

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The House of the Seven Gables (Unabridged)

by
Nathaniel Hawthorne

Book Information

Nathaniel Hawthorne, The House of the Seven Gables (Unabridged)

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274 Pages

Book Level: 11.0

Interest Level: UG

This story is of four relatives who live in an evil house cursed through the centuries by a man hanged for witchcraft.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Emotions, Fear; Family Life, Brothers; Family Life, Cousins; Horror/Thriller, Witches/Warlocks; Mysteries, Hauntings/Ghosts; Mysteries, Murder; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Series, Modern Library Classics

Main Characters

Alice Pyncheon ancestor in the Pyncheon family, who was ruined when Matthew Maule hypnotized her

Clifford Pyncheon brother of Hepzibah, who was falsely imprisoned for many years for the murder of his uncle

Colonel Pyncheon the Pyncheon family's patriarch

Hepzibah Pyncheon a sixty-year-old unmarried descendant of Colonel Pyncheon

Holgrave the daguerreotypist who boards at the House of the Seven Gables, later revealed as a descendant of Matthew Maule

Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon Clifford and Hepzibah's prosperous, respectable cousin, who was responsible for Clifford's false imprisonment

Matthew Maule grandson of the first Matthew Maule, who hypnotized Alice Pyncheon

Ned Higgins a little boy who buys gingerbread from Hepzibah's shop

Old Matthew Maule the man whose land Colonel Pyncheon secured for the house by accusing him of witchcraft

Phoebe Pyncheon the young, country niece of Hepzibah and Clifford

Uncle Venner the elderly town philosopher

Vocabulary

apoplexy sudden loss of consciousness and motion caused by a rupture or obstruction in the brain

grimalkin an old female cat

pertinacity adhering resolutely to an opinion

unctuous smooth and greasy in appearance

Synopsis

The House of the Seven Gables was built 160 years before the opening of the current story. To obtain the property, Colonel Pyncheon accused the property's owner, Matthew Maule, of witchcraft, for which he was hung. Maule cursed the Pyncheons from the gallows. Upon completing construction of the House of Seven Gables, Colonel Pyncheon died.

The house is then inhabited by an aging, reclusive spinster of the Pyncheon family, Hepzibah, and a tenant, Holgrave. For the first time in her life, Hepzibah is forced to earn a living and opens a small shop in the front of the house. Her niece, Phoebe, arrives unexpectedly and helps her. Soon, Hepzibah's brother, Clifford, is released from prison and returns to live in the house. Phoebe helps Hepzibah care for Clifford, who seems to be simple-minded. Phoebe brings sunlight into Clifford and Hepzibah's dark lives.

Phoebe returns temporarily to her mother's home. While she is away, Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, a wealthy cousin, demands to see Clifford. Although Hepzibah has previously refused to allow the Judge to see Clifford, implying that he was responsible for her and Clifford's misfortunes, this time she is coerced, as the Judge threatens to have Clifford committed to an insane asylum. The Judge believes Clifford knows the location of a deed to vast lands. Hepzibah cannot find Clifford, however. When she returns to the parlor to beg the Judge to help locate Clifford, Clifford is emerging. The Judge is dead in

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his chair.

At Clifford's urging, the two flee. They board a train, from which they soon disembark. They return to the house.

In the meantime, Phoebe returns, and Holgrave meets her. He tells her about the Judge's dead body and they confess their love for one another. Hepzibah and Clifford return. It is later determined that not only did the Judge die of natural causes, but Clifford's uncle, for whose murder Clifford was imprisoned, did also. Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon had been responsible for Clifford's imprisonment. Holgrave is revealed as the last descendant of Matthew Maule. Hepzibah, Clifford, and Phoebe inherit the Judge's wealth, and along with Holgrave and the town's elderly philosopher, they move to the Judge's country estate.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Early in the story, Hepzibah looked at a miniature that she kept locked in a secret drawer. Who was portrayed in the miniature, and why did Hawthorne describe it as the "strong passion of her life"?

The miniature was of Clifford. Hepzibah had mourned his imprisonment for years.

Literary Analysis

Describe Hawthorne's use of dark and light as symbols in the story.

Hawthorne's use of light and dark symbolizes the major contrasts in the story between past and present, hope and despair, life and death, freedom and prison. Some examples of the light and dark motif include: the house itself is dark, due to the guilt of Colonel Pyncheon. This contrasts with the sunlight in the street, where the residents of the house do not go. Except for Phoebe, the family members have dark frowns and wear dark clothes. A dark storm rages when the Judge dies and as Clifford and Hepzibah attempt unsuccessfully to flee from the past.

Inferential Comprehension

Compare Holgrave and Phoebe's ideas regarding the past as they discussed them in their early meetings. Did Holgrave's ideas change during the story?

Holgrave told Phoebe he rejected the past. He claimed to believe that at least every fifty years, humans should forget their ancestors and begin anew. He thought the old house should be purified by fire. Phoebe felt dizzy when she thought of how the world would shift if old things were constantly reformed and that the idea that the Pyncheons were cursed was absurd. It is interesting to note that, at the end of the story, Holgrave spoke of building his own stone house.

Constructing Meaning

What was Hawthorne saying when Hepzibah and Clifford returned to the House of the Seven Gables after fleeing on the train?

They could not escape the past. The past affects the future.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Plot The major theme of *The House of the Seven Gables* is that the past influences the future; the wrongdoing of ancestors affects

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their descendants. Hold a class discussion on this issue. Discuss how Hawthorne presents this idea in the novel, and ask the students to what extent they agree or disagree with him. Ask them to think of examples that either help prove or disprove Hawthorne's thesis.

Understanding Characterization Phoebe plays an important role in the novel. Ask the students to write a short essay describing her role and comparing her appearance, attitudes, and philosophies with those of the novel's other characters.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The curse on the House of the Seven Gables began when Matthew Maule was hung for witchcraft. The Salem witchhunts occurred in 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts Bay Colony as the result of hysteria. Nineteen people were hung and 150 more imprisoned before reason prevailed. Hawthorne reveals his feelings about the witchhunts in chapter thirteen of the novel. Ask the students to research the witchhunts and prepare short written reports. Present the reports to the class.

Understanding the Author's Craft *The House of the Seven Gables* abounds with symbolism. Ask the students to brainstorm as a class the various symbols in the story and their meanings, and write them down. Then, ask them to locate articles or books of criticism on the novel and read about how scholars of the novel have interpreted Hawthorne's symbols. Compare the interpretations of the critics to those of the students.