Hawthorne and Antebellum Theories on Hereditary Insanity

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ABSTRACT: Twentieth-century concepts of degenerative hereditary insanity and Social Darwinism can be viewed as preconfigured by the less fatalistic stance of antebellum medical and social thought. Taking the latter into account, the following article will analyze Nathaniel Hawthorne's novels *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables* in order to explore nineteenth-century theories on heredity and acquired character. These literary works do not simply represent antebellum concepts of madness, but actively contribute to or critique contemporary notions on insanity and therefore shape the early psychiatric landscape in their own right.

KEYWORDS: Insanity; Nineteenth Century, Domesticity, Heredity, Hawthorne

Shifting Concepts of Insanity

Hereditary insanity is a buzzword most often associated with the fin-de-siècle and the early twentieth century. Social Darwinism, degeneration theory and a dedication to eugenic thought, famously laid out in the writings of Max Nordau, Richard Krafft-Ebing, and the Americans William Sumner, John Fiske, and John Burgess, testify to a fatalistic belief in the hereditary and contagious transmission of undesirable qualities. According to Edwin Black, it was especially the United States that exhibited a fear of degeneration and that sought to keep society pure by racial and class segregation, and by pioneering the sterilization of physically and mentally defective people (24).

While eugenic and nationalist-purist thought only reached its height after the American Civil War, many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century concerns about degeneration and hereditary insanity were preconfigured by antebellum medical and social concepts of mental illness that differed substantially from approaches of the preceding centuries. In much earlier times, some forms of madness – divine madness in the works of Plato, for example, or spiritual ecstasy in the Middle Ages – were partly sanctioned by society. However, from the fourteenth century onwards, insanity increasingly came to be regarded as God's punishment of sin, or the result of an involvement with the devil. Sufferers of mental illness and other kinds of people deemed "inconvenient" or deviant from societal norms were ostracized, persecuted, or burned at the stake (Wigelsworth 112).

In the early nineteenth century, then, the insane turned from a religious into a medical and social concern. In the course of the early stages of the professionalization of medicine and the advent of psychiatry in the United States, a steadily growing number of physicians and laymen directed their attention to the prevention of mental illness and the treatment of the insane (cf. Goldman 27). At the same time, American asylums' superintendents—so-called alienists—identified an alleged rise of mental illness in the country. In 1832, Amariah Brigham, superintendent of the Utica Asylum and co-founder of the *American Journal of Insanity*, expressed his concerns about

> one of the most appalling and deplorable diseases which afflicts humanity; a disease which now prevails to great extent in this country, and is, I apprehend, increasing with fearful rapidity. The disease I allude to is insanity, or disorder of the organ of the mind, which produces a derangement in the manifestation of the mental faculties. (76)

Other notable members of the antebellum psychiatric community, such as Edward Jarvis, Pliny Earle, and Isaac Ray, made similar claims. Although they shared a uniform belief in the fearful increase of insanity in their times, their explanations of the origin, transmission, treatment, and prevention of this disease diverged widely. For Brigham, the underlying evil was "intellectual cultivation, and powerful mental excitement" (78). Isaac Ray believed that the freedoms of modern civilization in general and American politics in particular, as well as the structural transformations of an increasingly industrialized country were to be held accountable for the loss of traditional authority, the consequential disorientation of the individual and the ensuing slip into madness (Overholser 254). Jarvis saw the misuse and perversion of religious sentiment as closely connected to mental dysfunctions, while Pliny Earle was convinced of heredity being the ultimate cause (Earle 186).

These differing views did not have the divisive potential amongst the psychiatric community one might expect as they were united under a "single ideological structure" of concern about the health of the individual and the collective (Bainbridge 236). The system of determinants of psychological disorders commonly agreed on appealed to both the "ordinary citizen and the trained physician" (237) since on the one hand it referred to the detrimental influence of everyday worries, such as grief, financial trouble, and alcoholism, that were within the grasp of the general public's understanding, and on the other hand, the

system as a whole was sufficiently complex for its application to demand the knowledge of the expert physician, and therefore served to fortify the authority of the medical profession. Furthermore, the flexible and eclectic etiology of the time allowed for every presumable cause of madness to be subsumed under a general framework of predisposing and precipitating or "exciting" causes of mental derangement. In his seminal work *Concepts of Insanity in the United States 1789-1865,* published in 1964, Norman Dain describes both categories. Bodily disease, brain trauma, manual labor, excessive mental effort, immoderate love, overly strong emotions regarding business, politics, or religion, as well as masturbation were seen as precipitating mental dysfunction (Dain 7). More dramatic even, they were considered to possibly "occasion immediate insanity" (Brigham 31). The list of predisposing causes was equally long. It included such general points as the influence of climate, the government and economic system under which a person lived, excesses of the libido, inebriation, a sedentary life without enough physical exercise, or poor upbringing (Dain 9). But within this etiological framework, even the broad categories of predisposing and precipitating causes often became blurred. In 1848, Pliny Earle explained that "[s]ometimes two causes are found, and it is impossible to tell which is the predisposing and which is the exciting. That power which in one case may stand in the relation of a remote cause, may in another, become the proximate" (Earle 185).

However, the main idea was that stress (precipitating) could exhaust a constitutionally weak (predisposed) nervous system. Physicians felt that individuals could easily manage precipitating causes and evade the danger of mental illness by following the physician's advice on lifestyle and mental hygiene. Predisposing causes, not as subjectable to the will of the individual, were deemed to be the greater danger.

Heredity and Environment as Predispositions

The most consistent and therefore most significant entries in these descriptions of presumed predispositions of insanity were *heredity*, designating the propensity to mania[1] due to a familial history of mental illness, and the role of *environmental surroundings.* In the course of the nineteenth century, American psychiatrists increasingly adopted the opinion of their

[1] In the antebellum period, an official psychiatric terminology did not exist. Mania, insanity, lunacy, madness, and even expressions like imbecility or idiocy were interchangeable with each other (Dain 21).

European colleagues, according to whom "there is one great cause of insanity, a primordial cause, the cause of causes, heredity, which fixes the disease in families and makes it transmissible from generation to generation" (Trélat qtd. in Porter 1). For statistician Pliny Earle, who acted as physician to the Bloomingdale asylum, heredity, too, seemed to be the ultimate predisposing cause. He thought of precipitating causes as the final straw that lead to the collapse of a naturally weak nervous system (Bainbridge 231). Similar opinions can be found in the writings of Isaac Ray. Ray, superintendent of the Butler Hospital for the Insane, defended the contested concept of religious insanity with hereditarian thought in saying that people who inherited a weak mental constitution should be especially careful to avoid the dangers of religious sentiments and revivalism (Ray 191). Amariah Brigham was yet another psychiatrist who suggested the importance of the (seemingly) universally accepted theory of hereditary tendencies. He especially deplored female susceptibility to insanity and the resulting transmission of this predisposition to disease from mothers to their children (Brigham IX, 281). Indeed, historian Theodore Porter remarks that "the point [of hereditary insanity] seemed to have been widely shared, a solid, repeatable finding of asylum-based statistical research" (19). The same group of antebellum psychiatrists—Brigham, Earle, Jarvis, and Ray—who believed in *heredity* as a key factor contributing to insanity, also emphasized the *role of surroundings* in developing, curing or preventing mental derangement. What Gerald Grob describes as the "fundamental dilemmas of mid-nineteenth century medicine; namely whether disease arose from deficiencies in personal character, or from the nature of the environment and the social position occupied by the individual" were in fact reciprocally influential positions (98). As implied above, psychiatrists who employed hereditarian theories openly adopted both positions. Thus, I follow Charles Rosenberg, who, in his article "Heredity, Disease, and Social Thought" argues that in the nineteenth century, the concept of heredity was exceptionally fluid (191). Heredity itself was considered to be a dynamic process, which allowed the theory of acquired traits to be included under the notion of heredity. The general idea of heredity most physicians of the antebellum medical community subscribed to and thus diffused into the public was the doctrine of "like begets like" which emphasized the role of the parents in transmitting their general mental and physical dispositions and even "ALL their constitutional peculiarities" to their children (Fowler 18). As suggested above, the parents' mental and physical disposition

was thought to be influenced by their environmental surroundings. While this understanding of heredity may appear similar to notions of biological determinism, antebellum psychiatrists emphasized the role of human agency in their discussion of hereditary insanity. They believed that surroundings could be manipulated, for example, by establishing a healthy domestic environment and leading a privatized life outbalancing the strains of the marketplace. They were also convinced that not only primary characteristics could be transmitted from one generation to the next, but also *acquired traits*. When evaluating such beliefs, one needs to bear in mind the doctrine of human perfectibility that was dominant in the social, religious, and medical thought of the first half of the nineteenth century. By leading a healthy and productive life, by abiding commonly approved "laws of mental hygiene", people were thought to be able to mold their inherited physical and mental traits for the better and then to pass these improved traits on to their offspring, eventually leading to perfected individuals and a healthy nation (Grob 16).

This optimistic stance regarding perfectibility of the nation is evidenced not only in medical texts, but also in domestic treatises and advice-books written by reformers such as Horace Bushnell, Horace Mann, and Catharine Beecher. It was also prevalent in the fictional literature of the time. Authors such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne dealt with the concerns about the rise of mental illness and the findings of their medical and reformist contemporaries. In the following I will tend to the significance of literary works within the discourse on insanity as well as to the purpose they may serve.

In the first edition of the *American Journal of Insanity*[2], the psychiatrist Amariah Brigham stated:

> Though both poets and novelists are considered fictitious writers, yet in everything relating to the passions and emotions of mankind, the most celebrated of them, are

[2] This journal, established in 1844, was the official organ for disseminating the knowledge on insanity collected by the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane, amongst whose members were the psychiatrists here discussed: Isaac Ray, Edward Jarvis, Amariah Brigham, and Pliny Earle.

> the most correct of historians. […] The correctness of the writers, in these respects appears to be the result, for the most part, of a wonderful power of observation, or of a kind of miraculous ability. (9)

According to Brigham, then, authors serve as "historians." While literary texts can be looked at as a means of historical explication, the quote above implies that novelists are also capable of diagnosing the "passions and emotions of mankind" through their "wonderful power of observation." In this, Brigham's understanding of the function of literature allots the authors with the authority to diagnose, to support or to critique contemporary "truths" or knowledge on mental health and illness. In the following, Hawthorne's novels *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) will be scrutinized as to whether they are exhibits of the author's supposed "wonderful power of observation" on insanity. By analyzing these novels' negotiation of notions of hereditary insanity, the article reveals the impact popular scientific and cultural discourses on insanity, its causes, cures, and preventative measures had on literature, and vice versa. Consulting Hawthorne's major novels as exemplary, but complex texts, and tracing narrative structure, rhetoric and character development along the lines of nineteenth-century psychiatry will not only disclose the stance these particular novels take for or against antebellum theories on the predispositions of heredity and domestic environmental surrounding but also engage a broader discussion of the function of literature within a cultural and scientific discourse.

Female Responsibility in *The Scarlet Letter*

In *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel that, although set in Puritan times, reflects nineteenth-century medical, moral, and domestic ideology, two characters are presented as mentally unstable. Both Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth exhibit excessive cultivation of their mental faculties, signs of monomania, and both are marked by a slow but steady mental and physical deterioration. However, for the purpose of this article, the focus will be redirected to hitherto neglected characters when it comes to issues of insanity. In what follows, Hester Prynne and her daughter Pearl will be examined through the lens of the concepts of hereditary insanity and the influence of environmental (domestic) surroundings on mental health. In the course of the narrative, Hester undisputably evolves into a moral force and the heroine of the novel. However, she exhibits traits of character that were contrary to

nineteenth-century feminine ideology. Hester's strong moral disposition, her natural "dignity," and force of character are actually positive features that warrant her status as a heroine. However, these qualities are turned upon their head as the narrator continuously emphasizes Hester's defiant behavior, her "haughty demenanor" in the face of guilt and public shame (Hawthorne, *Scarlet* 57). Not only is Hester of an "impulsive and passionate nature" of which antebellum physicians warned it would endanger women's mental health, but what is more, her mind is "preternaturally active" and later turns from passion to thought, which was deemed unnatural in women (61). This overexertion of the intellectual and affective faculties would have made In her suspect in the eyes of the nineteenth-century psychiatric community and definitely made her suspect in the eyes of the novel's Puritan society, who take Hester's pregnancy, as the outcome of an undeniably adulterous liaison, as proof of her sinful nature. In the nineteenth century, major moral "missteps" like adultery were reconfigured. Sin would turn into madness, moral misbehaviors were explained as partial or moral insanity, and Hester's deed would have been a case for psychiatric diagnosis and treatment.

When the adultery is revealed, pregnant Hester is ostracized by her Puritan community and thrown in jail, where she eventually gives birth to her daughter Pearl. After suffering public humiliation, she is allowed to move into a cottage at the far edge of the town, where she spends the next years sewing, caring for the poor and visiting sick-beds, dedicated to redeeming herself from the sin of adultery. However, the town's inhabitants continue to enforce Hester's liminal status by shunning her and regarding her offspring, Pearl, with growing concern. The narrator describes the girl as "perverse, sometimes […] malicious" (99), even as an "imp of evil"(101), who has no regard for rules or authority: "The child's own nature had something wrong in it which continually betokened that she had been born amiss – the effluence of her mother's lawless passion" (183). Pearl's mood swings between joy and screaming fits reflect a child's normal behavior. However, as seen above, Hawthorne's narrator considers Pearl's behavior to be abnormal. By emphasizing the unlawful circumstances of her conception and birth in his diagnosis of the "wrongness" of her character, his judgement as well as Hester's (who thinks about Pearl in much the same terms as the narrator does) is revealed to be influenced by society's prejudicial notions of purity and sin, mental health and mental derangement, in short: norm and deviance . On the

basis of these norms, Pearl is shunned by the other children and behaves accordingly by treating them with the very same hostility she experiences. The narrator asserts that "[a]ll this enmity and passion had Pearl inherited, by inalienable right, out of Hester's heart" (102). In describing Pearl's alleged deviance from the expected behavior of children as her mother's fault, the novel ministers to a previously unmentioned aspect of hereditarian thought, namely, that the maternal influence on transmitting insanity was deemed to be far greater than the paternal one.[3] This focus on the mother was explained by women's more prominent role in carrying, nursing, and educating the child as well as their supposedly greater susceptibility to excessive emotions and hysterical fits in comparison to men. The belief that females generally also showed a greater "receptivity" for hereditary mental illness was widespread. In 1866, the German psychiatrist Wilhelm Jung created a meta-table in which he compared the statistical surveys of notable nineteenth-century researchers on insanity, both from Europe and America. Jung's summary of these studies on hereditary insanity, published in the *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Psychiatrie and Psychisch-Gerichtliche Medizin*, presents the belief that women played a greater role in the transmission of defective qualities as statistically validated fact (Porter 3; *Allgemeine Zeitschrift* 220).

Since women were seen as exerting more influence on the transmission of mental disorders they were also expected to acknowledge their duty to prevent it (Jacques 13). The Cult of Domesticity, the ideology of True Womanhood and the idealization of the home, characterizing the nineteenth century, did not necessarily emerge as a response to the growing medical and social discourse on insanity, but were certainly discussed in respect to it (Brown 85). Women were expected to turn the home into a safe haven, a place of retreat from the competitive antebellum marketplace for their husbands. For themselves the home should become a sphere of love, piety, serenity, and order; and for their children the home should provide the ideal environment necessary to educate and improve their character. Therefore, women's responsibility for mental health lay not only in the transmission of their physical and mental constitution to their children, but also in establishing an adequate

[3] In Pearl's case the maternal influence is reinforced due to the lack of a father figure since Dimmesdale does not openly acknowledge paternity until shortly before his death.

environment in order to beneficially influence husband and children (Pfister 6; Knadler 297; Baym 27).

The crucial role of (geographic and social) environment in addition to heredity is also emphasized in the opening chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne's narrator describes the matrons gathered on the marketplace as descendants of "those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding" who allegedly possessed "a coarser fiber […] morally, as well as materially" (53). Adapting to their environment of New England geography and Puritan theocracy, "every successive mother has transmitted to her child a fainter bloom, a more delicate and briefer beauty, and a slighter physical frame, if not a character of less force and solidity, than her own" (53). Here, the fear of degeneration of the American people widespread in society at the time the novel was written surfaces once again. For example, Hawthorne's contemporary, Amariah Brigham, deplores that "it is lamentable, and in fact alarming, to find that the females of the United States […] are in general more delicate and feeble than those in several countries of Europe" (VI). Consequently, this feebleness and delicacy will be transmitted to the next generation and eventually endanger the strength of the nation; a sentiment that is closely mirrored in the description of the Puritan women above. But what exactly has Hester transmitted to Pearl?

Conception and Gestation

Medical opinions varied as to the exact means of transmission of mental and physical traits between mother and child. Gathering material from physiological, phrenological, and psychiatric authors such as Orson Fowler, Amariah Brigham and Pliny Earle on this topic, I propose to divide the process of transmission into the four categories of conception, gestation, weaning, and domestic education, which most aptly corresponds to antebellum concepts of heredity. All of those categories are evoked as the narrator comments on the causes of Pearl's deviant nature. The "imp of evil," as he designates the child, was conceived in a moment of lawless passion. Hester herself exhibits concern over the impact of the moment of conception on Pearl. Convinced that the affair with Dimmesdale constituted an evil, "she could have no faith, therefore, that its results would be good. Day after day she looked fearfully into the child's expanding nature, ever dreading to detect some dark and

wild peculiarity that should correspond with the guiltiness to which she owed her being" (Hawthorne, *Scarlet* 97).

Hester carefully observes Pearl and, prejudiced by her own expectations shaped by the Puritan society's values, is convinced that the child must show signs of the mother's sinful and "impassioned state" in which Pearl was conceived (97). The belief that conception could have a profound impact on the transmission of both permanent and momentous parental traits was theorized by one of Hawthorne's contemporaries. In his *Hints Toward Physical Perfection*, David Harrison Jacques argued that

> both the maternal germ and the vitalizing fluid must represent not only permanent traits of character and configuration, but whatever is temporary and accidental in physical and mental states; and especially must the condition of the body and soul existing at the moment in which the generative act is consummated impress itself upon the germ thereby vitalized. (67)

The logics of biological determinism implicit in the quote above is undermined by the influence attributed to the periods of gestation, weaning, and the role played by the domestic environment in nineteenth-century theories of hereditary insanity.

Jacques suggests that "during the whole period of gestation, every influence which affects the maternal organism makes a corresponding impression upon the foetus" (69). The psychiatrist further proposed that "when a female is likely to become a mother, she ought to be doubly careful of her temper; and in particular, to indulge no ideas that are not cheerful, and no sentiments that are not kind" (69). The theory was, therefore, that a mother's mental and emotional state had a direct impact on the fetus she was carrying. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the narrator subscribes to this belief in asserting that "in the nature of the child seemed to be perpetuated those unquiet elements that had distracted Hester Prynne before Pearl's birth" (Hawthorne, *Scarlet* 147). Hester, having spent "the whole period of gestation" alone, imprisoned, and, as is repeatedly emphasized by the narrator, more than desperate, has imprinted this state of emotional turmoil and mental unsettledness unto her hitherto unborn child.

Nursing

After Pearl's birth, her mother's mental state deteriorates even more. Standing on the scaffold, Hester's shame exposed to the public both in the form of the scarlet letter A she needs to wear on her chest, and in the form of the baby, "she felt, at moments, as if she must needs shriek out with the full power of her lungs, and cast herself from the scaffold down upon the ground, or else go mad at once" (61). Hester bravely refuses to betray the name of the father and, although humiliation, shame, and exposure threaten her to "go mad", she ultimately withstands the town's judgemental glances, Her emotions, however, are overly taxed again as she lays eyes on the husband she believed to be dead. Seeing him return at this moment of public shaming pushes Hester to the limits of her sanity (74). After her return to prison, the narrator notes that she "was found to be in a state of nervous excitement that demanded constant watchfulness, lest she should perpetrate violence on herself, or do some half-frenzied mischief to the poor babe" (75). Hester is judged to experience a mental breakdown, and in danger of committing suicide or infanticide. The text further suggests that, although surveilled by the prison guards, Hester's troubled state of mind contributes to the immediate deterioration of her child's health, even without her laying hands on Pearl. Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband and the only physician in town, is called upon by the jailer:

> There was much need of professional assistance, not merely for Hester herself, but still more urgently for the child; who, drawing sustenance from the maternal bosom, seemed to have drank in with it all the turmoil, anguish and despair, which pervaded the mother's system. It now writhed in convulsions of pain, and was a forcible type, in its little frame, of the moral agony which Hester Prynne had borne throughout the day. (75)

In this excerpt, the narrator exemplifies the widespread belief that a mother's mental state had an immediate effect on the child during the time of nursing. According to nineteenth-century opinion, Pearl seems to have the worst imaginable conditions of leading a healthy and normal life when considering the presumable impact of the stages of conception, gestation, and nursing.

Domestic Education and Environment

The fourth stage, domestic education and the provision of a beneficial environment also lies within the responsibility of the mother. In the course of the novel, Hester slowly outgrows her tendencies to madness. She tries to lead an exemplary life post-adultery and tries to fulfill her task to care for her child. Hester's "enmity and passion," the narrator comments, begin to be "soothed away by the softening influences of maternity" (102). She attempts to establish the safe, domestic environment that would exert a beneficial influence on both her own and her child's moral and mental state of mind as laid out by the contemporary domestic ideology briefly outlined earlier. At a first glance, however, domesticity fails as a means to prevent mental disturbance. The positive influence ascribed to domestic surroundings is not only invisible, but turned upon its head. Hester is completely unable to discipline Pearl. She "early sought to impose a tender, but strict control," the reader learns, "but the task was beyond her skill. After testing both smiles and frowns, and proving that neither mode of treatment possessed any calculable influence, Hester was ultimately compelled to stand aside" (99). One of the reasons for this failure of domestic influence is that Hester does not fulfill the qualities of a True Woman, the nineteenth-century feminine ideal, characterized by subservience, modesty, piety, and purity (Smith-Rosenberg 13). Hester is neither subservient nor pure. Described as defiant and tainted by the stain of adultery, Hester occupies a liminal social status within society. In the course of her secluded life, her mind turns from passion to thought, which, in Puritan times as well as in the nineteenth century, was seen as unnatural for women. In the character of Hester, antebellum suggestions for gender appropriate behavior laid out by psychiatrists such as Amariah Brigham, are negated. Brigham's understanding of gender specific qualities proposes that men are dominated by will and reason, whereas women are ruled by their nervous system and their reproductive organs, making their constitution more fragile but also, due to their heightened sensibility, contributing to their moral superiority. In Brigham's opinion, women should consider their weaknesses as virtues making them superior to men, and they should not "strive to excel in the capabilities of men" such as reasonable thinking (Brigham 81). As Hester turns her activity to thought, her countenance is described as losing all femininity and henceforth bearing a cold, stern look, contrary to her original "rich and warm" nature (Hawthorne, *Scarlet* 144). This portrayed renunciation of womanly virtues negates the values of True Womanhood.

Another reason for the apparent failure of domesticity in *The Scarlet Letter* is the absence of the "domestic man," a father figure for Pearl (Beecher qtd. in Kowalski 11). In the eyes of notable nineteenth-century writers of domestic treatises, such as Catharine Beecher, this father figure plays a crucial role in the upbringing of children and the forming of moral and mental stability. Dimmesdale, Pearl's biological father, therefore contributes to Pearl's alleged deviance in two ways. Possessing an overly passionate nature himself—as evidenced in his religious fanaticism and excessive feelings of guilt—he is partly responsible for his daughter's emotional faculties. What is more, his refusal to acknowledge paternity denies Pearl the potentially balancing influence of domestic life. Hester also withstands the governor's plans to offer Pearl "a father's kindness" by "every good Christian Man" of the Puritan community (Hawthorne, *Scarlet* 78). As if to prove the importance of "the domestic man," Pearl's wild nature is subdued after Dimmesdale's public enuncation of his paternity on the brink of his death. The minister's acknowledgement of Hester as his lover and Pearl as his daughter has a profound impact on the hitherto unruly child. As he kisses her,

> a spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it. (Hawthorne, *Scarlet* 286)

This pivotal scene foreshadows Pearl's later development into the antebellum ideal of the True Woman. In this turn of events, the novel seems to openly critique the antebellum emphasis that the upbringing of children must be accompanied by domestic nurturing and discpline as otherwise the offspring inevitably would turn out to be morally and mentally defunct. Instead of demonstrating how Hester's failure of disciplinary methods affects the child's mental and emotional development for the worse, the text eventually emphasizes both the positive influence of love and the role of nature instead of nurture. Pearl, conceived in sin, carried and nursed by an emotionally fragile mother, is shown to have inherited Hester's "warm and rich nature" after all, a "well-spring of human tenderness, unfailing to every real demand" (178). Although, according to nineteenth-century theories of hereditary insanity, Pearl should have had no other prospect than to become mad, or at least mentally unstable, the end of the novel shows Pearl as a True Woman, as a mother, as a wife—on the whole, as a stable functioning member of society. The narrative thus subverts the claims that

individuals and the social environment make within its frame and does so by offering another contemporary ideology.

Expanding Hereditarian Rhetoric: *The House of the Seven Gables*

In *The House of the Seven Gables* Hawthorne expands on his juxtaposition of antebellum hereditarian rhetoric and subversive course of narrative by depicting the fall and rise of a degenerative family through the voice of a diagnostic narrator whose presumptuous and self-assumed authority surpasses even that of the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter*. The novel's treatment of degeneration and mental derangement again takes up nineteenth-century concepts of insanity and echoes the concepts of soft inheritance, acquired character, the influence of the environment, and perfectibility. In the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne discloses his intention: to show "the truth, namely, that the wrong-doing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and, divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief" (2).

The family of the Pyncheons inhabiting the eponymous house is descendant of Colonel Pyncheon. Their Puritan ancestor framed the original proprietor of the land, Matthew Maule, for witchcraft in order to claim the grounds as his own. The novel presents this "wrong-doing of one generation" as an "original sin" which is transmitted from one generation to the next and leads to the economic, physical, and mental deterioration of the entire Pyncheon family. Similar to *The Scarlet Letter*, then, sin functions as a symbol for moral insanity and other kinds of behavior diagnosed as mental illness by antebellum psychiatrists within the discourse of mental hygiene.

Diagnosing the Pyncheons

The remnants of the Pyncheon family inhabiting the ancestral home are described as "morbid specimen" by the narrator, who employs a diagnostic language throughout his characterization of Hepzibah and Clifford Pyncheon, Holgrave, and Phoebe (143). Hepzibah, the "gaunt, sallow, rusty-jointed maiden" (41) is an old spinster and has, according to the narrator, "grown to be a kind of lunatic" (184) due to her long self-inflicted isolation, needing from time to time "a walk along the noonday street to keep her sane" (95).

Furthermore, she exhibits "an absurd delusion of family importance, which all along characterized the Pyncheons" and which has contributed to the family's decline (19). Clifford, Hepzibah's brother, was framed for murder by his cousin Jaffrey, consequentially wrongfully imprisoned, and only recently released. His already weak bodily and mental constitution suffered heavily from the imprisonment and left him "partly crazy, partly imbecile," swaying between fits of passion and phases of depression (157). These descriptions are provided by Hawthorne's narrator who seems to take up the role of a psychiatrist informed by contemporary knowledge on insanity. His voice alternates between sympathetic and paternalistic, and distanced, such as when he describes the Pyncheons as a race, marked by distinctive traits but doomed to decline as mostly unfavorable characteristics were passed down from one generation to the next.

Phoebe Pyncheon, a distant relation from the countryside, seems unaffected by the "curse" of degeneration. She sees herself in no way as stemming from unproductive aristocracy (as Hepzibah does), but is repeatedly characterized as having inherited traits from her mother (who was not a Pyncheon). Taking over the little cent shop Hepzibah has established out of financial despair, she proves herself to be "as nice a saleswoman" as she is a housewife, both tasks at which Hepzibah fails (77). For Hepzibah, the explanation is obvious; she traces Phoebe's knack for shop keeping and household back to the girl's parentage. "These things come to you with your mother's blood," she says to Phoebe, adding that she never knew a Pyncheon who had practicable qualities (77). This emphasis on the maternal influence evokes the concept of transmission between mothers and daughters discussed in relation to *The Scarlet Letter*. At the same time, it also serves to persuade the reader that Phoebe is barely a Pyncheon but in name. The young girl, as the embodiment of health, functions as the antithesis to Clifford and Hepzibah. In the treatment of the latter, the narrator likens them to the ancient race of fowl in the garden. This sequence foreshadows notions of natural selection in explaining that "in respect to natural increase, the breed had not thriven; it appeared rather to be dying out" (24). Even worse, he adds, "it was evident that the race had degenerated like many a noble race besides" (89). The narrator attributes the poultry's (and concurrently, the Pyncheons') degeneration to inbreeding and the duration of their distinct existence, but also introduces the influence of the environment. Of the fowl and the family he says that despite "possessing very distinctive traits of their own, they nevertheless

took the general characteristics of the little community in which they dwelt" (21). This quote introduces the notion of environmental surroundings as directly influencing physiognomy and, in the case of the Pyncheons, mental states.

The Influence of the Environment

As Kowalski suggests in his analysis of *Cultural Genetics* in Hawthorne, "[t]he dusty and desiccated Pyncheon family results from maintaining the same domestic environment for too long" (13). Since Hawthorne places the plot mostly inside the eponymous house, this influence indeed becomes clear:

> The old house, as we have already said, had both the dry-rot and the damp-rot in its walls; it was not good to breathe no other atmosphere than that. Hepzibah […] had grown to be a kind of lunatic, by imprisoning herself so long. (Hawthorne, *House* 174)

The remaining Pyncheons do not realize that their surroundings can prove detrimental to their bodies and minds. Phoebe on the other hand understands the nature of home influence. As soon as she moves in, she tries to turn the house into a comfortable home by reclaiming the kitchen and the garden, by dusting, scouring, and generally putting to use the "gift of practical arrangement" she inherited from her mother's side (71). The formerly gothic mansion is imbued with Phoebe's friendly presence and finally turned into a home, an elementary condition in order for the residents to be beneficially influenced. Strikingly similar to Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* echoes the nineteenth-century belief—spread also in domestic and medical treatises—that the environment in general and the domestic surroundings in particular have an effect on people's mental states. Gothic residences, like the mansions of Usher and Pyncheon, disturb or at least add to the disturbance of the minds of the inhabitants up to the point of madness as evidenced in Poe's well-known tale. Although the Pyncheon house does not quite transmit the same degree of insanity to its residents as Poe's fictional mansion does, it is also not the home that Hawthorne's diagnostic narrator declares would beneficially influence Clifford, Holgrave, and Hepzibah (141). Despite her efforts, Phoebe does not quite manage to dispel the decay and gloom that has accumulated over generations, and in time she feels afflicted herself by the dreary surroundings, the very walls of the house being saturated with the memories of the

unhappy fates of Phoebe's ancestors. Holgrave, a resident of the Pyncheon house but unrelated to the family, confirms her subconscious anxieties as he explains to her his theory of the degenerative and infectious insanity of the Pyncheons. Similar to the narrator, the radical reformer blames the long succession of inherited and cultivated (acquired) traits. He adds that in "the family-existence of these Pyncheons, […] in their brief, New England pedigree, there has been time enough to infect them all with one kind of lunacy or another!" (185). No matter whether he refers to Clifford's mania, Hepzibah's depression, or Jaffrey's moral insanity, Holgrave's claim intensifies Phoebe's fear for her own sanity: "You talk of the lunacy of the Pyncheons! Is it contagious?" (193). Phoebe's concern stems from her own experience in the Pyncheon house that somewhat subdued her naturally lifted spirits, but also reflects the antebellum "law of family infection" as laid out in the contagion theory of health reformer Horace Bushnell.

Bushnell's Contagion Theory

Bushnell's concept of the prevention and treatment of moral insanity employs the analogy of the individual unit that gradually poisons its surroundings and its offspring (and ultimately the species as a whole). The conviction that "[h]uman depravation […] shows the past descending on the present, the present on the future, by an inevitable law" (196) is expertly illustrated in Hawthorne's novel by the family history of the Pyncheons starting with the injustice committed by their ancestor, the Colonel.

Bushnell's law of contagion or infection is twofold. His first major point is that parents "propagate their own evil in the child, not by design, but under a law of moral infection" (185). There is a striking similarity between Bushnell's ideas of the transmission of depravity and Hawthorne's literary treatment of heredity. Hawthorne displays his understanding of "moral infection" in the preface to *The House of Seven Gables*: "The act of the passing generation is the germ which may and must produce good or evil fruit, in a far distant time; that, together with the seed of the merely temporary crop, which mortals term expediency, they inevitably sow the acorns of a more enduring growth, which may darkly overshadow their posterity" (Hawthorne, *House* 6). This idea—that the deeds of the ancestor are passed on to and shape the next generation—is closely connected with the concept of hereditary acquired traits. The basic idea of this concept

was, as already suggested, the optimistic belief that inherited traits could be molded by the way of life, that certain mental faculties could be strengthened by repeated exertion and others subdued by neglect. These acquired traits and faculties would not only lead to the immediate improvement of the person exercising this practice, but, once cultivated, could then be passed on to offspring. This model of heredity catered to the doctrine of human perfectibility and the role of human agency in attaining it. While the sentiment of the quote above supports the notion that morbid or healthy ancestors influence their offspring for generations to come, its multiple reiterations by Holgrave suggests that the family of the Pyncheons has inherited, cultivated, and passed on only their defective traits. Holgrave's character serves to embody the radical reformer; but in some ways he also takes over the role of the diagnostic narrator and, by echoing the ideas sent ahead in the preface, is the medium through which Hawthorne can repeat his own belief in the hereditary transmission of human constitution and qualities.

The second aspect of Bushnell's theory of contagion takes up the notion of the influence of domestic surrounding as already discussed. This becomes apparent in his descriptions of the "spirit of the house" (186). In his outline of the law of infection, the home plays a distinct role, since every inhabitant breathes the atmosphere of the house. What follows, Bushnell claims, is that a nurturing, morally purified domestic space is beneficial for the mental hygiene of both parents and children. Vice versa, the moldy atmosphere of a mansion like the seven-gabled house in the novel can prove detrimental to mental and physical health and can infect the inhabitants. Holgrave seems to have included Bushnell's laws of contagion and the idea of environmental influence into his own theory of the Pyncheons' insanity. When asked by Phoebe, whether he deemed the lunacy of the Pyncheons to be contagious, he professes: "I believe I am a little mad!" (Hawthorne, *House* 186), testifying to the infectious qualities of the Pyncheon house.

Conclusion: The Prophetic Death of Jaffrey Pyncheon

At first glance, the character of Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, the novel's designated villain, seems to stand apart from his relatives in both mental and physical regard. He is described as a benign and respected member of the community, seems to care deeply for his impoverished relations, and shows no manifest signs of insanity or at least not in the way that Clifford and

Hepzibah do. Neither was he exposed to the house's detrimental influence. However, the narrator soon assesses Jaffrey's looks and behavior to be deceptive. The Judge's "hard, stern, relentless look" (120), his skullduggery and general similarity to the old Colonel serves to confirm the narrator's early suggestion

> that the weaknesses and defects, the bad passions, the mean tendencies, and the moral diseases 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. (119)

It is in Jaffrey's person that the narrator establishes the effects of the transmitted "original sin" committed by the Colonel. In the manner of a medical examiner, the narrator notes that "if we mistake not, moreover, a certain quality of nervousness had become more or less manifest" in Jaffrey (121). He uses his privileged position to condemn Jaffrey's authorial deportment, his feigned paternalistic concern, and his quick judgement of Clifford's mental health, all the while not realizing that he himself has subjected the novel's main characters to various therapeutic assessments, and has demonstrated the same conduct he scathes in Jaffrey Pyncheon. In the form of the narrator, Hawthorne is able to implicitly criticize contemporary policies of mental health in mocking the deportment of nineteenth-century psychiatrists, who saw insanity at every turn, who layered diagnoses on diagnoses, swayed between fashionable modes of explanations, and were quick to prescribe any type of therapy that promised fast results such as homeopathy, magnetotherapy, hydrotherapy, or blood-letting. This behavior, and the fact that there was no regulated education for psychiatrists, led to them often being denounced as quacks and charlatans, and even as deranged themselves – a sentiment that Hawthorne puts to use in the scene of Jaffrey's death by showing the narrator to shortly lose his mind over his multiple judgements, and diagnoses (272-282).

What is not contested but fully subscribed to in the novel, however, is the notion that insanity in whatever form is hereditary. In fact, by depicting the death of Jaffrey, Hawthorne foreshadows the natural selection theory of the Social Darwinists. Jaffrey inherited not only the physiognomy and the morally defective traits of the ancestral Colonel, but also his

tendency toward apoplexy. Jaffrey's death sees his fortune and house fall to Hepzibah and Clifford, the only remaining Pyncheons.

Many critics called the "happy ending" unconvincing and grafted-on; the dark shadow looming over the main character's mental well-being is removed as Jaffrey Pyncheon conveniently dies, and Holgrave seems to deny his former existence as a radical reformer and is integrated into the conservative community in order to marry Phoebe. The latter development was subject to heavy criticism, as literary scholars seemed to be under the impression that Hawthorne forfeited the radical potential of his novel and tried to comply with contemporary ideals and taste. Indeed, in Hawthorne's own time, *The House of the Seven Gables* was felt to be the redeeming novel after *The Scarlet Letter* in which contemporary critics detected a "tendency to disease" (Crowley 195). The author himself, and his wife Sophia, also felt that *The House of the Seven Gables* was a more optimistic, "more natural and healthy product" of his mind than the preceding bleak and dreary *Scarlet Letter (*Hawthorne, *Letters* 421).

However, by invoking the points that have been discussed in this paper—the concept of hereditary insanity, the influence of the environment, and the notion of acquired character—I would like to argue the opposite. From the outset, the two texts appear very similar in their narrative treatment of mental illness. Both use the influence of environmental surrounding on mind and body as a central plot element, and both echo the nineteenth-century conviction of the steerability of hereditary transmission of desirable or undesirable qualities to offspring. The difference, however, lies in the attitude the works express toward contemporary notions of the heredity of mental health and mental illness. Contrary to nineteenth-century and current criticism that projects *The Scarlet Letter* as the melancholic yet complex and critical masterpiece of Hawthorne's work, the novel is brought into line with dominant antebellum medical and social discourse as it subscribes to the pervading optimism of the antebellum period. The concepts of acquired traits and self-improvement are evoked in the character of Hester Prynne who, after committing the sin of adultery, spends the rest of her life trying to redeem her moral faculties, and succeeds. Although she cannot pass on these cultivated traits as Pearl remains her only child, she is still able to beneficially influence Pearl within the realm of domesticity and education. While *The*

Scarlet Letter emphasizes the role of human agency in the potential improvement of mankind, *The House of the Seven Gables* can be revealed to be the more critical and pessimistic novel when examined against the background of the discourse on insanity.

As has already been remarked, in some respects this novel, especially in regards to Holgrave's monologues and the allegedly unconvincing happy ending, anticipates the later turn from notions of artificial selection and the belief in perfectibility to Social Darwinism and a more fatalistic stance towards hereditary insanity in the last third of the nineteenth century (cf. Caplan 145). After 1865, the optimism exhibited by superintendents of asylums and physicians waned in the face of an increasing number of incurable, recidivistic, or chronic cases of insanity. The flexible and expansive etiological system prevalent during the first half of the century lost its dominance and was increasingly replaced by a concept of hereditary insanity that stood unaffected by outside influences. Isaac Ray, who formerly played a significant part in the wave of optimism among physicians interested in mental dysfunctions, adopted the stance that "the only effectual measure of prevention is that which gives them no chance to enter the blood. Most certainly, until this conclusion is adopted, we shall witness little diminution of the amount of insanity in the world" (Ray qtd. in Caplan 360). This understanding of hereditary insanity exculpated the psychiatrists from their responsibility to cure insanity. As a consequence the focus shifted onto the prevention of insanity. Heeding Ray's advice to give insanity "no chance to enter the blood" led to the ultimate logic of eugenics as evidenced in fin-de-siècle and twentieth-century medical and social thought. Yet this logic of eugenics is also already applicable to *The House of the Seven Gables*. The narrator, as pointed out before, takes a stance similar to Isaac Ray's. He laments the deterioration of the Pyncheons, which he sees as the result of the transmission of faulty qualities, and lauds the union between Phoebe and Holgrave, which promises to bring forth physically healthy and mentally sound offspring. The defective line of the Pyncheons will be discontinued. Jaffrey Pyncheon is dead, and soon after the reader learns of the death of Jaffrey's only son. Clifford and Hepzibah are too old to procreate. Phoebe, as was formerly established, is portrayed as being too much composed by her mother's blood to count as a true Pyncheon. Holgrave, even though he is domesticated and subscribes to the antebellum ideal of upward mobility, resists the accusation that he would forsake his beliefs. He provides exactly the kind of fresh blood to the family that would lead his offspring to be

"merged into the great obscure mass of humanity, and forget all about its ancestors" (Hawthorne, *House* 185). According to hereditarian logic, Phoebe's and Holgrave's potential offspring will most likely not be prone to disease since their parents have no defective faculties or moral wrongdoings to transmit. Neither will they be influenced by the disturbing and depressing environment that is *The House of the Seven Gables* as the former inhabitants move to Jaffrey's house in the countryside. What Hawthorne has foreshadowed through the death of Jaffrey he brings to an end at the close of the novel: the lunacy of the Pyncheons will be rooted out but this is only achieved at the price of the Pyncheons as a whole being eradicated, in order for a new and healthy family to take over land and responsibility.

What the analyses of the two novels have shown is that Hawthorne needs to be credited as more than just the "historian" Brigham says novelists are. As was presented in my readings of *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables*, the novelist's "wonderful power of observation" was used to display cultural and medical notions of sin and virtue, mental health and illness, norm and deviance. Beyond just representing prevalent nineteenth-century opinion, literary texts such as the two novels attended to can use the power of madness as a trans-temporal as well as a contemporary motive and thus raise their own voices in the discourse of insanity. In his complex treatment of mental hygiene and hereditary insanity, Hawthorne manages to dispel fears of a degenerating nation, supports and reinstalls womanhood and domesticity as a cure for insanity, and subtly critiques psychiatry's claim to truth. In this manner, his novels, and most certainly many other nineteenth-century texts, enter into a dialogue with cultural, religious, and political notions of insanity, and consequently constitute part of the discourse, shaping its course.

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