresponds to Hawthorne's own experience in love), but at the expense of the whole movement of the book, which should run successively through Evil to Lineage to Impermanence, like the movement of American history itself. Instead, Impermanence is discarded in favor of a revised, sunny version of Lineage for which we have not been prepared.

Much of the damage could have been avoided if Hawthorne had made the daylight of the final chapter less broad and bland. He provides prizes for everybody, including "the prettiest little yellowish-brown cottage you ever saw" for Uncle Venner and a lavish tip for little Ned Higgins. One senses the author's desire to polish the story off. The pace quickens to a trot. Previous indications that Hawthorne might have been toying with the idea of exposing poor Clifford to further indignities—because of his fugitive dash at the time of his cousin's death—come to nothing. There are signs of carelessness. Thus, in this chapter, the son of Judge Pyncheon who dies so conveniently is described as his only child. In Chapter XV, however, there is a brief reference to "an expensive and dissipated son," disinherited by
the Judge, who has died some years before. Hawthorne may have meant "only surviving child." The suspicion though is that he had forgotten the previous reference in his haste to finish; and that it would not have lodged in his memory because he was not interested in the Judge's lineal posterity, except to arrange that there would be none. Lineage for Hawthorne is confined to the past until, abruptly, he has to say what will happen to those who are still alive. His answer is not bizarrely at variance with certain ingredients of the story; but it evades rather than resolves. The irony of Holgrave's reversal, unlike James's climax in The Bostonians, is fatigued and inconclusive.

As for the third theme, Impermanence, this might seem to be perfectly expressed in the closing scene of The Seven Gables. Clifford and Hepzibah have suffered much; the past can never be entirely obliterated for them. Yet when a coach arrives to take them away from the House of the Seven Gables, "as often proves to be the case, at moments when we ought to palpitate with sensibility—Clifford and Hepzibah bade a final farewell to the abode of their forefathers with hardly more emotion than if they had made it their arrangement to return thither at tea-time." If the theme were handled with such subtlety throughout, the result would be beyond criticism. One facet, the vanity of human wishes, has a genuine solemnity. Death mocks ambition: the Judge is remembered by his associates for only a couple of weeks.

But the main feature of Impermanence in Hawthorne's scheme of things is less bleak. What strikes him, and us, is the past-denying briskness of American life. Old wrongs fade into oblivion. Old pretensions turn into absurdity. The travelers on the train symbolize a social order in which nothing stays put. Like Peter Goldthwaite's treasure, the Pyncheon land-claim is a comical anachronism and has long been so. The actual settlers "would have laughed at the idea of any man's asserting a right
... to the lands which they or their fathers had wrested from the wild hand of nature by their own sturdy toil." Morality becomes blurred. In some actual situations of Hawthorne's era, such as the Anti-Rent War of the 1840's in New York, each side can believe it is in the right and passionately says so. But one feels that landlord and tenant alike also have a slightly bad conscience. Indignation and buffoonery are curiously com­mingled in the controversy.

Hawthorne knows this, and has as much difficulty as other Americans in making sense of the national development. He knows that, however fascinating the old legend of the Hawthorne curse, it is a picturesque and rather thrilling excuse for the seediness which has overtaken one family among others in a declining town. Why, then, all the bother about Evil and Lineage? Why alternate between the portentous and the playful— for this, surely, is what baffles the reader of The Seven Gables, not the alternation between supernatural and natural details of the plot? Why pretend to a seriousness that has to be im­posed? Perhaps because otherwise Hawthorne would have no way of reducing the social flux to coherent order: because, like William Faulkner, he sought meaning in a tenuous heritage he could neither wholly admire nor wholly deplore. Each added a letter to his name (Hathorne : Hawthorne; Falkner : Faulkner) to differentiate himself from his ancestry. Each liked to think of himself as an ordinary citizen; each suspected his own introspective activity. Each grappled nobly with the prob­lem of relating an unsatisfactory past to an unsatisfactory, yet fantastically altered, present. Each denied discontinuity in a search for significance. Each resorted to a wide and sometimes incompatible range of literary modes, Hawthorne with more diffidence but with an equal and almost staggering ambition.

To me, The Seven Gables is a flawed book, whose strengths are somewhat incidental to its plot. They lie in Hawthorne's
acute response to the victims of social change—Hepzibah and Clifford—and to the complacent bullies—Jaffrey Pyncheon and his kind—who come close to committing the Unpardonable Sin but who do not know there is such a thing. Pyncheon is perhaps the most fully realized of all Hawthorne's characters. He is more substantial, for instance, than Chillingworth in The 'Scarlet Letter. He would have regarded the legend of Maule's curse as a piece of nonsense, to be left to more miscellaneous and divided characters such as Holgrave. And that, indeed, is what Hawthorne has done. Holgrave is left with the necromancy, and with sundry other components of the author's heroic, hesitant effort to make literature out of the proposition that happy families, in common with happy countries, have no history, backward or forward.