



**THE BLITHEDALE  
ROMANCE**



**BY  
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE**

**With an Introduction by  
ANNETTE KOLODNY**

**PENGUIN BOOKS**





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# Table of Contents

[PENGUINCLASSICS](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Introduction](#)

[PREFACE](#)

[THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

---

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[NOTES](#)

## THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE (1804-1864) was born in Salem, Massachusetts, where, after his graduation from Bowdoin College in Maine, he wrote the bulk of his masterful tales of American colonial history, many of which were collected in his *Twice-told Tales* (1837). In 1839 and 1840 Hawthorne worked in the Boston Customs House, then spent most of 1841 at the experimental community of Brook Farm. After his marriage to Sophia Peabody, he settled in the “Old Manse” in Concord; there, between 1842 and 1845, he wrote most of the tales gathered in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846). His career as a novelist began with *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), whose famous preface recalls his 1846-1849 service in “The Custom-House” of Salem. *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) followed in rapid succession. After a third political appointment—this time as American Consul in Liverpool, England, from 1853 to 1857—Hawthorne’s life was marked by the publication of *The Marble Faun* (1860) but also by a sad inability to complete several more long romances. His health surely accounts for some of this. But as the north and south plunged into Civil War, the specter of national fratricide may have finally eroded Hawthorne’s ability to create imaginative or moral sense out of America’s now ambiguous and very bloody present history.

ANNETTE KOLODNY is the author of *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History*, *American Life and Letters* and *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630- 1860*, as well as many articles on American culture and American literary history that have appeared in various journals and essay collections. Following her years as Dean of the College of Humanities at the University of Arizona, she published *Failing the Future: A Dean Looks at Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century*. Her several honors and awards include the Florence Howe Prize for Feminist Literary Criticism, the Jay B. Hubbell Medal for Distinguished Scholarship in American Literary Studies, the Western Literature Association’s Distinguished Achievement Award, and designation as an Honored Scholar by the Early American Literature Division of the Modern Language Association.

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# INTRODUCTION

In April of 1841, braving leaden skies and a threatening snowstorm, Nathaniel Hawthorne walked the nine miles from Boston to an isolated farmhouse on the Dedham-Watertown Road in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. His destination was Brook Farm, an experimental socialist community envisioned by its founders as “a society of liberal, intelligent and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more wholesome and simple life than can be led amidst the pressures of our competitive institutions.” Here Hawthorne hoped to find a secure home for himself and his fiancée, Sophia Peabody of Salem, as well as a haven in which to concentrate on his writing. He was almost thirty-seven years old. And although he had long ago determined to earn his living by his pen, he had as yet produced one slight novel (*Fanshawe: A Tale*, published anonymously at his own expense in 1828), a collection of previously published tales and sketches (*Twice-Told Tales*, 1837), and an assemblage of New England historical tales for children (*Grandfather’s Chair*, 1841). In the spring of 1841, then, having quit his job as the measurer of salt and coal at the Boston Custom House because it interfered with his writing, he was eager to get on both with his life and with his chosen life’s work.

Ten years later, in the summer of 1851, Hawthorne decided to “take the Community for a subject of his writing.” He was now an established writer, with *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), and two successful collections of tales and sketches to his credit. Brook Farm was no more. Financial difficulties had plagued it from its inception and, after a devastating fire in 1846, the entire experiment was abandoned in the spring of 1847.

Hawthorne himself, moreover, had only briefly been a participant in the Brook Farm experiment. Determined, along with the others, to give “my best efforts” to the enterprise, he found himself putting in eight- and ten-hour days to ensure the farm’s initial solvency. This was hardly the three-hour workday that the founders of the little community had anticipated. Soon after his arrival, therefore, Hawthorne admitted in a letter to a friend that the long hours in the barn and out in the fields had resulted in “the sacrifice of some objects that I had hoped to accomplish.” By June he was complaining in letters to Sophia that “this present life of mine gives me an antipathy to pen and ink even more than my Custom-House experience did.” A brief respite from the farm in September led him persuaded that his “life there was an unnatural and unsuitable” one for him. And, upon returning to Brook Farm later that month, he became a paying “boarder,” rather than a workingman, but still found himself unable to write. “I have not the sense of perfect seclusion, which has always been essential to my power of producing anything,” he explained to Sophia. It was not that anyone actually intruded upon his privacy, he continued. It was that in the excited atmosphere of the Brook Farm experiment, Hawthorne found he could not “but partake of the ferment around him.”

Finally, in November 1841, Hawthorne left Brook Farm for good; and in October of the next year he resigned as an Associate of the Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education (suing to recover his initial investment). Now quit of the cows and the manure piles (which he referred to as “the good mine” in his letters to Sophia), Hawthorne got married in Boston on July 9, 1842, settled into a happy and ordered domesticity in the Old Manse in Concord, Massachusetts, and began composing the tales and sketches that would be collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846). There, in the antiquated “Manse” built in 1765 by the grandfather of his Concord neighbor, Ralph Waldo Emerson—and not

among the communitarians along the Charles River—Hawthorne at last found the undisturbed opportunity, as he confided to his notebook, “to take pen in hand.”

The man who composed the romance of *Blithedale* still retained friendships with many of those earlier associated with Brook Farm. And he still required a quiet, secluded environment in which to work. But the Nathaniel Hawthorne who now lived with his wife and three children in a rented cottage in West Newton, Massachusetts, enjoyed a substantial literary reputation, both in England and in the United States. If he could not boast of riches from his work, his wife at least could boast of accolades. In a letter to her sister-in-law, she proudly noted that the great English poet Robert Browning considered Hawthorne “the finest genius that has appeared in English literature for many years.”

In keeping with its author’s reputation, contemporary reviews of *The Blithedale Romance* hailed it as the work of a man of unquestioned literary genius. “Unmistakably the finest production of genius in either hemisphere, for this quarter at least,” sang a notice in England’s *Westminster Review* (probably written by the English novelist George Eliot).

Not surprisingly, on both sides of the Atlantic, reviewers seized upon the book’s Brook Farm associations and connected these with the fact that *The Blithedale Romance* was the first of Hawthorne’s longer fictions to employ a first-person narrator. The conclusion repeatedly drawn from these observations was that the romance of 1852 offered itself as a barely disguised autobiographical account of the author’s brief sojourn at Brook Farm and, with that, Hawthorne’s final judgment on the experiment itself. “Certainly,” argued the reviewer for the *Christian Examiner*, “one has reason to believe that Mr. Hawthorne is presenting in these pages a story, which ... is essentially a delineation of life and character as presented at ‘Brook Farm.’ ”

In support of these views, the book reviewers of 1852—and literary critics ever since—pointed to parallels between Hawthorne’s characters and various individuals linked with Brook Farm. The drowned Zenobia was identified with the women’s rights advocate Margaret Fuller, who had herself drowned in a shipwreck just two years before. Hollingsworth was said to resemble the lecturer and social reformer Orestes Brownson or George Ripley, Brook Farm’s founder. And Miles Coverdale, the first-person narrator, was taken as a projection of the author, voicing the attitudes through which “Mr. Hawthorne would endeavor covertly to show the futility of the enterprise in whose favor he was once enlisted.” Those who read the story through a grid of real-world antecedents thus tended to see the whole as an unmediated indictment of socialism and proof, as one English reviewer phrased it, that “Mr. Hawthorne is not a disciple of that school of human perfectibility which has given rise to plans of pantisocracy and similar Arcadias.”

But there were also those who cautioned against so narrowly autobiographical a reading. Orestes Brownson, who had known many of the Brook Farm participants and sent his son there for schooling, reviewed *The Blithedale Romance* as a story “connected with some of our personal friends.” Yet he ended by advising readers that “very little of the actual persons engaged in it, or of the actual going on at Brook Farm” were to be found in its pages. Similarly, while some reviewers persisted in seeing Miles Coverdale as at least “a partial presentment of the author’s own person,” others followed the view of Edwin Percy Whipple, who treated Coverdale as just another invented character. Writing for *Graham’s Magazine* in September 1852, Whipple emphasized the ambiguous nature of this narrator, pointing out that as we read the novel, we become joint watchers with Miles himself, and sometimes find ourselves disagreeing with him in his interpretation of an act or expression of the persons he is observing.”

Of course, more was at stake in these debates than simply the proper reading of the late Hawthorne fiction. Depending on a reviewer's own ideological commitments, it could matter a great deal whether the reigning master of American romance intended to satirize socialism or altogether condemn efforts at societal improvement. These were, after all, the abiding concerns of the two decades preceding the Civil War—decades that saw a proliferation of experimental socialist communities and increasingly organized public activism directed at correcting a host of perceived social ills.

The great financial Panic of 1837 had shut banks, closed off credit, and caused many small farmers to lose their holdings. In the ensuing depression, which lasted into the 1840s, thousands of acres in Hawthorne's native New England were abandoned or were sold off as summer resorts for wealthy industrialists from Boston and New York. A newly dispossessed rural population moved into the cities and factory towns, joining there with recently arrived European immigrants to form an underclass of urban poor. By the 1840s, the sight of small children begging on the streets of major urban centers was no longer unusual. At the same time, a rapidly developing industrialization made possible by a technology forged of steam and iron was changing the face of what had formerly been a self-consciously agrarian nation. While the bulk of the population remained on the land, by the 1840s there was a demonstrable centripetal movement toward the town, the city, and the factory. Although the image had largely been an illusion, the nation's image of itself as a land of independent yeoman farmers was quickly being eroded by the reality of a ruthless market economy and the exploitation of wage laborers in the cities and factory towns.

In response, Americans were gripped by a wave of antiurbanism that lasted until the eve of the Civil War. The unprecedented accumulation of capital in the hands of a powerful few, the new technology, city tenements, overcrowded factory towns, and callous public institutions were all blamed as the causes of urban poverty, increased crime, and general moral decay. Private societies and philanthropic organizations sprang up to attempt the rehabilitation of criminals, the protection of prostitutes, and the care of orphans and paupers—though no group had resources adequate to the task. Those who despaired of such ameliorative measures took upon themselves more ambitious tasks for the reformation of society. All across the country, independent communities—generally organized around agriculture rather than manufacturing—were formed according to various idealistic blueprints for social and economic harmony. Brook Farm was only one such experiment.

Adding to—indeed, probably central to—the feverish political pitch of the antebellum decades was the increasing agitation on behalf of the country's two largest disenfranchised groups: blacks and women. The first women's rights convention was held at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. And, in a last-ditch effort to placate southern secessionists, Congress passed the notorious Compromise of 1850 with its more severe fugitive slave act. Increasingly, antislavery activists and women's rights advocates made common cause, demanding that the nation live up to its democratic pretensions.

The other great public debate to which Hawthorne only glancingly alludes was the Indian Question. Ever since the forcible removal of the Cherokee from their lands in Georgia in 1838, just three years before Hawthorne joined the Brook Farm community, government mistreatment of the Indians had repeatedly elicited protests from many of Hawthorne's friends and acquaintances, including Emerson and Margaret Fuller. Within the novel, the disappearance of Indian presence is first replicated symbolically when the Blithedaleers form a committee to choose a name for the fledgling community. But the result is the erasure of "the old Indian name of the premises" because "it chanced to be

harsh, ill-connected, and interminable word.” A second reference attaches to the rock known as “Eliot’s pulpit.” By tradition, this is the place where, two hundred years earlier, the Puritan minister John Eliot had preached to members of the local Narragansett tribe in their own tongue. By the time the Blithedale foursome visits Eliot’s pulpit, however, the area remains still “a wild tract of woodland,” but no wigwams, no Indian “posterity” are any longer in sight. In both instances Hawthorne appears to subscribe to the popular (but erroneous) nineteenth-century trope of the Vanishing Indian.

To be sure, little of the political turmoil of the period directly made its way into Hawthorne’s narrative. But it was, nonetheless, that very turmoil which gave rise to experiments like his fictional Blithedale, just as it was the issues of these decades which helped to create recognizable characters like a philanthropist like Hollingsworth, an intellectual feminist like Zenobia, and a poor, exploited seamstress like Priscilla. Those same social and economic tensions may even account for much of nineteenth-century America’s fascination with mesmerism and clairvoyance, the nation believing that if it could not escape into some utopian agrarian past, then at least it might receive saving messages from what one character in the novel denominates “futuraity.”

To understand how *The Blithedale Romance* was received in its own time, then, we must remember that, often enough, those who reviewed the novel held decided opinions both on the problems of the day and on the solutions advanced to resolve them. Thus one reviewer cried foul because he felt that Hawthorne (through Coverdale’s voice) had unfairly “made [socialism] responsible for consequences which it utterly condemned, and tried, at least, to remedy” Another, with a different political cast of mind, applauded the story for exposing “the vanity and selfishness which underlie the seemingly worthy and benevolent purposes of [those], who engage themselves in ... schemes of politico-moral reformation.

These disagreements have persisted even into our own century. The anti-Communist witch-hunts of the 1950s led critics to wonder, yet again, what lessons Hawthorne had gleaned from his singular exposure to homegrown agrarian socialism. The civil rights and anti—Vietnam War movements of the 1960s encouraged other critics to examine Hawthorne’s fictional response to organized efforts at social reform. And the renewed interest in communes which marked the 1960s, the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s, along with a growing concern for the environment that began in the 1970s and continues into the twenty-first century—all these have repeatedly made *The Blithedale Romance* a peculiarly timely text. As in the nineteenth century, however, the prior political sympathies of many critics have continued to influence their reading of the novel. As a result, twenty-first century critics still argue over the book’s autobiographical authenticity in an effort to get at Hawthorne’s judgment of Brook Farm. No discussion is complete without some analysis of Hawthorne’s relationship to his narrator, Miles Coverdale.

Before entering into these debates—and they are, after all, impossible to ignore—we should try to ascertain what Hawthorne thought he was doing as he composed his third major romance.

## II

On July 24, 1851, in a letter to his friend William B. Pike, Hawthorne speculated that, “When I write another romance, I shall take the Community for a subject, and shall give some of my experiences and

observations at Brook Farm.” Presumably with that in mind, he borrowed from one of his previous Brook Farm associates “two or three volumes of Fourier’s works ... with a view to my next Romance.” In that act, he was already veering from his determination to delineate his own “experiences and observations.” For, during its early years and while Hawthorne was in residence, Brook Farm remained a private cooperative organized as a joint stock company, its members attempting to support themselves by means of the school and the farm they ran. Not until 1844, amid much argument, did Brook Farm reorganize itself according to the principles of the French social theorist Charles Fourier. Of course, in the popular imagination, it was forever after associated with Fourierism, in part because of the journal published there, devoted to the dissemination of Fourier’s theories. And it may have been to this popular image that Hawthorne was now inclining.

By the time he had finished his writing, however, Hawthorne seemed no longer certain that “the Community,” by itself, constituted the central interest of his story. The manuscript that he sent on May 2, 1852, to his friend, the literary critic Edwin Percy Whipple (later his most astute reviewer) had “Hollingsworth: a Romance” on the title page. In the covering letter to Whipple, Hawthorne suggested other titles, none of which pleased him, and he hoped that “just the thing” would “pop in [Whipple’s] mind.” Whipple’s reply no longer exists, so we cannot know whether his remarks influenced the choice of title. And we cannot know whether Whipple’s response to the manuscript prompted Hawthorne’s subsequent decision, as he put it in his notebook, to “modif[y] the conclusion” thereby lengthening the text by two handwritten pages. (The modification was probably the addition of the final chapter, “Miles Coverdale’s Confession.”)

The single unchanging feature in Hawthorne’s letters and notebook entries regarding the new project—and what the final choice of title absolutely confirmed—was that, whatever its real-world antecedents, Hawthorne all along knew himself to be composing a *romance*. That is, as he tried to explain in his Preface, he was composing a type of fiction in which there was to be understood “a suitable remoteness” from “every-day Probability.” Though he readily admitted to “a faint shadowing of Brook Farm” in his depiction of Blithedale, Hawthorne cautioned readers not to expect any faithful historical rendering either of the place or of the people he had known there. If readers would have an authentic account, then they should turn to the founders and supporters—the renegade Unitarian minister George Ripley; the newspaper editor Charles Anderson Dana; the music critic John Sullivan Dwight; the Unitarian minister and social reformer William Henry Channing; the Unitarian minister and educator Warren Burton; or the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, whose West Roxbury parish was attended by many Brook Farm residents. These were the men, Hawthorne felt, “give the world its history.” For himself, he had finally come to be interested in the place only as a suggestively suitable “theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel, where the creatures of his brain may play their phantasmagorical antics.”

Impressions stored in notebook entries and letters written from Brook Farm do, nonetheless, confirm Hawthorne’s assertion that he had “occasionally availed himself of his actual reminiscences” in composing this romance. Miles Coverdale’s arrival at Blithedale in the midst of a snowstorm and his subsequent illness, for example, coincide with Hawthorne’s first days at Brook Farm. So, too, the grapevines that climb to the treetops, the description of various farm chores, Coverdale’s farewell to the swine, and the woodland masquerade—all these issue from Brook Farm memories. And all this Hawthorne easily conceded. He asked only that his readers appreciate the “fictitious handling” which his experiences had been subjected, and he urged them to accept the Blithedale inhabitants as “imaginary personages.”

His pleas that the work be taken as a fiction notwithstanding, Hawthorne also seems to have anticipated readers' propensities for discovering flesh-and-blood originals behind "imaginary personages." In a playful nod at such habits, he may even have tried to confuse readers by having Coverdale receive a letter from Margaret Fuller and by having Coverdale briefly note a physical resemblance between the famous women's rights advocate and Priscilla. But readers were not so easily thrown off the trail. Successive generations have insisted on the historical Margaret Fuller (whom Hawthorne and his wife both knew) as the prototype for Zenobia—not Priscilla—even though Zenobia articulates only a debased version of the arguments put forth in Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845).

No doubt Fuller was in Hawthorne's mind as he invented Zenobia. Though never a resident at Brook Farm, she supported the venture and visited there frequently during its first year, offering evening lectures on a variety of topics. But so, too, Hawthorne was recalling Mrs. Amelia Barlow, the Brook Farm resident upon whom he modeled Zenobia's luxuriant physical features. The same is also true of Priscilla, who may have been drawn as much from "a little sempstress from Boston, about seventeen years old," the subject of a notebook entry on October 9, 1841, as from Hawthorne's firsthand encounters with friends and relatives who ardently believed in mesmerism, clairvoyance, and the many current working mediums then claiming direct communication with spiritual realms.

Hollingsworth, too, has suffered the fate of narrowed identifications. If, to be sure, he reflected something of George Ripley, the visionary responsible for the founding of Brook Farm, and something of the reformist zeal of Orestes Brownson, he also takes substance from Charles and Murray Spear, two brothers who counseled prisoners in the Boston area—neither of whom had ever had any contact with Brook Farm. But to read Hollingsworth merely as a representation of one or another of the historical personages is to thwart Hawthorne's fictional purposes.

The most troubling identification that Hawthorne anticipated derived from his unusual decision to utilize a first-person narrator. Too easily, he knew, readers would confuse Coverdale's voice with the author's and believe they were getting Hawthorne's views in Coverdale's. In that event, Coverdale's perceptions of Blithedale might be taken as Hawthorne's indictment of what still remained for him "the most romantic episode of his own life." To preempt so facile an interpretation, Hawthorne used his Preface to emphasize that his whole treatment of Brook Farm was fictitious and that, anyway, "the affair is altogether incidental to the main purpose of the Romance." This was not autobiography or a political tract, he wanted readers to understand, and he was not using Coverdale's voice to put forward either a personal history of Brook Farm or any theory or conclusion, "favorable or otherwise, in respect to Socialism."

These are not disingenuous protestations. For, as with everything he wrote, Hawthorne had simply mined the observations and ruminations collected in his notebooks and adapted these for present fictive purposes. The saloon in which Coverdale is offered old Moodie's life story makes use of a lengthy notebook entry of 1850, when Hawthorne recorded a visit to Parker's saloon in Boston. And the most dramatically rendered scene in the novel—the search for Zenobia's drowned body—is taken in parts almost verbatim, from an incident that occurred on July 9, 1845, when a nineteen-year-old schoolmistress in Concord took her life. Both, we note, postdate Hawthorne's time at Brook Farm.

Despite all the evidence that may be adduced concerning real-world models, the characters and the stories should be taken as Hawthorne wanted—that is, as "entirely fictitious." "The self-concentrated Philanthropist; the high-spirited Woman, bruising herself against the narrow limitations of her sex."



the weakly Maiden, whose tremulous nerves endow her with Sibylline attributes; the Minor Poet beginning life with strenuous aspirations, which die out with his youthful fervor—all these might have been looked for, at Brook Farm,” Hawthorne reminds us, “but, by some accident, never made the appearance there.” To understand what Hawthorne intended as “the main purpose of the Romance” therefore, we must read *The Blithedale Romance* as he enjoined: “Do not read it as if it had anything to do with Brook Farm (which essentially it has not),” he wrote to a former Brook Farm acquaintance in 1852; rather, read it “merely for its own story and characters.”

### III

The story that emerges is one of failed possibilities and multiple human betrayals. The fragile fabric of community that binds the four central characters is gradually rent as, one by one, each plays false to another and, together, they make a mockery of “the blessed state of brotherhood and sisterhood, which we aimed.” Zenobia and Hollingsworth will be seen as complicitous in returning Priscilla to her hated bondage as the Veiled Lady. Hollingsworth will be seen to spurn Zenobia after she has been disinherited and can no longer supply the funds for his philanthropic schemes. In their unconditional ardor for Hollingsworth, both Zenobia and Priscilla appear prepared to support him in destroying Blithedale so that his obsession—an edifice for the rehabilitation of criminals—may be built instead. Even Miles Coverdale, having been tenderly nursed through his illness by Hollingsworth, begins to suspect “that Hollingsworth could have watched at my bedside, with all that devoted care, only for the ulterior purpose of making me a proselyte to his views!”

The denial of these characters’ claims upon one another inheres in language that is suggestively and insistently erotic. As might be expected after the tenderness in the sickroom, the philanthropist employs charged phrasing when he implores the younger man to join him in his project to “greatly benefit mankind.” “Coverdale,” murmurs Hollingsworth, “there is not the man in this wide world whom I can love as I could you. Do not forsake me!” Acknowledging his attraction to the philanthropist, Coverdale feels the man “pulling [my heart] towards him with an almost irresistible force.” Even so, Coverdale does refuse to join in the undoing of Blithedale. In consequence, the philanthropist experiences himself forsaken, rejected by his one potential “friend of friends, forever.” And Coverdale, disappointed that “Hollingsworth failed me,” contents himself with solitude in his leafy bower because “there was no longer the man alive with whom I could think of sharing all.”

So charged is the language of this confrontation that, by the end of Chapter XV, we feel almost that we have witnessed a failed seduction. The title of the chapter, “A Crisis,” supports that impression, signaling a common nineteenth-century euphemism for sexual excitation. But the crisis between Coverdale and Hollingsworth is not the novel’s only suggestion of failed intimacy between characters of the same sex. When Priscilla first arrives at Blithedale, falling upon her knees before Zenobia, she recapitulates the familiar pose of the suitor in nineteenth-century melodrama. Only here the suitor is a sister, and the adoration she offers is not so much rejected as betrayed. The frail girl who begs that Zenobia “will let me be always near her” is, instead, bound over by Zenobia to the evil mesmerist Westervelt.

There is, of course, throughout the novel a symbolic layering of sexual possibility. We see it in the description of Priscilla’s curious purses, in Coverdale’s regressive hermitage amid the grapevines, in

the sensuous Zenobia's badinage about "the garb of Eden." The point to be made is that—as with the failed seductions—the promised sexuality is never fulfilled. In the face of Zenobia's "fine, perfectly developed figure," Coverdale will look instead to the girlish, asexual Priscilla or the wombliness of the containment of his "leafy cave," while Hollingsworth will grapple with Zenobia's body only after her death.

Generally, this insistent erotic suggestiveness serves as a counterpoint to all the other promises of Blithedale left unattempted and unconsummated. More specifically, it focuses a key element in the unfolding relationship between the principals by emphasizing the pervasive failure of "love and freeness of heartedness" between and among them. Let us understand that it is not only the betrayals between men and women that are meant to chill. In the terms in which Zenobia characterizes relations between the sexes, these are almost to be expected. But in an age when male and female spheres were more strictly demarcated than they are today, and in a period when lifelong emotional intimacy meant friends and relatives of one's own sex (rather than one's spouse), the truly chilling rupture, the "absolute torture of the breast" (as Coverdale put it) was betrayal by a putative brother or sister. Which was precisely the imagery invoked at Blithedale. "We will be brethren and sisters," Zenobia announces to Coverdale upon his arrival, "and begin our new life from day-break." Into such harmonious family imagery, the note of eroticism breaks with a jarring and disruptive chord, promising what the narrative implies cannot be realized.

Precisely that disjunction between what the Blithedalers espouse and what they actually experience gives *The Blithedale Romance* its peculiar fascination. For, the fact is, within the story told by Miles Coverdale, we see none of the benefits of the communitarians' "new arrangement of the world." Coverdale reminds us of continuing class distinctions at what is supposed to be the communal board. Since no evidence is offered to the contrary, we must assume the continuing rigid division of labor by sex—even though Zenobia had hoped that, "by-and-by, ... some of us, who wear the petticoat, will go afield, and leave the weaker brethren to take our places in the kitchen!" The almost religious fervor with which the fledgling farmers first "purposed to offer up the earnest toil of our bodies" turns out, Coverdale admits, not "quite so well as we anticipated." In contrast to the popular agrarian mythology that working the soil ennobles, he finds that farm chores "symbolized nothing, and left us mental and sluggish in the dusk of the evening." And even the hope of avoiding "selfish competition with our neighbor" falls victim to economic imperatives as Coverdale realizes "that, as regarded society at large, we stood in a position of new hostility, rather than new brotherhood."

That same disjunction between intent and realized action also raises questions about the man upon whom we are dependent for everything we know about the place. His is the voice, after all, telling us from the outset that any vision "worth the having ... is certain never to be consummated other than by a failure." Could a man who holds such a view offer a story about anything other than failure? We wonder.

## IV

Throughout *The Blithedale Romance* Hawthorne keeps us conscious of the fact that it is *always* and *only* Miles Coverdale's version of events to which we are privy. What we are offered is what Coverdale sees (or thinks he sees), knows (or thinks he knows), and chooses to tell. But not even when

we are given supposedly direct observation can we always be certain of the truth of the matter. When Coverdale tells us that he “plainly saw Zenobia take the hand of Hollingsworth,” for example, we wonder at the laggard narrator’s suddenly unobstructed view where, just a moment before, he had complained of branches hanging so low over the path “as partly to conceal the figures that we saw before.” Credulity is further strained when we are offered only speculations and impressions—when, upon returning to Blithedale, Coverdale arrives too late to witness the final confrontation between Zenobia, Hollingsworth, and Priscilla. Here we have only the narrator’s “impression that a crisis had just come and gone.” But precisely “what subjects had been discussed”—this we can never know for certain. We are left then—as so often in the text—to Coverdale’s “conjectures.”

To be sure, we start out by trusting Coverdale. The youthful Coverdale seems an evenhanded fellow possessed of a social conscience. Not credulous enough to be taken in by the contrived stage effects of the Veiled Lady, he nevertheless is willing to puzzle out her sibylline utterances. Optimistic enough to have joined the Blithedale experiment in the first place, he is not so blinded by that optimism as to remit the imperfections and disappointments of the place. Even though he admits having entertained doubts about committing himself to the enterprise, even though he displays “but little alacrity and beneficence” to old Moodie, we tend to accept the youthful protagonist as an admirable, well-meaning chap, while we respect the honesty of the “frosty bachelor” telling his story.

As the narrative progresses, however, we find ourselves increasingly impatient with some of Coverdale’s speculations. When he begins his ongoing reflection upon Zenobia’s sexuality, for example, Coverdale *intuits* that she has been married, but then adds that “the idea ... was unauthorized by any circumstance or suggestion that had made its way to my ears.” He repeats, “There was not the slightest foundation in my knowledge for any surmise of the kind.” That said, by the end of the novel Coverdale all but takes it as fact not only that Zenobia has been married, but that she was thereby irrevocably connected to Westervelt.

In retelling Moodie’s life history, Coverdale at least owns up to employing “a trifle of romantic and legendary license.” But it is no mere “trifle,” we find. Having admitted that the details of the final interview between Moodie and his daughter Zenobia are “unknown to me,” Coverdale shows himself steadfastly unwilling “to lose the picturesqueness of the situation.” And so, for the sake of narrative completeness—if not with regard to verity—Coverdale proceeds to sketch the interview “mainly from fancy.”

Somewhere in all this, most readers become something more than impatient with a story, like Mr. Foster’s “substantial sock,” apparently being forged “out of the texture of a dream.” Beyond impatience, they find themselves at odds with the conclusions that Coverdale is drawing from his limited observations and seemingly unlimited fantasies. Thus, without ever directly intruding himself into the text, Hawthorne effectively erodes the reader’s initial trust in the narrator and leads us to wonder “whether the whole affair had been anything more than the thoughts of a speculative man.” In consequence, an offhand remark of the narrator’s, an idle speculation that seems to contradict some earlier rumination, or even Coverdale’s compulsion “to detect the final fitness of incident to character and distil ... the whole morality of the performance”—any or all of these will make us ask what other interpretations of the events are possible and what manner of man is telling this story, and why.

First and foremost, both the young Coverdale at Blithedale and, ten years or more later, the frosty bachelor narrating the tale identify themselves as poets (though the narrator claims to have “given up”). The young Coverdale hopes to translate his Blithedale experience into verses and ballads, and

for that purpose he casts himself as the “one calm observer” who will watch and make sense of it all. What foils him at the time, apparently, is the irrefutable fact that “real life never arranges itself exactly like a romance.” Zenobia and Westervelt do not stop in the woodland so that they may be overheard by him. Conversations and confrontations do not often coincide with his presence. If as he lived them, then, the events at Blithedale afforded only inadequate material for the “true, strong, natural” poetry Coverdale had hoped to compose there, his later incarnation has nonetheless managed to shape from these same events one of the most haunting romances of American literature. What chaotic and multifaceted reality could not supply, imagination will. Now unfettered by daily ties to the place or to its inhabitants, and with the bonds of memory loosened, an older Miles Coverdale broods “over our recollections” and creates the romance that life would not. Memory thus fades indistinguishably into invention and “what I seem to remember,” the narrator confesses, “I yet suspect may have been patched together by my fancy, in brooding over the matter, afterwards.”

Granted, then, that Miles Coverdale has always been possessed by the artist’s compulsion to distort a moral and create a coherent narrative from the fragments of experience, a crucial question remains. Why *this* story, why *this* particular interpretation of events? As Coverdale himself suggests when he warns us against “the kind of error into which my mode of observation was calculated to lead me,” the answer lies in the psychology and emotional makeup of the man.

From the first, Coverdale stands apart from the rest of the communitarians. Somewhat vaguely agreeable “to the inexpediency of lumbering along with the old system any farther,” he admits to no great liking “for the written constitution under which our millennium had commenced.” Financially independent, he knows nothing of Priscilla’s need for protection and shelter. Wary of seeming a fool, he can harbor no vision like Hollingsworth’s. And though not unsympathetic to feminist concerns, he feels no need and proposes no plan—as does Zenobia—for setting men and women upon a different course of relation. On the contrary, his life of indolent indulgence, his evenings “at the billiard-club, the concert, the theatre,” and his “pleasant bachelor-parlor, sunny and shadowy, curtained and carpeted,” had satisfied him “well enough.” Neither personal urgency nor passionate political commitment, we quickly understand, compelled Coverdale to Blithedale.

Still, we honor his attempt to assert a social conscience in that remove, even as we note his limited capacity to do so. Congratulating himself for once having “had faith and force enough to form generous hopes of the world’s destiny—yes!—and to do what in me lay for their accomplishment,” Coverdale the narrator humorously reveals what his younger self was made of. He could act on his generous hopes “even to the extent of quitting a warm fireside, flinging away a freshly lighted cigar, and travelling ... through a drifting snow-storm.” It is a cramped capacity for heroism, at best.

As we get to know him better, we see that Coverdale’s incapacity to risk himself in action is part and parcel of a personality incapable of retaining any “mental vision in regard to all life’s better purposes.” In this, to his dismay, he finds himself aligned with the “cold scepticism” of the hated Westervelt. “A part of my own nature showed itself responsive to him,” Coverdale reluctantly admits. On one occasion, he tries to blame Westervelt’s recent conversation for bringing on his own sudden “mood of disbelief in moral beauty or heroism, and a conviction of the folly of attempting to benefit the world.” But these doubts do not issue from Coverdale only when he is in Westervelt’s presence. Repeatedly in the narrative, these are the doubts of the youthful communitarian and the “old bachelor” narrator alike.

Indeed, although the frosty bachelor sometimes distinguishes himself from the youth of his story,

the end the two are different only in degree, never in kind. To emphasize that essential continuity Hawthorne plants echoes of the younger man's exchanges with Moodie and Westervelt in the old narrator's closing rumination on joining the liberation armies of Lajos Kossuth. As he considers the Hungarian leader's 1848 rebellion against Austrian rule over Hungary, Coverdale seems to appreciate the virtue of the deed. But, as in earlier passages, he declares he can commit himself only if "the effort did not involve an unreasonable amount of trouble." Lest the reader miss this echo, Hawthorne follows it by having the old bachelor assure us that, in fact, he is not "altogether changed from the young man he once was. The point Hawthorne would have us grasp here is that Coverdale has neither learned from nor been changed fundamentally by the events at Blithedale. He has simply allowed his experience of the place to justify all his initial youthful doubts and hesitations. And he has constructed his narrative so as to confirm his present fixed belief that any vision "worth the having ... is certain never to be consummated otherwise than by a failure."

As he presents himself in his narrative, Coverdale could conjure an imaginary theater in his head to populate it with those about him, but then refuse any role other than that of passively observing a chorus. He could refuse Hollingsworth's entreaties but then fail to reveal Hollingsworth's designs on the threatened community. He could mentally undress Zenobia, but he closed his eyes against "her womanliness incarnated." Belatedly, he claims all along to have loved Priscilla, but we cannot imagine him—like Hollingsworth—calling her from the mesmerist's trance. As he harks back to these events, the distance of the years affords the narrator a clearer view of his own makeup. He now knows himself never to have numbered among those who *earnestly* believe and aid in schemes for "human progress." What he does not forthrightly acknowledge—but everywhere demonstrates—is that he is also a man who has never known either passion or passionate commitment. And yet this is the man who would chronicle passionate people in a community dedicated to idealistic notions of human improvement.

For all of Coverdale's efforts to unveil the secrets of his friends' lives, and for all his attempts to probe the import of their actions, we finally suspect that he has always been constrained in his observations by a fundamental lack of sympathy with those he would understand. As a man like Coverdale is capable of apprehending them, socialists attempting a communal farm must seem like latter-day Arcadians affecting a picnic; a dedicated philanthropist must ever appear obsessive; a feminist outrage will derive not from principle but from personal injury; and a female suicide will always take her life as a result of unrequited love for a man, rather than remorse for injuries done to her sister. Ironically, we recall this narrator's single expression of real sympathy at Blithedale—his responsiveness to the skeptic, Westervelt.

To put the matter another way: Despite his youthful flirtation with idealism, Coverdale is not an idealist. Despite his vague protestations against "false and cruel principles," he is no social reformer. And despite his consuming interest in the moral obligations of Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla to one another, he may not himself be a morally adequate man. What he does prove himself to be is a consummate creator of imagined fictions. As such, he serves Hawthorne less as a vehicle through which to explore aspects of social idealism and more as a measure of a certain kind of artist's temperament.

The notebooks in which Hawthorne jotted down his daily observations and ruminations, along with his collected private correspondence, indicate a mind not unaware of but nonetheless profoundly detached from the great social issues and political passions of his day. His brief sojourn at Brook Farm represents his only foray into reformist activism, and it appears to have been prompted as much by his desire to locate a home for himself and his wife-to-be as by any conscious commitment to the social experiment itself. Analogously, *The Blithedale Romance* stands as Hawthorne's only major work to treat contemporary social issues in anything other than symbolic rendering. But even this, he would have us understand, is intended to convey no theory or conclusion, "favorable or otherwise, in respect to Socialism."

We are not unwarranted, therefore, in seeing similarities between Coverdale and his creator, Hawthorne. Both had acquired the habit of contemplative observation, and both men apparently preferred the dramas of their private mental theaters to any protracted involvement in the social and political dramas of the antebellum decades. But these similarities are overshadowed by differences. Where Miles Coverdale could only belatedly confess his love for Priscilla, Nathaniel Hawthorne passionately wooed and then wed Sophia Peabody, enjoying unblemished domestic happiness until his death in 1864. Where Coverdale feels that his life "has come to rather an idle pass," even to the extent of his giving up poetry, Hawthorne continued to write and publish actively after his year at Brook Farm. And where Coverdale visited Europe only for diversion, Hawthorne first lived in Europe as United States Consul at Liverpool (1853-57), appointed by his former college friend President Franklin Pierce.

The most significant difference between creator and character, however, derives from the fact that Hawthorne could contemplate interpretations unavailable to a mind like Coverdale's. In what is surely the prototype for Coverdale's recovery of the drowned Zenobia, Hawthorne also once steered a boat onto a river in an effort to help recover the drowned body of a young woman suicide. His journal entry for July 1845 contains much of Coverdale's horror at the discoloration and rigidity that mark such a corpse. But where Coverdale could see in the event only the distraction of a woman's unrequited love for a man, Hawthorne perceived the nineteen-year-old Concord, Massachusetts, schoolmistress's frustration at the limitations imposed upon her by her class and sex. "She died for want of sympathy," he explained in his journal, "her family being an affectionate one, but uncultivated, and incapable of responding to her demands." Though perhaps for different reasons, a corresponding want of sympathy might also be attributed to Zenobia's life—but Coverdale never grasped that interpretive possibility.

Coverdale, then, is neither Hawthorne's spokesman nor an incarnation of his beliefs and attitudes. As a fellow artist and romancer, and as a fleeting reflection of some of Hawthorne's propensities, he did nonetheless afford Hawthorne the occasion to examine—indeed, anatomize—selected elements of the writer's own mental makeup. What we discover through the story that emerges—and possibly what Hawthorne discovered in the process of composition—is that the particular habits of mind he set up for scrutiny here necessarily shape themselves into a morally ambiguous narrative voice. Driven only by "a yearning interest to learn the upshot of all my story," and despite his many premonitions of disaster about to unfold there, Coverdale returns to Blithedale filled with "a wild exhilaration." The storyteller, in short, has overwhelmed the man of warmhearted fellow-feeling.

There is a price to be paid for such selfish withdrawals from engagement and commitment, however, and Hawthorne uses "Miles Coverdale's Confession" as the closing tally. Because Coverdale could not "pledge himself, for life and eternity," to anyone or to any enterprise, he suffers the doom

Theodore in Zenobia's legend, never tasting "another breath of happiness!" The frosty bachelor narrator flings back only an "unsatisfied retrospect" on his life and, more than a decade after the event, he still confesses to "irrepressible yearnings over the Blithedale reminiscences." Like Theodore, in other words, Coverdale is haunted by that single moment in his own history when all things seemed possible; but when, like Theodore ("whose natural tendency was towards scepticism" he proved neither brave nor true enough.

The single triumph (if we may call it a triumph) that Hawthorne allows his character is the composition of the narrative at hand. It is, to be sure, a consummate achievement. But as the one story Coverdale is now capable of telling, it is, sadly enough, a chronicle of failure and betrayal emanating from a man whose "own life [is] all an emptiness." In Hawthorne's tally, it would seem there is a terrible price to be paid for the skepticism that precludes idealistic commitment and for the reticence that inhibits passion. In Coverdale's epitaph for Blithedale, therefore, we hear also Hawthorne's comment on Coverdale, the communal experiment and the fictional character alike both "dying ... for ... infidelity to its own higher spirit."

ANNETTE KOLODNY

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Examples of the critical appraisals and reappraisals accorded Hawthorne's work from his own time through the 1960s are available in B. Bernard Cohen, ed., *The Recognition of Nathaniel Hawthorne: Selected Criticism Since 1828* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1969) and in J. Donald Crowley, ed., *Hawthorne: The Critical Heritage* (New York, 1970). The Norton Critical Edition of *The Blithedale Romance* (New York, 1978), Seymour Gross and Rosalie Murphy, eds., provides useful excerpts from Hawthorne's journals and letters as well as samplings from contemporary reviews and modern critical analyses of the novel.

Because nothing short of a comprehensive bibliography can do justice to the wealth and variety of Hawthorne criticism and scholarship since World War II, the following short list offers only a small cross section of this work, with particular reference to *The Blithedale Romance*.

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