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The Realm of Holgrave's Mesmerism and the Narrative Strategy in *The House of the Seven Gables*

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Holgrave / Narrator

1.

One of the most controversial issues about *The House of the Seven Gables* is whether we can trust in Holgrave's love toward Phoebe.

To a disposition like Holgrave's, at once speculative and active, there is no temptation so great as the opportunity of acquiring empire over the human spirit; nor any idea more seductive to a young man, than to become the arbiter of a young girl's destiny. Let us, therefore—whatever his defects of nature and education, and in spite of his scorn for creeds and institutions—concede to the Daguerreotypist the rare and high quality of reverence for another's individuality. Let us allow him integrity, also, forever after to be confided in. (150-51)

After reading his own short tale "Alice Pyncheon", he finds Phoebe has slept because of his gesture of mesmerism. He frees her from his mesmerism while Young Matthew Maule exercises mastery over Alice Pyncheon in the tale. The narrator tells it proves Holgrave's "rare and high quality of reverence for another's individuality" and he also expresses great admiration declaring he has integrity "forever after to be confided in." Thus Holgrave's sincerity is certified by the narrator.

As Michael Dunne indicates (127), critiques are exclusively based upon the depiction to prove the integrity of Holgrave and the validity of the marriage with

Phoebe. On the other hand, there is a critic like Richard Millington (140), who pushes the envelope to evaluate that Holgrave, who narrates the history of the Pynchon family and the Maule family in "Alice Pynchon," is not only a reliable person as a narrator but also a writer that reaches the realm of a romance writer that Hawthorne thinks should be.

However, such an interpretation is simply a result of strictly following the narrator's words, generally saying, "let us trust forever in the future". It is still vague specifically what Holgrave's virtue and disposition as a narrator are (the narrator of a short story "Alice Pynchon" is referred to as "Alice's narrator" hereafter to distinguish the narrator of the entire narration). In fact, the narrator does not mention that Holgrave continued hiding his identity at that time. Unlike the narrator's words, there is definitely no sufficient information that is enough for us to believe the way the narrator narrates about Holgrave is trustworthy.

2.

In "Alice Pyncheon," Alice's death is described with Alice's narrator's triumphant tone.

Oh joy! For Alice had borne her last humiliation! Oh, greater joy! For Alice was penitent of her one earthly sin, and proud no more!

The Pyncheons made a great funeral for Alice. The kith and kin were there, and the whole respectability of the town besides. But, last in the procession, came Matthew Maule, gnashing his teeth, as wofullest man that ever walked behind a corpse. He meant to humble Alice, not to kill her;—but he had taken a woman's delicate soul into his rude gripe, to play with;—and she was dead! (150)

In Holgrave's tale Alice is described as such a proud lady that we can say her chief character consists in her pride. Her pride is so often referred to and emphasized. For example, the words "pride" "proud" and "haughty" are used as much as eleven times to express her character in the short tale. These words that express her pride are spoken by young Matthew Maule only twice; Alice's narra-

tor uses the words nine times. But it is certain that both of them share the same attitude toward Alice Pyncheon.

And we have to pay attention to the fact that Alice's narrator repeatedly refers to her pride after Alice was mesmerized by young Matthew. As we said before, Alice's pride is referred to eleven times, and eight out of the eleven times the pride is made mention of after Alice was mesmerized, that is, after Alice became a slave of young Matthew's will. After Alice completely lost her pride and "longed to change the natures with some worm"(149), Alice's narrator mostly mentions her pride. In consequence, Alice's narrator emphasizes her lost pride and the connection between her miserable state and her pride. The emphasis reveals Alice's narrator's hostility toward Alice's pride, so we can assume Holgrave has common with young Matthew and Alice's narrator in the hostility.

Facing Alice's death, young Matthew, who is the cause of her death, is "gnashing his teeth, as if he would have bitten his own heart in twain". He is described as "the darkest and wofullest man that ever walked behind a corpse", which is in sharp contrast with the tone of the quotation. In conclusion the cheerful tone of the quotation reflects Holgrave's opinion upon her death even if we can not decide whether or not he is aware of it. Needless to say, the cheerful tone comes partly from the fact that Alice is at last emancipated from the slavery state of young Matthew by means of her death. But strictly speaking, Alice is freed from the slavery state just after young Matthew's marriage. So we can say that the cheerful tone of the quotation discloses Holgrave's state of mind.

Why does he feel a kind of exaltation when he faces Alice's death? It is probably because he is a descendant of Maule and plays the role of young Matthew in the tale "Alice Pyncheon". While he is telling the tale of young Matthew and Alice, he is playing the role of young Matthew and is taking Maule's revenge on the Pyncheons in his fiction. By playing young Matthew's role, he substitutes for the actual revenge. In the fictional world he finishes his revenge on the Pyncheons, and consequently attains a kind of satisfaction. By telling the revenge tale, he succeeds in preventing the repetition of the past evil acts and can get rid of the abhorring past that obsesses him. Therefore he finishes his tale by telling the cheerful comments on Alice's death.

In addition, Holgrave actually mesmerizes Phoebe while he is reciting the short story and come close to repeating young Matthew's action. Based on the

depiction, the author Hawthorne seems to illustrate a recitation of "Alice Pyncheon" by Holgrave as a compensation for a revenge by Holgrave in reality. The positive depiction of Alice dying in despair should be interpreted as an uplifting feeling not of young Matthew's but of Holgrave, who is close to the narrator of the short story. Holgrave gets mentally excited by accomplishing the revenge in narrating the story.

On the other hand, through the narrator of the story, Holgrave illustrates young Matthew as "the most pathetic person among people who accompanied the remains" as quoted before, not as a happy wrongdoer who rejoices in accomplishing the revenge. In the end, Holgrave also convicts young Matthew by illustrating him as a person who is distressed and despairs of his own guilt. In this way, Holgrave wrote this story and read it to Phoebe, who is a part of the Pyncheon family, to satisfy his vengeful thoughts that come from his past that he has been hiding as well as recognizing his ancestors' past misdeeds and their guilt. Holgrave is reconciling with the past. This is why he demesmerizes Phoebe immediately after the recitation.

Alice's narrator remarks his peculiar opinion about the witch trial at Salem. He says the witch trial was "a work praiseworthy in itself" (134) and the execution of old Matthew Maule was "his just punishment" (134) as if he approved both the trial and the execution of old Matthew. The view of Alice's narrator is far different from the narrator of the whole narration. In Chapter 1, the whole narrator criticizes the witch trial by using the words such as "that terrible delusion"(7) and "the disorder of such various ruin"(7). And about old Matthew's execution, he also describes as "so unjust a death"(20), which is completely opposite to Alice's narrator's opinion. It indicates that Alice's narrator observes his own characteristic opinion while the overall narrator's represents the common opinion on the witch trials.

The view of Alice's narrator seems to be much stranger if we consider Alice's narrator is created by Holgrave and that Alice's narrator's opinion is probably not far from Holgrave's opinion, because Holgrave is a descendant of old Matthew Maule who was killed and was robbed of his land by Colonel Pyncheon in the witch trial. Holgrave must not be able to forgive witch trials, so it seems so strange for Alice's narrator to use those words which approves witch trials and accepts the Colonel's unjust act to some degree. Considering the different opin-

ions of the two narrators and the fact that Alice's narrator is created by Holgrave, we cannot but notice Holgrave's complicated feelings to the past. As using the writing technique, the author Hawthorne intends to disclose Holgrave's particular feelings toward the ancestors to the reader.

Needless to say, Alice's narrator's words "a work praiseworthy in itself" does not at all prove that Holgrave really praises witch trials. The same narrator also describes witchcraft, as "the grim, Puritan superstitions, which no man of New England birth, at that early period, could entirely escape" (145) in "Alice Pyncheon". That is, it proves indirectly that Holgrave also has the commonly accepted opinion on witch trials, and therefore he can tell the two different opinions through the same Alice's narrator.

In the same short story, Holgrave created the narrator, who can tell peculiar opinions as well as general thoughts. The person like him should fully understands the originality of an opinion that the witch trial is "praiseworthy". With the understanding, he tells such opinion. The reason is that, it is assumed that he wanted to address the meanness of his ancestors in the story. The narrator of the whole tells in the chapter 1 as the follows:

To all appearance, [the Maules] were a quiet, honest, well-meaning race of people, cherishing no malice against individuals of the public, for the wrong which had been done them; or if, at their own fireside, they transmitted, from father to child, any hostile recollection of the wizard's fate, and their lost patrimony, it was never acted upon, nor openly expressed. (20)

The narrator is a person who calls himself as an author of *The House of the Seven Gables*. This person says that the literary work was based on the local history and rumors. According to the historical evidences and rumors, to people in general, people in the Maule family did not appear to have a grudge over the Pyncheon family; they appeared rather quiet, honest, and innocent people. At the same time, the narrator also says that before the power of the Pyncheon family, the people in the Maule family kept their anger to themselves and could not express it.

The description contradicts with the character Matthew plays, who had

malice toward Alice and executed vengeance. This means “Alice Pyncheon,” of which Holgrave tells, has an aspect that exposes a grudge and anger over the Pyncheon family that were forbidden to express. In this short story, Holgrave did not only turn himself into Matthew. The more he was keeping the meanness of his ancestors to himself, the more he wanted to make his grudge and the execution of the vengeance upon the Pynchon family to the public. If this is the case, the more meanness the character Matthew plays, the more it helps to release and eliminate the grudge over Holgrave’s past. This is why Holgrave dares to affirm the existence of magicians and address Matthew’s magician-like character that is filled with meanness and malice. At the same time, by doing so, Holgrave tries to overcome the past capturing his mind.

Holgrave’s change can be found out in his conversation with Phoebe. He talks to her as follows:

“You really mortify me, my dear Miss Phoebe!” he exclaimed, smiling half sarcastically at her. “My poor story, it is but too evident, will never do for Godey or Graham! Only think of your falling asleep, at what I hoped the newspaper critics would pronounce a most brilliant, powerful, imaginative, pathetic, and original winding up! Well; the manuscript must serve to light lamps with;—if, indeed, being so imbued with my gentle dullness, it is any longer capable of flame!” (151)

The quotation clearly shows Holgrave has changed drastically after telling “Alice Pyncheon” to Phoebe. He admits that his tale is “[my] poor story” with smile, and also with smile approves Phoebe’s falling asleep while he is reading his tale. He dares not tell the truth—she falls asleep because of his mesmerism, but persuades her into believing the false explanation—she falls asleep because of his poor tale. He will not mention the awful tale again though she scarcely remembers it, which is in striking contrast to the former state of his mind. Before starting to tell his tale, he was impatient to read his tale to Phoebe. Now he has got what he calls a “gentle dullness”, which, he himself admits, can hardly light lamps. He doesn’t seem to be the same person who was so excited as to say “The house ought to be purified with fire—purified till only its ashes remain!”(131) before reading the tale. By describing the contrasting states of Holgrave’s mind,

the author Hawthorne obviously tries to suggest that Holgrave has undergone a big change.

Moreover, it is so strange to find myself an inmate of this old Pyncheon-house, and sitting in this old garden—(hark! How Maule's Well is murmuring!)—that, were it only for this one circumstance, I cannot help fancying that Destiny is arranging its fifth act for a catastrophe. (155)

At this point he feels it “so strange” to stay in the house of the seven gables. He can not find the reason to stay in the house no more, and “this one circumstance” makes him foresee the end of the long history of hatred between the Pyncheons and the Maules. He came to the house so as to “know the better how to hate [the past]”. Therefore his words “I cannot help fancying that Destiny is arranging its fifth act for a catastrophe” not only means the hatred history will soon end, but also that his deep-rooted hatred will be soon solved. He has been obsessed with the past and has almost lived by the past. In order to “know the better how to hate [the past]” he has changed his name and has lived in the past itself: the Pyncheon house. But now, after reading “Alice Pyncheon” to Phoebe, he is willing to say good-by and throw off the past, and is able to look at the future.

3.

Although reading of “Alice Pyncheon” is the significant event both for *The House of the Seven Gables* and Holgrave's life, the narrator of the whole shows a sort of incomprehension and indifference toward it.

Holgrave, plunging into his tale with the energy and absorption natural to a young author, had given a good deal of action to the parts capable of being developed and exemplified in that manner. He now observed that a certain remarkable drowsiness (wholly unlike that which the reader possibly feels himself affected) had been flung over the senses of his audient. (150)

After Holgrave's narration Phoebe is in a mesmeric state, as he narrates with

mesmeric body and hand gestures. The narrator adds here, Phoebe's sleepiness is "wholly unlike that which the reader possibly feels himself affected." The narrator is namely telling his opinion here that "Alice Pyncheon" is a dull story that might put readers to sleep. He seems to criticize the tale cynically.

The narrator is a person who claims to be the author. In addition, the narrator has previously behaved toward Holgrave as a senior writer would toward a young immature writer. Owing to that, readers are also led to trust and share this opinion to some degree in that this is not just a narrator's comment but a comment made by an experienced creator. However, "Alice Pyncheon" is by no means a story that puts readers to sleep.

Holgrave intends to publish "Alice Pyncheon" in *Graham's Magazine* or *Godey's Lady's Book*. According to Nina Baym, both two magazines were popular and responded sensitively to such stories that encourage social unrest and threaten the higher class and the class system (210-211). If this is the case, it can be easily imagined that the story about Matthew Maule, who is the lower class, ruins Alice, who is a daughter of the upper-class, with mesmerism would shock readers of the magazine and stimulate the sense of rejection. By selecting such magazine to publish the story, it is indicated that Holgrave wished to have the story to shock the society. At least, Holgrave, the author of "Alice Pyncheon," makes readers have a fear, not the one that makes readers sleepy.

According to Gillian Brown, in the mid-19th century mesmerism was used as a means of medical treatment. For example, doctors tried to find the origin of hysteria by mesmerizing their patients. The cure by mesmerism soon became familiar, and it staged publicly in the clinic or the classroom (86-87). In order to study human psychology mesmerism was commonly used. Dr. Joseph Haddock's says in 1850 that the mesmerism could "afford us the means of acquiring a knowledge of the laws and nature of the psychical, or mental, part of our being" (8). The narrator also says on mesmerism that "[m]odern psychology, it may be, will endeavor to reduce these alleged necromancies within a system, instead of rejecting them as altogether fabulous" (21). At that time it seems to be very common that mesmerism is applied to medical cure. For example, Sophia Peabody, who became Hawthorne's wife later, was willing to receive the mesmeric treatment in 1841.

Therefore when the reader reads "Alice Pyncheon", he is reminded of not

only the abominable history of old witchcraft but also the fear of mesmerism. Reading the tale of a young lady's tragic death, the reader seems to have seen again the danger of using mesmerism. In fact Hawthorne himself felt misgivings about mesmerism even if it was used for the medical treatment. He wrote a letter to his fiancée Sophia and expressed his misgivings about mesmerism. (*Letters* 588)

Therefore, the story about Alice, whose spirit was ruled by mesmerism, who became at Matthew's will, had hysteria-like symptom and died as the result, had some level of reality and gave fear to readers back then. Considering these two points, "Alice Pyncheon," which is told in the story, is evidently not a short story that makes readers sleepy as the narrator of the entire story insists.

The narrator does not apparently comprehend what "Alice Pyncheon" means to Holgrave. His "energy and absorption" is not "natural to a young author" but because of his private reason, that is, his desire to revenge. The narrator who sees Holgrave simply as "a young author" can not give pertinent remarks on his tale. Thus it is quite natural for the narrator to mistake Holgrave's release of Phoebe as the sign of his "rare and high quality of reverence for another's individuality". The narrator's repeated use of the phrases like "a disposition like Holgrave's" and "a young man" consequently serves to conceal the core aspect of "Alice Pyncheon" and its author Holgrave's hidden desire for the awful revenge by means of his mesmeric power.

Holgrave's true colors are hidden not only from the Pyncheons but also from readers. One of the reasons that the narrator does not accurately narrate Holgrave's reconciliation with the past lies in such settings. However, as mentioned earlier, "Alice Pyncheon" is apparently written as a story that horrifies readers. We must say that the narrator, who calls "Alice Pyncheon" a dull story that might put readers to sleep, is apparently taking an attitude of excessive lack of understanding and interest toward "Alice Pyncheon." However, this excessive lack of understanding and interest also serves as proof of the narrator's or author Hawthorne's strong awareness of the story on the other hand. From the awareness that "Alice Pyncheon" is a dangerous story that makes readers feel unpleasant arises an intention of avoiding readers' antipathy by showing that it has nothing to do with a dangerous story.

The book review of *Graham's Magazine* comments on "Alice Pyncheon"

that “We could also hope that if Holgrave continues his contributions to magazines, that he would send *Graham* some such a story as “Alice Pyncheon,” which he tells so charmingly to Phoebe.” (Whipple 170) The book reviewer only indicates that the story narrated by Holgrave, or his mesmerism only had a charm to attract one young lady. The book reviewer does not seem to notice about the contents of the story written by Holgrave since he asks Holgrave to contribute other stories to a magazine. He shows the same reaction as the narrator, who ignores the malicious intention of the writer of the story.

4.

The attitude of the narrator successfully guides readers and has them not to be too conscious about the horrifying vengeful thoughts Holgrave had and is playing a role in separating readers from the world of a horrific story and rebuilding his and readers’ safe world. It instantly pulls readers out from narrator Holgrave’s and listener Phoebe’s world, which is built by a totally different kind of dangerous sleepiness, namely, mesmerism, back to his and readers’ world, where only safe sleepiness exists.

The Pyncheons, if all stories were true, haughtily as they bore themselves in the noonday streets of their native town, were no better than bond-servants to these plebeian Maules, on entering the topsyturvy commonwealth of sleep. (21)

Holgrave is the inhabitant of this “topsyturvy commonwealth of sleep” and his tale “Alice Pyncheon” is the embodiment of this hidden world. According to the narrator, “For thirty years past, neither town-record, nor grave-stone, nor the directory, nor the knowledge or memory of man, bore any trace of Matthew Maule’s descendants.” (25-26) It is because Holgrave keeps hiding his identity until the story comes to an end, in which he becomes a member of Pyncheon as a result of the marriage to Phoebe. Therefore Holgrave as a descendant of Maule never exists in anything. He also gives up his idea of sending his tale to a magazine after he finishes reading it to Phoebe, the only listener, and she does not remember anything about his tale when she is awakened. “Alice Pyncheon”

is never known to anyone in this story after all..

Holgrave has written "Alice Pyncheon" with the aim of daring to arouse readers' antipathy by expressing his desire for revenge against the past with his mesmeric power in this story. Also, it is not that he is seeking fame as a writer from this story. He can be said to be in a position to be able to depict a dangerous and ugly world pretty honestly with little fear of readers' antipathy unlike the narrator of the entire story or Hawthorne. He is truly an ideal person as the author of the story "Alice Pyncheon." It can be said that the horror that the story "Alice Pyncheon" has and the horror of Holgrave's hidden desire for revenge are made to stand out in the light world of the work by such a Holgrave's narrating and by the narrator of the entire story not interfering with the story or Holgrave's true motives. Hawthorne successfully includes "topsyturvy commonwealth of sleep" in the world of "the noonday streets" and created *The House of the Seven Gables*.

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SUMMARY

The Realm of Holgrave's Mesmerism and
the Narrative Strategy in *The House of the Seven Gables*

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In *The House of the Seven Gables* Holgrave, the last descendant of the Maules, reads his own short tale "Alice Pyncheon". Referring to the scene, the narrator tells us that the tale is boring and sleepy, and he pays any more attention to neither the tale nor Holgrave's enthusiasms in reading the tale. And he comments Holgrave's respect for Phoebe's personality keeps him from controlling her. Despite the narrator's comments, the tale of horrible vengeance is not drowsy but awful, and Holgrave does not try to control Phoebe not because Holgrave respects Phoebe's character, but because he executes and dissipates his malice upon the Pyncheons by identifying himself with demoniac Matthew Maule and because he reveals what has kept secret in his mind: his ancestor's evil act and his own vengeance.

As the author Hawthorne must consider the readers' response and avoid their repulsion, he employs the unreliable narrator who can/will not tell Holgrave's inmost mind and the real meaning of his tale. By means of the narrator's carefree comments, the readers can enjoy Holgrave's tale without worry because the narrator guarantees its wholesomeness, and at the same time they can realize Holgrave's mind.

By reading his short tale to Phoebe, Holgrave reveals his hidden facts of Alice's miserable death and of Matthew's abusing mesmerism and wicked act, and consequently he can free himself from the past. Because Holgrave's emancipation from the past is one of the essential elements of *The House of the Seven Gables*, the horrible tale "Alice Pyncheon" and the evil-minded Holgrave seized by the past must exist in the story. In order to satisfy what the story needs and to make it possible for the readers to enjoy the story, the author Hawthorne contrives the carefree narrator who can/will not catch Holgrave's mind and the meaning of his short tale.