'Godlike Knowledge:' Light as Power in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*

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> But it was fortunate for us, on that wintry eve of our untried life, to enjoy the warm and radiant luxury of a somewhat too abundant fire. If it served no other purpose, it made the men look so full of youth, warm blood, and hope, and the women – such of them, at least, as were anywise convertible by its magic – so very beautiful, that I would cheerfully have spent my last dollar to prolong the blaze.[1]

Narrator-protagonist Miles Coverdale spends the majority of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) hiding from the gothic darkness and immersing himself in the light. Joining the newly established farming community in Blithedale in the countryside of New England, Coverdale sets out with the aims of establishing Blithedale as a prosperous utopia and becoming a successful poet. The narrative ends in confusion and disappointment after the dissolution of the commune, with Coverdale looking back on events several decades later, realising that 'I lack a purpose. How strange!' (p. 223). Coverdale's poetic aspirations have never been fulfilled – he is purposeless – yet even with the benefit of hindsight, he is unable to explain why he lacks a purpose; it is 'strange' to him. *The Blithedale Romance* is therefore the narrative of a man who missed all his opportunities to mature as a human and a poet.

Fire is one of the dominant images throughout the book, particularly in the first half.[2] Coverdale spends a considerable amount of time extolling the virtues of the fire at Blithedale: it is the centre of his focus for four of the first five chapters. The fire appears to give Coverdale much hope and happiness, but it does so at the cost of encouraging him to ignore the realities of the dark and cold surrounding the new recruits. As Hyatt Waggoner notes, the cheer that the fire provides in contrast to the cold outside strengthens the resolve of Coverdale and his companions. However, we can see Coverdale's constant and inexhaustible allusions to the fire as an act of desperation. It is not a confirmation of the group members' abilities as pioneers; it is his reaction to a group of inexperienced and ignorant dilettantes who are attempting to place their own stamp on the surrounding earth while dismissing the realities of the wilderness. Waggoner claims that the fire 'is very cheery, but it is not such as any real farmer would build: it is too large to be perfectly natural even in such a fireplace, and, as Silas Foster sardonically

[1] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (Modern Library, 2001), pp. 24-25. All subsequent references to this text will be cited using page numbers in parentheses in the body of the essay.
[2] Hyatt H. Waggoner, *Hawthorne: A Critical Study* (Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 191.

points out, it is built of brushwood, which burns very brightly but will not last'.[3] If the fire will not last, then it is purely for show, as demonstrated by the opening quotation above. Fire is therefore one of the key light-related motifs that Coverdale force feeds the reader to create an image of serenity and goodness that may at first seem genuine, but is revealed to be a result of Coverdale's falsifying of reality. He is using his authorial influence to control his medium – that is, writing – to a perverse extent, and in doing so blinds himself to any true awareness of his own surroundings. This culminates in his failure to arrive in time at the climax of his own romance, and in his inability to care for a friend before it is too late, as a consequence of which she dies by suicide.

This article argues, then, argues that Miles Coverdale fails as a poet as he ignores the darker, gothic aspects of existence that are required to create successful poetry. I begin by outlining the plot of *The Blithedale Romance*, and contextualise it in terms of mid-nineteenth-century American writing, positioning Coverdale as an antithesis to the hegemonically masculine, ostensibly all-knowing American Romantic poet of that moment, who welcomes the challenges of the natural world. Following this, I argue that Hawthorne illustrates the problems of American Romanticism through his representation of light. Light is used figuratively by many of his characters not to illuminate or clarify their situation, but instead to construct alternative and often self-serving narratives. Through these examples, the article establishes that what I term 'light' is the familiar – the comfortable, everyday reality that conforms to the beliefs of the aspiring masculine Romantic poets such as Coverdale. The gothic or the 'dark', in comparison, is the unknown – the often-unspoken and ignored problems that undermine those same beliefs. From here, the article moves on to discuss Coverdale's actions in *The Blithedale Romance*, demonstrating the ways in which he manipulates the medium of light to bend the narrative to his own ends. Finally, the article considers how in the romance's climax Coverdale, by avoiding the darkness and promoting the light for too long, has lost his way. I suggest that a confluence of the known light and the unknown darkness is Hawthorne's answer to this problem, an answer Coverdale himself never finds.

Coverdale as American Romantic Poet-Author

The Blithedale Romance, then, is an account of Coverdale's time spent with several members of the newly established Blithedale farm commune, its breakdown, and subsequent betrayals among the commune members. Before setting off on his journey to Blithedale, Coverdale is

[3] Waggoner, *Hawthorne*, p. 195.

told the story of the Veiled Lady, a mysterious clairvoyant much in demand in New England society, by a man known as Old Moodie. On arriving at Blithedale farm, Coverdale meets with its inhabitants, a company of reformers who have all gathered together with the aim of establishing a prosperous utopia. The recruits have brought with them differing agendas, leading to a clash of ideals, which eventually leads to a breaking up of the community. Coverdale spends much of his time observing a small number of the company who pique his interest, all but ignoring the other members. He is obsessed with the outspoken feminist Zenobia, and the forceful philanthropist Hollingsworth. He also spends time talking about the quiet, waif-like Priscilla, who follows Zenobia around and is eventually revealed as the enigmatic Veiled Lady; Professor Westervelt, an outsider with ties to Zenobia and Priscilla; and the practically minded farmer, Silas Foster.

Coverdale initially enjoys his time in Blithedale; however, once he discovers that Hollingsworth is more interested in his ideology than in their friendship, and as Zenobia and Hollingsworth become close, his attitude towards the Blithedale project cools considerably and he leaves the farm for the city. Despite his move, Coverdale nevertheless continues to concern himself with the actions of his Blithedale companions, many of whom have also moved to the city. Observing them from afar and intruding upon their affairs whenever he deems it necessary, Coverdale watches the breakdown of the Blithedale community and the relationships therein, culminating in the death of Zenobia. Due at least in part to Coverdale's inability to recognise Zenobia's distress, he does not arrive in time to prevent her suicide after she is betrayed by those closest to her. In the text's epilogue, Coverdale reflects on the years that have elapsed since the Blithedale experiment, claiming that he was in love with Priscilla all along.

Much mid-nineteenth-century American literature is concerned with human encounters with the unknown and unconquered spaces beyond the reach of civilisation. Some of this literature addresses the dark, untameable sea, such as Edgar Allen Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1850). Others, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), explore the wilder, unoccupied landscapes of the United States. In this context, *The Blithedale Romance* can be read as Hawthorne's attempt, like these contemporaries, to address the spaces that have remained unconquered by men; the gothic expanses that surround humanity's flickering civilisation. This can be seen in the wilderness that disturbs the dilettantes at Blithedale farm, the forests that hide those rejected by society, and the black river that becomes Zenobia's deathbed. For Hawthorne, the wilderness spaces he focuses on tend to have a dark edge to them, perhaps because, in an America that was becoming

increasingly industrialised, nighttime was one of the final refuges for its artists, a cleansing arena removed from the stifling conventions of society. As Thoreau writes in *Walden*:

> Every man has to learn the points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.[4]

Darkness here is seen as a restorative; a state which it is necessary for all humans to experience in order to begin to rediscover their place in the world. Being spatially disoriented is equated with having an open mind, with being able to re-orientate oneself with a clarity of vision not available to those who have never strayed from society. Hawthorne himself, in 'The Haunted Mind' (1835), writes about midnight as 'an intermediate space, where the business of life does not intrude; where the passing moment lingers, and becomes truly the present'.[5] While Hawthorne clearly recognised that a confluence or meeting of light and dark is required to reach any sort of knowledge, his narrator-protagonist Coverdale does not, demonstrating his naiveté as both a writer and a man, as the rest of this article illustrates.

The importance of light and darkness in Hawthorne's work – particularly his focus on their intersection – has been well demonstrated. Wendy Barker suggests that Hawthorne prefers 'the shadowy times of late afternoon, and early morning, when subtle differentiations and gradations of shadings are more visible', while Harry Levin notes that 'though we naturally think of Hawthorne's work in visual terms, we speak more appropriately of delicate shading than of rich coloring'.[6] Newton Arvin, meanwhile, writes that Hawthorne's favourite adjectives include '*dusky*, *dim*, and *shadowy*'.[7] In this vein, I argue that Hawthorne participates in what Eugenia DeLamotte claims 'the Gothic had always known: the way the perils of the soul in its darkest night reflect, in magnified and revealing forms, the quotidian realities of life in the daylit world of money, work, and social rank'.[8] Hawthorne recognised and stressed the importance of gothic darkness in magnifying and highlighting, though contrast, the strange and

[4] Henry David Thoreau, 'Walden', in *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. by Joseph Wood Kruch (Bantam Dell, 2004), pp. 111-366 (p. 243).
[5] Hawthorne, 'The Haunted Mind', in *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Tales and Sketches* (Library of America, 1982), pp. 200-04 (pp. 200-01).
[6] Wendy Barker, 'Emily Dickinson and Poetic Strategy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Wendy Martin (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 77-90 (p. 88); and Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (Knopf, 1958), p. 38.
[7] Newton Arvin, 'Introduction', in *Hawthorne's Short Stories*, ed. by Arvin (Knopf, 1950), pp. vii-xviii (p. xv), emphasis in original.
[8] Eugenia DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. vii.

grotesque nature of events that appear unremarkable in daylight. This aspect of his writing did not go unnoticed in his own time; indeed, Melville famously admired Hawthorne's ability to show America's 'blackness, ten times black', writing that 'this darkness but gives more effect to the ever-moving dawn, that forever advances through it, and circumnavigates his world'.[9] Melville here seems to be suggesting that Hawthorne utilises dark shades in order to better illustrate the brightness of a light. Similar to a chiaroscuro or the then-recently invented daguerreotype, Hawthorne uses the contrast of strong light and darkness to produce forceful effects in his writing. Take, for example, this passage from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), in which Reverend Dimmesdale feels compelled to write by night:

> Thus the night fled away, as if it were a winged steed, and he careering on it; morning came, and peeped, blushing, through the curtains; and at last sunrise threw a golden beam into the study, and laid it right across the minister's bedazzled eyes. There he was, with the pen still between his fingers, and a vast, immeasurable tract of written space behind him![10]

Here we can see the interplay of dark and light. On a purely visual level, the stark contrast provides the reader with fantastic imagery; but beyond that, we can see the interplay on a symbolic level. The darkness of night gives Dimmesdale the zeal to write as he rides the night 'as if it were a winged steed', while it is the light of day that reveals the results of his labour as an 'immeasurable tract of written space behind him!' Dimmesdale, who in this scene is figured as a writer, can be read as a stand-in for Hawthorne. Thus, Hawthorne seems to be suggesting that in order to write, it is important to embrace both darkness and light: the darkness in order to be inspired, and the light to create coherence.

Hawthorne, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, was observing America at a critical time in its history of industrialisation. 'No previous time in Western history', as A. Roger Ekirch claims, 'experienced such a sustained assault upon the nocturnal realm as did the period 1730 to 1830. [...] Even the term "night season", denoting the distinctiveness of nocturnal hours, gradually faded from everyday speech.'[11] With world-changing discoveries such as the recent creation of the incandescent light bulb, human dominance over the primordial darkness was fast becoming easier to attain. However, in Hawthorne's work, the ability to produce light at will is something that should be done with caution. Light, in Hawthorne's writing, can be seen as power itself, a power that can be used to distort and bend the truth for one's own benefit.

[9] Herman Melville, 'Hawthorne and His Mosses', in *Melville: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Watson G. Branch (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 237-47 (p. 240).
[10] Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance* (Wordsworth, 1999), p. 169.
[11] A. Roger Ekirch, *At Day's Close: A History of Nighttime* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 324.

As I have argued elsewhere, we see this in Hawthorne's short stories, including 'The Birthmark' (1843).[12] Aylmer, the obsessive scientist who wishes to remove all traces of a birthmark from his beloved's face in an attempt to make her perfect, utilises light that he has created himself in an attempt to remove the blemish. This light, we are told, creates scenery and figures that 'were perfectly represented, but with that bewitching, yet indescribable difference which always makes a picture, an image, or a shadow so much more attractive than the original'.[13] These light projections are much more attractive than reality, but they are *not* reality.

Here we see the procurement of artificial light as the preserve of those who are interested in progress purely for personal gain.[14] If both light and darkness are required to make sense of the world, it becomes dangerous when light is utilised by the powerful for their own selfish ends, as Coverdale does to paint himself as an innocent and likeable protagonist. This problem of a dictator-like control over viewpoint in Hawthorne's work is highlighted by Patricia Ann Carlson. Observing the importance of the lamp in Hawthorne's 'The Wives of the Dead' (1832), she notes that 'it is a visual projection of the conscious state of the widows – anxiously expectant and unable to accept the reality of death. Thus, the lamp signifies a psychic condition very susceptible to illusions, and it is within the light of this lamp that all the action of the tale takes place.'[15] Here we can see that the light does not illuminate the world as it is, but instead projects an image of what the widows wish to see: the return of their husbands. Because they are unable to accept that their husbands are dead, they use the lamplight to construct alternative narratives, in which they do not have to realise the 'reality' of their situation.[16] Dependence on light to the detriment of darkness can lead to a distortion or even destruction of reality.

American Romanticism and Emerson

Furthering this notion, as Waggoner writes:

> The assumption of Godlike knowledge could destroy the artist and man equally. Knowledge brings with it the possibility of control, and the artist must achieve control of his subject by controlling his medium; but he will falsify reality if he omits the

[12] Sarah Cullen, '"A Stern, a Sad, a Darkly Meditative, a Distrustful, if Not a Desperate Man, Did He Become, from the Night of that Fearful Dream": Nathaniel Hawthorne's Nocturnal Gothic', *Gothic Nature*, 1 (2019), pp. 103-26 (pp. 114) <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Cullen_103-126_Gothic-Nature-1_2019.pdf> [accessed 23 May 2024].
[13] Hawthorne, 'The Birthmark', in *Hawthorne's Short Stories*, pp. 177-93 (p. 184).
[14] Arvin, 'Introduction', p. xvii.
[15] Patricia Ann Carlson, 'The Function of the Lamp in Hawthorne's "The Wives of the Dead"', *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 40.2 (1975), pp. 62-64 (p. 63), doi:10.2307/3199189.
[16] Cullen, 'Nathaniel Hawthorne's Nocturnal Gothic', p. 115.

> element of mystery and assumes that he knows the unknowable. One error, then, to which the artist is peculiarly liable, threatens both artist and man.[17]

This is exactly what happens to Coverdale. Setting out to write Romantic poetry that will be as 'true, strong, natural, and sweet, as is the life which [he is] going to lead', Coverdale, as Hawthorne's representative of the Romantic movement, ultimately fails as he tries to ignore the gothic elements he encounters – the shadow and mystery of his time in Blithedale (p. 16). This can be seen in his desperate focus on the 'somewhat too abundant fire' at the commune. Hawthorne, this article argues, was concerned with the fact that American Romanticism, unlike Hawthorne's own strain of dark Romanticism, did not allow for any consideration for the darker aspects of literature. Moreover, Hawthorne represents this failure through the utilisation of light imagery throughout *The Blithedale Romance*. For, as Leslie A. Fiedler observes, 'the desire to be one with the forbidding fire is merely another version of the Faustian temptation, to be as a god'.[18] Overusing his artist's 'Godlike knowledge' by banishing the darkness and coldness to the corners of his narrative, Coverdale is at a loss as to what to do when the darkness overcomes the boundaries he constructs and subsumes his writing. Ultimately, *The Blithedale Romance* shows how dangerous it is to ignore the dark Romantic or gothic side of existence, as Coverdale is left an embittered and directionless man who cannot find his way back into the light.

These elements of darkness feature figuratively in the plot of *The Blithedale Romance* in the form of radical agendas, clashes of opinion, and misunderstandings. Many of the characters – Coverdale, as this article argues, being the most guilty – are unable to look beyond their own prejudices and assumptions to try and identify with the plight of another. They look instead for examples that confirm their own bias in the same way; and this, Hawthorne seems to be suggesting, is how American Romanticism operates in his time. Commenting on the lack of darkness in American literature, Hawthorne writes in the preface to *The Marble Faun* (1860) that

> No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a Romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a common-place prosperity in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land. [...] Romance and poetry, like ivy, lichens, and wall-flowers, need Ruin to make them grow.[19]

[17] Waggoner, *Hawthorne*, p. 33.
[18] Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Stein and Day, 1966), p. 387.
[19] Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun: Or, The Romance of Monte Beni*, ed. by William Charvat and others (Ohio State University Press, 1971), p. 3.

Hawthorne was writing in era in which it was not fashionable to acknowledge the darker aspects of the United States. The current generation, perhaps angered by the enduring cultural influences of their former European masters, and embarrassed by the ethical murkiness caused by the slave trade, Indian removals, and lack of women's rights, were unwilling to confront their problems, looking instead to the future with a blinding patriotism.[20] American darkness was something that should be overcome rather than ruminated upon. As Ralph Waldo Emerson asserted in 'Plato, or The Philosopher' (1850),

> There is a moment, in the history of every nation, when, proceeding out of this brute youth, the perceptive powers reach their ripeness, and have not yet become microscopic: so that man, at that instant, extends across the entire scale; and, with his feet still planted on the immense forces of night, converses, by his eyes and brain, with solar and stellar creation. That is the moment of adult health, the culmination of power.[21]

Here the literary night is the battleground in the narrative of the nation, but, Emerson implies, it needs to be overcome. The moment of daybreak is made synonymous with maturity into manhood, with America standing as a conqueror over the 'forces of night'. In comparison to Hawthorne in 'The Haunted Mind', where night is 'an intermediate space [...] where the passing moment lingers, and becomes truly the present', Emerson sees the night as a time of barbaric struggles from which America must emerge victorious along the way to civilisation; for Hawthorne, by contrast, it is a time of reflection.

Mid-nineteenth-century American Romantic writing, as David Morse observes, typically engages in an exaltation of nature – an explosive celebration of the American landscape. American Romanticism was a conventionally masculine and male-dominated movement, exemplified by those with the ability to move beyond the bounds of society, such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Walt Whitman.[22] Comparing the male American Romantics to female counterparts such as Emily Dickinson, Barker argues that while the male poets are able to move in and out of sunlight as they choose, female poets are often harmed by the rays of the sun, and thus relegated to shaded and night times.[23] Male writers were not only meant to capture

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[20] Fiedler, *Love and Death*, p. 144.
[21] Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Plato, or The Philosopher', in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson – Representative Men: Seven Lectures*, 12 vols (Houghton Mifflin, 1979), IV, pp. 40-79 (pp. 46-47) <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/emerson/4957107.0004.001/1:6?rgn=div1;view=fulltext#W11-00000060> [accessed 23 May 2024].
[22] David Morse, *American Romanticism: From Cooper to Hawthorne – Excessive America*, 2 vols (Macmillan, 1987), II, p. 119-68.
[23] Barker, *Lunacy of Light: Emily Dickinson and the Experience of Metaphor* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), p. 7-13.

the American Romantic landscape through their writing, but were expected to embody their subject matter. Morse quotes Whitman as an example of what was expected of an American Romantic poet: 'The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. [...] His spirit responds to his country's spirit [...] he incarnates its geography, and natural life and rivers and lakes.'[24] The American Romantic, then, was defined in terms of his inexhaustible potential. As Morse writes, through men such as Whitman, 'the poet assumes a new importance as the figure who can truly articulate the dimensions of an unprecedented American largeness'.[25]

Hawthorne, in comparison, has often been ranked among the dark Romantics. Unlike the American Romantics, who, according to Charles L. Crow, 'shared a vision of natural facts as symbols of spiritual facts, so that the world could be read as a text unfolding secrets about ultimate truths', the dark Romantics found

> 'the power of blackness' (Melville's words in 'Hawthorne and His Mosses'), [...] a profound reality, and in the woods, as Hawthorne demonstrated in 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835), faith could still be lost. [...] While Emerson's world was sunlit and morally clear, that of the dark Romantics was fractured, multilayered, and ambiguous.[26]

This essay argues that through his poet-author Coverdale, Hawthorne is challenging the accepted view of the American Romantic: in *Blithedale*, Coverdale approaches a dark Romantic world with the literary tools of an American Romantic and finds himself lacking, as he chooses to write in a mode that attempts to ignore the gothic. To even approach the darkness, Hawthorne appears to be arguing, a gothic or dark Romantic writer must first accept that it does not provide any clear or simple symbols that can be easily interpreted.

Alongside fire, Coverdale also uses other light imagery to divert both his and our attention away from his reality in order to construct his own narrative. Coverdale's control is highlighted when he remonstrates with Priscilla for simply seeing the world in a different light to himself:

> Her simple, careless, childish flow of spirits often made me sad. She seemed to me like a butterfly at play in a flickering bit of sunshine, and mistaking it for a broad and eternal summer. [...] 'What is the use or sense of being so very gay?' I said to Priscilla, while she was taking breath, after a great frolic. 'I love to see a sufficient cause for everything, and I can see none for this. Pray tell me, now, what kind of a world you imagine this to be, which you are so merry in?' (p. 70)

[24] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Ixia Press, 2020), p. v.
[25] Morse, *American Romanticism*, p. 6.
[26] Charles L. Crow, 'American Gothic', in *Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, ed. by William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith (Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 15-22 (p. 17).

Coverdale's description of Priscilla (and, as we will see later, Zenobia) brings to mind Emerson's veneration of woman three years later in his lecture 'Woman' (1855). Women may, Emerson claims, 'emit from their pores a colored atmosphere, one would say, wave upon wave of rosy light, in which they walk evermore, and see all objects through this warm-tinted mist that envelops them'.[27] Both Emerson and Coverdale see women as ethereal, and this enables Coverdale to dismiss Priscilla's worldview as an 'imagined', all-but-literally rose-tinted one. Because he is not the centre of attention in Priscilla's narrative, he feels the need to invalidate it and to attempt to impose his own.[28]

The Scholar and the Yeoman and Other Rigid Categories

As illustrated in the aforementioned scene from *The Scarlet Letter*, in Hawthorne's writing, light represents insight, and darkness represents information. The irony in his interactions with Priscilla is that Coverdale berates her for doing exactly what he himself does in mistaking a 'flickering bit of sunshine' for a 'broad and eternal summer'. A confluence or meeting of light and dark is required to reach any sort of knowledge. This meeting is exactly what Coverdale fails to achieve. His own measure of his artistry reveals a reliance on popular notions of beauty to the detriment of innovation. He desires to create poetry that is 'true, strong, natural, and sweet, as is the life which we are going to lead – something that shall have the notes of wild-birds twittering through it, or a strain like the wind-anthems in the woods, as the case may be!' (p. 16). 'If this remark does nothing else', James H. Justus observes, 'it establishes Coverdale as a thoroughly undistinguished talent of Mainstream Romantic'.[29] Certainly, if this statement is representative of his art, it does not seek to throw light on new territory. Coverdale is instead content to capitalise on the already tried-and-tested notions of mainstream Romanticism, while stressing aesthetic aspects ('the wild-birds twittering') and placid beauty ('true, strong, natural, and sweet') over any issues of substance. Coverdale's position within the narrative, then, is further complicated by his supposed role as an American Romantic poet. The Romantic poets were expected to transcend culture; to remain impartial observers to the world around them. Yet, Coverdale's position at Blithedale influences characters and events. Indeed, at one point,

[27] Emerson, 'Woman', in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson – Miscellanies*, 12 vols (Houghton Mifflin, 1979), XI, pp. 406-26 (p. 412).
[28] See Taylor Stoehr, 'Art vs. Utopia: The Case of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Brook Farm', *The Antioch Review*, 36.1 (1978), pp.89-102, doi:10.2307/4638010.
[29] James H. Justus, 'Hawthorne's Coverdale: Character and Art in *The Blithedale Romance*', *American Literature* 47.1 (March 1975), pp. 21-36 (p. 30), doi:10.2307/2925031.

Coverdale claims that his current role 'resembled that of the Chorus in a classic play, which seems to be set aloof from the possibility of personal concernment' (p. 90). Coverdale is too preoccupied with his own view, believing his observances to be impartial, to consider that he may be mistaken. We see this when he spies on Westervelt from his hermitage.[30] Coverdale muses,

> As for Westervelt, he was not a whit more warmed by Zenobia's passion, than a salamander by the heat of its native furnace. He would have been absolutely statuesque, save for a look of slight perplexity tinctured strongly with derision. It was a crisis in which his intellectual perceptions could not altogether help him out. He failed to comprehend, and cared but little for comprehending, why Zenobia should put herself into a fume; but satisfied his mind that it was all folly, and only another shape of a woman's manifold absurdity, which men can never understand. (p. 95)

Throughout this passage, Coverdale makes the error of mistaking outward appearance for inner reality.[31] Westervelt may indeed appear – in Coverdale's mind – to have a 'look of slight perplexity tinctured strongly with derision' on his face, but to claim that this means that Westervelt is 'not warmed by Zenobia's passion' is an interpretative leap that, while perhaps correct, cannot be considered anything more than an educated guess. However, he then makes the claim that Westervelt fails to comprehend Zenobia because 'men can never understand' a 'woman's manifold absurdity'. This is a significant breach of Coverdale's artistic licence. Unable to comprehend the thinking behind Westervelt's actions, Coverdale has gone beyond educated guesses and has substituted his own belief that 'men can never understand' a woman's 'absurdity'. This is no longer artistry; this is falsifying reality. It is, moreover, a significant disavowal of Hawthorne's own belief in the importance of shadow or mystery required to make Romance grow. As DeLamotte points out,

> Gothic terror has its primary source in an anxiety about boundaries and [...] Gothic romance offers a symbolic language congenial to the expression of psychological, epistemological, religious, and social anxieties that resolve themselves most fundamentally into a concern about the boundaries of the self.[32]

Unlike a gothic writer, Coverdale's view of himself rests comfortably on the belief that there is an incommunicable boundary between women and himself (and indeed women and other men) that can never be breached. Claiming such a boundary exists is useful for Coverdale, for

[30] Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 130.
[31] Michael Borgstrom, 'Hating Miles Coverdale', *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 56.4 (2010), pp. 363-90 (p. 375), doi:10.1353/esq.2011.0007.
[32] DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night*, pp. 13-14.

in hindsight, he can attempt to absolve himself for failing to save Zenobia. This is why Coverdale projects his own thoughts regarding the 'absurdity' of women onto Westervelt, externalising his own unflattering traits onto another man, because he requires Zenobia to be absurd in order to avoid self-examination. While observing her, Coverdale claims that women 'are not natural reformers, but become such by the pressure of exceptional misfortune. I could measure Zenobia's inward trouble, by the animosity with which she now took up the general quarrel of woman against man' (p. 111). What problematises this issue further is that Coverdale is unaware of what he is doing; he believes that he is qualified to 'measure' exactly what Zenobia is thinking. Just like the widows in 'The Wives of the Dead', Coverdale is susceptible to illusions and is projecting his own beliefs subconsciously.

Turning away from the darker aspects of existence is, by extension, the real reason that Coverdale leaves the Blithedale project. His talk with Hollingsworth on the future of Blithedale shows us that he is there only for glory, but is not really prepared to put in the work required to achieve it. He instead indulges in futuristic fantasies. 'When we come to be old men', he tells Hollingsworth, 'they will call us Uncles, or Fathers [...]. In a century or two, we shall every one of us be mythical personages, or exceedingly picturesque and poetical ones, at all events' (p. 119). Blithedale is not even a year old, yet Coverdale is already looking far into the future, to the style in which he believes they will be remembered. In doing so, he looks past the years of work that such an endeavour would require. In particular, he expects to reap the benefits of a life of intense labour without putting that strain on his body, as he imagines himself 'painted in my shirt-sleeves, and with the sleeves rolled up, to show my muscular development' (p. 119). Coverdale's decision to ultimately leave Blithedale is built upon his belief that the yeoman and the scholar 'are two distinct individuals, and can never be melted or welded into one substance' (p. 62). His claim serves to highlight his subconscious fear that the 'boundaries' that he has desperately constructed around himself may not hold against the gothic darkness, represented by the winter nights surrounding Blithedale's 'somewhat too abundant fire'. After all, under its sunny exterior, Blithedale represents the need not only for hard work, but for political and economic machinations that could disrupt Coverdale's utopian ideal. As long as Coverdale desires to create poetry based on only the sunny aspects of life, the heavy, considerably more substantial work of the yeoman will remain a threat.

We also see the boundary lines that Coverdale erects to distinguish those around him from one another. Peter B. Murray notes that Coverdale's favoured companions, Zenobia and Hollingsworth, are characterised through images suggesting that they are sources of heat and

light, while Priscilla and Westervelt are described as cold and dull.[33] In order to make sense of those around him, Coverdale sorts them into neat little categories.[34] Those who radiate light and heat deserve his attention, while those who are cold and dull are disliked and mistrusted. What problematises Coverdale's view of his friends and acquaintances, however, is that they refuse to remain within rigid categories, thus challenging the trust he has in his own worldview. Take Hollingsworth, for example. When Coverdale falls ill with a fever, Hollingsworth remains faithfully by his bedside, nursing him back to health. During this time, Coverdale has nothing but praise for Hollingsworth, saying '[t]here never was any blaze of a fireside that warmed and cheered me [...] so effectually as did the light out of those eyes'. He also tells Hollingsworth that '"your own vocation is evidently to be a priest, and to spend your days and nights in helping your fellow-creatures to draw peaceful dying breaths"' (pp. 41-42). During his convalescence, Coverdale is temporarily relieved of the duties of day-to-day living. He is therefore able to turn Hollingsworth into the kind of Romantic figure that populates his writing. In this scenario, Coverdale can put himself at the centre of Hollingsworth's world as the 'fellow-creature' to whom Hollingsworth devotes his days and nights. However, once Hollingsworth begins to discuss his real vocation, to engage in a philanthropic project on the site of Blithedale, Coverdale begins to mistrust him:

> But by-and-by, you missed the tenderness of yesterday, and grew drearily conscious that Hollingsworth had a closer friend than ever you could be. And this friend was the cold, spectral monster which he had himself conjured up, and of which, at last – as these men of a mighty purpose so invariably do – he had grown to be the bond-slave. It was his philanthropic theory! (p. 52)

Now that Coverdale is no longer the object of Hollingsworth's affections, he is jealous of the 'closer friend' with whom Hollingsworth has become preoccupied, describing him in gothic terms as a 'spectral monster'. Coverdale again attacks a conflicting worldview as being less legitimate than his own. This philanthropic theory has simply been 'conjured up' and is holding Hollingsworth captive as a 'bond-slave'. This disturbingly suggests that Coverdale, in comparison, considers himself to be in control and an impartial observer of what he sees. It is a series of incidents similar to this that causes Coverdale to turn his back on Hollingsworth and eventually Zenobia. When their actions serve to legitimise Coverdale's worldview, they are praised for their heat and light, but when they threaten his version of reality, they are ridiculed

[33] Peter B. Murray, 'Mythopoesis in the *Blithedale Romance*', *PMLA*, 75.5 (1960), pp.591-96 (p. 595), doi:10.2307/460670.
[34] Borgstrom, 'Hating Miles Coverdale', p. 373.

and gothicised for their reformative zeal.[35] This may be because Coverdale feels legitimised by Hollingsworth's and Zenobia's cruel fates. He can believe that if he too were to be consumed by a cause, he might similarly suffer. Coverdale would rather admire his friends for their style – Zenobia for her beauty, Hollingsworth for his friendliness – than allow them to turn their efforts towards matters of substance such as reform. This threatens Coverdale, as it forces him to recognise that, unlike his fellow emigrants at Blithedale, he has no substantial goals to drive him. However, it is not until his confession at the end of the narrative that he is able to admit 'I lack a purpose. How strange!' (p. 223).

Blithedale's Fallout: 'The Shadow of a Passing Figure'

After falling out with his friends, Coverdale feels that Blithedale 'was no longer what it had been': 'Everything was suddenly faded' (p. 127). There is no longer enough summer sunlight within the farming community for Coverdale's taste. His return to the city, Justus notes, is almost inevitable: 'Psychologically, Coverdale is never far away from his urban quarters, which he alludes to several times, and the society which shapes his tastes and values.'[36] Coverdale cannot be the embodiment of American Romanticism, because he will never be able to 'incarnate' wild America, as Whitman would insist. He will always fall back on the society that 'shapes his tastes and values'. Indeed, after establishing himself in a 'respectable hotel', he has already begun to distance himself from his uncomfortable experiences at Blithedale: it becomes 'so shadowy, that a question might be raised whether the whole affair had been anything more than the thoughts of a speculative man' (pp. 133-34). His inconvenient memory of Blithedale lasts for only a moment before it is relegated to the distance.

Coverdale's new vantage point from his hotel room provides him with exactly the 'broad and simple' cheerfulness that he requires. Looking out at the back view of affluent dwellings and their gardens, he claims that there is 'more truth' in the back view of a residence than the front (p. 136), hinting at the Romantic belief, as identified by Crow, that the world could be read as a text unfolding secrets.[37] What he would like to believe is his omniscient observance is arrested suddenly when he realises that Zenobia occupies one of these dwellings. When she spots him spying from his room, she replies with what Coverdale believes to be 'one of those pitiless rebukes which a woman always has at hand', pulling down the curtain to the drawing room, thus denying him access to the world within (p. 145). We can now see why

[35] Justus, 'Hawthorne's Coverdale', p. 22.
[36] Justus, p. 24.
[37] Crow, 'American Gothic', p. 17.

Coverdale is so insulted by this act: he believes that he alone should be in charge of the story's narrative. Cutting off his access to the events beyond the curtain challenges the validity of Coverdale's narrative. Zenobia has thus reintroduced the element of mystery and shadow that he has tried to ignore. As Dana Brand has observed, 'the goal of Zenobia's feminism is to permit women to enjoy Miles Coverdale's freedom to stand outside of fixed roles, moving between them freely. As Coverdale's response makes clear, this is precisely what she cannot be permitted to enjoy.'[38] Like Hollingsworth's philanthropy, Zenobia's feminism becomes a gothic spectral monster because it places her outside Coverdale's fixed boundaries. This is illustrated when, attempting to spy on Zenobia through the offending window, all he can see is '[t]he shadow of a passing figure' with 'too vague an outline for even my adventurous conjectures to read the hieroglyphic that is presented' (p. 147). An image that remains a mysterious shadow is too disturbing for Coverdale. This is clear in the warning he gives her:

> It is really impossible to hide anything, in this world, to say nothing of the next. All that we ought to ask, therefore, is, that the witnesses of our conduct, and the speculators on our motives, should be capable of taking the highest view which the circumstances of the case may admit. So much being secured, I, for one, would be most happy in feeling myself followed, everywhere, by an indefatigable human sympathy. (pp. 148-49)

Despite claiming that he has been tormenting himself with 'crazy hypotheses' as to what might be going on in the drawing room, Coverdale does little to discover the reason behind Zenobia's presence there (p. 148). Rather than find out what her secret is, he chooses instead to chastise her for attempting to keep secrets at all. It is clear that he believes himself to be the Romantic witness capable of taking the 'highest view' of the circumstance. If his view of the world is 'indefatigable', then any mystery left to be solved would undermine his role. The dark is terrifying to Coverdale in the same way it is to the eponymous character in Hawthorne's gothic short story 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835). The presence of darkness means the possibility of concealment, duplicity, even rebellion from secondary characters who should, Goodman Brown and Coverdale believe, be there simply to support their narrative as the protagonist. As a result, in order to establish control over his universe, Coverdale must insist that everything be out in the open. He thus goes to visit Zenobia not to discover new knowledge, but to insist on his omniscient role.

It is because of his belief that the yeoman and the scholar 'can never be melted or welded into one substance' (p. 62) that Coverdale is late for the climax of his own story. As

[38] Brand, *The Spectator and the City*, p. 152.

outlined above, the yeoman here represents the difficult, unknown aspects of life from which Coverdale shies away, such as the difficult labour at Blithedale. The scholar represents the familiar, cigar-smoking dilettante side of life upon which Coverdale focuses. As has been argued above, Coverdale has proven himself unable to identify with the suffering of others. Rather than empathising, he projects his own assumptions onto those around him. Unable to identify with someone else's pain, he is unprepared for what happens once it unveils itself. His failing comes to a head once he returns to Blithedale in search of Zenobia. Entering the nearby woods, he encounters a carnivalesque scene that is terrifying to his eyes: a 'concourse of strange figures' with 'streaks of sunlight glimmering down upon them' between overshadowing branches (p. 190). Timothy Jones has observed the presence of carnivalesque gothic in Hawthorne's work. In 'Young Goodman Brown', for instance, the midnight sabbat 'provides a carnival space where the everyday boundaries of the colony are erased'.[39] Not dissimilarly, here the boundaries of Blithedale are dissolving. The intersection of light and dark indicates that we should be about to discover something new, namely, the reason for the breakdown of Blithedale as a community. However, through Coverdale's eyes, the encounter is too chaotic to make any semblance of sense. He is so overcome from the gothic confusion that he is not fully aware of the macabre entertainment.

The gathering is composed of characters real and fictional, magical and practical, including an Indian chief, the goddess Diana, a Kentucky woodsman, and allegoric figures from Edmund Spencer's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96). Coverdale is not presented with the single explanation he was expecting, but a multiplicity of possibilities, each symbolised by a diverse character. Coverdale, who has spent so long ignoring the mysteries of Blithedale, is now overwhelmed by gothic possibilities. He no longer knows how to process new information and is left even more confused by this discovery. This is illustrated by the dance performed by the group, in which they spin so fast that 'their separate incongruities were blended all together', becoming an 'entanglement that went nigh to turn one's brain, with merely looking at it' (p. 191). Thus, the chaos of light and darkness continues, and Coverdale remains unable to make sense of the scene in front of him. Indeed, he himself claims that '[m]y sensations were as if I had come upon a battle-field, before the smoke was as yet cleared away' (p. 196). The grey smoke – the mixing of black and white – has obscured Coverdale's vision. He is

[39] Timothy Jones, *The Gothic and the Carnivalesque in American Culture* (University of Wales Press, 2015), p. 66.

completely out of his depth. He is so used to viewing the world through his own transparent lens that anything opaque or mysterious is completely foreign to him.

Coverdale is so far out of his depth that he fails to recognise trouble before it is too late. 'If there is tragedy attendant upon Zenobia's fate', Justus argues, 'it takes shape, outside and beyond the range of Coverdale's perceptions'.[40] Coverdale is completely uninterested and perhaps unable to parse the reason behind Zenobia's actions. Zenobia is devastated for a very understandable reason; Hollingsworth, who she believes loved her, has revealed that he was considering marrying her only for her money. Once he discovered that she is no longer rich, he chose instead to run off with Priscilla. However, Coverdale does not attempt to imagine what she may be going through. Instead, he focuses on her beauty, to the detriment of her feelings: 'How magnificently Zenobia looked, as she said this! The effect of her beauty was even heightened by the over-consciousness and self-recognition of it, into which, I suppose, Hollingsworth's scorn had driven her' (p. 206). Even as Zenobia is crying out in pain, Coverdale focuses on how she talks, rather than what she says. It is therefore no wonder that he leaves at the crucial moment before Zenobia takes her own life. Coverdale has always been fixated on Zenobia's sense of style, enchanted by the way she presents herself to the world, from the ever-changing flower she wears in her hair to the way in which she holds herself.[41] Even when he is furious with her, he cannot help admiring just how attractive she can make herself. When he is confronting her for closing the curtain to her drawing room, he observes: 'I saw how fit it was that she should make herself as gorgeous as she pleased, and should do a thousand things that would have been ridiculous to the poor, thin, weakly characters of other women' (p. 150). As a man of inaction, it does not cross his mind until after the fact that Zenobia may be about to commit suicide: like Emerson, Coverdale does not recognise that it is he who is seeing 'all objects through this warm-tinted mist' rather than Zenobia.[42] Instead of trying to understand her grief, he emphasises his own role as a benevolent overseer, congratulating himself on his ability to sympathise. 'Was it wrong', Coverdale asks rhetorically, 'if I felt consecrated to the priesthood, by sympathy like this, and called upon to minister to this woman's affliction, so far as mortal could?' (pp. 202-03).

When Coverdale finally realises what he has missed and calls upon Hollingsworth and Silas Foster to look for her body, they are faced with a nightmarish darkness, with no light to

[40] Justus, 'Hawthorne's Coverdale', p. 30.
[41] John N. Miller, 'Eros and Ideology: At the Heart of Hawthorne's Blithedale', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 55.1 (2000), pp. 1-12 (p. 6), doi:10.2307/2903055.
[42] Emerson, 'Woman', p. 412.

help them. In this chapter, appropriately titled 'Midnight', Coverdale is forced to face the gothic darkness that he has shied away from for so long. The river in which they fear Zenobia has drowned herself is almost impossibly black: 'Not a ray appeared to fall on the river itself. It lapsed imperceptibly away, a broad, black, inscrutable depth, keeping its own secrets from the eye of man, as impenetrably as mid-ocean could' (p. 211). Coverdale is forced to live out his nightmare. He is no longer in control, instead groping around in the darkness, terrified of the mysteries that could be at any depth below him. The darkness, however, is also Coverdale's chance at redemption. If he is able to accept that he is not the centre of the world, and can come to understand Zenobia's reasons for suicide, then he will not have failed completely as an artist or a man. This, however, does not happen. Upon reclaiming her body, Coverdale focuses only on the ugliness of her corpse:

> [C]ould Zenobia have seen all these ugly circumstances of death, how ill it would become her, the altogether unseemly aspect which she must put on, and, especially, old Silas Foster's efforts to improve the matter, she would no more have committed the dreadful act, than have exhibited herself to a public assembly in a badly-fitting garment! (p. 214)

Instead of trying to understand her, he once again clings to what he already believes, instead of searching for new information that might allow him to grow as a man and an artist. In doing so he commits his most outrageous act thus far. He has transformed another person's whole life and death into an object for his own consumption. Claiming that Zenobia would not have killed herself if she had known how 'ill it would become her', he dismisses any personal motives she might have had.[43] Coverdale thus reveals just how far he has fallen from any ability to understand the world around him, believing that Zenobia's only reason to live was to perform for him.

In the book's epilogue, Coverdale's confession reveals that he has learned from hindsight somewhat. He now understands that he lacks 'a purpose' (p. 223). He recognises he has failed as a man due to his inability to stand for anything, something that is highlighted by his claim that he would be prepared to die for a cause, provided 'the effort did not involve an unreasonable amount of trouble' (p. 223). He has also recognised his failure as an artist and has given up poetry, perhaps recognising that although his writing was 'pretty', it lacked substance. His final admission, that he loved Priscilla all along, however, only compounds his failure. It does not throw a 'gleam of light' over his behaviour throughout the story as he would like it to

[43] Justus, 'Hawthorne's Coverdale', p. 28.

(p. 224). Coverdale, ignoring the mysteries around him for so long, has forfeited the ability to reveal the truth. Instead, the narrative's ending highlights his regret, which has come far too late, that he did not embrace the darkness.

Throughout most of the story, Coverdale ignores or rejects Priscilla.[44] She is too cold, too plain, and too unfashionable for his liking. Where Hollingsworth and Zenobia radiated light, light seems to pass through Priscilla, not even reflecting off her (p. 170). Indeed, at one point he claims that she is 'like a flower-shrub that had done its best to blossom in too scanty light' (p. 27). Crucially, Coverdale's period of admiration for Priscilla coincides with the time of significant adoration for Priscilla within the Blithedale community in which 'everybody was kind to Priscilla' (p. 70). Once again, Coverdale's cannot help but follow a popular trend rather than forging his own path like an American pioneer. Thus, his confession is an admission, however unconscious, that he has failed as both an artist and a man, because he attempted to silence all narratives concerning darkness and gloom, and ended up following the well-trodden path of social conformity. Perhaps he eventually decides that Priscilla should be his object of desire because her role as the Veiled Lady brings with it an air of mystery. As the unnamed and perpetually shrouded clairvoyant who performs in town halls, the Veiled Lady is an enigma of great interest to the high society in New England. However, by claiming to love Priscilla, Coverdale shows that he has not really learned from his mistakes.

The question of who is under the veil is also one of the only straightforward mysteries of the romance. In comparison to the other questions that have far more complex and incomplete answers, such as why Zenobia killed herself or how Hollingsworth could rationalise sacrificing love for money, the mystery of the Veiled Lady is dramatically revealed near the end of the story. Coverdale may claim to love Priscilla as the ending of her story is the most convenient and satisfying, with no mystery or darkness left to ponder – that, at least, he can discern. Perhaps, conversely, he claims to love Priscilla because she is the character who he found most difficult to analyse. As Brand argues, Priscilla, even more than the other characters, remains beyond Coverdale's understanding.[45] In this way, Priscilla's existence remains like a remnant of the gothic carnivalesque, a reminder to Coverdale of the narratives going on beyond his perception. Coverdale is once again attracted to the aesthetic of mystery, without any interest in actually understanding it. As has been explained above, neither darkness nor light alone is enough to create meaning. Knowledge is gleaned and art is created only at the

[44] Justus, 'Hawthorne's Coverdale', p. 25.
[45] Brand, *The Spectator and the City*, p. 149.

intersection of the two. His conflicting emotions – the desire to return to the blindingly sunny days of Blithedale and his shame in losing the ability to utilise the darkness – suggest that he will never find the intersection of the two that is required to make up for his past failures. The world he nostalgically remembers never really existed, and the world of subtle shadings is forever lost to him.