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Keywords

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**The Blithedale Romance:
Sympathy, Industry, and the Poet**

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* participates in the antebellum discourse on labor, the complicated discussion in America over the meaning of work in the middle of the nineteenth century. As Nicholas K. Bromell recognizes in his study *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America*, during that critical period, "the nature and the meaning of work were anxiously discussed and contested as new ideological

formations were developed to explain and justify new work practices” (1). These “new ideological formations” that were designed to understand and manage the changing meaning of work as the Industrial Revolution progressed not only impacted labor proper but also held deep ramifications for the labor of the mind and of creative production. Antebellum writers such as Hawthorne were prompted “to revise accepted notions of creativity and to rethink both the aims and means of their artistic practice” if they were to survive and flourish in the changing cultural landscape of industrial America (15). In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne reveals his deep anxiety over both the “new ideological formations” that attempted to reformulate the standards by which literary work operated and his own effort to “revise accepted notions of creativity.” The contested relationship between aesthetic practice and labor ideology can be seen in the conflicting relationship between Coverdale and Hollingsworth and their troubled relationship with the Blithedale experiment.

Through Coverdale’s Blithedale adventure, Hawthorne investigates the crisis of the Romantic writer, with his romantic aesthetic of the sympathetic imagination, and his imminent collision with modernity, represented by Hollingsworth’s embrace of industrial morality. As Frank Christianson recognizes, “*The Blithedale Romance* . . . stages an aesthetic contest that takes the sympathetic imagination as that element of Romanticism which must be redefined in order to ensure a place for literature in the modern world” (247). To understand the relationship

between the “aesthetic contest” in Blithedale and the need to “ensure” a place for literature in “the modern world,” it is necessary to recognize Blithedale as a novel on the cusp of radical social transformation—as capturing the moment the antebellum era slides into the modern world and conceptions of American destiny such as an agrarian utopia envisaged by thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson fade away and assume the “inexpressibly dreary . . . dingy . . . atmosphere of city-smoke” that Coverdale eschews upon his departure for Blithedale from Boston (Hawthorne 45). Coverdale and Hawthorne share the fear of an encroaching modern world that subjugates meaningful artistic expression with cold industry, hence Blithedale’s obsession with exploring agents of resistance such as a pre-industrial mode of life and antebellum conceptions of sympathy.

In order to understand the sympathetic imagination, the capacity to imaginatively and creatively feel what another feels, as an antebellum construct influencing artistic practices of the day, it is essential to understand that for the antebellum era, sympathy was a distinct way of life, a certain way of looking at the world. Contrary to rationalism, sympathy elevated the human heart, trusted the emotions, and possessed an unshakable faith in the inherent goodness of human nature. Sympathy connected individuals to others through the heart, an emotional connectedness that creates a community of individuals who share intangible emotional bonds. Rather than viewing humanity as comprised of disparate, isolated individuals, each striving to conquer the other as Thomas Hobbes asserted, sympathy saw

emotion as the universal, underlying current that united all people in a positive, immutable bond, a positivism that gives rise to egalitarian aspirations such as empathy and equality as well as Coverdale's creative *modus operandi* the sympathetic imagination. Moments of tears and pity, exemplified by Coverdale's forgiving Hollingsworth at the end of Blithedale—"tears gushed into my eyes, and I forgave him" (166), symbolize the power of sympathetic connection and its ability to repair broken relationships and connect unlike people. Frank Christianson argues that sympathy was popular among reformers like Coverdale in the mid-nineteenth century because it provided an alternative sense of social connection to typical social relations, which were becoming more and more tinged by industrialism, expanding markets, and commercialism, precisely the things about "modern" society the Blithedalers hoped to reform by their flight to the wilderness (247).

Furthermore, sympathy provided the intellectual paradigm that allowed antebellum artists and reformers to transcend prejudice and look towards creating a more pluralistic society. At least in theory, by casting aside class privilege, reformers gained an emotional community, a family bond that transcended race, gender, and socio-economic status. Sympathy understands human relations as the holy union between peoples; by imagining a universal, "ubiquitous experience" that underlies all human action, sympathy makes possible an expansive sense of family united through emotional connections (Castiglia 200). Sympathy, as dramatized in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel

Uncle Tom's Cabin, allowed for white, middle-class women from the North to identify with Southern black slaves and their abjection; feeling the plight of slaves as similar to their own bondage to their families and homes, white women were incited to political action and social reform (Levine 225). Ideally, sympathetic identification imaginatively suspended the racial prejudices of the members of mainstream society and allowed them to establish an emotional bond with the marginalized “other” that held philanthropic and political underpinnings.

Blithedale represents many of these sentiments, especially the link between reformist aspirations, sympathetic emotions, and artistic creation. At one point in the novel, Zenobia thanks Coverdale for his “beautiful poetry,” to which he replies: “I hope now...to produce something that shall really deserve to be called poetry—true, strong, natural, and sweet, as in the life which we are about to lead” (12-13). In the furtherance of that goal, Coverdale soon finds his creative sympathies engaged by the “pitiableness” of Priscilla’s “depressed and sad...figure,” the result of her working in a factory. He desires to commit her “poetical” frailty to verse (21). Set against the surging tide of the Industrial Revolution, Blithedale, the communal farm, offers an alternative to the mode of life (and labor and creativity) that has been created by industrialism and market capitalism. Blithedale carves out a pre-industrial enclave in nature where reformers can step back in time and attempt to reverse, or at least critique and refine, the impact of industrialism on modern society. Blithedale’s liminal

occupation of a place and time between pre-industrial and industrial societies creates a kind of last bastion for the artist of the sympathetic imagination.

The aesthetic dimension of Coverdale's sympathetic imagination is well illustrated in the scene in which Old Moodie visits Blithedale and inquires about Priscilla's whereabouts and well-being, and here readers begin to see problematic aspects in Romanticism's ideals. As Coverdale and Hollingsworth eat lunch after "hoeing potatoes, that forenoon," Coverdale spots the degenerated form of an unexpected visitor, Old Moodie, "skulk[ing] along the edge of the field" (60). Coverdale instantly takes to describing Old Moodie's dilapidated exterior: he is a "shabbily" dressed, "subdued, undemonstrative old man," whose "red nose" indicates his penchant for consuming "a glass of liquor, now and then, and probably more than was good for him." His "shy look about him, as if he were ashamed of his poverty," causes Coverdale to recall his previous encounters with the unfortunate Old Moodie: "He haunts restaurants and such places, and has an odd way of lurking in corners . . . and holding out his hand, with some little article in it, which he wishes you to buy." Despite his poverty, Old Moodie remains a harmless person, and even a "tolerably honest one," in Coverdale's eyes. In the end, Old Moodie resembles a "furtive" rat, a harmless creature "without the mischief, the fierce eye, the teeth to bite with, or the desire to bite" (60).

Old Moodie's pathetic figure is noteworthy because it arouses in Coverdale the powerful sympathetic emotions that inspire both his call to reform and his imaginative

leaps into the interior life of the subject. Old Moodie's weakness ("a very forlorn old man") renders him vulnerable to Coverdale's "custom" of "making . . . prey of people's individualities," or his sympathetic imagination: "I tried to identify my mind with the old fellow's, and take his view of the world, as if looking through a smoke-blackened glass as the sun" (61). Coverdale then beholds the following "through old Moodie's eyes":

those pleasantly swelling slopes of our farm,
 descending towards the wide meadows, through
 which sluggishly circled the brimful tide of the
 Charles, bathing the long sedges on its hither and
 farther shores; the broad, sunny gleam over the
 winding water . . . the sultry heat-vapor, which
 rose everywhere like incense, and in which my
 soul delighted, as indicating so rich a fervor in the
 passionate day, and in the earth that was burning
 with its love." (61)

In his mind, Coverdale derives creative power not through his volition, imagination, or internal well of emotional wealth but by looking "through old Moodie's eyes." He takes the plight of Old Moodie, a victim of modernity, and turns forlornness into a beautiful vista. His encounter with Old Moodie shows that Coverdale's sympathetic imagination creates powerful imagery, elegant prose, and unique insights into the human condition. This aesthetic program, however, subjugates the "other" and achieves creative bursts through the appropriation of Old Moodie's abjection.

While Coverdale fears the changes wrought by

industrialism and uses Blithedale and the sympathetic imagination as a romantic escape into a pastoral way of life, Hollingsworth embraces modernity for the possibilities it creates for the reformation and subsequent perfection of man, as seen in his prison-reform project. With his constant attention to work and to his philanthropic dream, the construction of his “visionary edifice” dedicated to the “reform and mental culture of our criminal brethren” through “methods moral, intellectual, and *industrial*” (Hawthorne 41, 91 emphasis added), Hollingsworth is emblematic of what Paul Faler terms “industrial morality.” In his “Cultural Aspects of the Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, Shoemakers and Industrial Morality, 1826-1860,” Faler provides insight into how Hawthorne participates in the antebellum discourse on labor and how relevant the concept of industrial morality is to understanding Blithedale and Hawthorne’s need to reconsider his aesthetic conceptions. Taking Lynn, Massachusetts as a microcosm of the Industrial Revolution in mid-nineteenth century America, Faler explores the cultural and social changes that occurred in a New England town as a result of industrialism and the imposition of industrial morality. Industrial morality, simply put, was the cultural expression of the Industrial Revolution; it was, according to Faler, “a new morality based upon the paramount importance of work,” linking useful productivity with human worth (220). It enjoined the individual to take up strict inner discipline, “a tightening up of the moral code,” that sought to abolish, alter, or sublimate the culture of leisure or “those customs, traditions and practices that

interfered with productive labor” (220).

Bruce Laurie goes further to describe the proselytizing element of industrial morality, whose mission was to dismantle the culture of leisure, the “culture of sport, merrymaking, and drinking,” that characterized preindustrial labor (218). By regarding leisure, and preindustrial culture by extension, as “wasteful, frivolous and, above all, sinful,” industrialization based its new morality on regimentation, uniformity, and efficiency of production, a move that moralized economics and made the workplace the root of daily life and modern society (Laurie 219). Civil society played a crucial role in this process; philanthropists and reformers formed community groups that became the “cultural apparatus of ideas and institutions” that instilled the new values of industry (220). For example, in Lynn, reformers banded together in *The Society for the Promotion of Industry, Frugality, and Temperance* to promote the following values:

self-discipline, emphasis on productive labor, and condemnation of wasteful habits. Industry, frugality and temperance, if conscientiously followed, would result in savings that would bring material reward to the wage earner and wellbeing to the community. (Faler 220)

Industrial morality attempted to replace the community of feeling, of sympathetic emotions and invisible bonds, with a community of materialism. Rather than resist the tide of industrialism as Blithedale attempts to do, civil society—reformers and philanthropists—in Lynn played an integral

role in the promulgation of industrialism.

In this way, Hawthorne's reformer-philanthropist Hollingsworth resembles the moralists of Lynn more than Blithedale's idealists. Industrial morality manifests itself in Hollingsworth's inner character as the earnest, singular attention with which he attempts to consummate "his philanthropic dream" and in his recurring attempts to make converts to his cause. Coverdale hints at the duplicitous undertone and perhaps ulterior motive behind Hollingsworth's presence on the first night at Blithedale: "his heart . . . was never really interested in our socialist scheme, but was forever busy with his strange and . . . impracticable plan for the reformation of criminals, through an appeal to their higher instincts" (27). Coverdale aptly perceives an aberration of character in Hollingsworth when he reflects that Hollingsworth had joined Blithedale "actuated by no real sympathy with our feelings and our hopes," but because he had alienated himself "from the world" in his pursuit of his "lonely and exclusive object" (40). In Coverdale's eyes, Hollingsworth's alienation from the world, due to his pursuit, has rendered him as "not altogether human":

There was something else in Hollingsworth, besides flesh and blood, and sympathies and affections, and celestial spirit. This is always true of those men who have surrendered themselves to an overruling purpose. It does not so much impel them from without, nor even operate as a motive power within. . . and finally converts them into little else save that one principle. (Hawthorne 51)

Undergirding the passion and zeal by which Hollingsworth submits to this “over-ruling purpose” and strives towards nothing else “save for that one principle” is his emphasis on industrial morality, “the earnest and constant attention to work” (Faler 220).

That reference to “something else in Hollingsworth” that is neither “flesh,” sympathy, or spirit alludes to a prior conversation between Coverdale and Hollingsworth where the latter proclaims, “I have always been in earnest . . . I have hammered thought out of iron, after heating the iron in my heart! Were I a slave, at the bottom of a mine, I should keep the same purpose, the same faith in its ultimate accomplishment, that I do now” (49). While asserting that Coverdale is not in earnest, “either as a poet or a laborer” (49), Hollingsworth characterizes himself as an earnest slave, Sisyphean in his interminable labor, trapped within the iron furnace of his own subsumed, industrial heart. Furthermore, like a machine, Hollingsworth will always press on in his mission, destroying those sympathetic individuals “who should be drawn into too intimate a connection with him” because he possesses, in Coverdale’s words, “no heart, no sympathy, no reason, no conscience” (51). Through “faith” in the earnest attention to “the same purpose,” Hollingsworth’s labor will come to fruition and his philanthropic vision will be realized. The passage is nothing less than Hollingsworth’s articulation of his own personal industrial morality—the means by which he will achieve his dream—and a condemnation of Coverdale’s frivolous ways.

The conflict between the aesthetics of sympathy and the ideology of labor industry culminates during Hollingsworth's final attempt to convert Coverdale to his cause. In response to Coverdale's revelry over the "romantic story" their labor at Blithedale will make for their progeny, Hollingsworth says, "Listen to me, Coverdale. Your fantastic anticipations make me discern . . . what a wretched, unsubstantial scheme is this. . . I ask you to be, at last, a man of sobriety and earnestness, and aid me in an enterprise which is worth all our strength, and the strength of a thousand mightier than we!" (91). The higher "purpose in life, worthy of the most extreme self-devotion," that Hollingsworth offers to Coverdale reflects industrial morality's proselytizing mission to replace the cultures, ethics, and ideologies it deems inferior and wasteful, such as Coverdale's life of "aimless beauty," his embrace of sympathy (93). Hollingsworth's deep desire, bordering on religious destiny, to promulgate his morality is well alluded to in his comparison with the "venerable apostle Eliot," a comparison that links his "Indian auditory" with Coverdale, Priscilla, Zenobia, and the criminals he hopes to correct and edify through "methods moral, intellectual, and industrial" (83, 91). While Coverdale is able to resist Hollingsworth's Faustian bargain with an emphatic negative, his denial underscores Hollingsworth's criticism that Coverdale is neither a poet nor laborer and that his call to poetry and to reform—sympathy—lacks inner conviction.

Hawthorne stages the contest between sympathy and industry to consider the validity of his own calling: how useful is the poet in industrial society? Would industrialists,

like Hollingsworth, who “never had the slightest appreciation of [Coverdale’s] poetry,” (49) regard poetry, if not art in general, as “frivolous” or even “sinful”? What are we to make of Coverdale’s abandonment of poetry at the end of the novel if not that it was a dying art, displaced by the machine? The antebellum discourse on labor and its cultural productions, such as industrial morality, posed a mortal threat to Hawthorne’s creative calling. As such, Blithedale grapples with the forces of change and their conflict with convention. Hawthorne’s desire to abstract himself out of his present situation through romantic invention belies his active engagement with the modern world. Hawthorne questions sympathy’s ability truly to understand the “other” while simultaneously trying to inhabit the lives of his characters. With its new standards of ascertaining value, *The Blithedale Romance* speaks to Hawthorne’s fear of industry’s iron hammer as the death knell for poetry. In the final analysis, rather than identify, as the novel’s treatment of sympathy would have us do, with Coverdale’s retired life of quiet complacency or Hollingsworth’s shattered heart, Hawthorne asks us to look beyond contemporary obstructions and to affirm art and poetry’s place in modern society.

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