Burying the Body: Pandemic and Public Health in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*

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Abstract
This article discusses Hawthorne's engagement with discourses of public health, disease, and burial practices in The House of the Seven Gables. The recurring descriptions of the decayed house and its stifling air, coupled with the frequent imagery of bodies/corpses within it, evoke contemporary historical concerns related to "miasma," disease, and public health, as well as changing burial practices during the first half of the nineteenth century. These issues were made even more pressing, especially in urban centers, by the devastating 1832 and 1849 cholera pandemics, and Hawthorne's experiences with these events make their way into his writing. The fearful public health discourse connected with the cholera pandemics is epitomized in the now-obscure 1850 gothic novel The Cholera-Fiend, and Hawthorne engages in similar but subdued language and rhetoric in The House of the Seven Gables, employing it for his own thematic ends.

Keywords
disease, cholera, burial practices, graves and cemeteries, The Cholera-Fiend

"Temporary Morgue Set Up at Fitchburg State University."
-Boston Globe, April 1, 2020

"As Morgues Fill, N.Y.C. to Bury Some Virus Victims in Potter's Field."
-New York Times, April 10, 2020

"'We Ran Out of Space': Bodies Pile Up as N.Y. Struggles to Bury Its Dead."
-New York Times, April 30, 2020

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"And the facts which are here offered, will convince any but the most obstinate theorist, that the putrid exhalations arising from grave-yards . . . will generate disease equally malignant as yellow fever, and possessing at least some of its characteristics."
—F. D. Allen, Documents and Facts, Showing the Fatal Effects of Interments within Populous Cities, 1822

On September 9, 1849, as his family was contemplating a move from the bustling seaport of Salem to the remote Berkshire hills in the far western part of Massachusetts, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote the following notebook entry: "Julian says we cannot go to Lenox 'because it is mouldy there—the house is mouldy'" (American Notebooks 436). Julian, Hawthorne’s son, was then three years old, and this brief entry is one of several that month that record the young boy’s often amusing turns of phrase. As it turns out, Julian evidently had confused a conversation that he had overheard; as Hawthorne clarifies, it was “a mistake for sold, apparently; the latter being the fact” (436). In other words, the house in Lenox that the Hawthornes had planned to occupy was unavailable because it had been sold, not because it was moldy. Aside from the playful humor, what is noteworthy about this particular misstatement is that it raises concerns about the healthfulness of homes—concerns that would have been on the minds of many in the mid-nineteenth century, including the Hawthornes. Moreover, these concerns are ones that figure centrally in Hawthorne’s second novel, The House of the Seven Gables, which he began writing within a year of that notebook entry.

About two-thirds of the way into The House of the Seven Gables, Hawthorne’s narrator presents an iconic passage that foregrounds a related central motif. In a discussion of the character of Judge Pyncheon, the narrator draws attention to a concept familiar to readers of Hawthorne: the disparity between a person’s external appearance and behavior and the secrets that a person keeps hidden within. In this instance, the narrator explicitly compares the individual to a building:

Behold, . . . , a palace! Its splendid halls and suites of spacious apartments are floored with a mosaic-work of costly marbles; its windows, the whole height of each room, admit the sunshine through the most transparent of plate-glass; . . . ; and a lofty dome—through which, from the central pavement, you may gaze up to the sky, . . .—surmounts the
whole. With what fairer and nobler emblem could any man desire to shadow forth his character? (229)

Such an image is lovely: light and airy, full of sunshine, with views of the heavens. Who wouldn’t want to be thus compared? But Hawthorne’s narrator takes a decidedly gothic turn and reveals a frightful secret—the danger in the figurative palace of this description, we learn, is more than mere mold. “Ah,” the narrator continues,

but in some low and obscure nook—some narrow closet on the ground floor, shut, locked, and bolted, and the key flung away—or beneath the marble pavement, in a stagnant water-puddle, with the richest pattern of mosaic-work above—may lie a corpse, half-decayed, and still decaying, and diffusing its death scent all through the palace! (229-30)

Even more, we learn of the horrifying implications of this hidden corpse:

The inhabitant will not be conscious of it; for it has long been his daily breath! . . . Now and then, perchance, comes in a seer, before whose sadly gifted eye the whole structure melts into thin air, leaving only the hidden nook, the bolted closet, with the cobwebs festooned over its forgotten door, or the deadly hole under the pavement, and the decaying corpse within. Here, then, we are to seek the true emblem of the man’s character, . . . . And, beneath the show of a marble palace, that pool of stagnant water, foul with many impurities, and perhaps tinged with blood—that secret abomination, above which, possibly, he may say his prayers, without remembering it—is this man’s miserable soul! (230)

This is an impressive, unsettling description, and it stands at the affective and thematic center of the novel. Emblematic of Judge Pyncheon, this hidden body also suggests a wider context. In the pages that follow, I will examine both the “mouldy house” and this “corpse, half-decayed, and still decaying, and diffusing its death scent” to suggest their significance for Hawthorne and his contemporaries—a significance that has taken on new relevance now, in 2021, in the wake of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

As I will show, the repeated motifs of decay and polluted, diseased air in *The House of the Seven Gables*, coupled with the recurring imagery of corpses
exerting their influence on the present, are not mere metaphors; instead, I argue, these motifs also engage the very real and ever-increasing public health concerns of the 1830s and 1840s, concerns connected to urban centers, population growth, changing understandings of disease and infection, and, most significantly, the relationship of disease and infection to burial practices. Moreover, all of these concerns were exacerbated by devastating cholera pandemics in 1832 and 1849—public health crises that are largely forgotten in the twenty-first century, but ones that were written into the fabric of literature of this period. Put simply, in Hawthorne’s day, where a dead body was interred had become a grave matter of public health, and his novel appropriates the anxious discourse surrounding it for his own thematic ends.

**BAD AIR AND DECAYING HOMES**

From the first pages onward, *The House of the Seven Gables* is permeated by the imagery of deterioration and decline. Built on stolen land, the house itself is a cursed property, and its history is vexed. Aged, overgrown, and dilapidated, in the present day of the novel, it is repeatedly rendered as a place of decay. Its walls are covered by “crumbling plaster,” and the property is bordered by a “ruinous wooden fence” (27). There is a “green moss that had long since gathered over the projections of the windows, and on the slopes of the roof,” and “the dust of the street and the decay of the roof gradually formed a kind of soil” (28). While flowers (Alice’s Posies) have come to grow in that soil, “it was both sad and sweet to observe how Nature adopted to herself this desolate, decaying, gusty, rusty, old house of the Pyncheon family” (28). Outside the house we see “a rose-bush in the garden,” but we soon learn that even this “rare and very beautiful species of white rose . . . had blight or mildew at their hearts” (71). Moreover, these plants have rooted “in soil which . . . was now unctuous with nearly two-hundred years of vegetable decay” (71). Emphasizing again age and rot, the narrator describes the garden soil as having “fed itself with the decay of a long period of time; such as fallen leaves, the petals of flowers, and the stalks and seed-vessels of vagrant and lawless plants, more useful after their death, than ever while flaunting in the sun” (86). Inside the house is hardly better. The former cent shop is presented as an emblem of disuse. Prior to opening, for instance, the shop must contend with “rich and heavy festoons of cobweb,” measuring scales covered in “rust . . . [that] had eaten through and through their substance”
(35), as well as "skein[s] of cotton-thread" that are "very rotten" (52, 53). In and out of the house, the dominant motifs are diminution and decay.

As we are introduced to the characters, it becomes clear that the inhabitants of the house and those associated with it—which is to say, most of the Pyncheon family—are also far from healthy. We are told that the Pyncheon family "had not thriven; it appeared rather to be dying out" (24). Alone in the house lives sixty-year-old spinster Hepzibah, who barely leaves the premises; she is a kind-hearted woman but is described as "our decayed gentlewoman" and a "mildewed piece of aristocracy" (54). Her brother, Clifford, who was framed for murder and imprisoned for thirty years, returns to the house upon his release and lives a stunted, childlike existence—in the narrator's words, "accustomed to a sad monotony of life, not so much flowing in a stream, however sluggish, as stagnating in a pool around his feet" (111). And there is also Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, a villainous man described as having something "in him" that "implied 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" (119). Taken together, the Pyncheons are a family in decline.

This pattern is put into stark relief when cousin Phoebe enters the story. Youthful and innocent, she arrives from the country "so fresh" and "widely in contrast, at that moment, with every thing about her" (68). Upon entering the Pyncheon property, the extent of the decline becomes apparent. "The sordid and ugly luxuriance of gigantic weeds, that grew in the angle of the house . . . none of these things belonged to her sphere," the narrator tells us (68). The Pyncheon's familial degeneration—as with Edgar Allan Poe's earlier elision of his Usher family and the Usher home—seems intimately connected to the decay in and of the house itself. For when Phoebe first joins the family, Hepzibah describes the house as unhealthy to breathe. "'[I]t is a wretched thought," she says of Phoebe, "that you should fling away your young days in a place like this. Those cheeks would not be so rosy, after a month or two. Look at my face! . . . you see how pale I am! It is my idea that the dust and continual decay of these old houses are unwholesome for the lungs"" (74–75). To this claim, Phoebe replies: "I should keep myself healthy with exercise in the open air" (75).

At first, Phoebe does indeed seem to have a positive, almost cleansing effect on the house. Just as she gets the cent-chop functioning smoothly, the "grime and sordidness of the House of the Seven Gables seemed to have vanished, since her appearance there; the gnawing tooth of the dry-rot was
stayed, among the old timbers of its skeleton-frame; the dust had ceased to settle down so densely from the antique ceilings, upon the floors and furniture of the rooms below" (136). Such a purifying influence, though, is not permanent, and the narrator makes clear that the influence is reciprocal: "There was no morbidness in Phoebe; if there had been, the old Pyncheon-house was the very locality to ripen it into incurable disease" (137). Moreover, despite Phoebe's countryside purity, even she can be affected; we are told, "her petals sometimes drooped a little, in consequence of the heavy atmosphere about her" (143).

These connections between the "atmosphere" of the house and the language of ill health are even more emphatic in the mouth of Holgrave. The young artist and jack-of-all-trades (and secret Maule descendant) decries the stifling atmosphere within the mansion's walls: "'I certainly love nothing mouldy,"' he says. "'Now this old Pyncheon House! Is it a wholesome place to live in, with its black shingles, and the green moss that shows how damp they are?—its dark, low-studded rooms?—its grime and sordidness, which are the crystallization on its walls of the human breath, that has been drawn and exhaled here, in discontent and anguish? The house ought to be purified with fire—purified till only its ashes remain!'" (184). Holgrave's words here are forceful; and more than just a condemnation of old buildings, his tirade underscores the worry about disease that itself hangs throughout the atmosphere of the novel.

Such worries about dilapidated homes and ill health were not unique to Holgrave and Hepzibah, however. This discourse about the potential deleterious effects of the "mouldy" atmosphere and decay-filled air, along with the "crystallization... of the human breath," evokes the popular nineteenth-century concept of "miasma." Miasma (or "miasmata"), as it was widely understood in Hawthorne's day, was a theory of how disease could be caused by means of bad air (or miasma) produced by rotting, decomposing organic matter. As Emily Waples defines it, "imperceptible pestilential 'miasmata' or 'effluvia' was capable of penetrating the human body, rendering it sick with the incorporation of corrupted air" (14). Such corrupted air was particularly prevalent in enclosed spaces with poor ventilation, such as interior rooms, basements, and cellars. In a study of how mid-nineteenth-century American discourse about urban spaces often reflects these contemporary anxieties about health and architecture, Donald McNutt notes in particular how "cellar imagery" can "disclose organic processes ensuing within human habitations" (358). That is, dark, dank, and unventilated areas within homes
were considered to be (and in truth often were) unhealthy spaces—and this is precisely the discourse that Holgrave employs to describe the house.

It is important to note here the strong connections between the fears of miasma and urban areas. While miasma could be produced anywhere rotting matter was found, crowded cities and cloistered homes were seen as some of the worst offenders. In her study of the powerful allure of suburban environments in nineteenth-century American fiction, Maura D’Amore suggests that the draw of the suburban was at least in part about the flight from “industrialization, overcrowding, disease” in urban centers (3). Such fears as these directly link miasma with the real material conditions of place, even when the language used to describe it seems fantastical to us. “Like malevolent sprites, miasmas were at once wispy and possessed of great power, ethereal in nature but chillingly tangible in effect,” Conevery Bolton Valencius writes, and they “emanated from harmful or degraded places or things, infiltrating their surroundings with illness. They carried the essence of decay and putrefaction. . . . Transferring imbalance and ill health from the surrounding world to the interior of the human body, they were the causal mechanism whereby elements in the environment affected individuals’ health” (114). It is easy to dismiss such outdated medical beliefs now, but for scholars of literature and history, it is essential to understand how “Miasmatic disease” was, in Linda Nash’s words, “the quintessential environmental affliction of the nineteenth century” (5).

Hence the emphasis on atmosphere in The House of the Seven Gables. While the term miasma itself never appears in the novel, the implications of miasma theory can be found throughout. When the original Pyncheon was first staking his property claim on the stolen Maule land, we learn that “[h] ad he been told of a bad air, it might have moved him somewhat; but he was ready to encounter an evil spirit” (9). Ghosts are fine to Colonel Pyncheon, it would seem—just not “bad air.” Nevertheless, in the century and a half since the House of the Seven Gables was built, so much of human life had taken place there, and so much decay, that by the start of the story in the present day, “the very timbers were oozy, as with the moisture of a heart” (27).

GRAVES, BODIES, AND PUBLIC HEALTH

These patterns of miasmatic imagery and language take on an additional urgency when juxtaposed with another recurring image in The House of the Seven Gables—that of bodies. As mentioned earlier, Holgrave has a disdain
for old buildings ostensibly because of the negative effects of allowing the past to influence the present. But what I would like to emphasize here is that Holgrave repeatedly renders "the past" as a dead body, a corpse. At one point, the narrator reports, "It seemed to Holgrave... that in this age, more than ever before, the moss-grown and rotten Past is to be torn down, and lifeless institutions to be thrust out of the way, and their dead corpses buried, and everything to begin anew" (179). Later, Holgrave laments: "'[T]his Past?... It lies upon the Present like a giant's dead body! In fact, the case is just as if a young giant were compelled to waste all his strength in carrying about the corpse of the old giant, his grandfather, who died a long while ago, and only needs to be decently buried. Just think a moment, and it will startle you to see what slaves we are to by-gone times,—to Death, if we give the matter the right word!'" (182–83). For Holgrave, and by extension, for The House of the Seven Gables as a whole, proper living in the present requires a proper burial of the past.

Holgrave follows these words with a stunning monologue about the power of the past, once again rendered as a corpse:

"For example, then," continued Holgrave, "a Dead Man, if he happen to have made a will, disposes of wealth no longer his own; or, if he die intestate, it is distributed in accordance with the notions of men much longer dead than he. A Dead Man sits on all our judgement-seats; and living judges do but search out and repeat his decisions. We read in Dead Men's books! We laugh at Dead Men's jokes, and cry at Dead Men's pathos! We are sick of Dead Men's diseases, physical and moral, and die of the same remedies with which dead doctors killed their patients! We worship the living Deity, according to Dead Men's forms and creed! Whatever we seek to do, of our own free motion, a Dead Man's icy hand obstructs us! Turn our eyes to what point we may, a Dead Man's white, immittigable face encounters them, and freezes our very heart! And we must be dead ourselves, before we can begin to have our proper influence on our own world, which will then be no longer our world, but the world of another generation, with which we shall have no shadow of right to interfere. I ought to have said, too, that we live in Dead Men's houses; as, for instance, in this of the seven gables!" (183)

Holgrave's speech here can be seen as an eloquent evocation of Hawthorne's supposed moral for the novel, that "the wrong-doing of one generation lives
into the successive ones" (2). But when read alongside the description of
the corpse "diffusing its death scent" cited in the opening of this essay, and
in light of the pervasive discourses of decay and miasma throughout, these
passages also invite us to consider a wider picture.

In truth, this pattern of corpse and burial imagery suffuses The House
of the Seven Gables. The Pyncheon house is built "over an unquiet grave," we
are told, and its construction "would include the home of the dead and bur-
ied wizard, and would thus afford the ghost of the latter a kind of privilege
to haunt its new apartments" (9). The estate has "the black stain of blood
sunken deep into it, and still to be scented by conscientious nostrils" (23).
Later, when Hepzibah faces opening the cent shop, she sighs, "I wish I were
dead, and in the old family tomb" (44); and the "augury of ill-success . . .
fell upon her half-dead hope, like a clod into a grave" (48). Upon Clifford's
return, too, she muses that "in old houses like this . . . dead people are very
apt to come back again!" (75–76). And, of course, in arguably the novel's
most striking chapter, "Governor Pyncheon," the narrator scathingly mocks
the corpse of Judge Pyncheon as it sits in the central chamber of the house.

So: moldy, poorly ventilated houses, imagery of decay and diseased air,
miasma, the repeated invocation of corpses, both figurative and real—such
striking patterns throughout the novel urge us to ask, why this intensity
of images of dead bodies, connected to the stifling air of the Seven Gables
house and its negative effects on the inhabitants? The significance and
importance of these patterns become clearer when we look at them in the

To be sure, it is no accident that graveyard and funerary imagery appears
in the novel. While Hawthorne’s application of it in The House of the Seven
Gables is obvious—and perhaps even heavy handed—this imagery recurs
throughout much of his work. As Richard E. Meyer has noted, Hawthorne
has a “tendency to employ headstones and graveyards . . . as focal elements
in imagery, symbolism, setting, and plot structure” (1). Even the most casual
reader is bound to notice the repeated icons of burials, funerals, and graves
in his tales, images often figuring as central to the story, such as in “Roger
Malvin’s Burial” or “Chippings with a Chisel.”3 “[I]t seems clear,” Meyer
writes, “that something within him resonated with these burial sites and
artifacts in a manner surpassing even that of his average contemporaries” (1).

The biographical record certainly supports this reading, since we know
that Hawthorne himself was well acquainted with his local graveyards and
cemeteries. In fact, in Salem, only a few blocks from the Herbert Street
house in which he and his family had lived, was the Charter Street burial ground, a place Hawthorne knew intimately. This particular graveyard was the resting place of some of his own Hathorne ancestors, and it sat literally next door to his in-laws, the Peabodys. On July 4, 1838, before he and Sophia were engaged, Hawthorne wrote in his notebooks: “It gives strange ideas, to think how convenient to Dr. Peabody’s family this burial-ground is,—the monuments standing almost within arm’s reach of the side windows of the parlor” (American Notebooks 173). In the same entry, he comments on the gravestones of his ancestor “Colonel John Hathorne” (“the witch-judge”), as well as Cotton Mather’s younger brother, Nathaniel (172). The Charter Street burial ground also plays a role in Hawthorne’s 1835 tale “Alice Doane’s Appeal,” wherein it is populated with ghosts of “souls accursed” rising from the grave (Snow-Image and Uncollected Tales 276).4

As such details and patterns indicate, Hawthorne seemed particularly attuned to burial places; but in truth, most of his contemporaries were more than passingly familiar with local graveyards, especially when compared to US culture today. Such an awareness came about because during Hawthorne’s lifetime, burial practices in New England were undergoing major changes. Hawthorne himself notes this when, in late 1847 or early 1848, he muses: “Death possesses a good deal of real estate—viz. the graveyards in every town. Of late years too, he has pleasure grounds—as at Mount Auburn and elsewhere” (American Notebooks 280). His reference here is to Mount Auburn, the pioneering and famous 170-acre garden cemetery located outside Cambridge, Massachusetts, whose creation in the early 1830s—the period when Hawthorne’s writing career was just getting underway—helped usher in what became known as the rural cemetery movement. In Massachusetts, the development of Mount Auburn in 1831 marked a decisive shift away from the long-held previous practices of burying bodies in and around churches and churchyards, and it was the first of many to be created that decade, including Laurel Hill in Philadelphia and Green-Wood in Brooklyn.

Those of us who live in modern towns and cities might have difficulty envisioning this history, but in New England (and elsewhere), from the earliest Euroamerican settlements onward, “the standard places of burial had been amid the living—in the middle of towns, in churchyards or in churches, a practice which in England dated back to the 8th century,” as Stanley French puts it (70). Town commons, churchyards, and other such public-facing places functioned as repositories for the dead, and as history
indicates, for a long time these practices seemed to work—at least until a series of changes and events necessitated something different. By the start of the nineteenth century (and coinciding with the start of Hawthorne’s lifetime), populations had grown in such a way that burial within town centers began to be a problem. In Hawthorne’s own region, the growth was exponential: between 1800 and 1830, Boston’s population nearly tripled, and then by 1850, it had doubled again. With such a boom in population, there was an attendant boom in deaths, and within many cities, the circumscribed burial grounds soon became overburdened. As cemetery historian David Charles Sloane describes, “Mount Auburn resulted from the same crisis that was occurring throughout the larger American cities”—namely, massive population growth in a city with an infrastructure unprepared to handle the changes (44). Or, in Aaron Sachs’s more colorful words, “when the population of the northeastern United States exploded at the beginning of the nineteenth century, corpses quickly started spilling out of official enclosures” (22).

As the bodies piled up, the problem became more than just one of limited space; a health crisis also began to develop. In the northeast, the “old graveyards became so crowded,” French writes, “that they were frequently little more than stinking quagmires—chronically offensive and occasionally serious public health hazards” (74). The concerns that French points to can be seen in a cursory, thumbnail sketch of burial and public health history in the region. For instance, as early as 1806, the Board of Health of New York conducted an inquiry and recommended changes in burial practices, observing that for public health, “the present burial-grounds [within the city] might serve extremely well for plantations of grove and forest trees, and thereby, instead of remaining receptacles of putrefying matter and hot-beds of miasmata, might be rendered useful and ornamental to the city” (qtd. in City of Boston 9). The problem of crowded burial grounds was amplified, as this report points out, when the horrifying conditions of such places were experienced as “hot-beds of miasmata.” The connected worries became more dire when, in 1822, yellow fever swept through New York City and took the lives of over 16,000 people (for reference, the city’s total population was then around 140,000). With the number of bodies left in the wake of the epidemic, a renewed furor arose over the links between disease and burial within city limits—or “intramural interment,” as it was called. Simply put, the problem was safe disposal of the excess corpses because of the associated health risks.
At this time, a debate raged in the medical profession about what types of decomposing matter was most dangerous—whether vegetable or animal remains caused the most "putrid effluvia" (Coffin 18). Amid this uncertainty about the origins of miasma and its related diseases, a mild panic ensued in the wake of the yellow fever outbreak. Following the disaster in New York, a related controversy arose in 1823 in Boston regarding the dangers of burial in church cellars, which is where bodies had begun to be placed when graveyards became overloaded. Using the heightened rhetoric of the day, John G. Coffin railed against the dangers of intramural interment in Boston: "What better contrivance to generate yellow fever, for instance, was ever set up than what was permitted to exist unmolested last year [1822] in the city of New York?" (20). Here, Coffin, a medical professional, refers to the burial ground of Trinity Church in New York City, which, in his report on the "Dangers and Duties of Sepulture," he describes in language that may well come from a gothic novel: "[T]he grave-yard of Trinity Church," he writes, was "saturated with dissolved semi-liquid human flesh, oozing from every pore, and the incumbent atmosphere filled with noxious effluvia, concurring with the air of the city, contaminated by unexampled quantities of smoking filth, of fermenting, offensive animal and vegetable substances" (20–21).

Such rhetoric, with all of its excess, highlights the worries that were prevalent when, in 1825, Dr. Jacob Bigelow began plans to create a cemetery outside Boston—which eventually opened in 1831 as Mount Auburn. Thus, the rural garden cemetery, seen by so many as a romantic retreat and tourist destination for poets and artists, was not only a respite from the deleterious bad air of the city, but also a practical solution to that problem.

THE CHOLERA PANDEMICS, HAWTHORNE, AND THE CHOLERA-FIEND

Despite these changes, in 1832 it became clear that the problems of public health and burial in the northeast had not been fixed when the Asiatic cholera (as it was then called, because of its origins on the Indian subcontinent) arrived in the United States. This was the first of what would be three major cholera pandemics that reached the United States during the nineteenth century, and its toll along the Atlantic seaboard was devastating. During the winter of 1831–32, Americans had, with increasing alarm, tracked news of this disease spreading from Asia into Europe.
When reports confirmed that cholera had arrived in Canada on June 6, Americans on the east coast, especially those in port towns, braced for the worst. As we know now, cholera is a bacterial disease transmitted typically through water (or food), particularly amid unsanitary conditions; in the nineteenth century, however, this was not yet known, and it was understood to arise from either miasma or contagion. Thus, fear of the disease spread, particularly in crowded urban areas, and when the first cases were reported in New York on July 2, a mass exodus to the rural countryside began.10

In fact, given the poor sanitary conditions in most urban centers, medical professionals tended to recommend retreat to less densely populated areas. For example, at the end of June that year, just before the first cholera cases in the United States, a group of physicians in Boston offered the following advice: “[W]e believe the pure air of the country to be more salutary, during the hot season, than that of a large town. While, therefore, it is not indispensable to flee the city on the appearance of the cholera ... we should advise those who have a means of selecting their residence, to quit the frequented walks of men, and seek retirement and sequestration during the prevalence of the epidemic” (Warren 319–20). Such advice was warranted, as demonstrated by the disaster that unfolded in New York City. Charles E. Rosenberg, in his extensive study of the cholera pandemics, writes that, at the height of the outbreak in 1832, in New York “[d]ead bodies lay unburied for days before being thrown into shallow pits and covered with a foot or two of loose earth, which served neither to keep the rats out nor the odors of putrefaction in” (90). In other words, the same crises faced in that city during the yellow fever outbreak the previous decade had resurfaced, and again the city’s inability to handle its dead was highlighted.

In contrast, the cities of New England, including the Boston area, were left comparatively unscathed.11 Nevertheless, the cholera pandemic left an indelible mark on Hawthorne. On June 28—weeks after the news of cholera in Canada, but before the first confirmed cases in New York City—Hawthorne addresses his worries about the pandemic in a letter to Franklin Pierce: “I was making preparations for a northern tour, when this accursed Cholera broke out in Canada,” he writes, disappointed to have to cancel his travels (Letters, 1813–1843 224). Hawthorne had intended to tour northern New England and Canada to gather material for his never-realized “The Story Teller” collection. “I still hope that the pestilence will disappear, so that it may be safe to go in a month or two,” he continues (224). More than just the
inconvenience of these thwarted plans, however, Hawthorne’s letter to his old college friend reveals a more closely felt worry: “As to the Cholera, if it comes, I believe I shall face it here [Salem]. By the by, I have been afflicted for two days past with one of the symptoms of it (viz. a diarrhoea) which has weakened me considerably, and makes me write a rather tremulous hand. I keep it secret, however, for fear of being sent to the Hospital” (224). Worried about his own health, Hawthorne here reveals how the anxiety of potentially contracting a disease can carry its own mental toll. He would embark on his northern excursion in September that year, traveling through New Hampshire, Vermont, and upstate New York, but we know that the effect of pandemic uncertainty still weighed on him. Writing to his sister Elizabeth on September 16 from Burlington, Vermont, he acknowledges, “I might be in Canada tomorrow if I thought proper, but I have no sort of intention of going there. I see that there have been five new cases of the Cholera in Boston, and shall be impatient for further intelligence, which is very slow in getting to this part of the world” (Letters, 1813–1843 226).

Hawthorne’s brush with the 1832 cholera pandemic may have been relatively minor, but its influence can be seen in the stories he produced over the next several years. In particular, two tales from the late 1830s (and collected in the 1842 edition of Twice-Told Tales) highlight his fascination with sickness as a literary motif. One of these is “Edward Fane’s Rosebud,” an 1837 story about the Widow Toothaker, “a nurse of great repute, who has breathed the atmosphere of the sick-chambers and dying-breaths, these forty years” (Twice-Told Tales 464).12 Earlier in life, while she cares for her ill husband, her house is likened to a “tomb,” and we learn that she “had dwelt in a sick-chamber, and been the companion of a half-dead wretch, till she could scarcely breathe in a free air, and felt ill at ease with the healthy and happy” (467, 468). The horror of this tale reaches its apex upon the declaration that, eventually, “Disease itself had won the Rosebud for a bride” (469); her accumulated knowledge over the years is a catalog of contagious illness:

What a history she might record of the great sicknesses, in which she has gone hand in hand with the exterminating angel! She remembers when the small-pox hoisted a red banner on almost every house along the street. She has witnessed when the typhus fever swept off a whole household, young and old, all but a lonely mother, who vainly shrieked to follow her last loved one. Where would be Death’s triumph, if none
lived to weep! She can speak of strange maladies that have broken out, as if spontaneously, but were found to have been imported from foreign lands, with rich silks and other merchandise, the costliest portion of the cargo. And once, she recollects, the people died of what was considered a new pestilence, till the doctors traced it to the ancient grave of a young girl, who thus caused many deaths a hundred years after her own burial. Strange that such black mischief should lurk in a maiden's grave! (469–70)

Here, as the narrator describes the long, grim history witnessed by Nurse Toothaker in her lifetime devoted to caring for the sick, we can see Hawthorne testing the literary possibilities of illness as a thematic topic for a tale. Using illness for its terrifying effect, he also clearly evokes the discourse of his day when he connects the dangers of an open (or opened) grave with the transmission of disease.

Hawthorne develops these connections more fully in a tale published the following year, “Lady Eleanore’s Mantle.” Set in early 1700s Massachusetts, it tells the story of the haughty Lady Eleanore Rochcliffe, an emigrant from England, who “seeks to place herself above the sympathies of our common nature,” and whose downfall is connected with her wearing an embroidered mantle that turns out to be infected with smallpox, transmitted by the dying woman who made it (Twice-Told Tales 276). As the story’s narrator describes the panic that arose from the spread of the smallpox, he nods toward the recent cholera pandemic and the fear it created:

We cannot estimate the affright which this plague [smallpox] inspired of yore, by contemplating it as the fangless monster of the present day. We must remember, rather, with what awe we watched the gigantic footsteps of the Asiatic cholera, striding from shore to shore of the Atlantic and marching like Destiny upon cities far remote, which flight had already half depopulated. There is no other fear so horrible and unhumanizing, as that which makes man dread to breathe heaven's vital air, lest it be poison, or to grasp the hand of a brother or friend, lest the grip of the pestilence should clutch him. Such was the dismay that now followed in the track of the disease, or ran before it throughout the town. Graves were hastily dug, and the pestilential relics, as hastily covered, because the dead were enemies of the living, and strove to draw them headlong, as it were, into their own dismal pit. (283)
Eleanore Rochcliffe's hubris "had evoked a fiend" in the form of smallpox (284); and to fully appreciate the "affright" that it caused, the narrator asks readers to remember the recent "awe" and the "horrible and unhumanizing" fear that accompanied the cholera as it "str[ode] from shore to shore." Moreover, as Hawthorne builds the effect, his narrator reminds us that, in the context of "pestilence" and "disease," "the dead were enemies of the living"—thereby connecting once more the fear of contagion and the desperate need to dig graves.

A decade and a half after the 1832 pandemic, during Hawthorne's years toiling in the Salem Custom House, and just prior to his shift to writing novels, the concerns about corpses in crowded cities and proper burial remained. In fact, Boston Mayor Josiah Quincy, Jr., aware of the ongoing problem, pleaded for the public good in his 1847 inaugural address: "There are reasons connected both with health and the natural feelings of man that have caused almost all large cities to forbid interments within their limits" (qtd. in City of Boston 16). Similarly, two years later, in 1849, newly elected Boston Mayor John Bigelow gave an address that also highlighted the public health concerns of insufficient burial grounds: "Making all allowances for interments in Mount Auburn," he said, and other suburban cemeteries, there cannot be much less than two thousand human bodies annually consigned to their rest within the boundaries of Boston,—all deposited in tombs. Such an amount, of accumulating decomposition cannot but tend, in some degree, to impair the purity of the atmosphere; and the evil, as our population increases, will daily become more serious. (qtd. in City of Boston 17)

We should note that Bigelow addressed these worries knowing that cholera was, once again, knocking on New England's door. The disease had made its way across Asia and Europe in 1848, and in December, the first cases had been reported in New York City and New Orleans. It was only a matter of time, it seemed, before the outbreak spread once more through the states.

This second cholera pandemic did rage throughout the United States in 1849, and it crossed the land following trade routes in the east and throughout the interior of the country, once again leaving death, disaster, and fear in its wake. As before, it hit New York City hard. The "city seemed unable to bury its own dead," Rosenberg writes. "Bodies might lie for hours, in some cases for days, in the streets before they were started on their way to
Potter's Field” (112). In the early winter months, infection rates were relatively mild, but as the seasons warmed, the pace of the cholera picked up. It seemed to be the same story, all over again.

Notably, that summer of 1849, when the pandemic flared, was also a time that would change the direction of Hawthorne's life and career. Hawthorne's tenure at the Salem Custom House ended abruptly on June 8, when he received news that he was fired. He had recently been spending time in Boston, where Sophia and the children were staying while young Julian and Una recovered from a frightful bout with scarlet fever.13 Meanwhile, the cholera pandemic was accelerating. In Boston, infection rates were relatively low, but conditions had worsened enough that a temporary hospital was opened on June 29 (“Cholera” 142). A month later, at the peak of the summer heat, Hawthorne was dealt another blow: on July 31, his mother, whose health had been deteriorating, passed away—which he describes as “the darkest hour I ever lived” (American Notebooks 429). Reeling from the loss of both a steady income and an anchoring parent (and grandmother), the Hawthornes began considering options for their future. Around the country, cholera was continuing its destructive path. That same July, as the Hawthornes faced their own loss, residents were fleeing New York City as churches, theaters, and other businesses began to shut down, following rising infection rates.14 Within a month, the Hawthornes themselves had begun exploring plans to leave the life of the city behind them, and by September—the month in which young Julian made the comment about moldy houses—Hawthorne had returned to fiction writing, and work on The Scarlet Letter was underway.

Despite the unmistakable pervasiveness of the cholera pandemic in 1849, little direct mention of it turns up in Hawthorne's subsequent writing.15 One curious reference appears in “The Custom-House” sketch, which introduces The Scarlet Letter and was written sometime in late 1849 or early 1850. Writing about the “enervating” effect of Custom-House work, Hawthorne describes the tendency for such officers to wish for a return to their positions, once out of office. “Conscious of his own infirmity,” he writes, the Custom-House officer’s “pervading and continual hope—a hallucination which . . . haunts him while he lives, and, I fancy, like the convulsive throes of the cholera, torments him for a brief space after death—is, that finally, and in no long time, by some happy coincidence of circumstances, he shall be restored to office” (The Scarlet Letter 39). His use of cholera here is solely figurative; in The House of the Seven Gables, in contrast, Hawthorne
employs cholera literally, as a disease. It is a minor detail, yet one that has an outsized impact on the plot. Judge Pyncheon, we are told at the beginning of the tale, has “a single surviving son, who was now traveling in Europe” (24). This would-be heir to the Pyncheon estate is written out of the story without ever making an entrance. “Unknowingly, [Judge Pyncheon] was a childless man,” we learn at the novel’s conclusion. “Hardly a week after his decease, one of the Cunard steamers brought intelligence of the death, by cholera, of Judge Pyncheon’s son, just at the point of embarkation for his native land” (312–13). Small as it is, by this authorial stroke, Hawthorne thus makes cholera the final piece that precipitates the Pyncheon inheritance into the lives of Hepzibah, Clifford, and Phoebe.

Because the cholera pandemics figure only at the margins and in the background of Hawthorne’s writing of this era, I want to note a contemporary literary example that moves in the other direction, not obliquely invoking the horrors of the disease, as Hawthorne does, but instead foregrounding them. In 1850—the year that The Scarlet Letter was published, and the year that Hawthorne wrote The House of the Seven Gables—a curious little volume was published in Boston under the title The Cholera-Fiend; or The Plague Spreaders of New York, A Mysterious Tale of the Pestilence in 1849. Written by Charles E. Averill, this slender gothic novella—entirely unknown today—reads like a melodrama in its theatricality, staginess, over-the-top characterizations, and wild plot. It captures, with emphatic flourishes, the anxieties and fears about cholera and burial in this era. In brief, The Cholera-Fiend tells the story of three stock villains (a corrupt doctor, a wicked minister, and a “deformed hunchback”) who seek to use the return of cholera to New York (in 1849) to effect their schemes. In the story, when indications suggest that cholera will hit New York only lightly, unlike in 1832, their evil plot becomes evident: “[I]f the cholera will not come to town of its own accord, then we must find a way to force it here,” one of them says (19). Sneaking into the graveyards at night, they systematically open hundreds of tombs, and in the description that Averill provides, we see a magnificently overwrought depiction of the emotionally charged public health rhetoric of the day, one worth reprinting at length here:

Alas! from these hundred yawning and open-jawed sepulchers, the deadly breath of the Charnel House was bursting its imprisoned bounds, and mixing with the pure night-breeze that cooled the sleeping city, far and near! Yes—the deadly breath of the Charnel House!
Forth—forth into the mighty town, the silent and slumbering town, poisoning the fresh sweet air, swept the revolting exhalations of the sepulchres.

Forth from the rumbling coffins,—forth from the hollow skulls, were stealing the noisome vapors, born of the mouldering bones, begotten of the rotten flesh!

The *pestilential effluvia* had begun its appointed task; was doing its awful work!

Half a million of human beings, five hundred thousand sleepers, were respiring the venomous atmosphere, which enwraps the putrid corpse and corrupts the crumbling dead!

Had they visions of Plague and Pestilence? Were their dreams of—The *Cholera*? (74; emphases in original)

Here, in Averill's highly stylized, exaggerated rendering, we find all the threads of this contemporaneous public health discourse—fear of miasma, decay, improper burial, and pestilential cholera—woven together and used for a thrilling fictional effect.

**CONCLUSIONS: HAWTHORNE AND THE PYNCHEONS HEAD TO THE COUNTRYSIDE**

*The Cholera-Fiend* was published the same year that Hawthorne wrote *The House of the Seven Gables*, and while I have found no direct evidence that Hawthorne himself read the novel, it is entirely possible (and perhaps even likely) that it had crossed his path. That said, even if he had not encountered Averill's book, Hawthorne would have known well the charged rhetoric about burial, health, and cholera that *The Cholera-Fiend* employs—for it is the same language of the public health discourse of his day, and it is the same discourse that permeates the imagery and symbolism in *The House of the Seven Gables* itself. In short, the cholera outbreaks of 1832 and 1849 exacerbated a series of ongoing public health crises in urban areas arising from devastatingly poor sanitation and the desperate need for more sanitary burial practices. With widespread worries about the deleterious health effects caused by decaying corpses, laws prohibiting the burial of bodies within urban centers were slowly enacted, and a wider cultural shift toward the romantic, rural garden cemeteries followed suit. As Meyer notes, during
his lifetime Hawthorne “would witness firsthand, and to a certain degree incorporate within his works, what was without doubt the most important historical shift ever to occur in American material commemoration” (1). While the body of Hawthorne’s work rarely mentions cholera, the topics of sickness and disease are recurrent ones, sometimes used literally and often used figuratively.

It is notable, too, that following the fever pitch of the 1849 cholera outbreak, Hawthorne and his family left Salem, in May 1850, for the comparatively rural Lenox, in western Massachusetts, where he composed The House of the Seven Gables that fall and winter. With the loss of his job and his mother, much had changed in Hawthorne’s life in the summer of 1849, and I do not intend to suggest that cholera was the sole or even primary reason for their move. But it is interesting that on August 8, 1849—at the peak of the pandemic—the recently fired Hawthorne wrote to his brother-in-law Horace Mann about his intent to begin writing again, mentioning, “I mean, as soon as possible—that is to say, as soon as I can find a cheap, pleasant, and healthy residence—to remove into the country, and bid farewell forever to this abominable city” (Letters, 1843–1853 293). On August 22, a letter to John Jay reveals that Hawthorne is in “a very unsettled condition” and that he is “looking about me for a country or sea-shore residence, for the sake of economy and quiet” (Letters, 1843–1853 286). Soon after, on September 2, Sophia Hawthorne similarly wrote of their desired move: “The prospect of ‘mountainous air’ . . . already vivifies our blood. To give up the ocean caused a rather stifling sensation; but I have become used to the idea of mountains now,—the next best breath” (qtd. in J. Hawthorne 1: 353). It was during this September, too, that Hawthorne noted Julian’s comment about the moldy house in Lenox. It was not until the following May that the Hawthornes finally moved, but their plans to leave the urban seaport of Salem were set in motion in the midst of a pandemic.18

As The House of the Seven Gables ends, the conflicts are at last resolved when Judge Pyncheon dies inside the house, and, inheriting his estate, Phoebe relocates with Holgrave, Hepzibah, and Clifford to the Judge’s rural country home, where they are happy and ostensibly safe from the evils of the house and the city of Salem. As the plot threads coalesce, we are left with the iconic image of the body of the Judge, inside the house. As Clifford remembers, “[W]henever my thoughts recur to this seven-gabled mansion . . . immediately, I have a vision or image of an elderly man, of remarkable
stern countenance, sitting in an oaken elbow-chair, dead, stone-dead, with an ugly flow of blood upon his shirt-bosom. Dead, but with open eyes! He taints the whole house, as I remember it. I could never flourish there, nor be happy, nor do nor enjoy what God meant me to do and enjoy!” (261).

In the “Governor Pyncheon” chapter that follows Clifford's declaration, the narrator tauntingly muses over the unmoving body of the dead Judge. Recoiling at the grotesque image of “a fly . . . creeping over the bridge of his nose, towards the would-be magistrate’s wide open eyes,” the narrator retreats from the room and once again reiterates the now-familiar motif of a dead body infecting the house: “We breathe more freely,” the chapter concludes, “emerging from Judge Pyncheon’s [dead] presence into the street before the seven gables” (283).

In her study of doctors in nineteenth-century American literature, Stephanie P. Browner notes that in “imagining a body that is a strange mix of purity and carnality, the virginal and the violated, Hawthorne deploys both medical and gothic tropes to imagine an interiority—psychological and somatic—that is not idealized but diseased, morbid, dark, smelly, thrilling, and horrible” (69). For him, she observes, modern medicine had uncovered a “new pathology” that enabled him to see a “deep, alluring, and profoundly untranscendent body that was a suitable house for an interiority more complicated than suggest by cliched notions of a ‘pure soul within’” (69).19 In a larger context, Maureen Tuthill has argued that writers of the early American novel “employed a simple medical aesthetic that was implicitly understood by their readers: Good health secured one’s place in society while illness quite often erased it” (4). Moreover, she notes, “[c]haracters who have the ‘glow of health’ in these novels tend to enjoy wealth and prestige; others become sick because they are burdened by poverty and debt or have made bad decisions that have jeopardized their status. Bodies that waste away, faint, or literally disappear off the pages of America’s first fiction are resisting the conditions that ail them; as they plead for their right to exist, they draw attention to the injustice, apathy, and greed that afflict them” (5).20 Such analyses as these point to important ways in which we might consider the sick bodies—and the corpses—that recur in The House of the Seven Gables. But as I have emphasized in this essay, we can find an additional way of understanding the novel’s narrative arc by noting the characters’ wholesale retreat from the old, moldering, decaying house with—literally—a body in it. Fleeing the corpse, they seek solace in a rural retreat away from the cloistered and claustrophobic building and its stifling, corrupting air.
This narrative movement makes additional sense when read in the context of the growing awareness in the 1830s and 1840s of the need for public health reform, particularly in terms of sanitation, as well as the widespread reassessment of where a community should bury its dead. And, much to our chagrin, such a movement is all too familiar in our own contemporary moment of the coronavirus pandemic, which has disrupted our lives for over a year now. Most of us recall all too well the flight from urban centers when it was first reported that SARS-CoV-2 had arrived in the United States in 2020, as well as the horror stories of conditions in hospitals and morgues, especially in the early months—and as illustrated in the headlines that serve as the epigraph to this essay. So, when fiction meets fact, and the narrative movement of The House of the Seven Gables mirrors Hawthorne’s own retreat from urban Salem to rural Lenox following a major pandemic, something about that decision to relocate rings oddly familiar. Hawthorne, as we well know, had an almost obsessive interest in the New England past, and one of his recurring literary preoccupations is the weight of the past and its persistent influence on the present. But in its engagement with the wider contemporaneous discourse about anxieties related to burial, public health, and urban spaces, Hawthorne’s The House of the Seven Gables also offers a rich model for scholars to explore the complexities of how urban ecologies were conceptualized and experienced in the mid-nineteenth century.

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**NOTES**

1. Waples writes at length about what she calls the “miasmatic imagination” in early national US literature and history. Her useful study focuses largely on Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe, but her ideas could readily apply to Hawthorne as well.

2. Although her focus is not on disease, D’Amore includes an insightful chapter on Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*. 

4. Gallows Hill, the site of the executions (and burial) during the Salem witchcraft trials, also figures prominently in "Alice Doane's Appeal," and it appears in other Hawthorne stories, too.

5. In 1800, Boston's population was almost 25,000. By 1830, it had reached 61,000; and by 1850, it was over 136,000. These numbers are taken from The City Upon a Hill (Kennedy 261).

6. It is worth noting that cremation was not a viable alternative to earth burial until at least the 1870s, when the first "viable enclosed crematory" was unveiled in Vienna by Italian professor Ludovico Brunetti (Sloane 143). Moreover, in early America there was a long-standing opposition to cremation that arose from religious beliefs.

7. An informative and lengthy discussion of the historical changes in burial practices and related controversies in the northeast United States in the nineteenth century can be found in the City of Boston's 1879 "Report of the Joint Special Committee on Intramural Interments" (Document 96–1879).

8. See Coffin's Remarks on the Dangers and Duties of Sepulture for an example of how this controversy played out in pamphlets and city documents.

9. One of the best histories of the nineteenth-century cholera pandemics in the United States is Rosenberg's The Cholera Years, which I draw from extensively in this essay.

10. Chambers notes that, of New York City's population of 220,000, over 70,000 left the city during the 1832 pandemic (63).

11. The New England urban areas were largely spared the devastation that New York experienced, according to Chambers, in part because of their efforts to clean up cities in advance of the disease (52).

12. While "Edward Fane's Rosebud" was first published in the September 1837 issue of the Knickerbocker, or New-York Monthly Magazine, a seed for it can be found in Hawthorne's notebooks as early as September 1835: "A change from a gay young girl to an old woman... till she becomes a lover of sick-chambers, taking pleasure in receiving dying breaths and in laying out the dead" (American Notebooks 10).

13. Hawthorne notes his worry about his children's health in a June 5 letter to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, just days before he is fired from the Custom House (Letters, 1843–1853 271).


15. The only published scholarship I have located that specifically focuses on Hawthorne's writing and cholera is Guzel's "The Cultural Discourse of a Cholera Pandemic," which oddly focuses on "The Birthmark" and "Rappaccini's Daughter" rather than the few Hawthorne works that actually mention cholera.
16. Meyer later clarifies that Hawthorne “experienced first hand the transition from village graveyard to rural cemetery as the dominant funerary landscape in America, and often these changes are woven into the fabric of the American Notebooks and certain of his literary works” (23).

17. Hawthorne had begun writing The House of the Seven Gables by August 1850, and he finished it the following January, when he sent the completed manuscript to his publisher (House of the Seven Gables xvi–xviii).

18. As it turned out, Lenox and the Berkshires did not prove as idyllic as the Hawthornes might have hoped. Certainly, it was a productive period for Hawthorne in terms of writing, and he made important connections and friendships there (most notably with Herman Melville); however, by September the following year, Hawthorne was “sick to death of Berkshire” and looking to move once again “near the sea-coast” (Letters, 1843–1853 486). By November 1851, the family had settled temporarily in West Newton outside Boston, where Sophia’s sister Mary Mann lived, until they could find more permanent housing. Nevertheless, my point is that in the summer of 1850, the Hawthornes’ move from urban to rural is mirrored in the conclusion of The House of the Seven Gables, as well as in the general exoduses from the cities during the pandemic of the previous year.

19. Browner’s study focuses in part on “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” which she argues reveals “Hawthorne’s deepening sense of bodies”; in particular, she claims that “in the pathologized body he found a compelling image of a luxuriant and putrefying body that may well have spoken to a man who was now a father and a husband” (69).

20. Tuthill focuses her excellent analysis on the early national period at the end of the eighteenth century, but her concept in this passage rings true in the context of Hawthorne’s work, and The House of the Seven Gables in particular.

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