Nathaniel Hawthorne as an Artist:
The Use of Color in The House of the Seven Gables

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Abstract

It is argued that Nathaniel Hawthorne is fascinated with colors, that color plays a great role in The House of the Seven Gables, and that he uses colors in a number of ways indicative of his skill and creativity.

The examination of the ways in which color is used in The House of the Seven Gables reveals that Hawthorne uses colors to give a double meaning or a whole series of meanings, to treat his theme well, to delineate his characters, and to express his own perceptions of the Pyncheons' life in particular and the human life in general, and of the landscape and its relationship with humans.

The discussion demonstrates the centrality of color not only for characters and themes but also for the whole book. By using colors Hawthorne sets the tone for the whole novel.

The use of color

Color has been at the centre of the attention of both philosophers and writers. Aristotle, for instance, thought that color is a real property and that the form of any color is transmitted from the object to the soul during perception (Simmons, 1994). Like Aristotle, Descartes and John Locke reflected, during the early modern period, on color properties and color experiences, developing a distinction between primary and secondary qualities. According to
Locke, these secondary qualities are physical properties of objects that have the "power" to cause specific types of color sensations in perceivers (Locke, 1690, II. viii. 10-13). Commenting on this secondary property, Ayers contends that an object should possess the power to cause the sensation or experience of color in perceivers to have color as a secondary quality (Ayers, 1991, vol. 1, Ch. 23). Following the steps of these philosophers, writers have recognized, from early days, the value of colors which have been informing not only their own writings but also scholarly research in this domain. The nineteenth-century American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of these writers who have unraveled the mystery of color and its use in art and by artists, be they the ones portrayed in his works or the others whom he does not have much confidence in. In works such as "The Birth-mark" and "Rappaccini's Daughter," Hawthorne describes artists and artist-figures who are isolated from humanity on account of their cold intellect and desire to control others. In other tales such as "Drowne's Wooden Image " and "The Artist of the Beautiful," Hawthorne describes successful artists who are able to create art and maintain their humanity through their love of others. In The House of the Seven Gables, Hawthorne also depicts an artist, a photographer called Holgrave, whose isolation is indicated by his inhabiting a remote gable of the house, attempting to present himself as an outsider or an observer, distancing himself from his Maule ancestors, and working as a photographer who keeps maintaining a distance from others. This image constructed of Holgrave as an isolated figure represents Hawthorne's critique of the transcendental aesthetic he came into contact with in the 1930s and 1940s. It is through Holgrave that Hawthorne expresses his knowledge of photographers, reactions to them, and his comments on art which he first started learning about in England where he visited the British Museum for the first time in 1855. At this time, [s]culpture and painting were new revelations to him1 and it took him some time to understand and feel them. After visiting the British Museum, he felt bored by "the remains of ancient art which he saw there"2. When two more years had been spent, Hawthorne went to the Townley Gallery, and made a few comments indicating "the training of eye and mind which he had gone through"3. Commenting on ancient sculpture, he maintained that it had an excellence with the potency to "educate and refine the minds "4 of those looking at it even carelessly and casually as he did. This visit was succeeded by another one he paid to Hampton Court where he saw Raphael's cartoons. Besides, he did a careful study of the many paintings he saw at the Arts Exhibition in Manchester in 1857. These visits to galleries and exhibitions did Hawthorne good. Referring to his last visit to the Arts Exhibition, he argues in a manner which reflects the good progress made in the study of art. Having paid his last visit to the Exhibition, he claims, I "feel as if I had had enough of it, although I have got but a small part of the profit it might have afforded me '5. Hawthorne adds that "pictures are quite other things to [him] now from what they were at my first visit"6. The significance underlying Hawthorne's visits to these places is that they provided him with a unique opportunity of unhurriedly exploring color and its infinite possibilities. Moreover, these places represented a rare chance for him to train both his eye and mind on how to paint, how to employ color, and how to express perceptions in color the same way artists do.

**Using words and colors**

Hawthorne is an artist of a different type. Whereas painters, for instance, use only
colors, the medium of their art, in their paintings, Hawthorne uses both colors and words as his medium. He makes much use of words and colors to achieve a specific desired effect. In his descriptions of the house with the seven gables and the Pyncheons, he chooses the appropriate vocabularies that are marked by the peculiarities of thought and style. In the portraits he draws with words and colors, he demonstrates an unparalleled power of observation, incomparable attention to details, and an unrivalled skill of drawing with pen and ink. The result is that his descriptions are not only good, accurate, and vivid, but also akin to pictures taken by a camera. These descriptions are also as exquisite as his portraits of nature which he approaches as a portrait-painter who is painting its "beautiful face," and not "a lover stammering and trembling before it"7. He sets down his impressions of what he sees with inimitable grace, the same way a sailor puts down the course of a storm in his log-book 8. The unhurried scrutiny of these portraits and descriptions reveals that they are inspired by Murillo, a painter, whom Hawthorne admires and holds to be "the noblest and purest painter that ever lived"9. Like Murillo, Hawthorne combines a "sense of ideal beauty with the most accurate observation of real life"10. Commenting on Hawthorne's creativity as an artist, Alfred Kazin claims that Hawthorne is "the most interesting artist in fiction whom New England has produced" because his works form a profound imaginative world of their own"11. Echoing Kazin, Thelma Shinn quotes Rudolph VonAbele who contends that Hawthorne's artistic creativity is often associated with "supernatural goings-on of various sorts, " such as "mesmerism, witchcraft and the like"12.

Being an artist, Hawthorne uses a variety of colors. He employs the primary and the secondary colors. The primary colors of light are red, green, and blue, and the secondary colors are yellow, cyan (green and blue), and magenta (red and blue). To draw a portrait of the Pyncheons, Hawthorne uses several colors that symbolize something about them. To take an example, the black color that is dominant symbolizes the Pyncheons' sins and overshadows their death. Another example is that Hepzibah keeps wearing a black dress, which probably suggests her being aloof, evil, mysterious, and sad. Hawthorne contends that Hepzibah has dwelt "for above a quarter of a century gone by "in "strict seclusion, taking no part in the business of life"(p. 41). This black color is also the color of the house exterior, and it may suggest that the house is the home of sinners, a prison, a hell-like place, and a site where death often occurs. This color may also hint at the personality of its inhabitants who are evil people drowning in darkness. The house itself is dark and houses emblems of the past, such as the portrait and the map, which are both "visible tokens "13 of the Colonel's greed. Another color that Hawthorne uses in connection with the Pyncheons is the grey color which occurs between the white and black colors. This color is symbolic of the lack of spiritual values. Clifford, Hepzibah's brother, is associated with this color. Similar to people who prefer this color to other colors, Clifford feels more at home when he is with his sister than in large groups. A third color that Hawthorne uses is the white color, which is a beginning color. An example of Hawthorne's use of this color is Colonel Pyncheon's beard that is hoary (p. 28). This color has been traditionally used to symbolize purity and innocence. It also represents light that Hawthorne contrasts with dark symbolic of evil which seems to be dominating the world. By this contrast,
Hawthorne clearly shows that goodness and evil are always at war and engaged in a deadly competition with each other. To clarify this conflict between evil and goodness, dark and light, Hawthorne depicts Phoebe who epitomizes goodness, dwelling on the good impact she has upon other characters. Being sun-like, Phoebe prevails and relieves sin by her light.

**Black, white and grey**

While Phoebe's life consists mainly in goodness, the other Pyncheons' lives consist in enormities, and the color mostly connected with them is black. According to Hawthorne, the Pyncheons' life begins with laying the foundations of the house with the seven gables. White oak is used in these foundations. White is a beginning color and represents the beginning of Colonel Pyncheon's life. So long as the house site was taken by force from Matthew Maule, this color is transformed into black, which is symbolic of sin, of evil, and of the death to come.

This mix of white and black colors produces the grey color that hints at the corruption of these family members and their losing of their spiritual values. It is clear that the Pyncheons' life story is akin to a composition that is mostly black-colored. The reason for this color is sinning brought about by the absence of spiritual values. By using the black color, Hawthorne does not create tension within the composition of human life that consists of relationships. Hawthorne employs this color to give a sense of infinite time and space. This color is also symbolic of sin; it demonstrates that humans are sinners and that they keep sinning. Sins themselves color human life, and outlive sinners. The good number of sins underlies the dominance of the black color and the growth in its intensity. It can be said that Hawthorne uses the black color for a number of reasons. Firstly, Hawthorne's choice of this color indicates that the Pyncheons are sinners, whose sins outlive them. In other words, this color helps Hawthorne with the treatment of this theme of sin and how it bears on descendants. Secondly, the choice of this color provides harmony in the composition. While this color provides harmony within, it does not provide harmony without in the viewer. Thirdly, the black color sums up the whole life story of humans on earth. It demonstrates that humans are evil and sinful. This argument probably reflects Calvinism and Predestination in which Hawthorne strongly believed. Fourthly, this choice seems to indicate that black is probably Hawthorne's favorite as it is timeless and represents power. Reckoning with all these reasons, it can be also said that Hawthorne uses this black color as a metaphor for content. As I have already claimed, using the black color to sum up the Pyncheons' lives or the human life, for instance, hints at the content of this life. It suggests that this life is replete with sins.

**Color and landscape**

In addition to using colors in connection with his theme and characters, Hawthorne also uses them with certain aspects of the landscape he creates. One of these colors is the green color that is associated with nature and life. This is a refreshing color for it reminds people of nature. Green is the color of flowers in the garden...
which integrates the house with the seven gables into the landscape. Hawthorne contends, "there need be no question why the bees came to that one green nook in the dusty town" (p. 141). It is also the color of hopvine, squash vines, moss, flower shrubs, burdocks, and the elm tree. Besides, this green color acts as a background for all outdoor colors, and provides a stabilizing factor to the overall design of the landscape. It can be further used to tie a design together when many different hues are seen. Another color that Hawthorne employs in connection with the landscape is that of gold. Hawthorne claims that "[a] few clouds, floating high upward, caught some of the earliest light, and threw down its golden gleam on the windows of all the houses in the street, not forgetting The House of the Seven Gables " (p. 43). Speaking of Colonel Pyncheon, Hawthorne claims "what other upward step remained for this Good man to take, save the final step from earth to the golden gate of heaven" (p. 29). This color symbolizes height, and evokes the feeling of prestige. It also does one job: illumination. Parallel to this color is that of the sunshine, the yellow color, which is symbolic of joy and happiness. Phoebe, Holgrave and Clifford were sitting in the garden. When "the yellow richness of the declining sunshine... fell into the open space of the garden, Phoebe brought out a loaf of bread and a china bowl of currants, freshly gathered from the bushes, and crushed with sugar"(p. 148). These with water "... constituted all the entertainment" (p.148). At another time in the garden, Clifford hears the bees' buzzing murmur in the heart of the great yellow blossoms, and looks about him with a joyful sense of warmth "(p. 141). The bees' buzzing murmur in the heart of the yellow blossoms shows that bees are energetic. This characteristic is suggested by the yellow color.

To this array of colors Hawthorne adds the red one. When "the bean vines began to flower on the poles, there was one particular variety which bore a vivid scarlet blossom "(p. 141). Another example is that "it was a wonderful coincidence, the good lady thought, that the artist should have planted these scarlet-flowering beans – which the hummingbirds sought far and wide" (p. 142). This color, being a hot one, influences perspective, especially when the garden is seen from a distance. What happens is that scarlet blossoms and scarlet-flowering beans come forward into the scene instead of receding into the landscape. This red color is bright, and so is the yellow color. These two bright colors jump out, making a distant garden come forward, and a small garden seem to be smaller. Another example is that in the garden yellow and red flowers appear much closer to the eye than they are. These two examples demonstrate that these two colors impact perspective.

It is worth noting that this mix of colors in the house garden makes it romantic. In this place, there are various plants of many colors. When Phoebe, for instance, "was quite dressed, she peeped out of the window, and saw a rosebush in the garden"(p. 76). This rosebush, being of luxuriant growth, "had been propped up against the side of the house, and was literally covered with a rare and very beautiful species of white rose"(p. 77). On another occasion, Phoebe "found her way into the garden, gathered some of the most perfect of the roses, and brought them to her chamber"(p. 77). These roses that Phoebe has been gathering
constitute an important aspect of this romantic garden. They symbolize love. Phoebe, for example, picks a crimson rose from the garden and gives it to Clifford who, being very pleased with it, claims that the rose makes him "feel young again" (p. 110). In addition to these roses, there are also shrubs. The value of these shrubs lies in that they can "mask traffic, create areas of privacy, and reduce wind "14. So long as this privacy was secured, Phoebe and Clifford used to spend some time here, where "Uncle Venner and the daguerreotypist had made such repairs on the roof of the ruinous arbor, or summerhouse, that it was now a sufficient shelter from sunshine and casual showers" (p. 139).

It is interesting to note that this arbor represents a landscape feature and that it is an important element of this romantic garden, where Clifford was "fond of sitting with "a flower" in his hand, intently observing it, and looking from its petals into Phoebe's face, as if the garden flower were the sister of the household maiden" (p. 140). Another landscape feature that is a marker of this romantic garden is the fountain which was "set round with a rim of old mossy stones, and paved, in its bed, with what appeared to be a sort of mosaic work of variously colored pebbles" (p. 91). In this garden where there is sufficient sunshine, the "eye of heaven seemed to look down into " the fountain" pleasantly, and with a peculiar smile, as if glad to perceive that nature ... had here been able to retain a breathing place" (p. 91).

It has been demonstrated that Hawthorne has visited galleries, exhibitions, and museums. He has also recorded his reactions to the paintings he saw there. Moreover, he had contacts with artists and painters, especially his wife Sophia Peabody who was a painter. The value of these contacts and visits is that they sharpened his awareness, and gave him the opportunity to train his eye and mind on how to use colors in different ways, which he did in The House of the Seven Gables.

In addition to using colors to delineate his characters, he employed them to develop his themes, attach a value to certain aspects of the landscape he created, and set the tone for the whole work in which he seems to provide a solution for the transcendentalist artist, represented by Holgrave, by keeping him attached to the actual via his love for Phoebe. Hawthorne makes it clear that this love transforms Holgrave who positions himself as an outsider and an observer of others. This love also draws Holgrave toward wholeness and community. By virtue of this love, this source of inspiration, Holgrave becomes able to create art and, at the same time, maintain his humanity.

Notes

1 The English Note-Books of Nathaniel Hawthorne, p. 18.

2 Ibid. p. 18.
3 3 Ibid. p. 19.

4 Ibid. p., 19.


6 Ibid. p. 20.

7 *The English Note-Books of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, p. 17.

8 Ibid. , p. 17.

9 Ibid. p20.

10 Ibid. p. 20.


13 Cliffs Notes, *The House of the Seven Gables: Critical Essays*:

   Hawthorne's Use of Symbols, p. 1


**Works Cited**


Cliffs Notes, *The House of the Seven Gables: Critical Essays*:

Hawthorne's Use of Symbols, p. 1.


Hillard, G. S. *The English Note-Books of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. The


Andrew. Quick Tips in Design: Part 2 : Using Colors


He will be wise, no doubt, to make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and, especially, to mingle the Marvelous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the public. At all events, Thomas Maule became the architect of the House of the Seven Gables, and performed his duty so faithfully that the timber framework fastened by his hands still holds together. Author Nathaniel Hawthorne is best known for his novels 'The Scarlet Letter' and 'The House of Seven Gables,' and also wrote many short stories. Who Was Nathaniel Hawthorne? Nathaniel Hawthorne was an American short story writer and novelist. Born on July 4, 1804, in Salem Massachusetts, Nathaniel Hawthorne's life was steeped in the Puritan legacy. An early ancestor, William Hathorne, first emigrated from England to America in 1630 and settled in Salem, Massachusetts, where he became a judge known for his harsh sentencing. William's son, John Hathorne, was one of three judges during the Salem Witch Trials in the 1690s. Hawthorne later added a “w” to his name to distance himself from this side of the family.