

STUNTED SEXUALITY IN HAWTHORNE'S THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE

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By now a commonplace of *Blithedale Romance* criticism is that Coverdale is a voyeur. But hardly anyone has related Coverdale's voyeurism to the larger psychological pattern that includes voyeurism and these to its central themes. Otto Fenichel couples voyeurism and toucheurism and defines them as "scotophilia, the sexualization of the sensations of looking... analogous to touch eroticism."¹ Doubly restricted by Victorian morality as well as by his American Puritan heritage, Hawthorne indicated that the motivations that drew people to and that characterized their relationships at Blithedale were, in part, sexual. Since he could not directly describe this sexuality he used sight and touch images to convey the kind of attraction he had in mind.

Coverdale is scotophilic. His sexuality is objectified in terms of what he, the narrator, touches and sees. His personality covers dales — conceals the low places — therefore one must look to the symbolic network of this most 'psychological' book. For example, the prudish and repressed man describes the object of his passion in these terms: "No doubt it was a kind of sacrilege in me to attempt to come within her maidenly mystery; but, as she appeared to be tossed aside by her other friends, or carelessly let fall, like a flower which they had done with, I could not resist the impulse to take just one peep beneath her folded petals."²

Priscilla is further characterized by the sexualized purses she makes. "Their peculiar excellence, besides the great delicacy and beauty of the manufacture, lay in the almost impossibility that any uninitiated person should discover the aperture; although, to a practised touch, they would open as wide as clarity or prodigality might wish" (459).

In case one has missed the meaning, Hawthorne adds "I wondered if it were not a symbol of Priscilla's own mystery" (459).

The eyes and hands are both used so frequently in this novel that they may be considered in isolation as indicators of Coverdale's relationships. When he first arrives at Blithedale he warmly and uniformly presses hands around. When he leaves, the handshakes become modified and individualized as the relationships are modified. His doubts about Zenobia's suicide focus on whether her clasped hands at death signified defiance or submission. And her drowned body is finally fished out by Hollingsworth, the rejecting lover, wielding a hook "as if he were stabbing at a deadly enemy" (577).

The eyes also have it for Coverdale. His final protracted stare at Zenobia's towed corpse is the surfeited yet guilt-stricken leer of the voyeur in triumph, "gazing all the while at Zenobia whose limbs were swaying in the current.... Were I to describe the perfect horror of the spectacle, the reader might justly reckon it to me for a sin and a shame. For more than twelve long years I have borne it in my memory, and could now reproduce it as freshly as if it were still before my eyes" (578).

While Zenobia was yet still alive these two had engaged in grim visual combat, peering into one another's eyes as if they were the gateways to the soul. "She bent her head toward me, and let me look into her eyes, as if challenging me to drop plummet-line down into the depths of her consciousness. 'I see nothing now', said I, closing my own eyes" (466). Coverdale is emasculated by the greater intensity of her eyepower. His eyes, like Oedipus's become the sign of his uncertain manhood. Another time he reflects that while at Blithedale "I lifted stones which at this day... I should no more have thought it possible to stir than to carry off the gates of Gaza on my back" (519). Coverdale, who is neither blind nor heroic, implicitly compares himself to Samson, the eyeless carrier of the gates of Gaza who was betrayed and emasculated by his sexual ambitions. Coverdale only engages in staring matches, which he sums up thus: "It is really impossible to hide anything in this world, to say nothing of the next" (535). So the physical thing seen is extended into a moral concern; it is man's hidden, innate evil. But in the context of the seemingly innocent Utopian community it is also one's flesh, one's sex. Contrast Coverdale's feelings for Zenobia to his love for Priscilla. Although he yearned for her purses and the petals of her rose he professed indifference to the touch of

Priscilla's flesh. No doubt he wished to pass from the sensual feelings that oppressed him to the ethereal sublimations that Priscilla encouraged, and in his contrasting feelings for the two women we find the ambivalence he also felt towards the Blithedale community.

Coverdale would peep through garments and he habitually imagines Zenobia nude. She should have modeled for sculptors "Because the cold decorum of the marble would consist with the utmost scantiness of drapery, so that the eye might chastely be gladdened with her material perfection in its entirety" (464). And in her very first conversation with Coverdale, Zenobia says 'As for the garb of Eden... I shall not assume it till after Mayday!'

"Assuredly, Zenobia could not have intended it — the fault must have been entirely in my imagination. But these last words, together with something in her manner, irresistibly brought up a picture of the fine, perfectly developed figure in Eve's earliest garment" (448).

F. O. Matthiessen points out in a footnote that Hawthorne, in his original version of this passage, added the following line: "I almost fancied myself actually beholding it."³ This seemingly innocuous deletion is significant for what it reveals about Hawthorne's standards of self-censorship.

Hand and eye references negatively characterize Westervelt, the villain. In his first conversation with Coverdale, Westervelt lays his hand on Coverdale's sleeve, an indecorum as grave as calling Coverdale "friend". Coverdale remarks: "There was in his eyes... the naked exposure of something that ought not to be left prominent." But Westervelt's defect is not so much his grossness as his overtness, not so much his character as its display. Coverdale too has his normal New England portion of inherent evil but his hope for Blithedale lies in the possibility that the perfect society will nullify influence. He suffers about these qualities saying of Westervelt: "I detested this kind of man; and all the more because a part of my own nature showed itself responsive to him" (499).

Just as Coverdale has been at once repelled and attracted by Zenobia's corpse, the toucheur-voyeur enjoys his acts and yearns for the objects seen and touched; at the same time he fears exposure and dreads being drawn into the active world where he, too, would be

touched and seen. This ambivalent attitude marks Coverdale's behavior on at least three significant occasions.

First, when Coverdale, hidden in his tree perch, hears Zenobia and Westervelt approach, he is determined to give himself away rather than accept knowledge of their private lives, knowledge he yearns to know. His voyeur desire to know is overridden by his voyeur revulsion at the possible involvement which will be incurred by knowing.

Second, when Westervelt discovers Coverdale overlooking Zenobia's window in Boston, Coverdale is manful — or poised — enough not to draw back when he is discovered. Again Coverdale wished to hide but also wished to see more. The consequences of seeing more, however, involved accepting the insult of the dropped windowshade. Once again he would rather be humiliatingly exposed than emotionally involved.

Finally, when he returns to Blithedale, Coverdale spies upon the festive scene in the woods and, when discovered, flees rather than join the party. Because his split with Hollingsworth and his observations in Boston have reaffirmed his conviction of the innate depravity of man, Coverdale cannot join in the Arcadian romp. His desire for self-exposure has succumbed to his fear of involvement. He has, in his experience with Hollingsworth and his observations in Boston, finally seen what he has been spying on throughout: the hidden evil of all people, himself included. And much of this evil, as revealed by the imagery of the voyeur narrator, is sex.

A debate between Zenobia and Coverdale on the role of women threads the book. In the course of these exchanges it becomes clear that Coverdale, for all his *philosophe* liberalism has a rather stiff, authoritarian view of women, especially when he is challenged and intimidated by a forceful one. Indeed Zenobia openly implies her sexual superiority. "It is an endless pity," she said, "that I had not bethought myself of winning your heart, Mr. Coverdale, instead of Hollingsworth's. I should think I should have succeeded" (572-73). Coverdale, for his part, felt that Zenobia had abandoned her femininity; he responds by criticizing her "female" function of gruel-cooking, thus abandoning his own "masculine" dignity.

But in the end even the forceful Zenobia submits and falls uncharacteristically and femininely in love. She complains about woman's

fate: "How can she be happy after discovering that fate has assigned her but one single event, which she must contrive to make the substance of her whole life? A man has his choice of innumerable events.

'A woman, I suppose,' answered I, 'by constant repetition of her one event, may compensate for the lack of variety.'

Indeed! said Zenobia" (473).

Is Coverdale talking about child-bearing or only about fucking? In the debasing sense that he intends and that Zenobia understands they are probably equal. This, then, is a particularly dehumanizing and chauvinistic narrator telling us our story. The impulse to form a Utopian community in the Roxbury woods was apparently idealistically motivated on its face. However among the many unconscious preconceptions which propelled Coverdale and possibly Zenobia to Blithedale were the dreams of a community of sexual freedom, unashamed nudity and idealized love. Coverdale himself said: "The footing on which we all associated at Blithedale was widely different from that of conventional society. While inclining us to the soft affections of the golden age, it seemed to authorize any individual of either sex, to fall in love with any other, regardless of what would elsewhere be judged suitable and prudent" (481).

This naturally leads to a treatment of that other liberal conundrum, marriage. But it is a voyeur's view of marriage, a dirty view of marriage. When he is not imagining Zenobia nude, Coverdale is trying to guess if she has been married, "if the great event of a woman's existence had been consummated, the world knew nothing of it" (465). This means, had she had sex?

Coverdale observes Zenobia with Westervelt: "As they passed among the trees, reckless as her movement was, she took good heed that even the hem of her garment should not brush against the stranger's person. I wondered whether there had always been a chasm, guarded so religiously, betwixt these two" (499). Surely the mentality that considered the great event of anyone's life as the loss of virginity has been stunted at the age when most of us lost ours. On the face of it, the Blithedale gossip about Zenobia and Hollingsworth settling in a cabin without the dubious benefit of marriage retains the atmosphere of the state of nature that prevails until the feud with Hollingsworth. Such marriages, since they are consummated in an unfallen society, are

unaccompanied by lust. However, once we learn the true motives of Hollingsworth, Coverdale's fantasy of an Arcadian bower of innocent sexual joys is dragged down again to earth.

Coverdale hoped for sexuality to be spiritualized at Blithedale but he was disappointed. His return for a visit during the Fest of Comus is psychologically equivalent to the moment when Adam covered himself after eating the apple. Arcadia would become viable again for Coverdale if he also made an act of commitment and self-exposure. However such a commitment would be more feared than desired. The touching which would be its sign and to which the peeping is merely prelude is more repellent than attractive. Coverdale, the disillusioned voyeur, is no longer capable of even the qualified commitment he showed at the start of *The Blithedale Romance*. He is overly conscious of the selfish motives that brought Hollingsworth to Blithedale and he, in turn, is reminded of his own depraved self. He skulks "like an Indian" in the woods, ashamed, outlawed, lustful. The repellent half of his ambivalence is in the ascendancy and the urge to flee propels him. He has seen what he yearned and feared to see and he can no longer escape his vision.

With such psychological innuendoes, echoes and re-echoes does Hawthorne demonstrate the inevitable intertwining of evil with good in human motives. But it further shows the bias in his mind in so relentlessly coupling evil with a certain kind of sexuality. Much of the sexual weather in *Blithedale* may be created by the noticeably aberrant narrator but a similar attitude may sometimes be found in *The Scarlet Letter* as well, with its seemingly more trustworthy, third person voice. In that book Dimmesdale says: "I should long ago have thrown off these garments of mock holiness, and have shown myself to mankind as they will see me at the judgment-seat. Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom!... what a relief it is... to look into an eye that recognizes me for what I am!"⁴ A remark that can be read in the terms of stunted sexuality which we have already discussed. Who can say what sexual malaise underlies that earlier finer book and the relationship between that malaise and the notions of inherent evil it too grapples with.

NOTES

1. Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, (New York, 1945), p.71.
2. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, included in *The Complete Novels... Hawthorne* (New York, 1937), p.513. Hereafter in the text.
3. F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York, 1960), p.297n.
4. *The Scarlet Letter*, included in *The Complete Novels... Hawthorne* (New York, 1937), p.198.



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