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Mesmerism in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*[*]

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Mesmerism has a deep influence on Nathaniel Hawthorne's romance *The House of the Seven Gables*. On the one hand, Hawthorne disapproves of mesmerism because he believes it is an intrusion of one's sacred spirit. On the other hand, Hawthorne is obsessed with the mesmeric effects in his romance creating process. Hawthorne not only designs the mesmerism plots in the romance to express his negative attitude towards mesmeric practice but also applies the mesmeric arts in order to guide the reader to gain the ultimate spiritual revelation after reading. Hawthorne's approach to mesmerism is ambivalent.

Keywords: Hawthorne, mesmerism, *The House of the Seven Gables*, spirit

Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) is famous for his romance writing in American literature. Romance is, as Hawthorne observes in the well-known passage "The Custom-House", "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary might meet, and each imbues itself with the nature of the other" (Hawthorne, 1983, p. 149). Hawthorne is always fascinated with human mind and spares no effort to explore the spiritual world. Due to Hawthorne's focus on human psychology and spirit, his writing is labeled as "dark romance" by some critics (Thompson, 2004, p. 6).

The general darkness and mystery of Hawthorne's romance is a product not only of his own apprehension of the world, but also, in part, of the influence of mesmerism at that time. Mesmerism today is regarded as a discredited scientific theory that leaves its mark on the literature, culture, and psychology in the 19th century. Robert Fuller suggests that "the phenomenon of mesmerism, the nation's first popular psychology, now looms as a much larger determinant of the nineteenth century's legacy to modern self-understanding than we had formerly observed" (Fuller, 1982, p. X). Maria Tatar argues that for Hawthorne "the mesmerist stands as a model for the coldly intellectual artist" (Tatar, 1978, p. 229). In *Mesmerism and Hawthorne: Mediums of American Romance*, Samuel Coale explores the mesmeric writing features in Hawthorne's romances (Coale, 1998).

The paper is supposed to focus on *The House of the Seven Gables*, one of Hawthorne's most outstanding

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romances, to reread the mesmerism plots in the story and to examine the mesmeric medium applied by Hawthorne to allure the reader, thus to assist the reader to understand Hawthorne's complicated attitude toward mesmerism.

Hawthorne's Personal Encounter With Mesmerism

Mesmerism is a term originating from the German doctor Franz Mesmer in the 18th century. This term means a special treatment in which the mesmerist induces the patient to go into a state of sleep in order to heal illness.

Mesmerism first appeared in Europe and was quite popular among Europeans. It was introduced to New England by Charles Poyen in 1836. The mysterious effects of mesmerism attracted lots of Americans, even including Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his essay "Historic Notes on Life and Letters in New England", Emerson says,

> …mesmerism, which broke into the inmost shrines, attempted the explanation of miracle and prophecy, as well as creation. …It was human, it was genial, it affirmed unity and connection between remote points, and as such was excellent criticism on the narrow and dead classification of what passed for science. (Emerson, 1993, p. 338)

Hawthorne had a more intimate connection with mesmerism because his fiancee Sophia Peabody believed in mesmerism's power to ease her chronic headache and accepted the mesmeric treatment. Hawthorne was shocked by Sophia's interest in mesmerism. In his letter to her, he expressed his strong objection to mesmerism.

> Supposing that this power arises from the transfusion of one spirit into another, it seems to me that the sacredness of an individual is violated by it; there would be an intrusion into thy holy of holies—and the intruder would not be thy husband! (Hawthorne, 2010, p. 149)

Hawthorne argues against mesmerism. He believes if the claims of the pseudoscientists are true, "we are then dealing with spiritual phenomena which we do not understand and which are better left unexplored, for it is immoral and sacrilegious to pry into another's soul or to let someone pry into yours" (Coale, 1998, p. 112).

Due to Hawthorne's personal involvement with mesmerism, it is easy to understand the abundant mesmerism materials in his writings. We cannot deny the fact that while Hawthorne holds a negative attitude towards mesmerism, he still tries his best to reflect this mysterious phenomenon in his romances.

Mesmerism Plots in *The House of the Seven Gables*

In the romance *The House of the Seven Gables*, almost every major character has a relationship with mesmerism directly or indirectly.

Midway through the romance, after Holgrave reads Phoebe Pyncheon the story of Alice Pyncheon's mesmeric possession by Matthew Maule, "plunging into his tale with the energy and absorption" and animatedly acting out many of the parts, he comes to discover that his tale or its telling has left Phoebe in a trance-like state. With "but one wave of his hand and a corresponding effort of his will", Holgrave believes, he "could complete his mastery" of Phoebe and "establish an influence" over her "as dangerous and perhaps as disastrous, as that which the carpenter of his legend had acquired and exercised over the ill-fated Alice" (Hawthorne, 1983, p. 534). But Holgrave does not do that. He resists the temptation to mesmerize Phoebe and wakes her instead. "He forbade

himself", the narrator tells us, "to twine that one link more, which might have rendered his spell over Phoebe indissoluble" (Hawthorne, 1983, p. 535). Holgrave's rejection of mesmerism in this scene is commonly considered to mark a key turning point in the narrative, paving "the way for the resolution of various tensions in the novel" (Tatar, 1978, p. 215) and moving the book toward thematic resolution. Mesmerism appears in this scene not only as the subject of Holgrave's tale, but as a threat and a temptation in its performance. It is a figure for a relation to others or to language, and to what Freud calls "the magic of words" (Freud, 2008, p. 296).

Mesmerism is portrayed in Holgrave's tale as a kind of speech act. Matthew Maule says "Alice, laugh!" and "Alice must break into wild laughter" (Hawthorne, 1983, p. 532). Holgrave attributes the power and affective force of Maule's words to the will of the mesmerist. Language is represented in the tale as a medium through which the mesmerist exercises his will.

We are told in the romance that Phoebe often becomes deeply absorbed in works of fiction. The trance state into which she falls when Holgrave reads her his tale appears to be a kind of literary-effect, an effect of the fictional narrative and its language. There is a certain automatism in the functioning of language, something arbitrary and seemingly mechanical that is not governed by the will or intention of a subject. For Hawthorne, people do not simply possess language but are also possessed by it. Mesmerism is in this scene not only an intersubjective relation, but a relation to language. It is an event of language.

Clifford is a figure of passivity in *The House of the Seven Gables*. At one point in the story, a political procession passes in front of the house. The narrator describes the scene of the procession as follows,

> It melts all the petty personalities, of which it is made up, into one broad mass of existence—one great life—one collected body of mankind, with a vast, homogeneous spirit animating it. But, on the other hand if an impressive person, standing alone over the brink of one of these processions, should behold it, not in its atoms, but in its aggregate—as a mighty river of life, massive in its tide, and black with mystery, and, out of its depth, calling to the kindred depth within him—then the contiguity would add to the effect. It might so fascinate him, that he would hardly be restrained from plunging into the surging stream of human sympathies. So it proved with Clifford. (Hawthorne, 1983, p. 494)

Possessed by an irrepressible instinct, Clifford tries to throw himself off the balcony into the crowd. Whether he is "impelled by the species of terror, that sometimes urges its victim over the very precipice which he shrinks from, or by a natural magnetism, tending towards the great center of humanity" (Hawthorne, 1983, p. 495), the narrator is unable to decide. Like Freud and other social psychologists once discussed (Freud, 2008), Hawthorne associates crowd consciousness and the psychology of the mass or crowd with mesmerism. Fluid tropes, so prevalent in the rhetoric of mesmerism, pervade the passage. The individual dissolves into the whole. The man in the crowd, immersed in "the surging stream of human sympathies" is, like the mesmerized subject, seemingly indifferent between self and other, subject and object. It is not the discovery of an organic unity, but the loss of clear distinctions. Clifford's plunging into the crowd is a certain loss of self-conscious control.

A similar ambivalence underlies Hepzibah and Clifford's flight from the house after they discover Jaffrey dead. Boarding a train, they are "drawn into the great current of human life, and were swept away with it as by the suction of fate itself" (Hawthorne, 1983, p. 569). Hepzibah "lost the faculty of self-guidance" (Hawthorne, 1983, p. 569). "She was like a person in a dream, when the will always sleeps" (Hawthorne, 1983, p. 572). Hepzibah is in kind of mesmeric state throughout the journey. The narrator tells us that in such state, individuals will "follow implicitly whatever guidance, even if it be a child's" (Hawthorne, 1983, p. 571). In a sort of waking dream,

unable to distinguish the actual from the imaginary, hallucination from reality, Hepzibah asks repeatedly "Am I awake?—Am I awake?" (Hawthorne, 1983, p. 571).

There is a tension in *The House of the Seven Gables* between exposing complete mastery as a dangerous delusion and preserving the sovereign self. Whether obsessed by language or immersed in crowd, the subject faces the hazard to lose the self. Mesmerism threatens in the novel to contaminate the reverence of the soul. Mesmeric transfusion of one spirit into another is also a confusion of self and other. In the "curious psychological condition" that overtakes Phoebe when Holgrave reads her his tale, she begins to live only in his "thoughts and emotions". In the chapter of "Alice Pyncheon", Matthew Maule is said to have the power both to "draw people into his own mind" and of "getting into people's dreams, and regulating matters there", "like the stage-manager of a theatre" (Hawthorne, 1983, p. 515). The mesmerist becomes the unseen despot of another.

Mesmeric Writing Features in *The House of the Seven Gables*

Hawthorne holds a disapproving attitude towards mesmerism in both his personal life and his romance plots arrangement, while he cannot resist the fantastic effect of mesmerism to explore human mind. In the process of creating his romances, Hawthorne applies mesmeric features to guide the reader to enter a kind of trance state on purpose. *The House of the Seven Gables* is a case in point.

At the beginning of the romance, Hawthorne tries to transit the reader from the reality to the realm of trance. According to the mesmeric theory, all tedious and repetitive stimulations can cause the subject to enter a state of mesmerism. On the opening page of *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne offers the reader such a paragraph:

> Halfway down a bystreet of one of our New England towns stands a rusty wooden house, with seven acutely peaked gables, facing towards various points of the compass, and a huge, clustered chimney in the midst. The street is Pyncheon Street; the house is the old Pyncheon House; and en elm tree, of wide circumference, rooted before the door, is familiar to every town-born child by the title of the Pyncheon Elm. On my occasional visit to the town aforesaid, I seldom failed to turn down Pyncheon Street, for the sake of passing through the shadow of these two antiquities—the great elm tree and the weather beaten edifice. (Hawthorne, 1983, p. 355)

In this short paragraph, the name "Pyncheon" appears four times. Moreover, Hawthorne applies long clauses to establish the reader's concentrated gaze upon the language. Freud suggests that "words are the most important media by which one man seeks to bring his influence to bear on another. Words are a good method of producing mental changes in the person to whom they are addressed" (Freud, 2008, p. 292). Here it is self-evident that Hawthorne resorts to the words' magic power to exert a kind of mesmeric influence on the reader.

By reading the repetitive diction the reader enters the state of trance. Mesmerists explain the trance as a kind of sleep in which the subject's will has been suspended. Once within the trance, the subject may offer prophecies, insights, and revelation, he or she otherwise could not conjure up when normally awake. Here discoveries are made, and healing processes of all kinds, both medical and spiritual, are possible.

In Hawthorne's trance-like realm, darkness and psychological domination prevail. Hawthorne calls this realm as the "neutral territory" in his romances. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, the scenes are so like the real world in a suitable remoteness both in time and space, but with an atmosphere of strange enchantment. Thus they offer an available joint between fiction and reality. The house is a dim and dark place filled with strange images

and powerful icons, such as the portrait of Colonel Pyncheon, the map the Pyncheon territory, and the pieces of antique furniture. "It is a realm of the haunted mind often visited by ghosts and shadowed by the doom of the past, some primeval curse or original sin" (Coale, 1998, p. 282).

In the process of mesmerism, the subject experiences the expansion of interior perception and a kind of spiritual omniscience within the trance state. Similarly, Hawthorne's romance becomes the mesmerized medium within which the reader, suitably enchanted, should realize the invisible fluid of human spirits. With Hawthorne's and his characters' induction, the reader gets rid of the restraints of consciousness to reveal ultimate truth about the human condition.

Hawthorne believes that "truth often finds its way to the mind close-muffled in robes of sleep, and then speaks with uncompromising directness of matters in regard to which we practice an unconscious self-deception, during our wakening moments" (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 40).

As a sophisticated writer, Hawthorne induces the reader into his romance with mesmerism arts to detect the inner world. By entering the literary trance unconsciously, the reader eventually realizes his or her inmost mind. Hawthorne's craft lies in the fact that the reader gains the final spiritual omniscience without the intrusion of author/mesmerist. The author only functions as a medium to guide the reader into the trance. The reader can keep the secret of his own spiritual revelation after reading. That avoids the defects of mesmerism of which Hawthorne strongly disapproves.

Conclusion

Despite the various repudiations and disavowals, mesmerism imposes itself in *The House of the Seven Gables* in its writing. The staging in the novel, its telling, and plots reflect Hawthorne's strong obsession with mesmerism. As Taylor Stoehr concludes,

> Hawthorne's art could be taken as a variety of mesmerism, a spell he wove over his readers… He was like the "writing medium" that began to spring up in the 1840s, mesmerist and somnambulist in one, whose magnetic trances could be self-induced. (Stoehr, 1978, p. 61)

In his early sketch "The Haunted Mind", what is essential to romance is "an intermediate space" between dreaming and awakening, a state "on the borders of sleep and wakefulness" in which "the mind has a passive sensibility, but no active strength; when the imagination is a mirror, imparting vividness to all ideas without the power of selecting or controlling them" (Hawthorne, 1982, pp. 200-202).

Mesmerism has a deep influence on Hawthorne. On the one hand, Hawthorne's family members are involved in the practice of mesmerism. Hawthorne holds a clearly negative attitude towards his wife's mesmeric treatment because he firmly believes that mesmerism pries into others' inner spiritual domain and mesmerist's exploration in this realm disturbs and violates both bodily and spiritual health of the mesmeritized subject. It is the "Unpardonable Sin" (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 149). On the other hand, Hawthorne is fascinated by the effects of mesmerism because the human psychology is always his concern. Hawthorne applies both the mesmerism materials and mesmerism techniques to his literary creation to explore human spirit. Hawthorne's ambivalent attitude towards mesmerism conforms to his persistently obscure comprehension of the physical world and human mind.

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