CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

The House of the Seven Gables

Nathaniel Hawthorne · *1851 · original English text*

A family house in a New England town stands on a wrong: a greedy ancestor, a condemned man, and a dying curse. Hawthorne's romance follows the later Puncheons —Hepzibah, Clifford, young Phoebe, and a daguerreotypist with a hidden name—as the past lies upon the present like a giant's dead body, and a later generation must decide whether the curse will be their life.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a later generation be free of a house built on a wrong, or does the guilt of real estate and of a curse still have a claim?

"Shall we never, never get rid of this Past? ... It lies upon the Present like a giant's dead body!"

Holgrave · Chapter XII

Holgrave names the burden; the book shows it in Judge Pyncheon, in Clifford's ruined mind, and in the house itself. Phoebe's goodness and a refusal to repeat the old grasping make a way out. The curse is not a toy. Neither is repentance a mere change of address.

KEY CHARACTERS

Hepzibah Pyncheon
A poor gentlewoman, scowl and all, whose love for Clifford is her true dignity

Clifford Pyncheon
A delicate, broken man, imprisoned for a crime that was not his, and almost unable to bear the world

Phoebe Pyncheon
A young country cousin whose ordinary goodness does more than anyone's claim or curse

Holgrave
The daguerreotypist in the gable, a Maule who will not use the old power to bind a Pyncheon

Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon
The successful kinsman, the colonel's heir in smile and in greed

Colonel Pyncheon
The founder, whose portrait still presides, and whose wrong built the house

Matthew Maule
The dispossessed man whose dying words hang over the family

Uncle Venner
A poor neighbor, kindly and shrewd, who sees the shop and the family without flattery

THE PAST, AND A DUNGEON OF ONE'S OWN

> *"Shall we never, never get rid of this Past? ... It lies upon the Present like a giant's dead body!"*
> **Holgrave** · Chapter XII

> *"For, what other dungeon is so dark as one's own heart! What jailer so inexorable as one's self!"*
> **The narrator** · Chapter XI

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Old Pyncheon Family
CHAPTER I

A lot taken, a man hanged, and a curse spoken at the point of death.

- Colonel Pyncheon builds the seven-gabled house on land that had been Matthew Maule's
- Maule is executed as a wizard in the time of the old persecutions; the colonel's interest in the lot is not forgotten
- The dying man points at his enemy: God will give him blood to drink
- On the day the house is opened, the colonel is found dead in his chair, a bloody stain in his beard

> *"God will give him blood to drink!"*
> **Matthew Maule** · Chapter I

02
The Little Shop
CHAPTERS II—VI

A decayed gentlewoman opens a cent-shop, and a younger cousin brings air into the house.

- Hepzibah Pyncheon, proud and nearly poor, must keep a little shop in the gabled house
- Her first real kindness in the new trade is toward a child; her first trial is the look of the town
- Phoebe, a country cousin, arrives and makes the shop and the garden livable
- Holgrave, a young daguerreotypist, already lodges in a remote gable, and watches the family with a cool interest

03
Clifford and the Judge
CHAPTERS VII—XV

A ruined brother comes home, and a smiling kinsman wants a lost title.

- Clifford, broken by long imprisonment, is returned to Hepzibah's care; he can bear very little
- Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, sleek and public-spirited, wants a document that may recover a great Eastern claim
- The narrator lets us feel that the Judge's smile and the colonel's portrait belong to one line
- Phoebe and Clifford are a comfort to each other; Holgrave tells her the legend of Alice Pyncheon

04
The Arched Window
CHAPTERS XI—XIV

A mind looks out, and a heart is named as its own jailer.

- Clifford at the arched window watches the procession of life he cannot join
- Hawthorne writes that no dungeon is so dark as one's own heart, no jailer so inexorable as one's self
- Holgrave, talking with Phoebe, asks whether they will ever get rid of this Past
- He has the Maule gift, and he will not use it to master her, as an ancestor mastered Alice

> *"For, what other dungeon is so dark as one's own heart! What jailer so inexorable as one's self!"*
> **The narrator** · Chapter XI

05
The Flight and the Chair
CHAPTERS XVI—XXI

The Judge waits in the colonel's chair, and the house is at last left behind.

- The Judge comes to force Clifford's secret; he is left in the parlor
- He dies in the chair, as the first Pyncheon did, the curse's words fulfilled again in a natural death that looks like judgment
- Hepzibah and Clifford flee in a strange, almost airy interlude; they return to a house already changed
- The hidden deed of the Judge's youth is told; Holgrave's name is Maule; he and Phoebe will not stay to repeat the old grasp

> *"Shall we never, never get rid of this Past? ... It lies upon the Present like a giant's dead body!"*
> **Holgrave** · Chapter XII

Inherited Guilt · Justice · The Past · Mercy · Self-knowledge · A New Generation

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The curse "God will give him blood to drink" is spoken in Chapter I and fulfilled, in the book's own terms, more than once. Hawthorne also offers natural causes. Hold both.
2. Holgrave's speech about the Past is radical, and he still chooses not to repeat Maule's mastery over a Pyncheon woman. That refusal matters as much as the speech.
3. Judge Pyncheon's long chapter in the chair is a moral anatomy of a public man, not only a gothic scene.
4. The book is called a romance. Its ghosts and its everyday shop-counter belong to one argument about a wrong that does not stay buried.
5. Phoebe's name is printed Ph{oe}be in the hosted text. The map uses the ordinary spelling in the commentary; any quotation would follow the book.
6. Hawthorne's preface says he has laid claim to a certain license with the actual. The moral of the cursed house is not therefore less earnest.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #77, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-house-of-the-seven-gables/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.