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The Insensible Sliding Process: Hawthorne, Melville, and Historical Memory

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Abstract

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This paper explores the relationship between Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville and the problem of historical memory in their works. Both authors examine the limits of constructing a history as well as the relationship between dominant and suppressed histories. Looking at the past, the authors turn to the present to demonstrate the cyclical and inescapable nature of inheritance. Hawthorne presents the past as a medium for understanding contemporary conflicts. *The Scarlet Letter* stages two historical commemorations to demonstrate how they become misapplied in the present. *The House of the Seven Gables* contemporizes the events of the narrative to emphasize heredity's influence on immediate experience. Both works develop a subversive style that works to undermine conventional and dominant perceptions of history. Hawthorne's style would influence Herman Melville in presentation of historical memory in *Pierre or, the Ambiguities*. The novel underscores the selective nature of viewing the past, especially when a history forms the underlying elements of one's character. By looking at their works in relation to history, this paper seeks to illustrate the sources of their influence as well as the themes in their novels pertaining to contemporary experience.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

The relationship between Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville continues to fascinate scholars of antebellum American literature. During the short duration of their friendship, the authors exchanged a wealth of philosophy. Although the relationship between their bodies of work is difficult to encapsulate, we can find traces of shared meaning throughout their works and letters. Of the many themes they share, the problem of ancestry is significant for its complexity and historical relevance. The American cultural climate during the early nineteenth century underwent a massive transformation. Society was becoming increasingly aware of ideological contradictions inherent in conventional renderings of history. This process had been accelerated by a proliferation of sensational media that the United States had never before experienced. The image of man as capable of moral perfection conflicted with the increasing exposure to images of man as sensual and base.[1] After the invention of the steam printing press in 1843, the written word took on new economic as well as cultural meaning.[2] Writing as a profession became more financially sustainable, supposing that a writer did not wander too far outside the limits of social convention.

The stringent code of ethics often associated with Calvinism had begun to loosen by Hawthorne's time, but critical characteristics of the theology remained active throughout New England Society. An ideological conflict between the post-Calvinistic and sensational images of society fueled a series of reform efforts during the early to

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[1] Post, Sheila. "Melville and the Marketplace," *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville*, ed. Giles Gunn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 105.

[2] *Ibid*, 106.

mid-nineteenth century. David Reynolds describes the dynamic well when he says, "the antebellum reformers were still close enough to the Puritan past to sense the dramatic dualisms and the otherworldly emphasis of Calvinism. At the same time, they were driven by their culture's moral obliquities to question otherworldly faith and to go to any linguistic extreme to expose and extirpate social corruption."[3] Calvinism itself became the target of its own ideological drive. The Calvinistic influence did not directly catalyze the reform movement, but the belief in the perfectibility of humanity provided a cultural framework for reform. While social ills could no longer be perfected by subservience to an otherworldly God, they could still be eradicated through strict conformance to moral convention. Like other authors of their time, Hawthorne and Melville channeled reform energy and extremism into an exploration of reform's origins and artistic import.[4] Examining the conflicts of the present, they inevitably turned to the past.

Both Hawthorne and Melville considered to what degree we can accurately understand and depict the process of historical construction—meaning the process by which history is articulated and commemorated. They reached similar conclusions regarding the inherent and natural character of selectivity, but departed significantly in their understanding of its complications and implications in the modern world. I have selected two works of Hawthorne (*The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables)* to reflect a refinement of his methods of depicting the process of historical selection. While *The Scarlet Letter* emphasizes a natural balance embodied in an ironic conflict between perceptions of history, *The House of the Seven Gables* subtly underscores the

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[3] Reynolds, David S. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 89.

[4] *Ibid*, 113.

inescapable and cyclical nature of hereditary chains. I have selected Melville's *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* both for its thematic relationship with these texts and its adaptation of Hawthorne's linguistic style. *Pierre* assumes a similar concern with heredity, but accentuates how the contradictions of filiopietism dominate virtually all dimensions of our perception.

Hawthorne provided Melville with a type of an American author who could remain connected to the artistic meaning of his national culture. In his anonymous review of Hawthorne *Mosses from an Old Manse,* Melville writes, "[Hawthorne] is one of the new, and far better generation of your writers. The smell of your beeches and hemlocks is upon him; your own broad prairies are in his soul; and if you travel away inland into his deep and noble nature, you will hear the far roar of his Niagara. Give not over to future generations the glad duty of acknowledging him for what he is. Take that joy to your self, in your own generation."[5] Melville observed a function of Hawthorne's writing as confronting its social context, even as that confrontation undermines the author's relationship with his culture. From this perspective, Melville asserts Hawthorne understands the past as modified by the present. Melville emphasizes the significance of Hawthorne's history to the reader's "own generation." Melville's concern with the present suggests ambivalence toward the perception of history as a fixed set of narratives regarding the past. He sees *all* national narratives as histories, including the most colloquial and seemingly inconsequential. Hawthorne may not have emphasized the same sources of history as Melville, but his serious consideration of colloquial histories allowed Melville to experiment with the approach.

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[5] Melville, Herman. "Hawthorne and His Mosses," http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/nh/hahm.html

Writing later in 1879, Henry James reaches a different conclusion regarding Hawthorne. When describing his style James says, "he was not a man with a literary theory; he was guiltless of a system… He had certainly not proposed to himself to give an account of the social idiosyncrasies of his fellow-citizens, for his touch on such points is always light and vague, he has none of the apparatus of an historian." James continues, "none the less, Hawthorne's work savours thoroughly of the local soil—it is redolent of the social system in which he had his being."[6] James observes a major conflict in Hawthorne's writing: its ability to represent a particular, bounded historical context, while also aspiring to represent general human themes. James is right to describe Hawthorne as "lacking the apparatus of an historian" from his definition of history. Hawthorne did not wish to explore the particular details of the past, but rather how we form an understanding of those experiences as being separate from ourselves. While both modes of history are appropriate given their context and use, Hawthorne fixates primarily on the latter method. Hawthorne may have anticipated James' critical approach in his opening to *The House of the Seven Gables*. Describing the distance of "the romance" from realistic depictions of the past Hawthorne tells us, "it exposes the romance to an inflexible and exceedingly dangerous species of criticism, by bringing his fancy pictures into almost positive contact with the realities of the moment. It has been no part of his object, however, to describe local manners, nor in any way to meddle with the characteristics of a community for whom he cherishes a proper regard."[7] Hawthorne understands the past as in "almost positive contact" with the present; his conception of

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[6] James, Henry. "Hawthorne," http://www2.newpaltz.edu/~hathawar/nhhj1.html

[7] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: New American Library, 2001), ix.

history explores both how we try to see ourselves separate from the past and how the past latently influences our perception. We desire to be part of our past and separate from it, but ultimately both notions are an illusion. Our perception of the past transmutes to reflect modulations in our lives. To depict the meaning of events in the present, Hawthorne emphasizes the relationship of the present to human experience in the past. By underscoring the process of forming a history in his works, Hawthorne demonstrates the meaning contained in historical perception itself. The Romance, as Hawthorne conceives it, utilizes history to emphasize the artistic meaning in its construction.

2. Historical Commemoration and *The Scarlet Letter*

Hawthorne often considered his relationship to his ancestors and their influence on his perception in his writing. John Hawthorne was notorious for his participation in the Salem witch trials, a legacy that would haunt Nathaniel throughout his life. Even toward the end of his life in 1857, Hawthorne writes, "the spirit of my Puritan ancestors was mighty in me."[8] While Hawthorne felt drawn to the narratives of his past, he could not ignore the contradictions he perceived as being tied to those histories. *The Scarlet Letter*, his first and most famous novel, provides a crucial lens in understanding Hawthorne's relationship to history. The work certainly reflects the social isolation Hawthorne experienced after his removal from a politically appointed position in Salem. That isolation helped Hawthorne write what he considered a dark book, which would

[8] Wineapple Brenda. *A Historical Guide to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Larry J. Reynolds (Oxford; New York : Oxford University Press, 2001), 18.

conform to convention in appearance, but remain thematically subversive.[9] Hawthorne's expulsion may have provided enough distance to actively consider the sources of his culture's contradictions and the limits of change.

Although *The Scarlet Letter* has been a fixture in high school education in the United States for over fifty years, it is no longer a book most readers would read on a regular basis. The plot deserves a brief recapitulation. The main dramatic action of the work takes place in the late seventeenth-century in the Puritan community of Salem. A woman named Hester Prynne has had an affair out of wedlock and has been sentenced to wear a symbol of her crime (the scarlet A) for the rest of her life. During the trial, Hester's husband, named Roger Chillingworth, arrives from the wilderness after he had been presumed dead. Chillingworth tells Hester he intends to find and exact revenge on the man who participated in the affair, but Hester refuses to admit his name. She moves just outside the community with her daughter Pearl, whose relationship to the affair and trial has imbued her with a strange and nearly supernatural quality. Working in the community, Hester devotes her life to charity and the service of Salem. As the narrative develops it becomes apparent that a young preacher named Arthur Dimmesdale, who is revered by the community, had the affair with Hester. Roger Chillingworth discovers Dimmesdale's guilt, and living with him, psychologically tortures the man under the guise of a physician. Seven years pass and Hester decides to expose Chillingworth to Dimmesdale, both of whom have degenerated in their relationship. Meeting in the woods, Dimmesdale and Hester make a decision to leave Salem, but as Dimmesdale

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[9] Reynolds, David S. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 119.

returns to town, his mind becomes filled with deviant thoughts. Partially dispelling these thoughts, Dimmesdale retires to his room inspired to write his final sermon in Salem. On the day of their planned departure, Hester learns that Chillingworth has learned of their plan, and intends to follow them to Europe. In the dramatic peak of the novel, Dimmesdale delivers his sermon and exposes his guilt—symbolically and physically manifested in a red A on his chest. Hester and Pearl move to Europe, where Pearl inherits the deceased Chillingworth's money. Hester eventually returns to live in the community that painted her life with so dark a hue.[10]

Memory remains highly selective throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, undermining any absolute understanding of events. Hawthorne frames the work as an embellished history, but one with roots in real events.[11] By emphasizing the work's location as in the past, Hawthorne could comment carefully and subversively on the present. Characters within the novel continually shift or question meaning they had considered permanent and natural. The narrator introduces multiple versions of events to belie the reliability of any one history, often emphasizing a mythological and fantastic account to subvert the conventional. The methods of selection inherent in constructing a history serve multiple functions in the novel, but none more significant than to expose the problem of selection itself.

The novel treats historical construction as a significant social process that has the potential to commemorate and/or omit different versions of history. Hawthorne demonstrates one function of history as producing narratives of social deviance, but ties

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[10] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009)
[11] Although Hawthorne says he discovered Hester Prynne's story in the coffin of an old magistrate, his rendition has been proven to be false. His story functions, in part, thematically to introduce a dualism between true historical events and myth.

that function to a living member of the community. Instead of producing moral conformance, the stigmatization distances Hester from society, catalyzing her ethical crisis. Alternatively, histories can view an individual as perfect, seeing him or her as an embodiment of heroic and mythic qualities. As a living saint, Dimmesdale cannot escape the conscious hypocrisy unraveling his connection with society. Both functions of history have been selectively misattributed to living members in the community, and have lost their religious and social value. Even as the events of the novel occur in the past, history remains tied to the selective perception of the present. Hawthorne does not imply we can easily disentangle the moral obliquity of the past without being selective ourselves. When matters of interpretation arise in the novel, the reader must actively engage in his or her own process of selection. No one history remains dominant in the novel; instead multiple histories conflict to illustrate the processes of their construction. Although histories do not remain permanent, the process of forming these histories illuminates their significance in human experience.

The long introduction to the novel entitled “the Custom House” immediately establishes the work as mediated by the present. Traces of the biographical sketch recur throughout the novel, and Hawthorne’s account of his work associates should not be seen as thematically separate from the novel itself. The introduction describes Hawthorne’s work in the Custom House of the near past, but his analysis of his job and coworkers parallels a concern with the selective perception of events. By discovering the scarlet letter in the Custom House where he works Hawthorne ties the novel to a “real” historical event. Describing the find, Hawthorne writes, “this envelope had the air of an official record of some period long past, when clerks engrossed their stiff and formal chirography

on more substantial materials than present."[12] The phrase establishes a stylistic device of making the reader feel above the "simplicity" of the past, while insinuating the past's relationship to the present. Though it starts by describing "some period long past" and the "stiff and formal chirography" of clerks, it shifts to criticizing the lack of substance in modern writing. The sentence also establishes ambivalence between what can be thought of as a real or embellished event. By doing so, Hawthorne elevates the finding of the letter to a kind of mythic event. The rest of the novel serves as a commemoration of historical meaning (the letter) "re-discovered" in the present.

Hawthorne's relationship to his elder associates at the Custom House parallels the conflicting ideology of the New England Puritans he later depicts. While he admires qualities in the men, he cannot help but notice the contradictions inherent in their mode of reasoning. Relating his understanding of their selective reason Hawthorne writes, "mighty was their fuss about little matters, and marvelous, sometimes, the obtuseness that allowed greater ones to slip between their fingers!"[13] Hawthorne's associates in the Custom House misattribute their focus on matters that do not require so much attention (such as inspecting a harmless box that arrives at the Custom House). Although Hawthorne implies that these men may have an aged and faulty faculty of reason, the theme of fixed perception dominates the actual narrative of Hester Prynne. The description of the Custom House mirrors the depictions of the Puritan elders in the novel, whose selective perception of Hester Prynne's affair fuels dramatic conflict. The edifice of the Custom House itself parallels the psychological prison Hester Prynne must face later in the novel. When describing the American eagle that hangs over the entrance to

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[12] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 31.
[13] *Ibid*, 15.

the building, Hawthorne writes, "she has no great tenderness and, sooner or later,—oftener soon than late,—is apt to fling off her nestling with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or a rankling wound from her barbed arrows."[14] The description mirrors both Hawthorne's political removal and Hester's punishment in the novel. Hawthorne does not produce a distinction between his present condition and the commemoration of Hester's experience. Rather the present should actively engage the past regarding events that hold cyclical and universal significance.

The ideological world that Hawthorne portrays in the body of *The Scarlet Letter* is not as homogenous as might be inferred from stereotypes of Puritan culture. Members of the community view Hester's crime differently both during and after the event. While some consider the strictest methods punishment, such as death, others see the burden of the letter as enough. The reactions of the community to Hester's punishment force us to think about the process of historical memory. The narrator suggests that regardless of their personal opinions, however strong, "the witnesses of Hester Prynne's disgrace had not yet passed beyond their simplicity. They were stern enough to look upon her death, had that been the sentence, without a murmur at its severity, but had none of the heartlessness of another social state, which would find only a theme for jest in an exhibition like the present."[15] The narrator describes the community as "simple" in the sense that its members do not question the authority of the community. At the same time, the narrator juxtaposes the present in relation to that simplistic Puritan past. According to the narrator, the present would view this historical practice as lacking meaning or seriousness. Implicit in that assertion is the perception of the present as absent of social

[14] Ibid, 6.
[15] *Ibid*, 56.

rituals that hold the same deep significance. While the ritual of stigmatization is likely overzealous and misapplied (in Hester's case), it still serves an important social and religious function in the novel.

For the community of Salem, these legal and social practices have strong religious meaning. The narrator describes the community's understanding of Hester's punishment when he says, "there was very much the same solemnity of demeanor on the part of the spectators; as befitted a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused, that the mildest and the severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful."[16] The religious meaning tied to Hester's sentence modifies the town's historical perception of Hester's punishment. The juxtaposition of the words "venerable" and "awful" evinces a sense that while ritualized stigmatization may be necessary to produce moral boundaries, in Salem, the process does not maintain strong distinctions among offences. Any offence made against moral convention stages an attack on religion itself. Hester functions as a kind of living history, even for those living in the present. Hester's punishment should serve as a deviance narrative, providing a historical example of what not to do in society. By historical example, I mean that the narrative would commemorate a specific event to represent a larger social truth for the community. It is historical in its concern for encapsulating the views of the present for the benefit of future generations. Although it occurs in the present, the trial has significant historical implications in how the town ritualizes Hester's experience.

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[16] *Ibid*, 50.

It has been widely observed that Puritan culture became virtually obsessed with discovering and exposing inner corruption. With no set lineage to distinguish social merit, many early Americans fixated on setting moral boundaries in the mind and appearance of individuals.[17] The Salem Witch trials serve as a prominent historical example, but the cultural fixation did not always manifest itself in such extremes. In the novel, the community's reaction to Hester's crime suggests a problem of historical construction. While the community tries to form a fixed image of Hester as base, her actions contradict and transmute the stigma. She cannot serve the religious and corrective social function the elders intended, because she has been incorrectly labeled as a moral imposter within her society. While the events of Hester's stigmatization occur sequentially in the present, they illustrate how the selective perception of the present shades any interpretation of an historical event.

Hester's trial can be better understood as a historical commemoration by observing the novel's treatment of the Puritan elders' decision. The narrator remains ambivalent regarding the elders of the town, producing two conflicting historical representations of the men. Michael Bell expresses the ambivalence well in regard to the nineteenth-century historical romance when he says, "the ideas of decline and progress (from the past) are not as contradictory as they might at first seem; both affirm change to be linear. The difference between the two ideas is not a disagreement over the nature of history but only a value judgment about its direction, upward or downward."[18] Hawthorne utilizes the themes of the historical romance in both senses, but does not see

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[17] Crane, Gregg. *The Cambridge Introduction to the Nineteenth Century Novel* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6.
[18] Bell, Michael Davitt. *Hawthorne and the Historical Romance of New England* (Princeton; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), 23.

the two views as conflicting in his model of history. At Hester's public display, the narrator describes the elder John Wilson when he says, "he looked like the darkly engraved portraits which we see prefixed to old volumes of sermons; and had no more right than one of those portraits should have, to step forth, as he now did, and meddle with a question of human guilt, passion, and anguish."[19] In describing the elder, the narrator utilizes the device of the gothic portrait to establish the elder's aging ideology and faculties of reason. While Wilson appears real, his ideology has a foreign character reflective to its age in the present. The image dehumanizes the elder in a scene that moves closer to Hester's consciousness. The scene is not directly narrated from her perspective, but John Wilson would appear mythic and terrible from her perception on the scaffold. The narrator deemphasizes the human complexity of the man to establish the psychological and spiritual impact he holds over Hester and the community.

The narrator complicates the reader's understanding of the elders in a later scene in Governor Bellingham's house. Describing the governor, the narrator tells us, "the old clergyman… had a long established and legitimate taste for all good and comfortable things; and however stern he might show himself in the pulpit, or in his public reproof of such transgressions as that of Hester Prynne, still, the genial benevolence of his private life had won him warmer affection than was accorded to any of his professional contemporaries."[20] By distinguishing between the social image of the man and his private life, the narrator establishes Bellingham's leniency in allowing Hester to keep her child. The narrator also contradicts the expectations of the reader, who has been led earlier in the novel to fix the leaders into the historical type of the narrow-minded

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[19] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 65.
[20] *Ibid*, 107.

Puritan. By undermining and reinforcing conflicting depictions of the elders, the narrator produces ambivalence in constructing the history of those elders in relation to Hester Prynne. That ambivalence is not uncommon to the conventional historical romance, but Hawthorne complicates the dynamic. Instead of exploring the ethical ramifications of the Puritan elders and attempting to reconcile the conflict, Hawthorne accepts the ambivalence as an appropriate understanding of history. Hawthorne would describe the effect of the ambivalence as intimately tied with the effect of the Romance, the name that he gave to this and other works of fiction. The past can seem permanent, but a single beam of "moonlight" will undermine all substance that appeared absolute.

The imagery preceding Hester's encounter with the governor reinforces the tension between two modes of historical perception. Many have observed Hawthorne's thorough knowledge of heraldry and the construction of familial symbols of distinction. Hawthorne probably had been consulted to review an article in the "New England Register" regarding Sophia Hawthorne's family coat of arms, and he probably had other exposure to heraldry as well.[21] Given his understanding of symbols as distinguishing individuals for their family's historic achievements, images of heraldry in the novel reflect Hawthorne's understanding of history. When Hester looks at the portraits hanging in Governor Bellingham's home, the narrator tells us, "all were characterized by the sternness and severity which old portraits so invariably put on; as if they were the ghosts, rather than the pictures, of departed worthies, and were gazing with harsh and intolerant criticism at the pursuits and enjoyments of living men."[22] The distinction between

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[21] Moore, Margaret B. *The Salem World of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Columbia; London; University of Missouri Press, 1998), 16.

[22] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 103.

"pictures" and "ghosts" establishes a difference between the actual men and their social appearance. The narrator frames the conceit in a simile, implying mediation through Hester's consciousness. For Hester, the portraits do not convey anything real about the men, but rather distance the elders from her understanding. They become ghosts in the sense that their inherited social identity has obscured an understanding of their actual person.

Juxtaposed next to the portraits, a modern suit of armor vividly contrasts with the rigid and foreign image of the men. The narrator describes the suit: "the bright panoply as not meant for mere idle show, but had been worn by the Governor on many a solemn muster and training field, and had glittered moreover, at the head of a regiment in the Pequod war."[23] The contrast between the social and military images of the men parallels the modes of history the narrator establishes thematically. While the men may be harsh or intolerant in their judgment regarding social issues, they serve a vital purpose in fortifying the nation. Hawthorne would have viewed the Pequod (or Pequot) war as a patriotic and symbolic event in the past, or would have at least understood his audience well enough to frame the war positively. The suit can be more readily understood by contrasting it with Hawthorne's use of armor imagery in "Endicott and the Red Cross." In the short story, the narrator describes Endicott's armor when he says, "this piece of armor was so highly polished that the whole surrounding scene had its image in the glittering steel."[24] The contrast between the "highly polished" breastplate and the suit of armor meant for practical use symbolically establishes a major contradiction regarding

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[23] *Ibid*

[24] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Complete Short Stories* (Garden City, N.Y.: Hanover House, 1959), 206.

Puritan leaders; while the leaders have served a historical purpose in fighting for the nation, their status as social leaders may or may not relate to real achievements. The narrator arranges two heraldic symbols in the novel, the armor denoting historical significance and portraits meant to establish social distinction, to subtly augment the theme of historical ambiguity in the novel. The conflict between images of authority in the novel materializes when these historical perceptions become confused and misapplied in the present.

The decision of the Puritan elder's to punish Hester indicates a problem of historical commemoration. They want to protect the community from the influence of evil that they see as tied to social deviance. However, Hester cannot serve the elder's intended function because of her individual understanding of the affair. When Hester contemplates her new position in society, the narrator describes her thoughts when he says:

> "thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her, the child of honorable parents—at her, the mother of a babe, that would hereafter be a woman,—at her, who had once been innocent,—as the figure, the body, the reality of sin. And over her grave, the infamy that she must carry thither would be her only monument."[25]

The parallel structure between the words "figure," "body," and "reality" emphasizes a problem of using living people as historical representations of sin. Because Hester understands the meaning of the social process, she cannot ignore the ignominy as an amoral criminal would. She becomes imprisoned not in the physical edifice of a jail, but in a psychological conflict between the historical need to produce social order and her

[25] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 79.

own individual intimations regarding her punishment. Caleb Smith expresses the dynamic well when she says, "through the juxtaposed stories of Hester and Dimmesdale, Hawthorne dramatizes the failure of public punishments and the emergence of a private realm of 'conscience' where a more intractable discipline can be instilled."[26] Hester's punishment remains within her consciousness, and illustrates the psychological torture that can be impressed through memory. It is not the punishment itself, but the memory perpetually reinforced in the present that produces torture. Hawthorne writes: "in our nature… there is a provision, alike marvelous and merciful, that the sufferer should never know the intensity of what he endures by its present torture, but chiefly in the pain that rankles after it."[27] By mislabeling Hester a living representation of sin, the community reinforces a temporal dissonance in Hester's consciousness. She cannot internalize the label placed on her and remains isolated from society (even the deviant society of witches). Ritualized stigmatization might be necessary for some living members of the community, but it can be easily misapplied. The novel does not decide between the need for historical commemoration and individual liberty, but demonstrates how commemoration can infringe upon personal freedom of thought. Without considering differing histories, we will never be able to accurately commemorate the meaning of a historical event.

Hawthorne often underscores the significance of colloquial and exaggerated histories to emphasize the need for flexibility in history. Histories that seem the most absurd (from a modern context) should not be rejected, but considered for what historical

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[26] Smith, Caleb. *The Prison and the American Imagination* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 17.

[27] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 55.

meaning they could provide socially. While some of these legends have bearing on real people, such as Governor Winthrop's death, others serve to enhance the mythic quality of the narrative, such as the supernatural symbol that appears in the sky during the governor's death. The effect leads the reader to question histories that would appear logically sound; for Hawthorne, what may seem the most conclusive history also might omit the most meaning. These mythical renderings of history provide a method by which the narrator can explore both the literal possibility of the fantastic events and their potential psychological and spiritual meaning. It also arranges historically real men and events into a mythical production of Hawthorne's own making. The work enhances its mythopoetical function by emphasizing the symbolic meaning contained in mythical histories. When describing the public sentiment regarding Roger Chillingsworth, Hester's ex-husband, the narrator says, "when an uninstructed multitude attempts to see with its eyes, it is apt to be deceived. When, however, it forms its judgment, as it usually does, on the intuitions of its great and warm heart, the conclusions thus attained are often so profound and so unerring, as to possess the character of truths supernaturally revealed."[28] These truths do not have any clear reasonable explanation, but form a vague impression on the mind. Like Emerson's notion of self-reliance, the truths possess a supernatural quality that one knows intuitively to be meaningful regardless of the reasoning of others.[29] However, Hawthorne questions whether that trust in the suspension of reason can also lead away from truth. Exploring the bowdlerized history of Dimmesdale's death (in which he did not have an affair with Hester Prynne), the narrator

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[28] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 125.
[29] Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance," *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, ed. Joel Porte and Saundra Morris (New York; London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 121.

tells us, "without disputing a truth so momentous, we must be allowed to consider this version of Mr. Dimmesdale's story as only an instance of that stubborn fidelity with which a man's friends—and especially a clergyman's—will sometimes uphold his character; when proofs, clear as the mid-day sunshine on the scarlet letter, establish him a false and sin-stained creature to dust."[30] Truth in history emerges when the meaning has been felt spiritually to be true, not when convention would make it so. To use Hawthorne's language, "the head" can misinterpret "the heart." Still, even in this account, a "momentous" truth lies behind the selectively arranged history. Histories in the novel have the potential to preserve meaning or obfuscate it, and sometimes do both simultaneously.

The narrator often reinforces the significance of these versions of history by emphasizing their mythic quality. Describing the effect of the scarlet letter, the narrator says, "we must needs say, it seared Hester's bosom so deeply, that perhaps there was more truth in the rumor than our modern incredulity may be inclined to admit."[31] The narrator emphasizes the literal nature of the supernatural effect to indicate its larger spiritual and psychological import. His emphasis also blurs the line between what can be conceived of as real or imagined. The effect of the burning heart precedes a perceivable cause, but the effect has still been understood. A similar understanding emerges between Dimmesdale and Hester during their encounter in the woods when the narrator says, "they were awe-stricken likewise at themselves; because the crisis flung them back to their own consciousnesses, and revealed to each heart its history and experience, as life never does, except at such breathless epochs. The soul beheld its features in its mirror of

[30] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 249.
[31] *Ibid*, 87.

the passing moment."[32] The narrator describes the revelation of historical truth as bound temporally to the present. History in this sense cannot be permanently constructed, but only perceived and understood in the moment. Like Hawthorne's description of moonlight in a room, historical meaning passes and can only be imaginatively and selectively reconfigured.

The novel indicates that a complete history can be perceived in the present, but questions the subjective nature of defining the revelation. Describing the appearance of natural signs (such as Dimmesdale's A in the sky), the narrator tells us, "its credibility rested on the faith of some lonely eyewitness, who beheld the wonder through the colored, magnifying, and distorting medium of his imagination, and shaped it more distinctly in after thought. It was, indeed, a majestic idea, that the destiny of nations should be revealed, in these awful hieroglyphics, on the cope of heaven."[33] While the narrator questions the subjective construction in forming a history, he also expresses the artistic beauty of the pursuit. Even as he undermines the definiteness of the symbol, the narrator reinforces the meaning inferred from it. The narrator encapsulates Dimmesdale's perception of the symbol in the sky when he says, "it could only be the symptom of a highly disordered mental state, when a man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature, until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul's history and fate."[34] The phrase, "it could only be the symptom," provokes the reader to question a narrator who rarely allows one version of history to dominate a

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[32] *Ibid,* 185.
[33] *Ibid,* 151.
[34] *Ibid,* 152.

scene. The narrator implies that Dimmesdale's perception of the clouds has been shaded by his psychological or spiritual condition. At the same time, the novel emphasizes the beauty of interpreting nature. It remains undecided whether significant historical events can be interpreted correctly in retrospect or the present.

The ambivalence regarding historical interpretation and commemoration thickens toward the end of the novel. The conclusion of the novel thematically stages two rituals pertaining to history. They are rituals in the sense that they provide a sense of time and place for the community; the rituals unite the town by providing them with an impression of historical relevance. In this sense, historical commemoration functions as a ritual in the novel. The first ritual, or "the procession," emphasizes the community's distance from the past and older forms of organization; this ritual culminates with Dimmesdale's sermon. The second ritual, or "the revelation of the scarlet letter," demonstrates the cyclical and unpredictable nature of history. The revelation of the letter is in itself a form of historical commemoration or ritual, but serves a more disruptive function. I describe these series of events as rituals in part due to their thematic similarity and relationship. They are not merely Dimmesdale's sermon or Dimmesdale's revelation, but rather reflect different methods of commemoration that have been apparent in other parts of the novel. Hester describes the dynamic of "the procession" ritual when she says, "for to-day, a new man is beginning to rule over them; and so—as has been the custom of mankind ever since a nation was first gathered—they make merry and rejoice; as if a good and golden year were at length to pass over the poor old world."[35] The use of the phrase "as if" implies that the ritual may be a more imagined transformation than real. At the same

[35] *Ibid*, 221.

time, Hester's description emphasizes the deep spiritual and psychological significance of the ritual, blurring the distinction between the real and imagined. The ritualistic and historical importance of the event does not come from the narrow Puritan ideology, but from older methods of producing meaning. The narrator describes the degeneration of the ritual's significance historically when he says, "had they followed their hereditary taste, the New England settlers would have illustrated all events of public importance by bonfires, banquets, pageantries, and processions."[36] So the assertion by Bell that Hawthorne establishes a dynamic between the "Old" world and "New" is true to a degree.[37] Hawthorne draws a line not between the English and New England settlers, but between older methods of commemorating historical events and the Puritan ideology rigidly obscuring the significance of those events. The degenerative process of heredity reflects a conflict between aspects of Puritan ideology and human methods of producing historical meaning through ritual.

The first ritual sequentially in the novel provides historical meaning for the town, even while it reinforces the historical deification of Dimmesdale. The narrator reflects the ambivalence in the first ritual's effect when he says, "It was an age where what we call talent had far less consideration than now, but the massive materials which produce stability and dignity of character a great deal more. The people possessed, by hereditary right, the quality of reverence; which, in their descendants, if it survives at all, exists in smaller proportion, and with a vastly diminished force in the selection and estimate of

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[36] *Ibid,* 222.
[37] Bell, Michael Davitt. *Hawthorne and the Historical Romance of New England* (Princeton; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), 126.

public men."[38] The town's reverence for historical heroes is not the source of the problem; rather, the town's process of selecting public heroes has become less keen in the new world. Dimmesdale should not be reverenced for his self-castigation, but Hester should be commemorated for her handling of an over-zealous punishment. The narrator describes Dimmesdale's decision to alter the message of his ritual when he says, "another man had returned out of the forest; a wiser one; with a knowledge of hidden mysteries which the simplicity of the former never could have reached. A kind of bitter knowledge that!"[39] The difference in the novel's first ritual stems from Dimmesdale's emergence from "the wilderness." In the new world, Dimmesdale decides like Endicott in "Endicott and the Red Cross" to cast behind the "simplicity" of a former way of thinking. While Endicott literally strips the British cross from a flag, Dimmesdale attempts to psychologically cashier the selective ideology of his forefathers.[40] His rejection of his past self symbolically contains a dismissal of past forms of producing meaning. He fails to observe how his rejection reinforces the rigidity of selective perception in Puritan ideology. Just because he sees his "new" message as "divinely" right, it does not mean that all past messages are wrong. By reinforcing the imagined distance from the past, Dimmesdale augments the problems of perception he wishes to leave.

The narrator accentuates Dimmesdale's influence over the town in producing historical significance, but also indicates the jingoism of an overly imagined importance in the community. Dimmesdale's sermon mesmerizes the town, elevating the mood of the occasion while detracting from individual thought. Describing Dimmesdale's

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[38] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 228.
[39] *Ibid,* 215.
[40] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Complete Short Stories* (Garden City, N.Y.: Hanover House, 1959), 208-209.

hypnotic influence over the town, the narrator says, "then ensued a murmur and half-hushed tumult; as if the auditors released from the high spell that had transported them into the region of another's mind, were returning into themselves, with all their awe and wonder still heavy on them."[41] Dimmesdale's speech at the end of the novel produces a ritualistic effect in commemorating the historical significance of the day. It extends Dimmesdale's internal conflict to the community itself, and like in hypnosis, influences the selective perception of the town.[42] However, Dimmesdale reinforces the contradictory historical views of the town by deemphasizing the problems of rigid dedication to the community. The narrator alludes to ambivalent function Dimmesdale provides for the community when he says, "a spirit as of prophecy had come upon [Dimmesdale], constraining him to its purpose as mightily as the old prophet's of Israel were constrained; only with this difference, that, whereas the Jewish seers had denounced judgments and ruin on their country, it was his mission to foretell a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord."[43] The difference is significant because Dimmesdale establishes a drive similar to the concept of "Manifest Destiny" that becomes more apparent in the nineteenth century. Instead of renewing the historical awareness of the community, Dimmesdale overly accentuates the community's sense of purpose in the new world. The exclusive nature of that exaggerated sense of historical purpose leads to the domination of groups threatening or appearing to threaten that

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[41] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 239.
[42] Coale, Samuel Chase. "Mysteries of Mesmerism: Hawthorne's Haunted House," *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville*, ed. Giles Gunn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 68.
[43] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 240.

imagined purpose. While Dimmesdale's speech provides historical relevance for the community through ritual, it overly exaggerates a fixed view of purpose.

While the end of the novel may appear as a single historical event, Dimmesdale's second revelation of the symbol on his chest conflicts with the purpose of his first speech. The difficulty in interpreting the end of the novel derives largely from the ambivalence between two uses of history in the new world. While the first ritual provided a sense of community and imagined historical significance, the second undermines the perception of man as capable of historical perfection. Dimmesdale exhorts the Calvinist drive toward community perfection, but his revelation of the letter exposes the hypocrisy of that view. The contradiction epitomizes the larger thematic conflicts between views of history in the novel. Both dimensions of the ritual have an important social function tied to history, but may or may not alter the exaggerated rigidity of historical perception in the town. The conflict itself parallels the function of the two rituals for the town and the purpose of the novel for the reader.

The second historical commemoration in the novel reflects a consciousness of the problem of conventional forms of ritual in the New England community. When characterizing Dimmesdale's perception after his speech the narrator says, "there stood Hester, holding little Pearl by the hand! And there was the scarlet letter on her breast! The minister here made a pause; although the music still played the stately and rejoicing march to which the procession moved. It summoned him onward,—onward to the festival!—but here he made pause."[44] The repetition of the word "pause" implies a moment of conscious consideration of the effect of his speech. Even while the

[44] *Ibid*, 242.

"procession" moves Dimmesdale "onward," he pauses because he has realized a problem with his commemorative approach.[45] The narrator indicates the crowd's misperception of a transformation in Dimmesdale's consciousness when he says, "the crowd meanwhile, looked on with awe and wonder. This earthly faintness was, in their view, only another phase of the minister's celestial strength; nor would it have seemed a miracle too high to be wrought for someone too holy, had he ascended before their eyes, waxing dimmer and brighter, and fading at last into the light of heaven!"[46] It would be the same mistake as the town to see the speech and Dimmesdale's revelation as the same. By doing so, the reader would further the deification that Dimmesdale attempts to dispel by exposing the letter (or hidden meaning) on his chest. The strength Dimmesdale requires is the power to separate himself from the historical perception of the town. Specifically, Dimmesdale requires the strength that has been cultivated in Hester through her stigmatization. He tells Hester that, "in the name of Him, so terrible and so merciful, who gives me grace, at this last moment, to do what…I withheld myself from doing seven years ago, come hither now, and twine thy strength about me! Thy strength, Hester; but let it be guided by the will which God hath granted me!"[47] The "will" that God has given Dimmesdale is a mesmeric command over the community in establishing the setting for historical commemoration. By "twining" Dimmesdale's strength with the suppressed meaning of the scarlet letter, Dimmesdale attempts to combine the two modes of historical perception

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[45] It is also interesting to note that the division between the chapters reflects two dimensions to the "New England Holiday;" while the speech falls in the chapter titled the "procession," Dimmesdale's second revelation has been divided sequentially into another chapter titled "the Revelation of the Scarlet Letter.

[46] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 242-243.

[47] *Ibid*, 243.

thematically established in the novel. While the first utilizes the cultural atmosphere of historical ritual, the second attempts to transform those cultural practices by exposing their contradictions.

The two rituals augment awareness of conflicts in historical perception, but that effect may or may not be temporary. The narrator explains why he does not describe the actual particulars of Dimmesdale's revelation when he says, "but it were irreverent to describe that revelation. For an instant the gaze of the horror-stricken multitude was concentrated on the ghastly miracle; while the minister stood with a flush of triumph in his face, as one who, in the crisis of acutest pain, had won a victory."[48] By using the phrase "ghastly miracle," the narrator illustrates the intended effect of the historical revelation. The revelation should be "ghastly" in exposing the latent sin of the community, but a "miracle" in the ritual atmosphere in which Dimmesdale delivers it. Still, by emphasizing the "instant gaze" of the community, the narrator implies that effect may only be temporary. As the narrator indicates, "when time sufficed for the people to arrange their thoughts in reference to the foregoing scene, there was more than one account of what had been witnessed on the scaffold."[49] The event itself does not solve the problem of selective perception of history, but temporarily augments an awareness of history's contradictions. While multiplicity of historical perceptions will always be a problem, Dimmesdale's ritual heightens the tension between histories to expose the problem of historical selection.

The novel itself serves a similar ritualistic function as Dimmesdale's speech in commemorating the historical importance of the characters' dramatic struggle. At the

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[48] *Ibid*, 246.
[49] *Ibid*, 248.

end of the novel, the narrator comments on the intended meaning of the "legend" of the scarlet letter. The burial ground of Dimmesdale and Hester has "a space in between, as if the dust of the two sleepers had no right to mingle. Yet one served as tombstone for both."[50] Although coded, the phrase does not separate the two just for their sin, but for the modes of history they embody. While one "tombstone" represents both, the relationship between the dominant and suppressed histories of New England life can be understood through the symbolic arrangement of the novel itself. The tombstone or "memorial" symbolically reflects the function of Hawthorne's historical novel. The narrator conveys a sense that more than one memorial may exist, but the significance lies in the contradictions within the tombs themselves. Continuing his description of the gravesite the narrator says, "all around, there were monuments carved with armorial bearings; and on this simple slab of slate—as the curious investigator may still discern, and perplex himself with the purport—there appeared the semblance of an engraved escutcheon. It bore a device, a herald's wording of which might serve for a motto and brief description of our now concluded legend…"[51] The difference between the memorials mirrors the division between separate histories, which contain within them conflicting models of the past. While some memorials have clear "armorial bearings," the tomb of the scarlet letter has only the "semblance" of these heraldic symbols. The word "device" reflects both the intricate design of the symbol, but also the function it serves in exposing the contradictions of historical perception.

The initial ritualistic effect of Dimmesdale's sermon style reflects a function of the novel itself. It has the "simple" or conventional appearance of other novels, but its

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[50] *Ibid*, 253.
[51] *Ibid*

content exposes the latent influence of subjective and selective perception on our renderings of history. It utilizes the themes of the American historical romance, but accentuates the genre's contradictions in arranging the past. The novel does not reconcile the contradictory perceptions of Dimmesdale's speech, because the novel itself would produce the same differences in response. While some would see the novel as accentuating the contradictions of the narrow-minded Puritan (and undermining national identity), others would see it as a commemoration of past forms of political and religious observance. The novel serves both functions by accentuating the confusion between these modes of historical judgment. It simultaneously juxtaposes the themes of the Puritan past with Hawthorne's experience in the Custom House in the present day. In this manner, the novel exposes the problem of seeing the past as separate from present reality. By doing so, we view ourselves as part of an exclusive moment in history, separate from the universal experience of mankind. Not every reader can refrain from producing one moral of the story, but "the curious investigator may still discern" a meaning in the contradictory functions of history in the novel. The novel attempts to bring the reader into a conversation with the past to underscore that communication's purport in the present. It deemphasizes the significance of any history that does not illuminate the inherent selectiveness of history itself.

Perhaps the novel's reception did not produce enough of the "careful investigation" that Hawthorne intended. As Hawthorne described it, the book had a "dark tinge" that might limit its thematic functions. Originally Hawthorne wanted to have the work included with a series of other short stories intended to grab the reader's

interest.[52] That interest is significant, because it mirrors the attention of the crowd in Dimmesdale's speech. Hawthorne wanted to achieve mesmeric effect of Dimmesdale's sermon, but with a less direct message than Dimmesdale. *The Scarlet Letter* might not have had the full cultural resonance Hawthorne anticipated, and *The House of the Seven Gables* certainly suggests an adjustment in his stylistic approach. While the latter novel continues to illustrate the contradictions in historical perception, it does so more latently by being juxtaposed with happier themes. Herman Melville would take Hawthorne's subtle subversion of historical perception to its stylistic extreme. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* in large part mirrors a reversed transition between Hawthorne's styles, moving from the bright and happy realm of Saddle Meadows to the dark psychological terrain of New York City. Before exploring Melville's work however, Hawthorne's approach in *The House in the Seven Gables* must be more fully established.

3. Hawthorne and Heredity in *The House of the Seven Gables*

Melville's reaction to *The House of the Seven Gables* has been considered one of the most personal and critical assessments of the work.[53] The letters between the authors utilize a personal code that can be difficult to decipher. Much of their correspondence appears like inside jokes or references, as well as deep personal symbols communicated between the authors. Because Hawthorne burned many of his letters of correspondence, his reaction to Melville's enthusiastic review has often been viewed as distanced or

[52] Wineapple Brenda. *A Historical Guide to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Larry J. Reynolds (Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 2001), 28.
[53] Buitenhuis, Peter. *The House of the Seven Gables, Severing Family and Colonial Ties* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 58.

cold.[54] It would be a mistake to view the authors' relationship as one-sided or as falling apart solely due to differences in personality. While their relationship was brief, it occurred at a critical period of both authors' literary careers.

In Melville's letter regarding *The House of the Seven Gables*, he transitions from a congratulatory appreciation of the novel to a more philosophical exploration of Hawthorne's style. Melville tells Hawthorne that he and his wife, "spent almost an hour in each separate gable. This book is like a fine old chamber, abundantly, but still judiciously, furnished with precisely that sort of furniture best fitted to furnish it. There are rich hangings, wherein are braided scenes from tragedies!"[55] By describing the house as "furnished" with the "sort of furniture best fitted to furnish it," Melville may be alluding to themes of heredity in the work through his arrangement of language. The language repeats itself in a manner that reflects the inescapable heredity in Hawthorne's novel. While Melville's comment could be seen as a congratulatory response on a well-ordered novel, the alliteration of the words recapitulate in a way that mirrors the reciprocal nature of inheritance in the novel. His allusion to the furniture of the "fine old chamber" underscores Hawthorne's use of symbolism within the house. Melville observed a subtly in Hawthorne's arrangement of language, and his ability to confuse conventional notions of historical perception. His reading lies far from the public reception *of The House of the Seven Gables* as a celebration of American nationalism.[56]

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[54] Levine, Robert S. "Genealogical Fictions: Race in *The House of the Seven Gables*," *Hawthorne and Melville: Writing a Relationship*, ed by Jana L. Argersinger and Leland S. Person (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 228.

[55] Melville, Herman. *Critical Essays on Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (New York: G.K. Hall; Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan; New York : Maxwell Macmillan International, 1995), 23.

[56] Levine, Robert S. "Genealogical Fictions: Race in *The House of the Seven Gables*,"

The House of the Seven Gables would play a vital role in his understanding of history in *Pierre or, the Ambiguities.* Hawthorne's method of subverting conventional histories influenced Melville's understanding of a lack of permanence inherent in any historical construction.

The plot of the novel concerns the history of two families—the Pyncheons and the Maules. The first chapter explores town's Puritan past, and Pyncheon family's method of acquiring its land. Colonel Pyncheon uses his social and political authority to convince the town that Maule is a witch most likely so he can acquire the Maule land. On the scaffold, Maule prophesizes that "God will give (the Colonel) blood to drink."[57] Within a few days, the Colonel in fact dies from ingesting his own blood. Years later, the family has lost the majority of their wealth, and one of the last descendents, Hepzibah, must open a cent shop to make money. When Phoebe, a younger relative, arrives, the gloomy character of the mansion becomes symbolically transformed through her youth. It becomes apparent that Hepzibah's brother, Clifford, has a psychological condition stemming from some traumatic event in his past. He has become unable to retain the experiences of the day, but Phoebe's presence provides a therapeutic function for the old man. Phoebe also begins to be attracted to a man named Holgrave, who lives in the Pyncheon's house as a boarder and who, we later learn, is a descendent of Maule. When Phoebe leaves for the country, Clifford's brother, Judge Pyncheon, reveals his plot to acquire the house of the seven gables. He plans on exposing Clifford as insane, and removing the house from his and Hepzibah's possession. However, when Hepzibah goes

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Hawthorne and Melville: Writing a Relationship, ed. Jana L Argersinger and Leland S. Person (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 232.

[57] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: New American Library, 2001), 14.

to look for Clifford, she finds him next to the dead body of Judge Pyncheon who has died of the same biological disorder of his ancestor. The two flee the city, as the effect of Judge Pyncheon's death has shocked Clifford back to consciousness. Over the night there is a storm, and the narrator describes the "ghost story" of the Judge Pyncheon, where figures emerge from their portraits and haunt the dead man. Phoebe returns to find neither Clifford or Hepzibah, but Holgrave and the dead Judge Pyncheon. Holgrave, through his daguerreotype, has made it apparent that Clifford did not kill his brother, thus clearing his name. In the odd scene, Holgrave and Phoebe declare their love with the body of Judge Pyncheon cooling in the next room. The Pyncheon's ancient deed to Indian land is rediscovered behind the portrait of Colonel Pyncheon, only to be found worthless. The novel concludes with the family moving to Judge Pyncheon's estate.

The House of the Seven Gables thematizes the question of the influence of history upon the present. While the book appears obsessed with the past, its real concern with the past lies in its relationship with the present. In *The Scarlet Letter,* Hawthorne positioned the problems of historical construction and selection in a historical event of the past. By fixating on the past, Hawthorne looked to illuminate that event's relationship to the present. In *The House of the Seven Gables* Hawthorne contemporizes historical events to further elucidate the cyclical nature of past events. That is not to say that Hawthorne simply moved historical themes from the past to the present, but rather that he arranges the present as a more immediate manifestation of the past. Although the past looms in the background, it primarily becomes manifest through the present course of events. As Hawthorne says in his preface, "the point of view in which this tale comes under the Romantic definition lies in the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very

present that is flitting away from us."[58] Hawthorne intends to demonstrate how the past does not remain separate from the "very present" that is "flitting away from us." The present, for Hawthorne, is not distanced from the past, but exposes larger themes of human consciousness that reappear historically as if new. Even as we see ourselves as apart from the past, we may only appear to be different. *The House of the Seven Gables* intimates that even if we do not actively remember the past, we may unconsciously commemorate its best and worst aspects through our actions in the present. For Hawthorne, to what degree we perpetuate the social dominance and suffering of the past can only be perceived through this fundamental relationship.

In constructing the history of the two families, the narrator underscores the town's susceptibility to the influence of questionable authority. While the narrator does not openly condemn the trials, he hints at a truth in colloquial accounts of the execution. The witch trials serve as a symbolic representation of the problem of selective perception in the town. While Hawthorne does not reference Salem explicitly, the work has been interpreted as a response to Joseph Felt's *Annals of Salem* and many other compilations of Salem's history. Hawthorne reviewed Felt's history and would have been familiar with it as well as other histories of his native town.[59] Felt's narrative largely bowdlerizes the violence and suppression of Salem's origins. When he says, "hence we discern that few communities can claim a nobler origin, as to the motives and character of their founders, than our own city," Felt ignores the contemporary opposing frame of the

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[58] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: New American Library, 2001), 14.

[59] Emery, Allan. "Salem History and *The House of the Seven Gables*," *Critical Essays on Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (New York: G.K. Hall; Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan; New York : Maxwell Macmillan International, 1995), 130.

narrow-minded puritan that would have questioned his assertions.[60] Hawthorne approaches Felt's statement critically, and his history looks at his and other conventional frames of Salem's past. The narrator does observe a positive social purpose underlying the witch-hunt. Describing the trials, the narrator tells us, "if any one part of their proceedings can be said to deserve less blame than another, it was the singular indiscrimination with which they persecuted not merely the poor and aged, as in former judicial massacres, but people of all ranks; their own equals, brethren, and wives."[61] In this sense, the persecution has a strange character of equality. The line can be read as ironic, but even so it implies that the town did not see distinctions between people regarding spiritual issues such as witchcraft. The spiritual problem brings the town together against a threat, whether or not it is imagined. At the same time, the narrator indicates "the influential classes, and those who take it upon themselves to be leaders of the people, are fully liable to all the passionate error that has ever characterized the maddest mob."[62] While the narrator indicates the unity of the town as a positive characteristic, he implies that the leaders of the town do not correctly utilize that cohesiveness. In the present, it is easy to become lost in what appears to be correcting some sin of the past. That corrective impulse ultimately serves to perpetuate the problem a society may or may not have correctly perceived.

The town's witch-hunt has serious consequences for the arrangement of social order in the town. The death of Matthew Maule is significant historically for the class conflict it represents. Robert Levine has gone as far to see these class conflicts as

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[60] *Ibid,* 133.
[61] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: New American Library, 2001), 13.
[62] *Ibid*

undermining fixed racial identity in the novel.[63] The Maules certainly represent a subordinate and suppressed class of working men and women. The narrator tells us that the Maules, "were generally poverty-stricken; always plebeian and obscure; working with unsuccessful diligence at handicrafts; laboring on the wharves, or following the sea, as sailors before the mast; living here and there about the town, in hired tenements, and coming finally to the almshouse as the natural home of their old age."[64] The description draws on images from the entire working class, and indicates that the family's history has been suppressed. The word "obscure" implies that the history of the family has not been carefully recorded (like an oral history). The narrator juxtaposes the description of the Maules as plebeian with their obscured history to demonstrate a relationship between their class and the record of the family's past. The real history of the Maules has been passed down through the tradition of the family. In *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne emphasized the significance of colloquial legends; in *The House of the Seven Gables* Hawthorne adjusts his focus somewhat. The narrator indicates that, "tradition—which sometimes brings down truth that history has let slip, but is oftener the wild babble of the time, such as was formerly spoken at the fireside and now congeals in newspapers—tradition is responsible for all contrary averments."[65] These "contrary averments" can indicate the truth of an event or obscure it. Both the interpretation of the oral tradition and the clarity of the history remain problems of subjectivity in the novel. By leaving these meanings undecided, Hawthorne prompts the reader to question the reliability of

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[63] Levine, Robert S. "Genealogical Fictions: Race in *The House of the Seven Gables*," *Hawthorne and Melville: Writing a Relationship*, ed by Jana L. Argersinger and Leland S. Person (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 235.

[64] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: New American Library, 2001), 29.

[65] *Ibid*, 21.

any history in the work. Maule's legend and his prophecy on the scaffold point to a truth regarding the relationship of the two families, even if the literal course of events has been exaggerated or embellished. Melville may have drawn on this theme in *Pierre or, the Ambiguities,* while reaching a somewhat different conclusion. Tradition as history, embodied in the character of Isabel, appears convincing, but may be as deceptively conclusive as the dominant history of the times. Hawthorne indicates that there is some credibility in Maule's legend to subvert the dominant history of the Pyncheon family. Even while histories in the novel remain unreliable, events in the present reveal the suppressed truth of the past.

The narrator describes the execution of Maule in religious terms to emphasize its universal import to the history of humanity. The curse of Maule provides a major thematic crux for the novel. Because the narrator describes the execution like a legend, the reader will most likely read the event as purposely embellished by the narrator, even while looking for threads of realism in the story. Illustrating the execution the narrator says, "it was a death that blasted with strange horror the humble name of the dweller in the cottage, and made it seem almost a religious act to drive the plow over the little area of his habitation, and obliterate his place and memory from among men."[66] The words "place" and "memory" are tied to the religious function of plowing the land. By blurring the distinctions between the memory of Matthew Maule and the landscape, the narrator implies that Maule's memory remains tied to land on which he lived. The memory of the man becomes de-commemorated for future generations; Colonel Pyncheon suppresses his history by removing the visible symbols of his existence. The town even changes the

[66] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: New American Library, 2001), 13.

names of the streets from Maule to Pyncheon lane. It is "almost a religious act" because while it is the opposite of ancestor worship, Maule's removal has the character of a ceremony. While it historical suppression is the philosophic opposite of commemoration, the narrator questions the distinctions we place between remembering and forgetting the past. By building the house of the seven gables on Maule's land, Colonel Pyncheon attempts to suppress and forget the history of the man he helped murder. The action is as much religious as it is historical. While the physical ramifications of the colonel's actions are apparent in the legend, they become cyclically reflected in the present as a symbolic and biological disorder.

Utilizing the gothic theme of degenerated aristocracy, the narrator juxtaposes the Pyncheon family's decline with its methods of historical construction. It is not the physical persons of Colonel Pyncheon or Matthew Maule that reappear historically; rather, the conflict between the two perspectives cannot be reconciled. When Hepzibah looks at the portrait of Colonel Pyncheon the narrator tells us, "in one sense, this picture had almost faded into the canvas, and hidden itself behind the duskiness of age; in another, she could not but fancy that it had been growing more prominent, and strikingly expressive, ever since her earliest familiarity with it as a child."[67] The conflict between these two perspectives mirrors the perception of the Puritan ancestors in *The Scarlet Letter* and the seemingly contradictory themes of the historical romance.[68] The narrator also indicates in the passage that the perception of the past can change depending on the current developmental stage and conditions of one's life. Later in the novel, when Judge

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[67] *Ibid,* 57.

[68] Bell, Michael Davitt. *Hawthorne and the Historical Romance of New England* (Princeton; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), 22.

Pyncheon confronts Hepzibah regarding his plan to take the house, her view of the portrait becomes more significant. Hepzibah tells the Judge, "this hard and grasping spirit has run in our blood these two hundred years. 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!"[69] The phrase "in a different shape" indicates that while the Judge's plot may not directly mirror the exact history of the past, his methods of dominance do. The present may not appear precisely like the past, but it can assume a similar "shape." While the exact course of events may not be the same, the themes running between the stories parallel one another. For Hawthorne, even as the exact realism of history can only be understood in the present, the themes of the past can be observed because they influence our immediate experience. The characters of the novel are mostly unaware of their deep connection with the past until the past reveals its influence in the present.

When looking at the selective perception of the present, the novel emphasizes its relationship to constructing a memory of the past. The daguerreotype had become widely popular in the antebellum United States by the mid-nineteenth century.[70] Photography complicates Hawthorne's use of portraiture in the novel, by illustrating how the most realistic depiction of the present falls subject to selective perception. Even a picture can have the spiritual or psychological power of a gothic portrait. Phoebe's reaction to Holgrave's daguerreotype of Judge Pyncheon demonstrates the latent perception of hereditary traits. When Phoebe sees the Judge's daguerreotype she responds, "I know the

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[69] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: New American Library, 2001), 208.

[70] Dolis, John. *The Style of Hawthorne's Gaze* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993), 27-28.

face… for its stern eye has been following me about all day. It is my Puritan ancestor, who hangs yonder in the parlor. To be sure, you have found some way of copying the portrait without its black velvet cap and grey beard, and have given him a modern coat and satin cravat, instead of his cloak and band. I don't think him improved by your alterations."[71] Phoebe intimates that the daguerreotype, while a realistic snapshot, remains subject to forces beyond our immediate consciousness. The narrator may be using Phoebe's comment to dispel an interpretation of the Judge as the same as his ancestor. It would be easy to see the Judge as a direct embodiment of his forefather, but more than his costume has changed over time. Even though Phoebe has seen the Judge before, she still sees a heredity influence apparent in his physical characteristics.

When Phoebe realizes that the Judge is the man in the daguerreotype, the narrator begins to wonder to the extent physical appearance can reflect intangible inheritances. Moving away from Phoebe's consciousness the narrator says, "it implied that the weaknesses and defects, the bad passions, the mean tendencies, and the moral disease which lead to crime are handed down from one generation to another, by a far surer process of transmission than human law has been able to establish in respect to the riches and honors which it seeks to entail upon prosperity."[72] The Pyncheon's fixation with preserving the arrangement of their family ultimately leads to their hereditary decline. It is a "far surer process of transmission" because the influence of the past becomes apparent in the family's present degeneration. While "human law" places honor on social

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[71] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: New American Library, 2001), 85.
[72] *Ibid,* 108.

status, an obsession with social advancement and preservation exposes the deleterious effect it takes on the Pyncheon family.

The hereditary disease that characterizes the Pyncheon family is as much biological as symbolic. Although the narrator never directly addresses the issue of incest, the theme becomes apparent in the narrator's description of the fowls of the mansion's garden. The birds may allude to themes that Hawthorne felt he could not address publicly. Regardless, the fowls do explore dimensions of the Pyncheon family's heredity that remain more latent in the narrative. The narrator tells us regarding the fowls that, "it was evident that the race had degenerated, like many a noble race besides, in consequence of too strict a watchfulness to keep it pure. These feathered people had existed too long in their distinct variety; a fact of which the present representatives, judging by their lugubrious deportment, seemed to be aware."[73] The theme of incest becomes more apparent in the hereditary decline of the "feathered people" than the Pyncheons themselves. It is the bird's resistance to the natural flow of change that reflects the family's decline. Even while they "seemed to be aware" of their degeneration, the birds cannot adapt their methods of inheritance to the problem. While they try to keep the family "pure," that fixation only leads to a further decline from the original hope for future generations. This obsession with purity becomes juxtaposed with the Judge's methods of social dominance. While the birds introduce the theme of incest, the narrator continually relates the family's decline with the Judge's methods of suppressing the past. The incest of the birds in part reflects the Pyncheons' lack of

[73] *Ibid*, 83.

awareness of their position in a cycle of history. It reflects a fixation with purity that mirrors the Pyncheon family's obsession with social appearance.

Judge Pyncheon, the descendent of Colonel Pyncheon, embodies the diseased heredity that characterizes the Pyncheon family. While the narrator establishes this disease as having physical ramifications (the Judge's respiratory disorder), he juxtaposes the biological disease with the Judge's methods of suppression. The Judge represents a problem of selective memory in the novel, and the consequences of suppressing historical events in one's consciousness. In a metaphor later utilized by Melville, the narrator illustrates the Judge's consciousness in the form of a marble palace. The narrator, alluding to a hidden secret behind the Judge's character, tells the reader, "in some low and obscure nook—some narrow closet on the ground floor, shut, locked and bolted, and the key flung away; or beneath the marble pavement, in a stagnant water puddle, with the richest pattern of mosaic work above—may lie a corpse, half decayed, and still decaying, and diffusing its death scent all through the palace."[74] The Judge is not aware that his suppression of past events has physical, psychological, and possibly spiritual consequences. The narrator obscures the distinction between these "diseases," to complicate an understanding of the family's degeneration. Problems of social dominance become translated in the novel into forms of dominating oneself. The imagery of a death "scent" in the narrator's description of the Judge mirrors Hawthorne's use of olfactory language in "Rappaccini's Daughter." In the short story, Rappaccini brings a young man into the family through a poison ingested through his plants.[75] By overly focusing on the

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[74] *Ibid*, 203.
[75] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Complete Short Stories* (Garden City, N.Y.: Hanover House, 1959), 256.

perpetuation of their family lines, both Rappaccini and Judge Pyncheon ignore the relationship between social actions and their physical and psychological consequences. They also fail to observe how these consequences affect the structure of their family. The Judge dies without realizing his position in a cycle of heredity and shifting history of social dominance.

Emphasizing the imagined nature of the Judge's social preoccupation, the narrator questions his methods of forming a fixed understanding of the past. When characterizing the Judge, the narrator utilizes imagery apparent in Hawthorne's other works. The "smile" of the Judge largely reflects how he self-justifies and hides his methods of social dominance from the community. Introducing an interpretation of the character early in the work, the narrator says, "and if the observer chanced to be ill-natured, as well as acute and susceptible, he would probably suspect that the gentleman's face was a good deal akin to the shine on his boots, and that each must have cost him a bootblack, respectively, a good deal of hard labor to bring out and preserve them."[76] The word "shine" implies that the Judge's smile has been socially constructed primarily for appearance. He has put "a good deal of hard labor" to making his shoes look socially appealing. As a leader of the community the Judge focuses more on the social perception of his authority, than on legitimizing his authority through his actions in the community. Hawthorne juxtaposes the Judge's methods of concealing his real intentions with the Pyncheon's family's methods of suppressing history. By masking the narrator's opinions of the Judge, Hawthorne prompts the reader to form his or her own interpretation of his character. While the narrator directs the reader toward his own conclusions, a full interpretation of

[76] *Ibid,* 106.

the Judge's character remains ambivalent until later in the work. When the Judge reveals his plot to frame Clifford as insane to the town (to acquire the house), the reader recognizes that his malice stems from a subtle self-justification of his character established throughout the novel. While the Judge hides his intentions from society, he also hides them from himself. The Judge becomes lost in a mechanical process of justifying his position in the community, and ignores how these methods have perpetuated his and his family's decline historically. The past becomes manifest in the present through the Judge's latent methods of self-justification.

The family's awareness of their disorder plays a central role in defining the nature of the inherited disease. It becomes clearer towards the end of the novel that Judge Pyncheon may have been involved in the death of his uncle, and through his silence, condemned his brother Clifford to social isolation. The Judge suppresses the memory of the event, but the narrator indicates that his selective perception only serves to perpetuate the problem. The narrator tells us regarding the Judge that, "a daily guilt might have been acted by him, continually renewed, and reddening forth afresh, like the miraculous bloodstain of a murder, without his necessarily and at every moment being aware of it."[77] By saying that the Judge does not "necessarily" have to be aware of the memory's influence, the narrator indicates the effect of subliminal understanding on social actions and physical appearance. The Judge might be aware of his guilt at times, but as long as it remains unresolved the guilt will act like a poison on his character. The more he attempts to forget the past, and his involvement in it, the more the past begins to dominant his perception. In this sense, suppressing the past serves a similar function to remembering

[77] *Ibid,* 201.

the past. While commemoration seeks to remember (and thus replicate) the social actions considered honorable in the past, the Judge's suppression replicates only those actions that perpetuate his dominance over the community. In seeking to remain "pure," the Judge elevates his social position to conform to the image of his declining aristocratic family. The Judge forgets the original purpose of his family's authority in the community. While it served a social function in uniting the Puritan community, that function has been forgotten in the mechanism of inheritance.

The Judge's obsession with wealth and social appearance undermines the mythic significance of the Pyncheon family's history. When the Judge confronts Hepzibah with his plot to take the house of the seven gables, her family's memory becomes discombobulated. Regarding Hepzibah's perception after her "colloquy" with Judge Pyncheon, the narrator says, "whatever she had heard, from the legendary aunts and grandmothers, concerning the good or evil fortunes of the Pyncheons—stories which had heretofore been warm in her remembrance by the chimney-corner glow that was associated with them—now recurred to be somber, ghastly, cold, like most passages of family history, when brooded over in melancholy mood."[78] The Judge's actions influence Hepzibah's perception of her family's history by shading the past through the lens of the present. Hepzibah cannot escape to the fond memories of her family, because the Judge's plot overwhelms her perception of the past. While the Judge perpetuates the darker view of the family's history, the narrator indicates that both "good" and "evil" "fortunes" used to coincide in Hepzibah's remembrance. The Judge detracts from the narrative power of his family's history by embodying its worst dimensions in the present. Without being

[78] *Ibid,* 210.

aware of it, the Judge replicates the error of his forebears in valuing materialism above the family itself. He commemorates the worst memories in the Pyncheon family's history by actively perpetuating them in the present.

The Judge's death exposes the underlying physical consequences of his selective perception of social dominance. The scene where Judge Pyncheon lies in the chair "dead" further complicates the narrative strategy of the work in relation to history. When first reading the chapter entitled "Governor Pyncheon," the reader may be struck by the repetitive insistence of the narrator that the Judge should rise and leave. By repeating this insistence, the narrator emphasizes a problem of time in the Judge's former methods of perception. The symbol of a watch and the sound of its tick enhance the narrator's persistence on movement. At the same time, the narrator alludes to a reason behind the Judge's sudden death. Illustrating the dead man, the narrator says, "you must hold your own breath, to satisfy yourself whether he breathes at all. It is quite inaudible. You hear the ticking of his watch; his breath you do not hear."[79] Pointing possibly to an understanding of stress and its consequences physically, the narrator indicates a relationship between the Judge's death and his strict conformance to mechanical time. The narrator utilizes a gothic device in addressing the reader to augment the sense of the surreal and miraculous.[80] By doing so, the narrator implies that Judge Pyncheon's methods of suppression have supersensory as well as historical consequences. By supersensory I mean that the Judge's fixation with social status has no meaning in an

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[79] *Ibid*, 234.

[80] Scheick, William J. "The Author's Corpse and the Human Problem of Personal Identity in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*," *Critical Essays on Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (New York: G.K. Hall; Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan; New York : Maxwell Macmillan International, 1995), 101-102.

afterlife not bound by mechanical time. Historically, he will not be remembered or commemorated for anything but his superficial attachment to material achievement. All that will connect him with the living is his participation in a cycle of dominance.

As the chapter progresses, the narrator underscores the relationship between the Judge's death and his methods of commemorating the past. The narrator describes the Judge's schedule for the day in detail to illustrate its deleterious effect on the Judge's life. After introducing several business opportunities that would benefit the Judge financially and socially, the narrator says, "and if he have time, amid the press of more urgent matters, he must take measures for the renewal of Mrs. Pyncheon's tombstone, which, the sexton tells him, has fallen on its marble face, and is cracked quite in twain."[81] The usage pushes the reader to question why the commemoration of the Judge's deceased wife falls at the end of his list of activities. Using the words "more urgent matters," the narrator quietly mocks the Judge's perception of urgency. The image of a tombstone reinforces the conceit that the Judge's fixation on materialism undermines the memory of his family's past. Because the Judge viewed his life as severed from the past, he did not observe the conflict perpetuating his family's degeneration. Without looking at history, and the influence of the past on the present, we cannot begin to understand the influence of time on our perception. While the Judge's obtuseness remains tied to his egoism, the Judge's egoism stems from his understanding (or lack of understanding) of the past's influence.

The chapter becomes increasingly surreal as the lines between the past and the present blur in the "ghost story" of Judge Pyncheon. The narrator insists that "ghost

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[81] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: New American Library, 2001), 236.

stories are hardly taken seriously any longer," but does not directly comment on the credibility of the themes in the history.[82] Comparing the Judge to his ancestors, the narrator tells us, "the Pyncheon of two centuries ago, in common with most of his contemporaries, professed his full belief in spiritual ministrations, although reckoning them chiefly of a malignant character. The Pyncheon of tonight, who sits in yonder armchair, believes in no such nonsense. Such, at least, was his creed, some few hours since."[83] The passage reinforces a relationship between the Judge's irreverence of the past and its spiritual ramifications. By using the term "spiritual ministrations," the narrator implies the Puritan ancestors believed in the ministry of the spirit itself (or in forces beyond their immediate perception). They saw this ministration as actively real in their lives, but also as a threat beyond their control. These forces allude to the witch-hunt illustrated in the first chapter. What the town sees as Matthew Maule's "witchcraft" stems largely from his prediction of the Pyncheon's future. His prophecy of the future stems from his ability to understand the active commemoration of the past in the present. Holgrave asserts that the Maule's witchcraft lies in its diachronic understanding of the Pyncheon family history. He concludes, perhaps too affirmatively, that "[the Judge's] mode of death has been an idiosyncrasy with his family, for generations past… 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."[84] Holgrave points to Maule's observation of a biological strain in the family, but does not

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[82] *Ibid,* 243.
[83] *Ibid,* 242.
[84] *Ibid,* 264.

indicate how Maule understood it. He selectively perceives only the physical disease, even while the narrator has linked that disease with a spiritual as well as physical cause. Regardless, his comment implies that Maule's understanding of heredity's influence has been viewed socially as spiritual power. The line between a "real" history (like Holgrave's) and a "ghost story" remains thin in the novel to highlight the problem of selective emphasis in constructing a history.

The novel does not decide whether the Judge's death actually affects the course of history, or whether it is a consequence of history. As the town interprets the event, the reader may be reminded of the community of Salem's reaction to Dimmesdale's revelation of the scarlet letter. Because *The House of the Seven Gables* occurs in the present, the reactions of the town have been adjusted somewhat. The narrator directs the reader's attention to the relationship between a "natural" death and the town's remembrance of the Judge. Describing the town's shifting opinion after the death, the narrator says, "when it came to be understood, on the highest professional authority, that the event was a natural, and—except for some unimportant particulars, denoting a slight idiosyncrasy—by no means an unusual form of death, the public, with its customary alacrity, proceeded to forget that he had ever lived."[85] The "highest professional authority" may be superficial given Hawthorne's depiction of authority figures in the novel. Also, the term "natural" may mean that the Judge died only due to an internal biological disorder, or that the death fits naturally within the cycle of history. Both definitions of natural may be true given the juxtaposition of physical and mythic significance behind the Judge's death. The authority figures of the town may have

[85] *Ibid,* 269.

reinforced an incomplete and dominant history, or fate may have exposed historical truth to the town and two families.

The novel concludes optimistically, but does not decide whether the curse of heredity has been eradicated. During the chapter entitled "the departure," the narrator describes the death's effect on correcting the pain the Judge impressed on others such as Clifford. He tells the reader,

> "it is a truth (and it would be a very sad one but for the higher hopes which it suggest) that no great mistake, whether acted or endured in our mortal sphere, is ever really set right. Time, the continual vicissitude of circumstances, and the invariable inopportunity of death render it impossible. If after long lapse of years, the right seems to be in our power, we find no niche to set it in. The better remedy is for the sufferer to pass on, and leave what he once thought his irreparable ruin behind him."[86]

The juxtaposition of the phrases "continual vicissitude of circumstances" and "invariable inopportunity of death" implies that time is limited in its ability to heal the suffering caused through dominance and suppression. Even as the novel emphasizes the need to understand the methods of constructing a history, it also points to the limitations of forming a history. Without actively commemorating our past, we are still connected to the past through the present. However, the realization that the present is not separate from our perception of the past connects us to a larger temporal community or family. In the novel, this connection has been established to be mythic and also vital to our physical and psychological well-being. For the novel, the world will continue to shift in

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[86] *Ibid*, 272.

appearance, but the theme of suffering remains constant. It is our understanding of suffering itself that unites us with the past. In the novel, if we do not see the past as alive in the present, we commemorate the worst and the best of the past indiscriminately.

Hawthorne questions his character's methods of commemoration to demonstrate heredity's latent operation in the present. Whether or not we consciously consider the past in relation to our individuality, we continually relive the themes of the past, but with a slightly different appearance. By undervaluing his connection with the past, the Judge loses sight of his connection in a larger pattern of existence. He perpetuates the worst of the past because he does not consider the past's influence on his actions in the present. Authority figures, such as the Judge, without a reverence and hesitance toward the past, can misinform the public by reinforcing an incomplete and dominant history. In the present, the town's selective emphasis on the literal course of events tends to overlook those phenomena's relationship to the subjectivity of human consciousness. Whether or not the town's dominant and conventional history can represent the truth of past events or whether those events naturally arrange the town's history remains undecided. Even as Hawthorne remains optimistic, he suggests that suffering may not be put right in time. This adjustment marks a transition in Hawthorne's understanding of social dominance, and what the natural flow of time can and cannot repair.

Melville, with an understanding of Hawthorne's approach, would attempt to construct a work that could appear conventional, while subverting the perception of any fixed history. In his view, even if we become aware of the contradictions in our family history, separating their influence from our perception may be impossible. Melville utilizes many of Hawthorne's themes, but *Pierre* explores different thematic conclusions

due to its focus. The narrative and the style reflect developments and departures from the influence of Melville's contemporaries. Hawthorne may have succeeded in producing a conventionally subversive work, but Melville wished to examine the limits of that style and how it could complicate a reader's selective perception of the past.

4. Melville and Historical Memory

The commercial failure of *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* encapsulates Melville's tendency toward the subversive. Melville was not the culturally isolated rebel of his authorial myth, but he certainly arranged historical and cultural conflicts in a manner that unsettled his audience. The reaction of many contemporary critics to his novel *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* underscores the controversial style Melville developed in the work.[87] The novel has traditionally been treated as a failed project influenced in part by an estrangement with Hawthorne.[88] If any truth can be discerned from that narrative, it would be the strong stylistic influence Hawthorne exerted on Melville. Describing Hawthorne's understanding of "visible truth" Melville writes, "by visible truth, we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him."[89] Hawthorne's "black vein," that Melville observed in *Mosses from an Old Manse,* as Melville asserted, would

[87] Kelly, Wyn. "*Pierre's* Domestic Ambiguities," *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 91.

[88] Jana L. Argersinger and Leland S. Person. *Hawthorne and Melville: Writing a Relationship* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 17.

[89] Melville, Herman. *Correspondence* (Evanston : Northwestern University Press, 1993), 124.

not be perceived or understood by every reader.[90] Melville needed a linguistic code that would allow him to introduce his own controversial opinion, while maintaining the perception of his work as conventionally acceptable. Hawthorne probably would not have anticipated the extremes to which Melville utilized his approach.

There is a temptation to associate the madness of Pierre with Melville's own supposed insanity—a temptation enhanced by the narrator's proximity to Pierre's consciousness at times in the novel. *The New York Times* famously ran a review of *Pierre* titled "Herman Melville is Crazy," with the critic citing the novel as evidence of Melville's assured insanity.[91] More recent critical interpretations shy away from a causal relationship between Melville and his protagonist, but continue to focus on the narrator and Pierre. Regardless, readers have framed the narrator's sympathy as Melville's empathy with his central protagonist. The work does not allow a reader to fully arrange the narrator's moral position, which unsettles someone accustomed to that association. While the narrator questions the actions of his protagonist, he also begins to identify with his subject of analysis. The more the narrator tries to remain distinct, the more he begins to challenge those lines of distinctions. His ambivalence mirrors Pierre's own thematic struggle in constructing a true history from his family's past.

Pierre or, the Ambiguities explores the relationship between two worlds, Saddle Meadows and New York City, and the degree to which these spheres can be considered separate. The reader perceives quickly that the relationship between Pierre and his mother seems odd (somewhat Oedipal). Even stranger, the narrator continually

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[90] Melville, Herman. "Hawthorne and His Mosses," http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/bibliography.html

[91] Delbanco, Andrew. *Melville: His Life and Works* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 179.

foreshadows Pierre's fate, hinting at Pierre's limited perception of his family history as leading to some inevitable doom. When Pierre receives a letter telling him his father had an illegitimate child, Pierre slowly loses his mind trying to reconcile the discontinuity in his family narrative, which he has previously considered to be the paragon of virtue. He decides that the only way to save his sister while maintaining his father's honor will be to pretend to abscond with his sister, and leave his mother and fiancé. His mother disowns him, and his fiancé appears to have lost her mind. Pierre moves to the city where he has been renounced by his cousin, and begins trying to write a novel that will both sell in the market and retain artistic quality. Pierre's original fiancé, Lucy, then decides to leave her family and move in with Pierre as his "cousin." Isabel, Lucy, and Pierre live together for a short time, before Pierre's cousin (Glen) and Lucy's brother threaten Pierre legally. The novel concludes after Pierre has been arrested for the murder of his cousin. He, Isabel, and Lucy commit suicide in Pierre's prison cell.[92]

The relationship between narrator and protagonist exposes a problem that even "an observant reader" may have difficulty reconciling.[93] When trying to separate the opinions of the narrator and author, the reader engages with the problem of moral interpretation itself. The relationship between the narrator and Pierre stylistically mirrors Pierre's relationship with his father and the process of interpreting the actions of history. Narration immediately implies a temporal distance from the events being narrated, and in *Pierre*, that distance fuels conflict. Melville complicates the dynamic by directing much

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[92] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971)

[93] Melville comments on page twelve that an "observant reader" would understand his stylistic choices in the work. His comment may reflect one of many direct addresses to Harper Brothers, who had expressed hesitation in publishing his work.

of the focus of his novel toward an understanding of the past. More specifically, Melville focuses on his protagonist's family history, juxtaposing that history with the American national narrative. Through this juxtaposition, Melville illustrates the degree to which national and familial stories become entangled and confused. It has been observed that an element of American culture at this time reflected an apprehension toward the past, and especially toward past forms of social organization.[94] Melville would not have been excluded from this cultural influence, and his theory of "democracy on all sides" demonstrates an awareness of the persistence of past forms of domination within the American democracy.[95] Although Melville often looks to Europe for the roots of social domination, *Pierre* more often explores how the problem of domination perpetuates itself through the structure and functions of the family itself. The relationship between national and family structures in the work suggests that the two should not be understood as separate. By attending to the acts of historical interpretation in *Pierre*, we can recognize that the problem of social dominance should be more fully understood as a dimension of the selective perception of the past. Social dominance in this sense refers to the selection and suppression of historical events to legitimize authority and the perception of ascribed status as achieved merit. While *Pierre* may be over a hundred years old, its exploration of the source of cultural superiority continues to illustrate its latent persistence in the modern world.

No one voice provides an absolute interpretation of the past or present in *Pierre*. Rather, historical perception serves different functions at different times in the novel, but

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[94] Michael Kammon. *Mystic Chords of Memory: the Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 43.

[95] Milder, Robert. "Herman Melville: A Brief Biography," *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville*, ed. Giles Gunn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27.

those purposes mostly remain hidden from the characters (and occasionally from the narrator himself). The suppression of conflicting historical narratives constitutes a major function of historical selectivity in the novel. Pierre views the narratives of his family as representative or expressive of all history. He does not perceive how his family narratives have been shaped by the present to suppress other interpretations of the past. When Pierre first observes a conflict in his linear family narrative, he fails to see the many ways he remains bound to that construction. By attempting to maintain his father's honor by calling his illegitimate sister his wife, Pierre perpetuates his family's system of historical suppression. The novel questions to what degree historical selectivity can be altered, especially when those selected narratives form an understanding of one's family. Pierre becomes lost in a cycle of resymbolization where he cannot fix meaning on anything concerning his past. The mythic power of his family history cannot be reformed or abandoned, and Pierre remains between two models of history, neither of which he can fully comprehend.

The world of Saddle Meadows especially captures Melville's understanding of the latent nature of social dominance. The novel transitions thematically through its transitions in landscape, but the darker thematic elements of the city serve to augment an understanding of the sunny Saddle Meadows. Pierre's childhood home appears stable at first, but the narrator undermines its positive appearance long before Pierre learns of Isabel. Through the use of hyperbole, the narrator emphasizes aspects of Pierre's world that remain hidden and suppressed. The narrator does so both through his direct commentary, but also more subtly in his arrangement of language in certain scenes.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson examines how national forms of organization have assumed certain religious functions as language has changed.[96] In the novel, the narrator describes Pierre's view of his family in overtly religious language. If we are to view the novel as juxtaposing national and familial histories to indicate their degree of connection, the religious function of Pierre's historical narrative should not be ignored. The narrator especially emphasizes the religious unity of Pierre's understanding of history by exploring the ways his perception of the town and nation sees the land as unified through the past. The religious function of temporal unity surfaces in the novel as an operation of Pierre's historical narrative. The narrator describes Pierre's unification of the land when he says, "that fond ideality which, in the eyes of affection, hallows the least trinket once familiar to the person of a departed love; with Pierre that talisman touched the whole earthly landscape about him… so that his very horizon was to him as a memorial ring."[97] The words, "memorial ring," illustrate an understanding of the world that produces unity through a recollection of past events. By describing the horizon as a memorial ring, the narrator also indicates that Pierre's future remains bound to a cyclical process of familial glorification. In the previous sentence, the narrator describes how his family history "sanctified" the land through its "very long uninterrupted possession by Pierre's race." Pierre views the land as unified through the historical progression of his family line, reflecting a major function religion has played traditionally in organizing human experience.[98] Although religion is not always tied to bloodlines, it has often

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[96] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 16.

[97] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 8.

[98] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of*

provided a unified linguistic system that often appears natural and unitary in its function.[99] For Pierre's view of the world to retain its mythic influence, it must be linear in its formation of history. Linear history in this sense would not permit contradictions between actions and ideology; this history would also appear natural and eternal. History would be understood as a natural progression with set narratives of experience that deemphasize and or obscure other interpretations of the past. When ideological contradictions regarding his father's affair do appear, Pierre cannot replicate the function that history once served in organizing his experience.

Pierre's projection of meaning onto the landscape of Saddle Meadows confuses qualities associated with the land with Pierre's mythic rendering of history. When describing Pierre's relationship to the land, the narrator says, "she blew her wind-clarion from the blue hills, and Pierre neighed out lyrical thoughts, as at the trumpet-blast, a war-horse paws himself into a lyric of foam."[100] The narrator describes the lens through which Pierre interprets the natural landscape, highlighting Pierre's selectivity in the process. Nature serves as more of a catalyst for beliefs already within Pierre, providing an image of what he should defend. The narrator implies that this drive may verge on egoism and nationalism when he says, "she lifted her spangled crest of a thickly-starred night, and forth at that glimpse for their divine Captain and Lord, ten-thousand mailed thoughts of heroicness started up in Pierre's soul, and glared round for some insulted good cause to defend."[101] By describing nature's crest as a "thickly-starred night," the

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Nationalism (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 23.

[99] *Ibid*

[100] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 14.

[101] *Ibid*

narrator emphasizes Pierre's confusion between the natural landscape of Saddle Meadows and the nation itself (the United States). At the same time, he describes Pierre's identification with the role of "divine Captain and Lord," indicating that Pierre views himself as the central perpetuator of what he sees as naturally evident in his history. The "mailed" thoughts that nature instills demonstrate both the archaic quality of Pierre's heroism (chain mail) as well as the degree of defense those thoughts have against outside interpretation. The seeming eternal quality of nature becomes confused with Pierre's understanding of history, binding his perception of the past to immortal natural forms. The confusion between the natural world and our arrangement of nature suggests a concern with the Romantic concept of individuality. Pierre does not consider the relationship between his self and his experience, but views the events of his life and the natural world as reflective of his family's achieved merit and historical purpose in society. Reflecting a significant theme of Wordsworth's "Prelude," Pierre does not acknowledge the relationship between his arrangement of experience and its influence over his perception.[102] He will strike out to defend what he sees as an "insulted good cause," but he does not understand the influence of his past in shaping what he views as insulting.

Pierre cannot fully differentiate between a name placed on a piece of land and the qualities associated with the land. Names function in the novel to illustrate a distinction between language that labels the land and the natural qualities of the land. By placing a name on an object, one distinguishes that object as tied to the meaning associated with the name; the seeming eternity and beauty of the land become confused with the name

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[102] Wordsworth, William. *William Wordsworth: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 461-464.

associated with it. When the narrator describes Pierre's understanding of his country environment he says, "it had been his choice fate to have been born and nurtured in the country, surrounded by scenery whose uncommon loveliness was the perfect mould of delicate and poetic mind; while the popular names of its finest features appealed to the proudest patriotic and family associations of the historic line of Glendinning."[103] The reader can observe a discrepancy, filtered through the narrator, in the juxtaposition of the natural qualities of the landscape and Pierre's projection of his family's name onto the land. Describing Pierre's desire to live in the country as a "choice fate," the narrator indicates that while Pierre has been placed in his social position by fate, he views the arrangement as a choice on his part. The words "proudest" and "patriotic" evince a sense that while the "names" of Saddle Meadows appeal to the Glendinning narrative, they have been socially constructed to emphasize the achieved merit of the family. A name functions in the novel as a symbolic representation of the social standing of an individual, but becomes complicated by its association with the land and community it places under that title. Unlike Hawthorne's heraldic symbols in *The Scarlet Letter*, names do not positively contribute to social order, but rather the process of preservation itself undermines democratic freedom.

In a chapter Melville may have included in a later edition of the text, the narrator expands on the problem of associating a name with permanent ownership of the land. The narrator sees the power embodied in a name as temporary, especially in America. He expresses an admiring view of America's proximity to a "natural law" of cyclical growth and death. The "bubbling vat" lies at the center of the democratic spirit, and yet

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[103] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 5.

certain names, like Glendinning, continue to survive in that vat. The narrator describes the manner by which a name suppresses other names through a simile comparing oaks and grass to families. In the simile, the narrator explains that, "the grass is annually changed; but the limbs of the oak, for a long term of years, defy that annual decree. And if in America the vast mass of families be as the blades of grass, yet some few there are that stand as the oak; which instead of decaying, annually puts forth new branches."[104] Although he says this process surrenders to a "multiple virtue," the majority of the chapter fixates on the artificiality of a name's perpetuation. The image of the oak tree evokes the sense of a natural object, but also a natural object that dominates the landscape. If we view this through the frame of Pierre's confusion of the natural and historical, the symbol takes on added meaning. Even while the process may appear to have its origin in the competitive dimensions of nature, even oak trees will die, while names survive longer than what would be considered natural.

If a family were like an oak, then its influence would also be readily visible to the blades of grass that surround it. While names may have a dominating influence, the people should confer that dominance, at least in a theoretical democracy. Instead, names in the novel hide their dominance by presenting their existence as essential and permanent, neglecting the contradictions inherent in perpetuating an aristocracy in a democracy. Like the narrative mode of the plantation, idyllic, family names in the novel perpetuate their aristocratic existence through a frame of natural order.[105] That order ignores a family's dependence on the labor of marginalized communities and the

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[104] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 9.

[105] Crane, Gregg. *The Cambridge Introduction to the Nineteenth Century Novel* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 52.

industrial economy to perpetuate a "natural" existence. When comparing America to other countries, the narrator says, "an earldom, in abeyance for five centuries, has suddenly been assumed by some commoner, to whom it had not so much descended, as through the art of the lawyers been made flexibly to bend in that direction."[106] By describing the lawyer's "art" as "bending" descent, the narrator emphasizes the power of language to alter the perception of reality. Instead of achieving notoriety based upon merit, the work emphasizes the ways names assume that merit based upon their mythic arrangement of history. If a commoner can assume the role of a prince in Europe, then in a nation like America, where family lines have had less time to develop, the construction of a name should be more visible. However, as the novel suggests, "the art of lawyers" has more influence in determining social realities than one would imagine. When Pierre's mother gives the rights associated with his name to his cousin later in the novel, the artificiality of tying the law with hereditary rights becomes more apparent. If Pierre can lose the right to his father's inheritance because he did not conform to his family's convention, then his family's name has lost significant symbolic meaning. While Pierre's family history emphasizes its social purity (and in effect racial purity or white descent), its superficial legal meaning contradicts any association with actual bloodline.

Later in the novel the narrator indicates some hope to the problem, ironically expressed in death. Describing the death of a hard working man of Saddle Meadows (old Millthorpe), the narrator says, "I joy that Death is this Democrat; and hopeless of all other real and permanent democracies, still hug the thought, that thought in life some heads are crowned in gold, and some bound round with thorns, yet chisel them how they

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[106] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 10.

will, headstones are all alike."[107] The spectrum from a crown of "gold" to "thorns" encapsulates the variation of a name's social significance. Regardless of the meaning a name has in life, the memorial of a headstone connotes the same understanding—that the person has died and the social meaning of their name no longer has significance for him or her. For the narrator, and arguably Melville, a true leveling of names may only be achievable in death.

The relationship between a name and the natural landscape contradicts as much as the social norms associated with someone of that line. The components that comprise a "gentleman" include conformity to a certain view of the world, and more importantly a veiling of actions that contradict the values of that worldview. To Pierre's father, to be a gentleman, one must also be a Christian. Specifically, he must retain both the "meek, but kingly style" of that faith.[108] With the juxtaposition of those words, the reader may observe an inherent contradiction in being both humble and kingly. Although Christ typically embodies that association, the phrase also indicates a conflict of norms associated with the role of a gentleman. Pierre assumes his father's beliefs in the same manner he receives his land. The narrator describes Pierre's religious inheritance when he says, "Pierre had descended the numerous other noble qualities of his ancestors; and as he now stood heir to their forests and farms; so by the same insensible sliding process, he seemed to have inherited their docile homage to a venerable Faith, which the first Glendinning had brought over sea, from beneath the shadow of an English minister."[109] The word "insensible" implies that Pierre neither perceives, cares, nor completely

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[107] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 278.
[108] *Ibid,* 6.
[109] *Ibid,* 7.

understands the method by which he has assumed the role of a gentleman. Pierre's understanding of his role remains bound in the present, with little to no critical attention focused on his or his father's past. By describing the English minister with an indefinite article, the line implies that the "insensible sliding process" is not limited to one minister or family. Rather, Pierre's family represents a larger process that has occurred nationally.

Pierre's view of Saddle Meadows often contradicts itself, even while he bends those contradictions to fit into a linear history. The narrator comments on his view of historical progression when he says, "on the meadows which sloped away from the shaded rear of the manorial mansion, far to the winding river, an Indian battle had been fought, in the earlier days of the colony, and in that battle the paternal great-grandfather of Pierre, had sat unhorsed on his saddle in the grass, with his dying voice, still cheering his men into the fray."[110] By emphasizing that this battle had occurred "away from the shaded rear of the mansion," the narrator produces a sense that the reality of Pierre's family's social dominance remains selectively omitted from the family narrative. The word "shaded" indicates the event is not consistent with the family's perception of their past. "Shaded" also has the implication that those events might relate to a suppressed African-American history specifically. While it may appear noble to continue cheering men in battle even while dying, the passage questions his great-grandfather's judgment in the battle. By sitting "unhorsed," but still "on his saddle," the passage emphasizes Pierre's grandfather's rigid dedication to his beliefs. While the grandfather remains "on his saddle," his saddle has lost its intended meaning without a horse. Some scholars have gone so far as to read the passage as an emasculation of the grandfather, whose "horses"

[110] *Ibid,* 5-6.

in part represent sexually assaulted African-American women.[111] Considering how much that historical reality would conflict with Pierre's family narrative, the reading is consistent with the narrator's latent historical subversion in the passage.

Pierre extends his family line to the origins of the nation, but ignores the manner by which his line and the history of that line have survived. He assumes the process to be a reflection of the achieved merit of his family. Pierre's view of his grandfather especially demonstrates a selection of positive characteristics, to the neglect of more negative historical realities. Although the narrator remains ambivalent regarding Pierre's glorification, he sympathizes with the power Pierre's historical narrative holds over him. The narrator partially justifies Pierre's affection for his family when he asks the reader, "how think you it would be with this youthful Pierre, if every day descending to breakfast, he caught sight of an old tattered British banner or two, hanging over an arched window in his hall; and those banners captured by his grandfather, the general, in fair fight?"[112] The phrase "fair fight" appears again in the very next sentence, emphasizing through repetition the selectivity of Pierre's view of his grandfather. The repetition augments a sense that Pierre has experienced these ritualistic observances on a regular basis, but from a frame of reference that enhances the perception of his grandfather's action as just. By describing the battle as fair, the narrator highlights both Pierre's limited history and the reasoning behind his interpretation of that history.

The narrator continues to hint at discrepancies in Pierre's history through hyperbole produced by the repetition of positive descriptions. When describing Pierre's

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[111] Levine, Robert S., "Pierre's Blackened Hand," (*Leviathan* 1, March 1999), 31-35.
[112] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 12.

grandfather, the narrator emphasizes the height, size, strength, and kindness of the general. Simultaneously, he presents an alternative view. Although "grand old Pierre" had "smitten down an oaken door" during a manorial fire, he does so "to admit the buckets of his negro slaves." The narrator implies that grand old Pierre has the heroic appearance of saving the manor, but does not actually put out the fire. Even though "in a night-scuffle in the wilderness before the Revolutionary War, he had annihilated two Indian savages by making reciprocal bludgeons of their heads," "all this was done by the mildest hearted, and most blue-eyed gentleman in the world."[113] By describing the Indians as "savages" and the battle occurring in the "wilderness," the narrator implies that their death was both essential and acceptable given the time, place, and persons involved. The use of language points to Pierre's perpetuation of a limited perception of white heroism to the neglect of more violent historical realities. Grand old Pierre may have been violent, but that violence, for Pierre, becomes outweighed by the selective viewing of his grandfather's positive characteristics. These positive depictions so outweigh the negative that the narrator comments, "never could Pierre look upon his fine military portrait without an infinite and mournful longing to meet his living aspect in real life."[114] His grandfather exists as more of a testament of human goodness than a realistic figure with natural conflicts of interest. Pierre cannot fit into his grandfather's coat, because his grandfather's image is much too large to be real.

Although the narrator sympathizes at times with Pierre, he recognizes the social ambition that his view of the world evokes. While Pierre laments not having a sister, the narrator acknowledges that, "in the ruddiness, and flushfulness, and vaingloriousness of

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[113] *Ibid*, 29-30.
[114] *Ibid*, 30.

his youthful soul, he fondly hoped to have a monopoly of glory in capping the fame-column, whose tall shaft had been erected by his noble sires."[115] Although Pierre wants to fight on a sister's behalf, he also wants to immortalize himself as his forefathers have. The phallic imagery of a "tall shaft" that his family has "erected" enhances the notion that Pierre's ambition is in part a product of male egoism. At the same time, it establishes the symbol of a central pillar, which encapsulates both the image of a memorial monument (like an obelisk) and a history that must be linear to retain its force. Very few historical monuments had been erected by 1853, and the Bunker Hill monument, dedicated in 1843, constitutes the main exception.[116] Melville dwells on the symbol of a monument in large part to establish how a single crack might level the whole construction.

When Isabel becomes a visible reality to Pierre, his imagined pillar begins to fall apart. In the chapter immediately following Isabel's letter telling him she is his sister, the narrator expands on the symbol. He describes a "shrine" in Pierre's mental geography: "this shrine was of marble—a niched pillar, deemed solid and eternal, and from whose top radiated all those innumerable sculptured scrolls and branches, which supported the entire one-pillared temple of his moral life."[117] At the center of the pillar of his family lies Pierre's father, who Pierre had viewed as the holiest saint in his "abstractest religion." Once Isabel becomes real for Pierre, events in his life become arranged so as to present an alternate narrative of his family history and father. The conflict between the

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[115] *Ibid,* 8.
[116] Michael Kammon. *Mystic Chords of Memory: the Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 34.
[117] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 68.

family history Pierre assumes and the alternate reality of his father's affair drives the action in the novel.

Given the role of the family in the novel, Pierre's mother and her relationship to history are particularly significant. Pierre's mother, more than any character, inculcates a selective perception of history that omits contradictions in the roles of her family. When first describing their relationship the narrator tells us, "thus freely and light-somely for mother and son flowed on the pure joined current of life. But as yet the fair river had not borne its waves to those sideways repelling rocks, where it was thenceforth destined to be forever divided into two unmixing streams."[118] The word "unmixing" connotes a separation as socially powerful as that between races at the time. It also conveys the sense of the stream as a blood or family line. By implying that a mother and son can be separated from the blood they share, the narrator undermines the legitimacy of social distinctions based upon blood. Pierre's mother also reinforces Pierre's understanding of his aristocratic superiority in relation to the rest of the town. When the two go to a sewing circle Mrs. Glendinning tells Pierre, "I merely want you to peep in on them… I want you to know who they are you live among; how many really pretty, and naturally refined dames and girls you shall one day be lord of the manor of. I anticipate a rare display of rural red and white."[119] His mother uses the words live "among" instead of live with to indicate Pierre's superiority and dominance over the town. However, immediately following her comment, a fainting girl (Isabel) easily scares Pierre and he holds tightly onto his mother's arm in an effeminate manner. This emasculation serves to distinguish Pierre from the overtly masculine image of his grandfather. Whether Pierre

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[118] *Ibid*, 5.
[119] *Ibid*, 44-45.

represents a degenerative process of heredity or whether his grandfather's image functions as hyperbole is undecided by the novel; both possibilities are valid within the context of the scene.

His mother ignores the contradiction of Pierre's authority and docility, attempting to reconcile both values into one coherent view. In an earlier monologue where his mother repeats the word "docile" thirteen times describing Pierre, she discovers a discrepancy in her combination of heroism and docility. While looking at her father's military staff, she observes "here sure is a most strange inconsistency! For is sweet docility a general's badge? And is this baton but a distaff then?—here's something widely wrong… give him, O God, regardful gales! Fan him with unwavering prosperities! So shall he remain all docility to me, and yet prove haughty hero to the world."[120] For Pierre's mother, "docility" comprises all actions that do not deviate from the acceptable norms of his family line. It would seem impossible to be both a hero and a conformer, but his mother works to reconcile these competing value sets. She concludes by using the phrases "regardful gale" and "haughty hero," but fails to see the contradiction even in that language. A gale cannot be regardful and a real hero cannot be haughty. This contradiction comprises Mrs. Glendinning's greatest repressed fear. Any hint of Pierre deviating from his acceptable line of conduct as a Glendinning produces a deep emotional response in his mother, ultimately driving her mad when she sees (or thinks she sees) her intimations fulfilled.

The strange relationship between Pierre and his mother parallels Pierre's relationship to Isabel later in the novel. Pierre calls his mother by the name "Sister

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[120] *Ibid,* 20.

Mary" on account of her youthful appearance, but the name has a deep thematic function in the novel. The word sister has been noted for its complexity of meaning in nineteenth century culture. Using the word sister could denote anything from a biological relationship to a coded conventional friendship.[121] Melville applies the word in both senses, but extends its meaning to encompass a drive for nationalism, using the word sister as a symbol of the nation itself. Expanding upon Pierre's understanding of the word, the narrator says, "he mourned that so delicious feeling as fraternal love had been denied him. Nor could the fictitious title, which he so often lavished upon his mother, at all supply the absent reality. The emotion was most natural… for much that goes to make up the deliciousness of a wife, already lies in the sister."[122] The use of the word "delicious" implies a sensual desire coded within a "natural" desire for fraternal community. Pierre's voice follows the narrator's assertion; invoking heaven for a sister Pierre says, "oh, had my father but had a daughter… some one whom I might love, and protect, and fight for, if need be. It must be a glorious thing to engage in a mortal quarrel on a sweet sister's behalf!"[123] The drive to "fight" and "love" mirrors Pierre's reconstruction of history and reassessment of national identity. While Pierre sees his fraternal relationship with his mother as artificial, he ignores his own artificial application of the term later in the novel. The narrator's use of the word sister thematically juxtaposes Pierre's acts of incest and his drive to construct a linear and absolute history of his past.

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[121] Blanchard, Jennifer Peary. "More or Less than Kind: Brothers and Sisters in Nineteenth-Century American Literature." Ph.D. dissertation, The College of William and Mary, 2007.

[122] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 7.

[123] *Ibid*

Portraits serve multiple functions in the novel, but none more than to emphasize Pierre's methods of perception. Adapting the gothic device, Melville uses portraits in the novel to illustrate the processes of observation and the very real nature of fantastic intimations. The portrait of Pierre's father that his mother prefers especially captures her understanding of the role of a gentleman in her family. The portrait had been made late in her husband's life and arranged to convey the image of a gentleman at the time. Describing her preference of portraits, the narrator says, "the portrait which she held to do justice to her husband, correctly to convey his features in detail, and more especially their truest, and finest, and noblest combined expression; this portrait was a much larger one… and occupied the most conspicuous and honorable place on the wall."[124] The juxtaposition of the words "conspicuous" and "honorable" implies the perspective of Pierre's mother toward her husband has been arranged to fit her own view, to the point of exaggeration. Ms. Glendinning denies the alternate portrait of Pierre's father, painted when he may have been having the affair that yielded his illegitimate daughter, as representative of her husband. To Pierre, the difference between these portraits symbolizes the difference between two narratives of the past.

While before he never crossed the "sacred limit" where he would begin to question the difference between these views of his father, Isabel's letter catalyzes a reassessment of what he had taken for granted. Isabel tells Pierre that his father had an affair out of wedlock, but did not embrace his daughter as his own. The acknowledgment of his father's human sensuality and selective memory catalyzes Pierre's degenerative resymbolization of the past. While Pierre has had vague intimations of some hidden

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[124] *Ibid*, 72.

mystery in his family's past, he had repressed his ambivalence prior to Isabel's letter. His impressions are symbolically represented through the functions of a portrait in the novel. Reading a portrait mirrors the selective construction of a history. Someone may notice a slight smile, and another might look only at the quality of the eyes. Like constructing a narrative history, selective perception dominates an understanding of a nebulous picture or the past. Utilizing the gothic theme of the portrait, the narrator personifies Pierre's ambivalence in the ghostly voice of the portrait itself. The narrator moves closer to Pierre's consciousness when he assumes the voice of the portraits asking, "consider in thy mind, Pierre, whether we two paintings may not make only one. Faithful wives are every over-fond to a certain imaginary image of their husbands; and faithful widows are ever over-reverential to a certain imagined ghost of that same imagined image."[125] Through the repetition of the word "imagined," the narrator demonstrates how Pierre views his mother's perception as more limited than his own.

If we take the painting to represent a symbol of Pierre's view of his father and the past, the word "imagined" assumes more significance. Although the description comes sequentially after Isabel's letter, the voice represents a feeling that Pierre may or may not have actually experienced prior to her arrival. The voice transitions from the past to the present during the course of his narration, implying the section may have been included to represent Pierre's own recollection of the past after Isabel's arrival. At the beginning of the section (in the chapter immediately after Isabel's letter) the narrator tells us, "in the cold courts of justice the dull head demands oaths, and holy writ proofs; but in the warm halls of the heart one single, untestified memory's spark shall suffice to enkindle such a

[125]*Ibid,* 83.

blaze of evidence, that all the corners of conviction are as suddenly lighted up as a midnight city by a burning building."[126] Rather than weakening Pierre's linear perception of history, Isabel's letter thematically exposes the reasoning and problems of Pierre's interpretation of the past. The letter provides a dramatic device that allows the narrator to demonstrate the latent problems of Pierre's ideology. It is not Pierre's family narratives but the selective reasoning reinforcing those narratives that produces conflict.

The mythic power of Pierre's ancestral history can maintain its influence so long as it lacks serious ideological contradictions. Pierre has ignored, repressed, and overlooked the manner by which his family narrative has suppressed other interpretations of the past. He has viewed himself as the heir to a line of national heroes, who embody a historical myth regarding white heroism. Also, Pierre cannot observe the subtle influence of his language in projecting and arranging meaning in Saddle Meadows. Melville encapsulates Pierre's linear family history with the image of a marble monument that, for Pierre, one crack undermines entirely.

Isabel's letter catalyzes a rearrangement of perceived contradictions in Pierre's family narrative, but does not undermine the influence of his family history. Rather, events that had not held resonance for Pierre begin to dominate his perception of history. While Pierre sees his past as completely destroyed, the narrator emphasizes how Pierre has rearranged meaning more than he has assumed a new understanding. Pierre takes small, possibly unrelated memories, and produces an absolute causal connection between those remembrances. Instead of viewing those memories as selective like his family's narrative history, Pierre considers his new assessment to be absolutely true. While the

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[126] *Ibid,* 71.

narrator questions the authority of those events, he underscores the complexity of memory's power over Pierre. The narrator expresses reticence at even assessing Pierre's perception of his family portraits when he says, "if, when the mind roams up and down in the ever-elastic regions of evanescent invention, any definite form or feature can be assigned to the multitudinous shapes it creates out of the incessant dissolvings of prior creations; then might we here attempt to hold and define the least shadowy of those reasons."[127] The narrator directly addresses the reader regarding the process of interpreting a complicated moral situation, indicating the difficulty in finding clear reasoning behind a person's understanding. The narrator emphasizes the creative dimension of Pierre's perception, and the "elastic" nature of reasoning as limiting the narrator's ability to depict Pierre's shifting train of thought.

Although the narrator frames his analysis as examining the "least shadowy" of Pierre's reasons, even the clear events in his life do not seem that convincing. While the narrator, in the voice of his father's portrait, pushes Pierre to examine further for the truth of his family history, he only hints at a possibility, and does not decisively indicate the truth of his father's past. Instead, he points to the process of examination itself as something Pierre should assume when he says, "something ever comes of all persistent inquiry; we are not so continually curious for nothing, Pierre; not for nothing, do we so intrigue and become wily diplomatists, and glozers with our own minds, Pierre; and afraid of following the Indian trail from the open plain into the dark thickets."[128] He does not indicate that anything can be found in the "dark thickets," but only points to the process of analysis itself. The image of the Indian trail also reframes Pierre's quest as

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[127] *Ibid*, 82.
[128] *Ibid*, 84.

significant in a larger American context. By utilizing the distinction between the "open plain" and the "dark thickets," the narrator recalls a common narrative device of American fiction that separates the wild Indian Territory from the civilized world.[129] He broadens Pierre's quest as not limited to the personal interpretation of family history, but as part of a national process of historical construction. On a more conceptual level, he frames Pierre's inquiry into his father's history as the quest of the hero, who must leave his ordinary world and journey into the unknown. The repetition of Pierre's name in this passage should also be noted for its hyperbolic effect, addressing Pierre directly thirty-two times in the brief selection. The repetition could be utilized as a parody of the device of the gothic portrait; however, it does appear more directed toward highlighting how deeply Pierre associates his identity with his father's history.

Pierre rearranges his memories to conform to the strong narrative causality of Isabel's version of his father's past. While exploring Pierre's reasoning after reading Isabel's letter, the narrator questions Pierre's decisiveness through his arrangement of language. Describing the effect of the letter in rearranging Pierre's perception the narrator tells us, "now his remotest infantile reminiscences—the wandering mind of his father—the empty hand and the ashen—the strange story of Aunt Dorothea—the mystical midnight suggestions of the portrait itself; and, above all, his mother's intuitive aversion, all, all overwhelmed him with reciprocal testimonies."[130] The word "testimony" indicates that while these events may seem to indicate the absolute truth of the situation, they only offer a rendering of the events. The hyperbolic language, while emphasizing

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[129] Crane, Gregg. *The Cambridge Introduction to the Nineteenth Century Novel* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 39.

[130] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 85.

the dramatic effect of these events on Pierre, produces the sense that Pierre may be too quickly assuming an interpretation of events. When describing Pierre's response he says, "but without being entirely aware of himself, Pierre was one of those spirits, which not in a determinate and sordid scrutiny of small pros and cons—but in an impulsive subservience to the god-like dictation of events themselves, find at length the surest solution of perplexities."[131] Pierre already assumes his course, focusing only on the means of arranging his actions. The line is highly ironic; even while Pierre may think he has escaped his parent's historical construction, he does not perceive how his decision derives from the same method of historical suppression as his parents. Pierre already knows how he should respond within the context of his value system, but does not stop to think why he should respond in that manner. He fails to observe how his perception remains bound in a language system of absolutes, labeling Isabel his sister *or* his wife. What distinguishes Pierre as the hero of the work is his fated attempt to reconcile the conflicts of his language system.

The notion of absolute interpretation can be further evinced from Pierre's interaction with the Reverend Falsgrave. While considering the condition of another scandal that has just occurred regarding a woman having an illegitimate affair, Pierre asks Falsgrave hypothetically, "should the one refuse his highest sympathy and perfect love of the other, especially if that other be deserted by all the rest of the world?'"[132] Falsgrave responds that, "it is not every question Mr. Glendinning, which can be conscientiously answered with a yes or no. Millions of circumstances may possibly dictate freely in any

[131] *Ibid*, 88.
[132] *Ibid*, 101.

known special case."[133] Given the depiction with which the narrator introduces Falsgrave, his opinion seems valid in the context of Pierre's question. Instead of listening to what Falsgrave has said however, Pierre immediately poses a similar question asking for an absolute interpretation. Although Pierre acknowledges Falsgrave's opinion, he continues to search for an authority that will provide a clear answer to his dilemma. He cannot bring the situation out of the hypothetical, and continues to place his situation in the moral context of all of humanity. When Mrs. Glendinning poses a question regarding the applicability of a verse of the Bible, "'the sins of the father shall be visited upon the children to the third generation,'" Falsgrave responds, "but madam that does not mean that the community is in any way to take the infamy of the children into their own voluntary hands, as the conscious delegated stewards of God's inscrutable dispensations."[134] Falgrave indicates that no belief can be absolutely fixed in any given moral situation. Like family names placed on a piece of land, the stigma associated with sin may be displaced onto a person who should not be ritually stigmatized.

The rearrangement of meaning that Isabel's presence catalyzes becomes increasingly convincing for Pierre as the novel develops. Like historical perception, the longer one believes a version of history to be absolutely true, the more convincingly it appears true. Although the majority of the novel tends to gravitate toward the belief that Isabel is Pierre's sister, several lines remain troubling. In the chapter immediately after Pierre's reaction to the Isabel's letter the narrator says, "such a note as thine can easily be written, Pierre; imposters are not unknown in this curious world; or the brisk novelist, Pierre, will write thee fifty such notes, and so steal gushing tears from his readers eyes;

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[133] *Ibid*, 102.
[134] *Ibid*

even as *thy* note so strangely made thine own manly eyes so arid."[135] Here the narrator presents his only real warning that Isabel's letter may have been a forgery. The narrator compares Isabel's sentimental letter to the wealth of sensational novels during this period that the narrator sees as mimicking real emotion.[136] Whether or not Isabel is Pierre's actual sister does not seem as significant as Pierre's belief that she is. She embodies contradictions in Pierre's worldview that have been unearthed by his belief in her existence. The language consistently indicates her sensual and dark nature, and some scholars have gone so far as to interpret these descriptions as an indication that Isabel is African American or Native American.[137][138] Even if Isabel is not marginalized for her biological race, her experience mirrors the suppressed histories of many African-Americans and Native Americans at the time. The narrator's allusion to the sentimental novel complicates an understanding of Isabel as representative of one race or culture, as the sentimental novel form explored many suppressed historical realities during the time. Isabel, for Pierre, embodies all the overlooked histories he has failed to observe prior to her existence.

By contrast, Lucy, Pierre's intended fiancé, encapsulates the national and family history he feels he must abandon in Saddle Meadows. Again the narrator's understanding of Lucy matters less in this context than how Pierre arranges her into his understanding of history. When he first characterizes Lucy, he tells her, "I would return thy manifold good mornings Lucy, did that not presume thou hadst lived through a night; and by heaven,

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[135] *Ibid*, 69.
[136] Although this sentiment can be discerned from the narrator, Melville did express his distaste of many writers of sensational fiction.
[137] Levine, Robert S., "Pierre's Blackened Hand," *Leviathan* 1, (March 1999): 23-44.
[138] Oshima, Yukiko, "Isabel as a Native American Ghost in Saddle Meadows: the Background of Pierre's 'Race,'" *Leviathan* 5, (October 2003): 13-17.

thou belong'st to the regions of infinite day." Lucy belongs to the "regions of infinite day," or in other words, to a land that Pierre sees as purely good and bound in the present. After placing a flower from her home on his chest Pierre tells her, "I must away now, Lucy; see! under these colours I march."[139] Associating a natural object like a flower with the passion he feels for Lucy does not appear that peculiar. However, Pierre complicates the association by using the language of national pride. Marching implies that the passion Pierre feels for Lucy does not remain isolated to a love of the young woman's natural beauty, but embodies a larger passion that Pierre associates with all of Saddle Meadows (and the nation itself). Pierre remains passionate for Lucy so long as she embodies the values of his imagined community. When he begins to question that community, he cannot bring himself to question his love for Lucy. Instead, he represses his memory of her entirely. Both women represent values associated with the competing historical narratives that dominate Pierre. In order to reconcile that conflict he must focus on one or the other, but cannot consider both simultaneously.

The conflict between different understandings of history produces a temporal crisis for Pierre who has viewed his life history as a linear progression through time. The narrator describes Pierre's reasoning when he says, "he could not but be aware, that all meditation on Lucy was now worse than useless. How could he now map out his and her young life-chart, when all was yet misty-white with creamy breakers! Still more: divinely dedicated as he felt himself to be; with divine commands upon him to befriend and champion Isabel."[140] Pierre cannot feel sure of his future, while the history of his

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[139] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 4.
[140] *Ibid*, 105-106.

past remains in conflict. The narrator uses the word "divine" twice to describe the quest of Pierre, implying Pierre believes his understanding to be absolutely true (to the point of being divinely approved). He does not see that his drive to understand the history embodied in Isabel has sensual as well as religious motivation. Both histories Pierre associates with the women equally hold power over Pierre at some point in the novel. There is not sufficient evidence outside Pierre's consciousness to determine whether one history has more influence than the other. The meaning Pierre attributes to the women shifts based upon his need to make sense out Isabel's existence and his attraction to her.

Although Pierre may make the right decision by taking care of Isabel, he codes and hides that decision within the language system of his parents. He calls Isabel his wife to conform to the proper image of his family narrative, even after he feels he has abandoned it. When Pierre leaves with Isabel for the city, he does not leave alone. A woman named Delly has also had an affair out of wedlock, and leaves Saddle Meadows with Isabel and Pierre as their servant.[141] Delly serves a dramatic purpose in the novel by reinforcing Pierre's conformance to conventional appearance. Although Lucy complicates the dynamic further, Delly's perception of Pierre and Isabel's relationship influences Pierre's use of language. The response of Delly to Pierre's use of the word wife illustrates the degree of power language holds in altering the perception of events in the novel. Delly begins to doubt the legitimacy of Pierre and Isabel's relationship when Lucy decides to move in with them later in the novel. The narrator describes Delly's intimations when he says, "again startled by the peculiar emphasis placed on the magical

[141] It is not entirely clear why Delly decides to become a servant for Pierre and Isabel. Aside from possible thematic reasons, it has a practical narrative purpose in allowing the three to conform to the appearance of conventionality.

word *wife*, Delly, who had long before this, been occasionally struck with the infrequency of his using that term; she looked at him half perplexedly."[142] By using the word wife, Pierre partially assuages Delly's concern; however, he does not realize the extent his use of language alters the way he views reality.[143] By coding his language, Pierre suppresses the truth of his family's past and his own. When Pierre receives the news of his mother's death the narrator tells us he was, "resolved to hide these new, and—as it latently seemed to him—unworthy pangs, from Isabel, as also their cause, he quitted his chamber, intending a long vagabond stroll… to wear off his sharper grief, ere he should return to his sight."[144] The sequence of actions is familiar because Pierre tried to hide his father's affair from his mother in the exact same manner. Even this late in the novel, Pierre continues to suppress information from those around him to fit into the image of a gentleman. The narrator describes his pangs as "unworthy," implying Pierre feels Isabel's perception of him will be negatively shaded if he reveals the truth to her. He remains intent on maintaining a history of events that hides realities that do not fit into the ideology of his family. While Pierre desires a "true" history, he perpetually undermines his quest by suppressing and repressing historical truths.

To understand Isabel, Pierre must explain the confusion Isabel's existence has produced; by abandoning Lucy and his mother, Pierre intends to re-establish the power he associates with his family narrative. However, by doing so, Pierre unintentionally perpetuates the same sin of his father. He labels Isabel as his sister, even though the

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[142] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 321.
[143] Weinstein, Cindy, "We Are Family: Melville's *Pierre*," *Leviathan* 7, (March 2005): 37.
[144] Melville, Herman. *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 289.

narrator's language indicates sensual as well as altruistic motivations behind Pierre's actions. Whether or not Pierre has a sexual affair with Isabel later in the novel matters less than the larger harm his decision causes. Instead of openly embracing his sister publicly, Pierre suppresses her history as his father did.

Even while he doubts his family's narratives, Pierre works to recreate a history that expresses the same form of unity. His struggle manifests itself in the form of the novel; Pierre obsessively struggles to write a work that will both sell and be great literature. When describing Pierre's obsession with his novel the narrator tells us, "that which absorbs the time and the life of Pierre, is not the book, but the primitive elementalizing of the strange stuff, which in the act of attempting that book, has upheaved and upgushed his soul. Two books are being writ; of which the world shall only see one, and the bungled one."[145] The narrator implies that Pierre's obsession with his work actually represents a continual resymbolization of his understanding of reality and history. When describing Pierre's endeavor the narrator says, "there are immense quaries of fine marble; but how to get it out; how to chisel it; how to construct any temple?"[146] The image especially captures the struggle of writing, but the metaphor of the pillar remains troublesome. The narrator intentionally switches the metaphor to marble before the sentence; the symbolism emphasizes the relationship between Pierre's family history and Pierre's novel. The narrator, like Pierre, has been engaged with the history of his protagonist throughout the novel. As Pierre begins to write his novel, the thematic parallels between *Pierre*'s narrator and Pierre become more apparent. Both explore the limits and uses of historical construction through an examination of the past;

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[145] *Ibid,* 304.
[146] *Ibid,* 257.

they also express a hesitance at embracing a single image of that past. At the same time, both the narrator and Pierre undergo a process of historical selection. The narrator has selected pieces from Pierre's life like Pierre has selectively viewed his past. As the narrator moves closer to and further from Pierre's consciousness he begins to question Pierre's influence on his perception. The narrator may express an awareness Pierre's effect on his mind when he says, "even so it may possibly be, that arrived at this quiet retrospective little episode in the career of my hero—this shallowly expansive embayed Tappan Zee of my otherwise deep-heady Hudson—I too begin to loungingly expand, and wax harmlessly sad and sentimental."[147] The narrator cannot remain distinct from Pierre like Pierre cannot remain distinct from his father. The narrative style mirrors the themes of historical construction in the novel by blurring distinctions between the voices of narrator and protagonist. The production of a history can only be conveyed by an illustration of the processes of historical selection itself. For Melville, a truly elastic history could only be expressed through the novel.

The process of writing the novel reflects a conflict not only within Pierre's consciousness (or the narrator's), but symbolically extends to include the nation itself. The narrator abstractly describes Pierre's struggle when he says regarding a toddler, "it shall leave the very mother that bore it, and the father that begot it, and cross the seas, perhaps, or settle in far Oregon lands. There now, do you see the soul… it is born from the world husk, but outwardly clings to it;--still clamors for the support of its mother the world, and its father the Deity."[148] The narrator reframes Pierre's writing within the religious dualism of mother and father, later expanding the metaphor to include other

[147] *Ibid*, 259.
[148] *Ibid*, 296.

dimensions of the myth of Enceladus. While Pierre tries to construct a novel that encompasses a complete history of his world, he does not realize the source of his motivation. He began writing because he felt his family's history blinded him, but remains searching for the same absolute narrative through his novel. His search for the truth of his family's past has grown to include the absolute history of humanity. The narrator's reference to the "far Oregon lands" implies that Pierre's struggle does not end with him, but expresses an element of national history as well. The notions of Manifest Destiny and the drive to conquer the West become symbolically extended to Pierre's quest for an absolute history. The conflict of leaving the absolutism and methods of historical suppression of the past remains central to the American national narrative within the novel. The familial language of "father" and "mother" also intimates that national narratives remain tied to micro level institutions like the family. National conflicts derive from the ideological problems passed down through the family narratives and the reasoning behind those narratives.

The narrator encapsulates the conflicting modes of history of the novel through his description of writing itself. At the beginning of a chapter considering Pierre as a writer, the narrator says:

> Among the various conflicting modes of writing history, there would seem to be two grand practical distinctions, under which all the rest must subordinately range. By the one mode, all contemporaneous circumstances, facts, and events must be set down contemporaneously; by the other, they are only to be set down as the general stream of the narrative shall dictate; for matters which are kindred in time, may be very

> irrelative in themselves. I elect neither of these; I am careless of either; both are well enough in their way; I write precisely as I please…[149]

The terms history and novel are almost interchangeable in the passage. Although the selection partially reflects Melville's conflict with Harper Brothers publishing, it provides a framework of theory highly relevant to the theme of historical construction. The first method of producing a history consists of a strict dedication to the linear flow of events. This history greatly reflects Pierre's understanding of the past prior to Isabel's letter, but has implications for his approach later in the novel. Pierre continues to reconstruct linearity even as events in his life increasingly contradict a coherent view of his past. This history views time as one stream flowing from the same source to the same mouth. The second mode is more complex. Setting events "down as the general stream of the narrative shall dictate," implies a belief in different types of narratives. Some narratives may require a different stylistic composition than others to reflect the same coherent meaning. However, it also indicates that the narrative will "dictate" how one conceives of history; the term narrative used here reflects Melville's understanding of "Fate." If the narrative experience of someone's life controls how he or she conceives the past, then historical truth becomes relative to subjective experience. Like Pierre, our understanding of our selves and the past can be modified by the slightest whim of chance. The novel in this mode of history conforms to the same processes of selection that spell Pierre's doom. Events that fit into our cultural understanding of coherence should be juxtaposed, and meaning inferred from their juxtaposition. The product in part reflects Melville's understanding of the conventional novel of his time. Coherence to conventional cultural

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[149] *Ibid*, 244.

and moral narratives undermines heteroglossia, and the artistic meaning in the conflict between languages.[150] The narrator tells us he chooses neither mode of history, but writes based on his own judgment of the meaning between events. This choice is the thematic crux of the novel. Pierre has applied both methods of history in his attempt to form a coherent narrative of the past; he has tried to understand the linear flow of events and the meaning of the relationship between those events. He does not acknowledge how he has combined the first and second modes, assuming his resymbolization to be both fated and of his own volition. The narrator echoes his frustration in his own arrangement of Pierre's narrative, but intimates that his history has been constructed from what he intuitively knows to be correct. The narrator is performing the same task as Pierre, with the same confidence in his arrangement of events. They are distinguished by the narrator's understanding of his confidence. The narrator's conceit echoes Emerson's notion of self-reliance, and an individual understanding that transcends social mechanisms.[151] However, Melville complicates Emerson's concept by implying that even when we do trust in what we conceive to be true in history, our consciousness may have misattributed the meaning that we feel to be correct. Pierre felt from "the heart" that he must save Isabel, but his methods of interpreting his emotion obscured its meaning.

Pierre does not abandon the methods of historical suppression of his parents, but also cannot recreate the mythic effect of his family narrative. He remains caught between

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[150] Reynolds, David S. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 89.

[151] Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance," *Emerson's Prose and Poetry,* ed. Joel Porte and Saundra Morris (New York; London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 121.

two images of history that he cannot resolve. By calling Isabel his wife, Pierre ignores the effect of his parent's language system in altering his perception of their relationship and her past. Pierre perpetuates the problems of his family's history through suppression and repression of information. Like a lawyer bending the history of the past, Pierre alters the social perception of himself through language. He maintains the image of a gentleman even as he feels he has distanced himself from the contradictions of his parent's ideology. Pierre's quest to produce a novel true to experience mirrors the narrator's own arrangement of Pierre's history. Both thematically and stylistically, the work reflects the theme of historical selection and suppression, intimating the problem's irresolvable nature.

In interpreting Melville's understanding of history, one ultimately falls subject to selection like any other historical construction. The threads between *Pierre* and Melville's own life form a dense fabric, and although they can be picked out and viewed separately, the complete pattern will never be re-sewn. The thematic relationship between Melville and the novel has a great deal of narrative causality, but its biographical parallels serve more as an extension of the novel itself. There is an underlying assumption that Melville unconsciously put his own experiences into his work due in part to the unique biographical conditions of his life. Whether or not that conceit proves true, the causal relationship between Melville's life and the text has been augmented through a reconstruction of his history. Melville may not have anticipated his rise to literary fame, but it has produced a long reassessment of his life and works; we have emphasized and selected a view of Melville, which latently influences our reading of his texts. In interpreting the position of the narrator in relation to Melville, the reader undergoes yet

another selection of history. Not every reader would necessarily approach the text with Melville's biography in mind, but the strong narrative persona in the work prompts the reader to question the author's own opinion. The public reaction to *Pierre* reflects ambivalence between the opinions of the narrator and author. That same ambivalence lies within the themes and narration of the novel itself. As the narrator explores Pierre's selective perception of his past, the reader forms an understanding of the narrator's methods of arranging Pierre's history. The lines of distinction between the narrator and protagonist begin to fade while the lines between the narrator and authorial persona become more nebulous. A hereditary chain becomes apparent, emphasizing the problem of influence. Does the narrator arrange Pierre's history or has that process of arrangement influenced the narrator's perception of his protagonist? The same question holds true for Melville and the narrator. Did Melville arrange his narrator's opinions from his own experience or did the process of creating a narrator develop his individual persona? Deciphering the opinions in the novel reflects the theme of ancestral inheritance. Whether or not Melville intended the text's growth, it has assumed added stylistic complexity.

Melville's use of the third person narrator anticipates the modernist concern with subjective and unreliable narration. From a modernist perspective, producing a work true to experience must consider the process of arranging meaning itself. Our post-modern cultural understanding of texts has shifted to emphasize the problem of narration and authorial persona. The commercial failure of *Pierre* encapsulates the division between the text's cultural atmosphere and post-modern interpretation. Melville's conclusion regarding the inescapable nature of historical selection may not have held the cultural

resonance it does today. Hawthorne's response to the conclusion of *Pierre* illustrates his understanding of its failure.

In a letter recently discovered near Melville's estate, Hawthorne writes to Melville, "you wrote such a book as only a very reckless man can venture, and you won the wager. *Pierre* is in some ways an even braver book, putting Ahab into a parlor. It is a marvelous conception of youthful enthusiasm crashing its surf against an adamantine world. But Melville, the book spills the inmost You over the floor along with Pierre's brains! It commits suicide. And for what?"[152] While Hawthorne considers the book a success ("you one the wager"), he understands its inapplicability in the market ("and for what?"). Even Hawthorne, who had a close relationship with Melville, sees his authorial persona scattered across the pages of his work. Perhaps Melville did intend some of the stylistic confusion between the narrator's voice and his own. In adapting Hawthorne's subversive style, Melville engendered his own literary approach and theory. Even with Melville's national hero influencing his approach, he wrote precisely as he pleased.

5. Conclusion

In considering the problem of memory for Hawthorne and Melville, we find ourselves with little solution to historical selectivity. The intense political climate of the mid-nineteenth century, coupled with ardent social reform, led both authors to examine the past's influence in arranging the conflicts of the present. By looking at their works, the reader observes more than a relationship between isolated artistic endeavors. The

[152] Hawthorne, Nathanial. *Hawthorne and Melville: Writing a Relationship*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008.

intense friendship experienced by the authors provided them with an opportunity to exchange ideas regarding their immediate cultural experience. We learn almost as much about the contemporary antebellum climate as we do about the author's personal relationship with one another by looking at their works.

Both authors explore the relationship between dominant and suppressed histories, but reach different conclusions based on their narrative focus. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne indicates that historical selectivity may produce a natural balance in what it does and does not suppress. He implies that forms of commemoration have become entangled and lost their purpose in organizing the community's perception of historical significance. By framing his exploration of the past as an arrangement occurring in the present, Hawthorne underscores commemoration's significance for his contemporary audience. *The House of the Seven Gables* attempts to further emphasize the relationship of the past to the present by contemporizing the plot while illustrating heredity's influence in arranging social order. It does not decide whether we can actively perceive the past's influence or whether it becomes apparent through a fated course of events. At the same time, it demonstrates the importance of recognizing heredity's influence, and the physical and psychological deterioration produced by historical suppression. Whether we commemorate the good or the bad in the past depends on our understanding of the past's influence in the present. Melville questions whether our relationship with the past can ever be untangled. Even the most conclusive histories remain subject to fate arranging an alternate history that seems just as permanent. While Pierre does not recognize the past's influence on his actions, his quest represents a larger struggle for

national and religious identity. For Melville, the solution is poison. Only death can liberate us from the conflict between dominant and suppressed histories.

When looking at the Hawthorne and Melville's works, the reader should be conscious of the historical perspective that their novels establish. While these authors channeled the social fervor of their times, it would be a mistake to view their ideological struggle as separate from our own. The problem of historical memory and suppression illustrates an ongoing human struggle that has become increasingly complicated in the modern world. By viewing the authors' themes as separate from our immediate experience, we lose sight of how the struggles of the past relate to the present. We see ourselves as "reformed" from the problems of past, or in a perpetual search to eradicate the past's influence. The author's indicate that the selectivity of historical memory may be a limitation to human consciousness, but one without a solution. While we can only try to understand memory's influence, and the pursuit itself is heroic.

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