



The Blithedale Romance as Psychological Novel

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Abstract:

Nathaniel Hawthorne was a novelist and short story writer. His contribution to the American transcendentalism is worthy to be noted. Hawthorne's ancestors had been prominent puritans. His novels are coloured by puritanism. Hawthorne was born in 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts. His father was a sea Captain who died when Hawthorne was aged 4. Hawthorne attended Bowdoin College in Maine and in 1928 he published his first novel, Funshawe. He later withdrew it from circulation and concentrated on writing short fiction. Hawthorne worked at various jobs, including a spell in the Boston Custom house, and he lived in the Brook Farm community for six months in 1841.

He married Sophia Peabody in 1842 and moved to Concord where he came into close contact with Ralph Waldo Emerson and other prominent thinkers.

His publications are - The Scarlet Letter (1850), The House of the Seven Gables (1851), and The Blithedale Romance (1852). He lived in Europe for several years and published his final novel, The Marble Faun (1860). He left several novels unfinished when he died in Playmouth, New Hampshire, in 1864.

Herman Melville, friend of Hawthorne, dedicated his novel Moby-Dick to Hawthorne. In his tales and romances, he repeatedly plays out his ambivalence towards Puritanism, and although his work typically has a historical setting, he examines Puritanism as a contemporary force rather than a historical fact. In particular, he often explores the conflict between the attractions of Romanticism.

The present paper deals with The Blithedale Romance as a psychological novel. A close study of The Blithedale Romance would reveal the fact that he was working with the inner recesses of the mind and soul. His characters and incidents are just so many symbols of unseen moral laws. His books turn out to be case histories of men and women afflicted by guilt, by sin, or what he called "a stain upon the soul." With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see the leading themes of the novel.

In The Blithedale Romance that author is not so much interested in telling a story. His interest lies more in showing how sin affects four different individuals. The sin is taken not so much as a theological problem but as a psychological one. He depicts its consequences on four minds, altogether different from one another. Miles Coverdale, Zenobia, Hollingsworth and Priscilla have their own separate worlds of experience and suffering.

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Miles Coverdale is the narrator of the novel. He is an old bachelor, recollecting events that have taken place in his youth. As a Youngman, Coverdale had joined the Blithedale community fired by a desire for social reform.

But the noble motives are merely camouflage for his voyeuristic tendencies. Coverdale indulges in his curiosity unobserved, from his leafy tree top "hermitage" and the boarding house window in the town from which he could see into Zenobia's hotel room opposite. He further observes the dramatic conflict between other people as unobtrusively as possible. He condones his wrong doing on the ground that he has sympathy for the people observed and sought to give the immutability of lives. Coverdale is not in earnest, "either as a poet or a Laborer."

Coverdale is especially interested in the sensuous Zenobia and probes into her relation with Hollingsworth, the reformer and Priscilla, her sister. Zenobia resents his scrutiny and rebukes him often enough.

Coverdale, however, continues with his voyeuristic tendencies, claiming that he did so out of "uncertain sense of duty." Zenobia in turn lashes out at the cold-blooded curiosity of the artist which seeks to play games with human emotions for one's own personal satisfaction. She realizes that the artist seeks to poetise reality, never present the naked truth. Coverdale likewise probes into Priscilla, "I could not resist the impulse to take on peep beneath her folded petals." He also manages to pry out the secret of old Moodie, the father of the two sisters. All this inquisitiveness has been taking a toll of Coverdale. He has been turning slowly but immeasurably into a fiend-cold hearted beyond endurance.

Coverdale is left with a guilt-stricken sense of responsibility for the tragic outcome of events into which he had pried and intruded. As he confesses the later years turn out to be "all an emptiness." The artist disintegrates with the subject of his art.

Hollingsworth is another important character whose self has been explored by the author. In the beginning, it is seen that Hollingsworth is equipped with admirable traits and good intentions. But unfortunately he is unappreciative of artistic concerns. He has no "external polish" and "courtesy of manner" but more than makes up with, "a tenderness in his voice, eyes, mouth, in his gesture, and in every indescribable manifestation which few men could resist, and no women." Hollingsworth is a reformer with a zeal and his cherished project of establishing an institution for the reformation is laudable enough. But the zeal turns to fanaticism and intolerance of differences of opinion, his virtue becomes his vice. His compassion perverted by self interest. His solicitous attendance at Coverdale's sick bed appears in hindsight to be motivated by self-interest. Hollingsworth's rise from toil and obscurity, while it helped him understand the labouring classes, it made him impatient with matters beyond his understanding. He condemned Coverdale's poetry as idle frippery and Zenobia for her interest in matters beyond his comprehension.

Hollingsworth was determined to advance his own scheme of social reform and flatly refused to accept the scheme of other social reformers. Although he was one of the prominent member of the Blithedale community, Hollingsworth privately called Blithedale "a wretched, insubstantial scheme." Intolerant of interference, he contemplated turning his friends off Blithedale Farm so that he could establish his pet project.

Hollingsworth's obsessive desires make him incapable of being unmotivated even in his closest relationship. He contemplates marrying Zenobia so that her wealth could fund his projects. He was quite reluctant to accept the equality of sexes: "Woman is a monster..... Without man as her acknowledged principal."

Hollingsworth was a perversion of personal relationships. He casts off Coverdale, discards Zenobia when her wealth proves unavailable to finance his schemes. Hollingsworth is aware of the disastrous effects of his conduct and relapses into impotent despondency. He remains, from first to the last, in the words of Zenobia, "Self, Self, Self ! you have embodied yourself in a project. You are a better mansquerader than the witches and gypsies yonder; for your disguise is a self deception."

There are two women - Zenobia and Priscilla - who have different characters. Although they are relatives, yet they are a class apart. Zenobia has been a feminist ahead of her time. Zenobia's passion betrays her, making her judgments untrust worthy. She had initially lavished her "dewdrops" on the cynical Westervelt who was incapable of a spiritual response to her passion. Coverdale realizes that Zenobia's moral judgements have been perverted by her sexual aberrations. Since Zenobia is insincere she cannot be an effective feminist. She even betrays her sister Priscilla into Westervelt's hands to be mesmerized as the veiled lady.

Priscilla is one of Hawthorne's snow images. Like Phoebe she is the incarnation of purity. Her physical frailty and spirituality are reinforced throughout the novel. In the proverbial clash of good and evil, the rivalry of the passionate and willful Zenobia with the feeble Priscilla, Hawthorne hands the laurels of victory to Priscilla, who achieves the marital felicity her proud voluptuous sister contended for.



Hollingsworth rejects Zenobia for Priscilla. The sexually experienced woman pays the price. In the ultimate analysis it is only the pure and innocent like Phoebe in the House of the Seven Gables and Priscilla in The Blithedale Romance who escape unscathed in Hawthorne's scheme of things.

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