

*The Blithedale Romance. A Woman's Story*

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**Abstract**

Although it does not seem to be particularly groundbreaking in today's world, I contend in this essay that the story Nathaniel Hawthorne tells in *The Blithedale Romance* was radically forward-thinking for his contemporary society. Analyzing it from a contemporary perspective, some feminist scholars have argued that the depiction of female characters is misogynist. In addition, the narrator is often considered to be unreliable and, as such, a failure. Drawing mainly on the theory of Foucault, this article argues that Hawthorne uses an unreliable narrator to interrogate patriarchal monologic discourses and to create a narrative space for the voice of Zenobia, the book's feminist character, to be heard. Gender and genre considerations are particularly intertwined in the text. Thus, while Coverdale's narrative empowers Zenobia's voice, Hawthorne's use of romance challenges established genre conventions. I claim that *The Blithedale Romance* challenges patriarchal authority by presenting Zenobia as a more reliable and powerful voice than that of the male narrator.

**Keywords:** Nathaniel Hawthorne, feminism, unreliable narrator, monologic discourses.

*The Blithedale Romance. La historia de una mujer***Resumen**

Desde una perspectiva contemporánea, la historia de *The Blithedale Romance* no resulta particularmente reformadora. No sólo ha sido tachada de misógina por algunas críticas feministas, sino que la obra también recibió críticas porque su narrador no parece fidedigno.

No obstante, enmarcada en el siglo en el que se escribió, *The Blithedale Romance* sí que resulta innovadora en más de una manera. Manejando principalmente teorías de Michel Foucault, este artículo demostrará que Hawthorne usa a propósito este narrador para desestabilizar los discursos monológicos del sistema patriarcal y para crear un espacio que visibilice la opinión feminista de Zenobia. Mientras la narración de Coverdale logra que la voz de Zenobia resulte la más poderosa de toda la narración, la forma en la que Hawthorne juega con el término romance pone en entredicho las convenciones literarias de su época. *The Blithedale Romance* desmonta, por tanto, discursos monológicos referentes al papel de la mujer y a los géneros literarios, al tiempo que presenta la voz de Zenobia como más autorizada y poderosa que la del narrador.

**Palabras clave:** Nathaniel Hawthorne, feminismo, narrador no fidedigno, discursos monológicos.

“Art is not a mirror held up to reality,  
 but a hammer with which to shape it.”

BERTOLT BRECHT

The death of Zenobia in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* has led some scholars, including Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Louise DeSalvo, and Wendy Martin, to censure the portrayal of female characters in the novel as deeply misogynistic. However, in contrast to this viewpoint, I believe that Zenobia plays a key role as she allows the author to critique the patriarchal social structures that discriminate women. As Carolyn Maribor suggests, “her faults or ‘frailties’ are the result of, not the justification for, society’s restrictions” (98). The story is narrated by a man, Miles Coverdale, a character that has been variously described as “unreliable, crazy, self-absorbed to the point of blindness, ineffectual, and/or a deluded but cunning murderer” (Davis 99). In this essay, I contend that the difficulties in interpreting *The Blithedale Romance* stem from Hawthorne’s “uncertainties about his own society” (Auerbach 114). Thus, Coverdale’s unreliability as a narrator is an effective authorial device that exposes society’s oppressive discourses.

As Nina Baym (430) argues, before the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, the term ‘romance’ was used as a synonym for ‘novel’. With this in mind, it is noteworthy that Hawthorne was keen to differentiate the two genres by insisting that his work exemplified the former rather than the latter. This might seem curious, given that, in Hawthorne’s world, romances were often criticized as the product of a “‘sickly’ imagination” rather than deriving from ‘wholesome’ reason or judgment” (Bell 39). Furthermore, such fiction was thought of as “dangerous, psychologically threatening, and even socially subversive” (Bell 39). Hawthorne’s insistence that he wrote romances can be interpreted, therefore, as a deliberate strategy by which he separated himself from the literary and social conventions of his time. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that, although the author makes several comments about the romance in the prefaces to his four novels –*The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), and *The Marble Faun* (1860)– his statements fail to offer a clear definition of the genre. Instead, Hawthorne provides only an imprecise explanation of what the romance is *not* and, as such, his comments actually mask the author’s personal vision of the genre.

By analyzing Hawthorne’s use of literary genre and gender to promote proto-feminist ideas, this article explores how *The Blithedale Romance* critiques monologic discourses by presenting Zenobia as a more reliable storyteller than Coverdale, a first-person narrator whose omniscience will be called into question by an ‘other’, “that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcise the interior danger) but by being shut away (in order to reduce its otherness)” (Foucault xxiv).

## 1. A Narrative Theatre

While “The Custom-House” and the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* would seem to present Hawthorne’s views on the constituents of a romance, I consider these texts to be disingenuous, literary performances of what is expected from a romance but not a true definition of the genre. For Bell, “these prefaces are not essays in critical definition but (...) dramatic, ironic, and often comic social performances, in which the author adopts a series of masks and poses in order to obscure —and yet

also to hint at— the true authority behind his fiction” (45). In a similar vein, Peter Bellis points out that

when Hawthorne speaks directly of the romance as a genre in “The Custom House,” he does not offer a true definition—he describes a scene. He *stages* the romance itself, as a performance, rather than grounding it in abstract or theoretical terms. And the quintessentially “romantic” moments in his texts are almost always visual displays or tableaux, scenes of revelation and spectatorship. (24)

As we read Hawthorne’s prefaces, readers are cast in the role of an audience to a theatrical representation, expecting their active involvement. Hawthorne needs his readers to take what aestheticians refer to as a psychic distance, the “necessary separation between beholder and art object (...) which disengages the beholder from the real world and enables him to accept the artistic illusion as real” (Rohrberger 18). Hawthorne uses this idea both in his prefaces and in his sketch “Main Street”. In these texts, he emphasizes the difference between reality and imagination in order to distinguish the traditional notion of a novel from his very specific version of romance.

The *Blithedale* preface is addressed to its readers and mentions that some of them may find connections between the contents of the book and Brook Farm. The writer acknowledges that he was indeed inspired by that real life enterprise, in which he himself participated, but his intention as an author is “to establish a theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel, where the creatures of his brain may play their phantasmagorical antics, without exposing them to too close a comparison with the actual events of real lives” (Hawthorne 3-4). This is the first preface in which Hawthorne uses the word ‘theatre’ to refer to his literary output. Playing on Shakespeare’s and Calderón de la Barca’s vision of the whole world as (a) stage, this concept will appear, directly or indirectly, throughout the story when Hawthorne mentions the Blithedale community, a gesture that reminds readers of the representational nature of what they are reading.

Hawthorne’s decision to describe the Blithedale story in terms of theatre is not random. One of the main features of a play is the presence of multiple voices that often speak in dialogue. But it is also

worth noting that, in this preface, Hawthorne refers to himself as the author in the third-person singular, a device that produces an aesthetic distance between Hawthorne as individual and Hawthorne as writer. In contrast to this technique, the story itself is a first-person narrative by Miles Coverdale who recounts his memories of his time at Blithedale. Nevertheless, throughout the course of the book, it becomes apparent to readers that Miles's subjective version of events is open to question. Unlike the 'author' of the preface, therefore, Hawthorne uses Miles as a deliberately unreliable narrator.

The questionable story that Miles tells is a mechanism that serves a two-fold purpose: on the one hand, to expose the nature of patriarchal monologic discourses, whilst, on the other, to open a space for Zenobia's feminist opinions to be heard. Hawthorne, thus, "created in Coverdale a type of narrative voice that makes room for and even solicits response and critique" (Davis 102). Hawthorne's particular use of a first-person narrator in *The Blithedale Romance* becomes his way of involving his art with a social cause. After all, "the point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter" (Lodge 155). I contend, therefore, that the figure of Miles Coverdale calls into question the role of such narrators by showing the unreliability of any male discourse.

It is significant that the character of Miles Coverdale is named after the man who finished William Tyndale's translation of the Bible into English and who, in 1535, became the first person to have a Bible printed in English. The Italian '*traduttore traditore*' summarizes a long-running debate on the role of translators. According to some, translators are 'traitors' because they modify the original text and adapt it to the target language. For others, translators are artists capable of producing new artifacts in different languages. For the purposes of my analysis, Coverdale's character can be analyzed by bearing these two contrasting approaches in mind. On the one hand, it can be said that, after living through the Blithedale experience, Miles's version of past events is colored by his current point of view and, thus, he can be accused of reconstructing the narrative to fit his own interests. On the other, it can be argued that Coverdale is not editing the Blithedale experience for his own benefit but, instead, to help readers understand the experimental

community of which he was a part. Thus, he presents the flaws of the Blithedale community in order to explain, with hindsight, why it did not succeed. In this sense, Miles's narrative distills how "the book's aesthetic incoherence corresponds to the community's social incoherence" (Auerbach 110). Coverdale, as a guise for Hawthorne, is therefore a clever strategy that actually engineers narrative spaces for those members of the project who were not given the chance to speak out.

As Coverdale narrates the story, we could consider him to be in a privileged and powerful position compared to the other characters. According to Foucault (1980), knowledge implies dominance over those who do not possess the same information. Yet, by undermining the reliability of Coverdale's testimony about the series of events in which he was involved, Hawthorne effectively downplays Miles's narrative authority within the book. Consequently, Coverdale's story leads us to recognize the impossibility of an account of events ever being definitive, this being even more so when reported by a single voice. Hawthorne's text, therefore, becomes an open forum where different voices can be heard. He conceived the tale as a democratic scenario, a theatre in which a varied range of characters are allowed to put forward their ideas without being censored by an overruling first-person narrator. *The Blithedale Romance*

is not a historical representation of Brook Farm, but a scene of the dialogue of multifarious social languages, a struggle essentially of interpretation and dominance (...) The novel, thus, becomes a heteroglossic polylogue of ideological discourses on social structure and community in the Blithedale "theatre." (Bauer 18)

The other main characters involved in the Blithedale theatre are Zenobia, Hollingsworth, and Priscilla. They are supported by two other characters –old Moodie and Westervelt– who set the 'Veiled Lady' strand of the narrative in motion. But Zenobia is by far the most important of the supporting cast. She is introduced in the first pages of the text in connection with literature and "the advocacy of women's rights" (Hawthorne 9). Discussing Zenobia's literary preferences, Mary S. Schriber notes that

[her] intellect and sardonic wit repeatedly show themselves in her “literary” mode, which is invariably a negative judgment on the pusillanimous literature of her time. The robust, passionate Zenobia cannot admire literature that feeds on melodrama and insipid ideals of the feminine. (69)

These ideas parallel Hawthorne’s own about the literary conventions of his time. By establishing a structural parallel in the story, we can interpret Hollingsworth and Priscilla as characters who are complementary to Coverdale and Zenobia. Using Hawthorne’s distinction between novel and romance, it can be argued that the former, more traditional couple, are closer to representing novelistic conventions, while the latter operate within the sphere of romances as they are more imaginative and less bound by social precepts.

Hollingsworth and Priscilla appear in chapter IV of *The Blithedale Romance*. The first time the male character is mentioned, there is a reference to the moving power of his speech and the strength of his voice: Zenobia exclaims, “What a voice he has!” (Hawthorne 22). Whenever Coverdale talks about Hollingsworth, he also notices the tone of his voice. This might lead us to believe that, although not the narrator of the story, Hollingsworth is a dominant vocal presence within the text. From the moment of his arrival, Hollingsworth proclaims himself as the leader of the community, whereas Priscilla lacks a voice to express her own opinions. Hollingsworth represents the conventional patriarch of his time concerning women’s socially accepted roles, and thus his voice is that of a dominant, nineteenth-century male. By contrast, Priscilla seems a much weaker presence within the book as she possesses no sociopolitical opinions of her own. She aptly illustrates Coventry Patmore’s ideal of the ‘Angel in the House’, a role that Zenobia struggles to change, just as Hawthorne’s text set out to confound genre conventions.

Coverdale’s narrative is accompanied by the legend of the Veiled Lady, a subtext that is crucial to the main plot as it hints at the relationship between Zenobia, Priscilla and the two male protagonists. Coverdale opens his chronicle by mentioning that he has just attended the Veiled Lady show, which revolves around the identity of a mysterious woman. He ends his account by stating abruptly that this anecdote has “little to do with the present narrative” (Hawthorne 8). Yet by trying to minimize the importance of the tale in this way, Coverdale stimulates the readers’

curiosity. In fact, we hear about the Veiled Lady story again in chapter XIII, when it is both told and performed by Zenobia to the Blithedalers. Zenobia takes over from Coverdale and presents the tale in her own voice, which evidences her narrative importance within Hawthorne's text.

It is important to consider at this point that this story of the Veiled Lady is a legend, popular folklore orally transmitted by the characters within Coverdale's written narration. It is also full of fantastic elements. Therefore, according to the standards of the day, it would not fit into the parameters of a traditional novel due to its elevated concern with the non-rational. By introducing such a relevant oral discourse within Coverdale's account, Hawthorne's wish to undermine those monological discourses that are imposed upon others' voices is made even more evident. Besides Coverdale, Zenobia is the only character who is given a voice to tell a story. The critic bell hooks explains that "one becomes a believer in feminist politics through choice and action" (7). Thus, if we consider the role that Zenobia plays throughout the text, along with the amount and type of dialogue that she is given, Hawthorne can be regarded not as a misogynist but, instead, as a radical and pioneering proto-feminist.

Readers meet Zenobia in chapter I, when old Moodie asks Coverdale whether he knows her. Apart from mentioning her role in the women's rights movement, Coverdale explains that Zenobia is not her real name but "a sort of mask in which she comes before the world, retaining all the privileges of privacy—a contrivance, in short, like the white drapery of the Veiled Lady" (Hawthorne 9-10). In relation to Zenobia's physical appearance, not only does Coverdale describe her as attractive, but he adds that Zenobia's presence inspired "an influence breathing out of her, such as we might suppose to come from Eve, when she was just made, and her Creator brought her to Adam, saying—'Behold, here is a woman!'" (Hawthorne 19). The female character who is trying to achieve a better society for her fellow women is also the person who, according to the narrator, still retains the essence of womanhood: she is the new woman from whom womankind will be reborn into a better society. As such, Hawthorne grants Zenobia a prominent position within this new community.

Hollingsworth and Priscilla stand in clear contrast to Zenobia. In Hawthorne's approach to genre, Priscilla displays some characteristics that he seeks to challenge while Zenobia displays traits from both



the novelistic and romance tradition in a balanced way. As Joyce Warren states, “Priscilla or Hilda appears as the embodiment of what Hawthorne believed the conventional heroine should be. But in his “inmost heart” Hawthorne knew that this was not a true picture of womanhood” (204).

## 2. A Masquerade

*The Blithedale Romance* follows a circular structure. The mysteries presented during the first chapters find their parallels in the closing ones, where the enigmas of the story are revealed and the circle is closed. Before his sickness, Coverdale wonders about Priscilla’s origins and, consequently, she is the first person he meets after his recovery. Coverdale openly compares Priscilla’s physical appearance with that of Margaret Fuller and, although unaware of Mrs. Fuller’s ideas, Priscilla immediately rejects the comparison and asks Coverdale “How could I possibly make myself resemble this lady, merely by holding her letter in my hand?” (Hawthorne 50). To this Coverdale can offer no answer. In fact, the narrator never responds to any of the questions posed by Zenobia or Priscilla as he seems to be verbally overpowered by them.

Chapter VIII, “A Modern Arcadia”, anticipates chapter XXIV, “The Masqueraders”. It focuses on Priscilla and Zenobia, who are celebrating May Day. This chapter reintroduces the link between the two women and the story of the Veiled Lady by suggesting the possibility of Priscilla having “the gift of hearing those ‘airy tongues that syllable men’s names’” (Hawthorne 57), a special quality the Veiled Lady does possess. The chapter also recounts that, on the first day after Coverdale’s illness, when he leaves his bedchamber, he finds out that Zenobia has covered Priscilla in spring flowers. The latter’s merry disposition leads Zenobia to reflect upon Priscilla’s happiness. From her perspective, Priscilla’s belief that it is “a Paradise here, and all of us, particularly Mr. Hollingsworth and myself, such angels!” is “quite ridiculous, and provokes one’s malice, almost, to see a creature so happy —especially a feminine creature” (Hawthorne 56). Zenobia is concerned about the situation of women in her society, and most of the people for whom she is fighting do not share Priscilla’s naive happiness. When Coverdale suggests that women “are always happier creatures than male creatures” (Hawthorne 56), Zenobia replies by pointedly asking him whether he has ever seen “a happy

woman” and by declaring, “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” (Hawthorne 56-7). Once again, Coverdale’s voice is here silenced by that of Zenobia. This incident illustrates Joyce W. Warren’s notion that “one of the problems Hawthorne notes is the lack of opportunities for women” which he “regrets” (194). Throughout their conversation, Priscilla remains still. She only moves when she notices Hollingsworth and then she immediately rushes towards him. Upon Hollingsworth’s arrival, Priscilla loses all her previous ‘enchantment’, as if his presence completely overrides the woman’s true personality which is displayed only when she is in the presence of Zenobia (and Hollingsworth is absent).

Recovered from his sickness, Coverdale opens chapter IX, “Hollingsworth, Zenobia, Priscilla,” by acknowledging that

if we take the freedom to put a friend under our microscope, we thereby insulate him from many of his true relations, magnify his peculiarities, inevitably tear him into parts, and, of course, patch him very clumsily together again. What wonder, then, should we be frightened by the aspect of a monster, which, after all —though we can point to every feature of his deformity in the real personage— may be said to have been created mainly by ourselves. (Hawthorne 65)

To some extent, Coverdale admits here that the characters he presents have been altered in his imagination. Coverdale’s statement can be read as Hawthorne’s way of suggesting that every narrative, no matter how truthful it is intended to be, has been filtered through the author’s thinking, and it is, therefore, inevitably biased. Perhaps for this reason chapter IX portrays a disagreement between Hollingsworth and Coverdale. The incident takes place after Coverdale has mentioned how close Hollingsworth and Priscilla are becoming and, also, that “the gossip of the Community set them [Hollingsworth and Zenobia] down as a pair of lovers” (Hawthorne 74). Here Coverdale begins to estrange himself from Hollingsworth when he realizes that the latter has a better chance of receiving the two women’s affections. His narration is clearly biased by his emotional state and, as readers, we cannot be sure

whether he is telling the story as it happened, or as he would like it to be because this version suits him best. Again, Hawthorne emphasizes that a narrative that silences other viewpoints is not one to be trusted.

As soon as Coverdale makes this observation, the story gathers momentum and two characters appear in succession. The first one, old Moodie, reenters the story, while the second one, Westervelt, is a new addition. Both, however, are closely linked to the Veiled Lady legend and they possess a superior knowledge about Zenobia's and Priscilla's interconnected lives than Coverdale does. When old Moodie appears in Blithedale, Coverdale is working in the fields with Hollingsworth. The narrator unsuccessfully tries to engage Moodie in a conversation because he fails to see beyond his preconceived set of ideas. Hollingsworth, however, does talk with the old man, which reminds us of the strength of this man's voice as opposed to that of Coverdale. Throughout Hollingsworth's conversation with Moodie, Coverdale is a mere spectator and his language is that of somebody who is in the process of interpreting a play that has just been performed. Coverdale has become part of the audience, an observer of the play, a notion that takes us back to the classic conception of the world as a theatre that was mentioned earlier in this article. The fact that the first-person narrator of the story is the one who feels isolated within this new community can also be understood as a subversion of traditional narrative roles. It is Coverdale who lacks the knowledge about this community established by the two women.

Immediately after his attempted conversation with old Moodie, Coverdale meets Westervelt. His description of Westervelt echoes that of the devil in "Young Goodman Brown":

his hair, as well as his beard and moustache, was coal-black; his eyes, too, were black and sparkling, and his teeth remarkably brilliant. (...) with a gem that glimmered, in the leafy shadow where he stood, like a living rip of fire. He carried a stick with a wooden head, carved in vivid imitation of that of a serpent. (Hawthorne 86)

As will be disclosed later, Westervelt is the man who controls the Veiled Lady and knows about the relationship between old Moodie, Zenobia and Priscilla. Therefore, his association with the devil, by

means of the serpent-shaped head of his stick and his fire-like gemstone, suggests both his illicit knowledge and his alleged psychic powers.

Westervelt asks Coverdale about Zenobia's whereabouts as he wishes to speak with her in private. Although reluctant, Coverdale feels compelled to answer all the stranger's questions, which marks the first time in the book when Coverdale provides all the news that another character needs. However, following Westervelt's departure, Coverdale displays once again his usual lack of awareness. He begins to wonder about

the fact that, ever since the appearance of Priscilla, it had been the tendency of events to suggest and establish a connection between Zenobia and her. She had come, in the first instance, as if with the sole purpose of claiming Zenobia's protection. Old Moodie's visit, it appeared, was chiefly to ascertain whether this object had been accomplished. And here, to-day, was the questionable Professor, linking one with the other in his inquiries, and seeking communication with both. (Hawthorne 89)

This paragraph functions as a summary of all the instances that connect the two women and, as such, it not only refreshes readers' memories but also foreshadows what is to come. This passage also emphasizes Coverdale's inability to link a sequence of events in a logical way so that they can lead him to a fruitful conclusion. Furthermore, the chapter closes by his acknowledging, again, that his "part, in these transactions, was singularly subordinate. It resembled that of the Chorus in a classic play" (Hawthorne 90). Coverdale has already taken for granted that he is just "one calm observer" of the "drama" (Hawthorne 90), adapting the theatrical subtext to refer to his own role within the story. Significantly, here he specifies "a classic play" (Hawthorne 90), in which actors wore masks to hide their faces and only show the predetermined expressions that the public needed to see. It can be thus inferred that Coverdale is also figuratively wearing a mask throughout the whole story. Alternatively, it could be argued that Coverdale is, in fact, the mask that Hawthorne wears to expose the absurd conventions of his time, such as the excessive rigidity of traditional literary genres and gender inequalities.

Interestingly, as soon as all the characters involved in the story of the Veiled Lady have been introduced, Zenobia tells the Blithedaleers her own version of the tale. Chapter XIII is fully devoted to this storytelling. The legend, as noted earlier, has a very rich subtext within Coverdale's narrative because it displays

many of the ingredients for a feminist critique of patriarchal theater and display. It depicts the Veiled Lady as the object of male observation and discourse, as a group of young men seeks to establish her identity in conventional patriarchal terms — through a father's name or a brother's protection. The Lady calls herself a "prisoner" behind her veil, either a virgin or wife, at the whim of her male pursuer. (Bellis 54)

In fact, *The Blithedale Romance* at large revolves around such mysteries, particularly in relation to both Zenobia and Priscilla. At the end of her narration/performance, for example, Zenobia covers Priscilla with a veil, thus turning her into the Veiled Lady and anticipating the key to understanding the legend that is told about her. A profound critique of the traditional roles assigned to women by the male-dominated establishment is latent within the narration at this point. Hawthorne uses both Zenobia and Coverdale to expose the unfair treatment of women in nineteenth-century society. Coverdale, who is granted authorial power to tell his story, allows Zenobia's voice to be heard by recounting this incident as part of his narrative.

Chapter XIV describes Zenobia's confrontation with Hollingsworth regarding women's role in society. She tells us that she feels the urge to "lift up my own voice, on behalf of woman's wider liberty" (Hawthorne 110). Zenobia continues to express

[her] belief —yes, and my prophecy, should I die before it happens— that, when my sex shall achieve its rights, there will be ten eloquent women, where there is now one eloquent man (...) It is with the living voice, alone, that she can compel the world to recognize the light of her intellect and the depth of her heart! (Hawthorne 111)

Her statement here encounters Coverdale's agreement, who explains to her that he "would give her all she asks, and add a great deal more,

which she will not be the party to demand, but which men, if they were generous and wise, would grant of their own free motion” (Hawthorne 111). As a sign of his solidarity, Coverdale goes on to mention the social changes he would make. Priscilla, however, cannot believe what she is hearing and tells him so. With these words, Zenobia denounces the girl as “the type of womanhood, such as man has spent centuries in making” (Hawthorne 112), a comment that reminds us of the Pygmalion myth in which a sculptor chiseled a ‘perfect’ female made of ivory because he was dissatisfied with real-life women. As Foucault notes, in a patriarchal system, “women are figured only as objects or, at most, as partners that one had best train, educate, and watch over when one had them under one’s power” (1986 22). Priscilla’s skepticism about Coverdale’s pronouncements is encouraged by Hollingsworth, who regards woman as

the most admirable handiwork of God, in her true place and character. Her place is at man’s side. Her office, that of the Sympathizer; the unreserved, unquestioning Believer (...) Man is a wretch without woman; but woman is a monster—and, thank Heaven, an almost impossible and hitherto imaginary monster— without man, as her acknowledged principal! (Hawthorne 112-3)

Hollingsworth here voices the stereotypical conception of women’s role, popularized in Patmore’s poem discussed earlier, and from which Zenobia wants to break free. However, taking into account that she is part of a society, one in which women “were not regarded as persons” (Warren 3), it is not surprising that Zenobia cannot successfully challenge the conservative beliefs that Hollingsworth and Priscilla represent.

It is crucial to state that this does not imply, as some feminist scholars have insisted, that Hawthorne despises Zenobia and the values she embodies. As hooks suggests, we should bear in mind that, in Hawthorne’s time, “Patriarchal masculinity [taught] men that their sense of self and identity, their reason for being, reside[d] in their capacity to dominate others” (70). In fact, Coverdale confesses that Hollingsworth’s speech was an “outrageous affirmation of what struck me as the intensity of masculine egotism. It centered everything in itself, and deprived woman of her very soul, her inexpressible and unfathomable all, to make it a mere incident in the great sum of man” (Hawthorne 113).

Coverdale's ideas are more liberal and progressive than Priscilla's, which, if we accept his character as a mask for Hawthorne, goes some way to refute the accusations of misogyny made against the writer. However, it is also apparent that society at the time was not ready for the radical changes that Zenobia and Coverdale propose. If we further extrapolate this notion to the issue of genre, it becomes clear that Hawthorne was not attempting to overthrow existing literary conventions in *The Blithedale Romance*. Instead, his conceptualization of romance can be read as challenging the establishment, rather than trying to dismantle it. In this sense, Hawthorne's work illustrates Bakhtin's definition of the novel form as "parod[ying] other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and reaccentuating them" (45). Hawthorne's hybridized genre, therefore, combines the novel and the romance to create an innovative form of expression that nuances literary genres, while Zenobia's sociopolitical struggle points forward to how the lives of women could be improved.

### 3. The Curtain Falls

Coverdale leaves Blithedale following his argument with Hollingsworth and he goes to stay at a boarding-house. In one of the windows of the building across the street, he sees Zenobia and deduces that the other person in the room must be Priscilla. Coverdale's perspective of Zenobia is that of an actress in a mime show. She is framed by the window, as on a stage, and he can only see her movements. But Coverdale soon realizes that the two women are not alone and that they are, in fact, accompanied by Westervelt. Coverdale keeps watching them until Zenobia, who is warned of his presence by Westervelt, "[lets] down a white linen curtain between the festoons of the damask ones" (Hawthorne 145). Coverdale describes this action "like the drop-curtain of a theatre, in the interval between the acts" (Hawthorne 145). Ironically, it becomes quite literally an interval because Coverdale decides to visit Zenobia to try to find out what is happening. Coverdale also enquires about Priscilla, who is with Zenobia, and who greets him. When he asks Priscilla whether she came to the city "of your own free-will," she replies that "I am blown about like a leaf. I never have any

free-will” (Hawthorne 157), a response that encapsulates the experience of many women at that time.

A few weeks later, Coverdale once more attends the Veiled Lady show and, at the performance, finally discovers that Priscilla is the eponymous character, as Zenobia’s earlier narration anticipated. Hollingsworth breaks Westervelt’s enchantment over Priscilla and rescues her thus embodying the stereotypical knight who saves a distressed damsel. This scene conclusively establishes Hollingsworth and Priscilla as characters who are representative of the conservative novelistic tradition.

Upon his return to Blithedale, Coverdale finds his fellow Blithedalers celebrating some sort of carnival. Hawthorne’s particular use of this event indicates his will to draw attention to the situation of women at the time since a “carnival challenges God, authority, and social law” (Cohen 28). Zenobia is given the chance, for one night only, to radically alter society and, reading in terms of the Bakhtinean carnivalesque, freeing herself from the social constraints that made women dependent upon men. However, what Coverdale actually discovers is that Zenobia has been put on trial by Hollingsworth. Zenobia reproaches such men who want

to bring a woman before your secret tribunals, and judge and condemn her, unheard, and then tell her to go free without a sentence. The misfortune is that this same secret tribunal chances to be the only judgment-seat that a true woman stands in awe of, and that any verdict short of acquittal is equivalent to a death-sentence. (Hawthorne 196)

Zenobia has unmasked Hollingsworth’s selfish character by demonstrating, with Coverdale and Priscilla as witnesses, that his affections towards her change when he discovers that she had lost her fortune and thus was no longer useful to him. Her words expose the ease with which a man’s opinion can ruin a woman’s reputation without giving her the chance to defend herself and, perhaps, to prove him wrong. Zenobia is thus trying to undermine the power of patriarchal justice, another of the establishment’s monological discourses. Zenobia then asks Coverdale to make a ballad out of her story. But, when we next hear about her, Hollingsworth and Coverdale find Zenobia’s drowned body. Her corpse is recovered by Hollingsworth, who strikes his pole into



her breast, an action which reenacts Hollingsworth's earlier behavior towards Zenobia and, symbolically, makes him responsible for her death. A week after Zenobia's burial, Coverdale recalls Hollingsworth's unsteady figure as he is supported by Priscilla. The narrator emphasizes that neither looked happy but, instead, were chastened with remorse. In this respect, Warren notes that "what seems to disturb Hawthorne most of all in his observations on the position of women is the misuse that men have made of their dominance" (193). Hollingsworth's lack of success in his enterprise, therefore, serves as his punishment for his hostile attitude towards Zenobia and her ideas about the role of women.

Although Zenobia is dead, Coverdale does indeed turn her story into a ballad so that her progressively feminist ideas can be disseminated. It is a story in which Hollingsworth is portrayed as the egotistic man who brings about her downfall. Thus, Coverdale, despite his lack of awareness, manages to construct his narrative in a way that supports Zenobia's sociopolitical beliefs. In light of this conclusion, Zenobia's suicide should not be regarded as a rejection of her perspective. On the contrary, her death is an act of subversion because it "is a way to "finaliz[e] oneself rather than being finalized in essentializing, monolithic discourse" (Bauer 27). By choosing to commit suicide, Zenobia exposes the injustices within her society towards women. As Spivak concludes in relation to the Indian rite *Sati*, "By the inexorable ideological production of the sexed subject, such a death can be understood by the female subject as an *exceptional* signifier of her own desire" (96). The resonance of Zenobia's voice, therefore, has a longer lasting impact than that of Coverdale, since his peculiar narration is devised as a strategy to expose the flaws of Hawthorne's society. The subtle social critique inherent to Coverdale's story is a clever maneuver that seeks to challenge patriarchal monological discourses. As readers acknowledge Zenobia's voice to be central to the meaning of *The Blithedale Romance*, this strongly suggests that Hawthorne himself endorsed his female character's progressively feminist ideas.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Coventry Patmore published a narrative poem entitled "The Angel in the House" between 1854 and 1862. The poem, with his wife as the model, describes the perfect woman/wife, who should be, among other things, devoted, obedient, and passive. The social impact of this vision of

women was such that, in her speech "Professions for Women", Virginia Woolf stated that "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (p. 4).

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) was a key member of the American Transcendentalist movement. She met Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1836 and they founded *The Dial* journal in 1840. Fuller has been regarded as the first American feminist, sharing Emerson's ideas in open philosophy discussions with some of her female contemporaries, such as Sophia Peabody Hawthorne. This proved that women were just as capable as men of understanding, and producing, philosophy. Her work *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) is a canonical feminist text in American letters.

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