



Exploring the Downfall of Utopian Ideals: A Critique of Reform Movements in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*

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Abstract

This paper explores the connection between Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel The Blithedale Romance and his experience at Brook Farm, a Utopian socialist community in Massachusetts. The paper argues that the novel reflects Hawthorne's disillusionment with the ideals and practices of Utopian socialism, as well as his critique of the social issues of his time. The paper analyzes the reasons behind the failure of Blithedale, the fictional counterpart of Brook Farm, by examining the characters, themes, and symbols in the novel. The paper also discusses how Hawthorne uses the narrator, Coverdale, as his alter ego to express his personal views and feelings about the reform movement. The paper concludes that The Blithedale Romance is a novel of social criticism and self-reflection.

Keywords: Nathaniel Hawthorne; *The Blithedale Romance*; Brook Farm; Utopianism; Reform Movements

Introduction

The Blithedale Romance (1852), Hawthorne's sole novel infused with his personal engagement in a reformation experiment, draws inspiration from his firsthand encounters at Brook farm. This novel expresses Hawthorne's understanding of the social issues of his time. It holds significant value for us in gaining a profound understanding and evaluating the author's perspectives on politics, ideology, utopia, and various other topics.

Amidst the prevalent atmosphere of Utopian socialism during the 1830s, numerous reform movements emerged, with Brook Farm being among them. Despite Hawthorne's denial of any direct connection between Blithedale and Brook Farm, it is evident that the two entities share an intertwined relationship. "Blithedale, of course, is Hawthorne's fictionalized version of Brook Farm" (Beauchamp 42). *The Blithedale Romance* is "the reflection of the Utopian experiment fever from 1820s to 1840s" (Shang 79). According to the research conducted by Arlin Turner (1935), Hawthorne himself began conceptualizing certain chapters of *The Blithedale Romance* in his diary during his time at Brook Farm. A significant portion of the novel is directly excerpted from Hawthorne's diary and miscellaneous notes from his involvement at Brook Farm. Therefore, *The Blithedale Romance* is inevitably linked, to a greater or lesser extent, to the author's personal experiences at Brook Farm. Additionally, the narrator of the novel, Coverdale, shares with Hawthorne a similar disposition characterized by a calm and observant nature, along with a

propensity for deep contemplation. They both undergo a transformative journey, transitioning from a hopeful outlook on the reform community to ultimately distancing himself with a sense of disillusionment. It is not difficult to make readers feel that Hawthorne is speaking through Coverdale.

Similar to Brook Farm, Blithedale community ends in failure. This paper will analyze the reasons behind Blithedale's failure by examining the author's hints and implications in the text.

Analysis

Lack of Capability for Reform

In *The Blithedale Romance*, the narrator, Coverdale, participates in the reform movement of Blithedale, similar to Hawthorne's own involvement in the reform efforts at Brook Farm. Both endeavors are experimental Utopian models based on the ideal societal patterns proposed by French Utopian socialist philosopher Charles Fourier. These ideas were prevalent in early 19th-century Western Europe, reaching their peak in the 1830s and 1840s. They called for the abolition of capitalist private ownership and advocated for an egalitarian, communal socialist system.

In the novel, Coverdale describes Blithedale's mission as follows: "we had divorced ourselves from pride, and were striving to supply its place with familiar love. We meant to lessen the laboring man's great burden of toil, by performing our due share of it at the cost of our own thews and sinews. We sought our profit by mutual aid, instead of wresting it by the strong hand from an enemy, ...or winning it by selfish

competition with a neighbor;... And, as the basis of our institution, we purposed to offer up the earnest toil of our bodies, as a prayer no less than an effort for the advancement of our race” (Hawthorne 57). However, the development of the Blithedale enterprise was not smooth. On the first night that the narrator arrives at Blithedale, they encounter a snowstorm (the natural environment mirrors the actual environment experienced by Hawthorne in Brook farm), which undoubtedly becomes an ominous omen for this reform movement: “the snowstorm, in its evening aspect, was decidedly dreary. It seemed to have arisen for our especial behoof; a symbol of the cold, desolate, distrustful phantoms that invariably haunt the mind, on the eve of adventurous enterprises, to warn us back within the boundaries of ordinary life” (Hawthorne 56-57). The implication is clear that “these reformers are just the ordinary people and do not possess the immense talent for reforming the society” (Dai 89).

Hawthorne believes that given their lack of capacity for reform, ordinary people are bound to revert back to their original lives eventually. In the novel, as the story unfolds, the narrator's attitude toward the purposes of the community becomes increasingly skeptical and critical. The narrator becomes disillusioned with the community's inability to translate their ideals into practical actions.

The Dangers of Utopia as an Ideology

In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne intertwines the utopian experiment with mesmerism, two seemingly unrelated concepts. However, when examined within the cultural context of the first half of the 19th century, these two have intricate connections. Between 1820 and 1840, as a result of economic crises, labor conflicts, intensified class struggles, and racial issues, the United States witnessed a golden age of reform movements and utopian experiments. Furthermore, the Second Great Awakening, which occurred between 1795 and 1835, acted as a catalyst, fueling the fervent dreams of individuals and society during that era. As Robert Fuller points out, “Between 1800 and 1850, Americans had a natural affinity for various sects and utopian social movements” (Fuller 15). For the people of that time, mesmerism, like utopian experiments, was packaged in a spiritual guise and was no less than a “new belief” (Coale 9). It also promised people a chance for redemption and rebirth, enabling them to achieve societal transformation through universal individual salvation. In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne writes about the mesmerist, Westervelt, as follows: “He spoke of a new era that was dawning upon the world; an era that would link soul to soul, and the present life to what we call futurity, with a closeness that should finally convert both worlds into one great, mutually conscious brotherhood. He described (in a strange, philosophical guise, with terms of art...)” (Hawthorne 243). Hawthorne's fundamental aversion to mesmerism lies not in its pseudo-scientific or deceptive nature but in its manipulative effect on the consciousness and psyche of others: “the miraculous power of one human being over the will and passions of another” (Hawthorne 241). “After inducing the hypnotized individual into a trance state, the hypnotist can, in a devilish manner, occupy and control the

hypnotized person, infringing upon their personal soul and replacing their will with their own” (Coale 3). Therefore, the relationship between the mesmerist and the mesmerized person resembles a master-slave relationship. The essence of mesmerism is the power dynamic of domination and submission, rather than genuine prophecy and divine revelation (Coale 121). In *The Blithedale Romance*, the relationship between the mesmerist Westervelt and Priscilla also serves as a powerful illustration of a master-slave dynamic.

In addition to that, the writer also portrays several instances of master-slave relationships. Hawthorne uses the character of Hollingsworth, an enthusiastic philanthropist and prison reformer, to shed light on the nature and consequences of utopian and mesmerizing ideologies. As Cotton points out, “The main characters in the Blithedale community are all mesmerists who impose their own imagination upon the world, attempting to renovate it according to their will” (Carton 242). Utopian beliefs, like mesmerism, manipulate individuals by creating a state of mental trance and exerting control over their consciousness. Westervelt mesmerizes through hypnotism, while Hollingsworth mesmerizes others through his provocative utopian beliefs, gaining followers for himself. The relationship between Priscilla and these two figures carries significant implications. Westervelt controls Priscilla's physical body through mesmerism, enslaving her as a tool for his hypnotic performances, while Hollingsworth dominates her emotions through his fervent utopian reform beliefs, turning her into a blind follower. The narrator is the first to perceive Hollingsworth's hypnotic desire for ideological control, where he puts his so-called beliefs and political blueprint above others' emotions and desires, transforming them into his followers or tools. In order to obtain financial support, he manipulates Zenobia's love, leading directly to the tragic event of her suicide. Zenobia angrily rebukes Hollingsworth: “Are you a man? No; but a monster! A cold, heartless, self-beginning and self-ending piece of mechanism!” (Hawthorne 261-262). “You are a better masquerader than the witches and gypsies yonder; for your disguise is a self-deception” (Hawthorne 262).

Zenobia's criticism of Blithedale also points out the danger in utopianism as an ideology. She claims: “I should think it a poor and meagre nature that is capable of but one set of forms, and must convert all the past into a dream merely because the present happens to be unlike it. Why should we be content with our homely life of a few months past, to the exclusion of all other modes? It was good, but there are other lives as good, or better.” (Hawthorne 208). Viewing one belief as the only eternal truth is precisely the trap into which fervent utopians easily fall. It is also the fundamental reason behind Hollingsworth's selfishness, narrow-mindedness, and fanaticism. In Hawthorne's view, utopianism as an ideology possesses dangerous tendency towards authoritarianism, allowing only one discourse to control and manipulate the thoughts and wills of individuals and groups, suppressing diverse voices through tyranny. It is destined to end in failure.

Moral Defects of Individuals

Hawthorne has realized the underlying personal defects and moral crisis behind the enthusiastic New England reformers.

One of the main characters of the Blithedale community, the philanthropist Hollingsworth, complains that “I see through the system. It is full of defects — irremediable and damning ones! — from first to last, there is nothing else! I grasp it in my hand and find no substance whatever. There is not human nature in it!” (Hawthorne 175).

Furthermore, Hollingsworth's character reveals selfish, stubborn, and heartless. Hollingsworth uses others around him, including Coverdale, Zenobia, and Priscilla. He never empathizes with their personal feelings, subordinating them to his purposes. In order to obtain financial support, he manipulates Zenobia's love, leading directly to the tragic event of her suicide. Zenobia paints him as a selfish, cold, and heartless individual. She accuses Hollingsworth: “foremost and blackest of your sins, you stifled down your inmost consciousness!—you did a deadly wrong to your own heart!” (Hawthorne 262).

The other major characters in the novel, such as the narrator and Zenobia, are also driven by self-interest. They each have their own motives and suspicions, ultimately causing their relationships to fracture. This demonstrates the inherent contradiction within the reform movement: “On one hand, it emphasizes mutual sympathy, but in reality, it creates a new form of hostility and mutual suspicion” (Kaul 161).

Hawthorne questions the true motives and sincerity of the community members, suspecting that many are driven more by personal desires rather than the collective interests. And he ultimately distances himself from the community, concluding that it is an unsustainable experiment.

Lack of Unity among the Reformers

The narrator points out that “persons of marked individuality—crooked sticks, as some of us might be called—are not exactly the easiest to bind up into a fagot...We were of all creeds and opinions, and generally tolerant of all, on every imaginable subject. Our bond, it seems to me, was not affirmative, but negative. We had individually found one thing or another to quarrel with in our past life and were pretty well agreed as to the inexpediency of lumbering along with the old system any further. As to what should be substituted, there was much less unanimity... My hope was, that, between theory and practice, a true and available mode of life might be struck out” (Hawthorne 104). This implies that the community members had different beliefs and opinions, and while they were generally tolerant, they didn't agree on what should replace the old system. This lack of consensus may become one of the obstruction to achieve the community's goals.

The Conflict between Physical and Intellectual Labor

The narrator realizes that intellectual and physical labor are incompatible: “The clods of earth, which we so constantly belabored and turned over and over, were never etherealized into thought. Our thoughts, on the contrary, were fast becoming cloddish. Our labor symbolized nothing and left us

mentally sluggish in the dusk of the evening. Intellectual activity is incompatible with any large amount of bodily exercise. The yeoman and the scholar...are two distinct individuals, and can never be melted or welded into one substance.”(Hawthorne 107-108). Hawthorne's own experience shows that engaging in physical labor leaves little room for intellectual pursuits or deeper introspection. Consequently, the community's idealistic goal of achieving the spiritualization of labor proves to be unrealistic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Blithedale Romance* draws inspiration from his experiences at Brook Farm, reflecting his introspection of the Utopian reform movement. The novel explores the failure of the Blithedale community and provides insights into the reasons behind its downfall.

One major factor contributing to the failure of Blithedale is the lack of capability for reform among its members. Hawthorne portrays the community as composed of ordinary individuals who lack the immense talent required for societal transformation.

The dangers of utopianism as an ideology are also highlighted in the novel. Hawthorne intertwines the utopian experiment with mesmerism, both of which manipulate individuals and exert control over their consciousness. He portrays characters like Hollingsworth, who impose their own beliefs and ideologies on others, leading to a master-slave dynamic. Hawthorne warns of the inherent authoritarian tendencies of utopianism, suppressing diverse voices and ultimately destined to fail.

Moral defects of individuals within the community are another contributing factor to its failure. Characters like Hollingsworth are driven by selfish motives, using others for their own purposes and disregarding their personal feelings. The lack of unity among the reformers further hinders the community's progress, as different beliefs and opinions prevent them from reaching a consensus on the way forward. Additionally, the conflict between physical and intellectual labor poses a challenge to the community's ideal of spiritualizing labor. The narrator realizes that engaging in physical labor leaves little room for intellectual pursuits, making the community's goal unrealistic.

In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne skillfully weaves together these elements to present a critique of the reform movements and utopian experiments of his time. By exploring the reasons behind Blithedale's failure, the novel offers valuable insights into the limitations and pitfalls of idealistic endeavors.

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