Causes of the Literary Presentation of Estrangement in the *House of the Seven Gables*

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the exploration for the possible causes of the presentation of estrangement in *The House of the Seven Gables.* With a detailed examination of personal, social, political and historical forces working on Hawthorne's creation, a conclusion is drawn that the literary presentation of the varieties of estrangement in *The House* is a natural product of Hawthrone's inclination towards solitariness, a long-delayed recognition of literary status, the unfair dismissal from the job and his meditation on the negative influences of the material civilization on the wholeness of man's mind and spirit.

1. The Literary Presentation of Estrangement in *The House*

The House of the Seven Gables, Hawthorne's second novel, was completed in 1851, which Hawthorne himself repeatedly expressed a preference over *The Scarlet Letter*. The story of *The House* is structured around an old feud between two families originated from their disputes over the right ownership of a piece of land. When reading the story, readers are given a strong impression of estrangement experienced by protagonists in different degrees. The word "estrangement" used here does not merely mean that one literary character is away from others in the sense of the physical distance; it refers more to the psychological isolation of man. The presentation of estrangement can be classified into three distinctive types--man and man; individual and society; even man from himself represented by Colonel and Judge Pyncheon; Hepzibah and Holgrave; the young Maule respectively.

Colonel and Judge represent those who resort to all means in order to achieve their personal goals. Such egoism drives men in an antagonistic position and even the blood-bond kinship would be crushed to pieces. The second group of people is the man who can not locate personal position in the dramatic changing society. Hepzibah, an old aristocratic and social outcast, has imprisoned herself for half of her lifetime, owing to her nameless panic and poor adjustment to social changes. On the contrary, Holgrave eagerly dives in the fluctuating waves of social life, and supports radical social reforms with great enthusiasm. However, the more he takes part in social activities, the more confused he becomes over man and society. What's more, his extreme political opinions seem to be a bar separated him from people around. Holgrave spends his life in search for his personal identity in the world, but finally comes to know that he is nothing but a lonely wanderer who can find neither peace nor a place to which he feels an attachment. For different reasons, Holgrave and Hepzibah live a similar life of estrangement. Both are like marginal men and social outsider, without a real connection with society. The last type of man estranged might be the most tragic character in the story. The young Maule is created to be a self –split who behaves outwardly in complete discord with his inner self. Heavily laden with class ideology and family feud, the young Maule becomes unable to realize his subconscious affection for Alice Pyncheon and eventually betray his innermost desires for love and happiness. At last, the young Maule destroys the beautiful girl he adores most.

2. Causes of the literary Presentation of Estrangement in *The House*

Any comprehensive reading of *the House* should not neglect personal, social, political and

historical forces in the working of Hawthorne's works. And it might be hard not to take the following factors into account in the exploration of the causes of estrangement presented in *The House:* historical background of Hawthorne's time, Hawthorne's family influence, his long pursuit of literary dream, and Hawthorne's political experience of dismissal from the post.

In the early nineteenth century. America witnessed an enormous commercial and industrial expansion from 1800 through 1860. The railroads, the steamboat, the locomotive, and the telegraph became all agents of change and economic growth (Norton 153). The rapid development in transportation greatly sped the pace of westward expansion which could be seen in a large population of nearly 80,000 rushing into California either by train or by ship in just one year after the discovery of the gold there in 1848. The spread of industrialism, the sudden influx of immigration and westward expansion contribute together to a thriving economic power in a new world. What's more, New England Transcendentalism blew a strong wind throughout the country with its inspiring beliefs in man's sacredness and perfectibility. The ideals of individualism and the optimistic mood of the nation seem to embrace a new Garden of Eden for man in all. However, Hawthorne began to cast his cold eyes on the problematic changes caused by this dramatic social advancement. His sensitiveness to the mixture of shabbiness and freshness, the coexistence of decay and novelty was exhibited in many of his writings such as *The House of the Seven Gables*.

When democracy and individualism played its positive role in the realization of personal and national dreams, its negative influences began to take on in every facet of life. Excessive emphasis on individual freedom and personal dreams results in egoism which laid personal interests above anything else. Man can resort to every means in order to achieve his own benefits, regardless of others' welfare. As a result, communicative disharmony emerges and men distances from others. In addition, when the railroad and the telegraph lead to the diminishment of distance and time and the promotion of commerce, they also result in "a loosening of the close-knit social fabric of villages and town: throughout America" (Buitenhuis 55). The stability of the old settled communities was severely challenged by a prevailing value of social mobility. Man was no longer attached to a certain job and a place for decades. In pursuit of personal aims, man moved from one place to another, temporary nature of social mobility made it hard to for man to cultivate trust and closeness necessary for a harmonious human relationship. Besides, mobility results in a resetting of social structures. Some became wealthy while others are poverty-stricken; some stepped socially upward while others downward. When the gap between the rich and the poor was increasingly widened, man's psychological structure changed in accordance. Such feelings as jealousy, hatred, self-righteousness, complacency and cynicism demonstrated more intensely than ever before, which threaten and even disintegrate natural human relationship. Man lived separately, like fragmentary pieces. With his sensitive insight into and deep meditation on the social problems at that time , Hawthorne created various kinds of his estranged characters in their different ways such as corrupted politicians, deceptive businessmen, crazy scientists, radical reformers, money-minded speculators, various criminals and isolated artists. It was no wonder Shulman commented that Hawthorne, among the American writers, became the early explorer of personal and social fragmentations in a market society and in an upwardly mobile world in which people are cut off from each other, their families and their own personal depths, leaving people, especially the young, divided, isolated, and on their own (Shulman 122-123) .

Nathaniel Hathorne, father of the famous American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne was depicted to be "silent, reserved, severe and habitually of a rather melancholy cast of thought sea-captain" (Julian 36). He died of yellow fever in South America and left his wife and 3 young children under the care of his wife's family (the Mannings). Though kind and friendly were the Mannings, young fatherless Hawthorne eventually developed a disposition of highly sensitiveness, which can be sensed in his reluctance to receive schooling and his lifelong unwillingness to make a recitation or speech in public. In a letter Hawthorne wrote later to his friend Stoddard, he said when young, he had a "grievous and natural disinclination to go to school" and he never did go to school as much as other boys. In the biography written by Randall Steward, one of the reasons for his unwillingness to go to college was revealed that he said he could not bear the thought of living upon Uncle Robert

for four years longer. In addition, when Hawthorne's mother hesitated about whether to continue to live in their new house in Raymond built by Hawthorne's Uncle or return to her parent's family, he urged his mother to stay in Raymond since Mrs. Hawthorne would be the hostess of her own house rather than under the authority of Miss Manning. From all his words mentioned above, it could be inferred that Hawthorne had a keen sensitivity of his position to be dependent upon his mother's family and held an unconscious desire to live independently from his young age. The young Hawthorne's hypersensitivity could be also sensed in his lifelong unwillingness to make a recitation or speech in public. Once at school, when young Hawthorne walked towards the front of the classroom and made his public speech, he was laughed at and rudely pulled down by some boys immediately. Since then Hawthorne often refused to do pubic recitations as school required, and received repeated fines and punishments for his refusal. His reserve and reticence in public made him a seemingly outsider to people around. Jonathan Cilley, one of his three close friends, once described him as a man he loved and admired but he could never enter "Hawthorne's mysterious world of thought and imagination since he never told a story and sang a song and his voice was never heard in any shout of merriment…" (Rubinstein 85).

If the death of his father was partially responsible for the formation of the delicate and sensitive disposition of young Hawthorne, his mother's influences upon the development of Hawthorne's characteristics should not be neglected, too. As a widow, Mrs. Hawthorne withdrew herself from the world, seldom receiving her husband's relatives, nor of her own. Her eccentricity inevitably exerted some negative influences on the healthy development of the normal family relationship. Hawthorne's mother, two sisters and he lived quite reclusively; Mrs. Hawthorne has eaten alone ever since her husband's death. Thus all of four family members took their meals apart in their respective rooms. Such a lack of communication or demonstrativeness between family members might be one of the reasons in the formation of Hawthorne's inclination towards solitariness.

Hawthorne developed a keen interest in reading from his early age and the habit of constant reading was strengthened during his three year's confinement to house for his foot injuries. When his avidity of reading inspired him to be an American writer as prominent as those literary masters in England, Hawthorne decided to return to Salem after graduation, and started an unusually solitary life for the following twelve years. In describing this special period of time, Hawthorne always spoke with a melancholy and sentimental tone. In his letter to Miss Sophia Peabody, Hawthorne called his house as "a haunted chamber" in which he had been imprisoned so many years that he even doubted whether he would break through "the viewless bolts and bars" and let himself known by the outer world before his death (Myerson, 135). Similarly, his inner painful loneliness in the long seclusion was impressively depicted in his letter to Longfellow. He compared his dwelling to a terrible "dungeon" in which he was sunk so deeply that he should be almost afraid to come out even if the door was open for he had not lived, but only dreamed of living (Rubinstein 87).

Though the painful feeling of a long seclusion was probably an inevitable part of a young man with an ambition to realize his dream, Hawthorne still experienced a time of unusual estrangement from people and society of his age. Writing was not being viewed to be in a position of respect from the common people in that both puritan work ethics and hard life of American pioneers taught people to work with efforts and hard toils to accumulate a fortune so as to fulfill their holy religious duty in the glorification of God. Hence reading and writing was not encouraged for being one sort of leisure-time entertainment as cards-playing, dicing and theatre-going etc. in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In an essay describing the great difficulties of the professional American writers in the beginning of the nineteenth century, Washington Irving once wrote "in a nation where every one is busy; where literary leisure is cofound with idleness; the man of letters is almost an insulated being, with few to understand, less to value, and scarcely any to encourage his pursuits." (Sacvan 17)

3. Hawthorne's dismissal from the Custom-House

The victories in the War of Independence and the War of 1812 eventually established the total independence of America, at the same time, created two main parties of the federalists and the

republics.The federalists advocated for the establishment of highly centralized central government and regarded American prosperity rising out of industrial capitalism, while the republics maintained that national government should decentralize its power as much as possible and favored an agrarian economy. All their political divergences eventually focused on the issue of slavery. The great disagreement on slavery bred a deep hostile mood among both opposing party members and their followers. Facing such a big dispute, Hawthorne is greatly worried about the potential war at hand. He struck to his idea that the slavery should be abolished in a natural and gradual way instead of in a violent means. Due to his conservative attitudes on this issue, Hawthorne subjected himself into a state of estrangement from the outside world because almost all the northerners and other important writers of his time showed a strong opposition to slavery. As he put it, "hundreds of friends at the north dropped off from him like autumn leaves." (Steward 133) .Throughout the country, man separated from man for their different answers to the question "what's your identity?" Under the prevailing climate of political division and intensified antagonism, Hawthorne failed to escape being dismissed from the post in Salem Custom House for an unjust charge of corruption in office by Charles Uptam in 1848.The event became a hot topic throughout New England. Arguments and counterarguments, charges and countercharges filled the country presses during the summer months of 1849. In response, Hawthorne publicized his defense with valid evidence in Boston Daily Advises. However, Hawthorne was eventually removed from the post. Such a slander aroused a great sense of indignation at his political enemies and a distressed frustration about dishonest political strife in Hawthorne. What makes him feel more estranged is a pure indifference of his townspeople to his misfortune. In his letter to Bridge, Hawthorne openly expresses his estranged situation:

As to the Salem people, I really thought that I had been exceedingly good-natured in my treatment of them. They certainly do not deserve good usage at my hands after permitting me to be deliberately lied down—not merely once, but at two several attacks—on two false indictments—with hardly a voice being raised on my behalf; and then sending one of the false witness of Congress, others to the Legislature, and choosing another as the mayor. (Steward 98)

Whether it's justifiable for Hawthorne to develop such a mood of being persecuted by his political opponents and their followers, it's obviously revealed in the passage quoted above that a deep sense of unfriendliness or separation is formed between Hawthorne and his townsmen.

4. Conclusions

To Sum up, drawn much from Hawthorne's family history and his personal life experience, the artistic creation of *The House* is a natural product of Hawthorne's cold observation and critical thinking about the ongoing industrialization at his time. Though what Hawthorne reveals in *The House* is a sort of isolation or estrangement suffered by people of his age, in the light of the world today, *The House* still gives significant implications and revelations for the modern world. People today and in the future continue and will still have to face such existential problem as estrangement and spiritual loneliness. In this sense, Nathaniel Hawthorn is a great writer ahead of his time and deserves eternal reputation in both America and world literature.

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