

‘Fire’ and ‘Circle’ in *The Blithedale Romance*:  
The Meaning of Masquerade

Shosuke KOTOKU

(Received 20 May 1982)

It is often said that the author tends to mature toward his own maiden work. In the case of Hawthorne, if this is true, essentially, his maiden work is “Young Goodman Brown” (1835), which will turn out to be the ‘womb’ that is to send many children into the world.

R. H. Fogle once rightly called the basic form of this short story a “turning wheel”<sup>(1)</sup> because this is the story about the experience of a young Puritan husband, Brown, who leaves Salem in the evening, “pass[es] one night” in the forest and comes back again in the next morning to the same village.

In a similar way, in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), the narrator of the novel, Coverdale, who is a bachelor, starts off from his lodgings in Boston in early April to join the Community of socialists, but he is to be back after all, in Autumn.

This means that the contours, the outlines, of these two works are almost the same, accepting the small difference that the former is one night’s experience while the latter is a half-year, that is to say, “the turning wheel[s]” in Fogle’s words, or ‘(half-) cycles’.

In terms of the theme, Brown shares “the sympathy of [your] human hearts for sin” and gets to the recognition that “evil is the nature of mankind”. On the other hand, about two hundred years after that, Coverdale sets forth to Blithedale because he agrees with the view of the Blithedalers that man’s inborn nature is good, and tries to show “mankind the example of a life governed by other than the false and cruel principles, on which human society has all along been based”<sup>(2)</sup>, as “the beacon-fire” or “moral illumination” to kindle for humanity. Here, in the mid-19th Century, the Puritan view, the doctrine of original sin is transcended, and human beings seem to be purified of sin thereafter.

On the very night when Coverdale and his friends arrive at Blithedale's old farm house, the "little semi-circle round the blazing fire" is the symbol of the solidarity of the membership of Blithedale. Zenobia, who has arrived there just before them, says, "I take the part of hostess, for to-day, and welcome you as if to my own fireside. You shall be my guests, too, at supper. Tomorrow, if you please, we will be brethren and sisters and begin our new life from day-break"<sup>(3)</sup>

As 'fire' and 'circle' symbolizes the family itself, just like in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and many others,<sup>(4)</sup> so Blithedale, where we can find semi-circle round the fireplace, should be also the 'house' that contains the large family, each member of which shares 'labor' and 'profit'. In the *Seven Gables* house, Phoebe, who is given the part of the housewife, revives all other inmates and eventually unites them into one family. But here in Blithedale we can find no 'house wife'. Zenobia should have been one, but, as she herself says, she is 'hostess for to-day'. She is not what is called a 'fair lady' like Phoebe, but a 'dark lady' whose hair is "dark gloomy of singular abundance" like Hester and Beatrice. She is too full of "pride and pomp" to keep the house of the Blithedale. And she is depicted as the prototype of an advocate of women's liberation, who brings the house into disorder rather than unites it.

On the other hand, Priscilla is one of the fair ladies, whose appearance, Coverdale, a minor poet, describes as follow;

Her brown hair fell down from beneath a hood, not in curls, but with only a slight wave; her face was of a wan almost sickly hue, betokening habitual seclusion from the sun and free atmosphere, like a flower-shrub that had done its best to bloom in too scanty light.<sup>(5)</sup>

But she is "a slim and unsubstantial girl" unlike Phoebe. It turns out that Zenobia and Priscilla are half-breeds, whose father is Old Moody, or Fauntleroy, however, no two sisters could be less alike insomuch that Zenobia is called "the brilliant child of my prosperity," while Priscilla is "the daughter of my long calamity" by him. Furthermore, Zenobia is often compared to 'fire,' but Priscilla, first to 'ice' and then to 'water.' Coverdale fancies that Priscilla is "some desolate kind of a creature, doomed to wander about in snow-storms" from "the icicles out of her hair." In short they are the embodiment of 'light' and 'darkness' (Prosperity and Poverty) of Old Moody. (In other words

they might be said 'to be the opposite sides of one woman.) They are such a contrast to each other that they cannot exist at the same time like 'fire' and 'water.' Zenobia gains an insight into this fact, the rivalry between them, instantly, and says;

“...this shadowy snow-maiden, who precisely at the stroke of midnight, shall melt away at my feet, in a pool of ice-cold water, and give me my death with a pair of wet slippers!...”<sup>(6)</sup>

In fact they are to vie with each other for the heart of Hollingsworth. Finding herself the loser in the 'battle' Zenobia drowns herself in the nearby river at midnight. (The title of the scene is Chapter XXVII, "Midnight.")

After all, Zenobia is not equal to the 'housewife' of Blithedale, but is the black sheep. She is also compared to Pandora of Greek Myth on account of her haughtiness.

As for Zenobia, there was a glow in her cheeks that made me think of Pandora, fresh from Valcan's workshop,....<sup>(7)</sup>

If she is Pandora, then it is Hollingsworth who corresponds to Valcan. Because he was originally a blacksmith, and his appearance—"his great shaggy head, his heavy brow, his dark complexion, his abundant beard, and the rude strength with which his features seemed to have been hammered out of *iron*"<sup>(8)</sup> (My Italics)—is exactly the image of Valcan.

Hollingsworth is a philanthropist who has a plan for the reformation of criminals.<sup>(9)</sup> He desires to make use of Blithedale to realize it. But his intention is contradictory to the socialistic principle of other Blithedalers who are willing to "lessen the laboring man's great burthen of toil, by performing our due share of it at the cost of our own thews and sinews,"<sup>(10)</sup> and eager to seek their "profit by mutual aid."

Thus from the very beginning there is a wide gap of ideological disagreement within the Blithedalers, which will eventually lead to the disintegration of the Community itself. Moreover, the unity is broken when Hollingsworth and Zenobia are rumored to be living together and to be creating a new family. The crisis broadens as human relations between the sexes—Hollingsworth, Zenobia, Priscilla, and Coverdale (who seemed to be attracted by Zenobia.)—become more complicated.

He—and Zenobia and Priscilla, both for their own sakes and as connected with him—were separated from the rest of the Community, to my imagination, and stood forth as the indices of a problem which it was my business to solve. <sup>(11)</sup>

It is true Coverdale thanks Hollingsworth for having tended him when he was ill in bed, but he gradually comes to dislike this philanthropist because of his arrogance and self-centredness to a degree that he comes to doubt if Hollingsworth was being kind in his bid to entice him into the scheme for the reformation of criminals.

And Zenobia's motive for participation in the Community is not so clear, for judging from her behaviour she appears to have followed Hollingsworth rather than sympathized with the ideology of Blithedale. In this point we suspect that they all joined the 'Commune' without knowing their own real motive, or pretending to agree to the cause of Blithedale.

So far we have discussed this novel from the point of view of 'fire' and 'circle' imagery. However, we must not neglect one more major—but negative—image in this 'romance', because it is closely connected with the others, that is 'mask' or 'veil' imagery. (This image, as well as water image, is thought to oppose 'fire' and 'circle'—the positive imagery—in terms of the theme.)

The veil on Priscilla, of course, hides and darkens her figure and mystifies her past and identity. But Zenobia also covers her 'face' wearing a sort of 'veil', because the name is not her real name but a pseudonym meaning a queen in the East. And an exotic flower in her hair which Coverdale thinks "the only flower fit to be worn" by her, is also a kind of 'mask'.

"Zenobia is an enchantress!" whispered I once to Hollingsworth. "She is a sister of the Veiled Lady! That flower in her hair is a talisman. If you were to snatch it away, she would vanish, or be transformed into something else!" <sup>(12)</sup>

"The patch over one eye" of shy Old Moodie is also thought to be another example. For he always seemed to be hiding himself behind [it].

And the last one, "a gold band around the upper part of his [Westervelt's] teeth" is a 'mask' which indicates "the whole man" is "a sham" or "a moral and physical humbug."

We will find out in Chapter XXIV, "The Masqueraders" that all the characters in this novel wear masks on their faces.

So they joined hands *in a circle*, whirling round so swiftly, so madly, and so merrily, in time and tune with the Satanic music, that *their separate incongruities were blended all together*; and they became a kind of entanglement that went nigh to turn one's brain, with merely looking at it. <sup>(3)</sup> (My Italics)

What a large difference there is between "a circle" in this quotation and "the little semi-circle round the blazing fire" which we saw at the outset of Blithedale! This circle of masqueraders reveals that this Community consists of separate members, each one of whom has his own purpose different from the others'. Wasn't it they that get together and vowed their cooperation for the purpose of the realization of an idealized society?

It might be said that masks or veils are originally used to cover our faces, but that they sometimes become the 'mirrors' which reflect our reality (the inside) against our will. In other words, we men wear masks in one way or another, to hide our own identity, but which will reveal itself, however hard we may try to conceal it from the eyes of others. The veil of Hooper in "The Minister's Black Veil" (1835), and the scarlet letter of Dimmesdale are further examples of visualization of this moral. <sup>(4)</sup>

The three persons who come out of this 'circle'—Zenobia representing the 'Oriental princess' just like her name, Hollingsworth in the "ordinary working-dress" and Priscilla wearing a "pretty simple gown" prove this point quite well. Because, as I said earlier, they have been 'covering' their faces from the very beginning and they don't have to wear masks any more. In addition to this, this 'circle' predicts the upcoming collapse of Blithedale exactly. We can guess it might be caused partly by a sort of 'chaotic' state, a sexually disordered orgy among the members of the Community. The eternal triangle of these three is just an example of this 'orgy'.

The next paragraph may serve as a hint for this hypothesis;

The bond of our Community was such, that the members had the privilege of building cottages for their own residence, within our precincts, thus laying a

hearthstone and fencing in a home, private and peculiar, to all desirable extent; while yet the inhabitants should continue to share the advantages of an associated life. <sup>(15)</sup>

On the other hand, Coverdale, like Paul Pry, peeping at this masquerade from behind the trees, is a 'by-stander' and a kind of *voyeur* who cannot act in unison with the other fellow members.

The reason why only he does not wear the 'mask' is that he has been devoting himself to being a 'byplayer' or rather the 'narrator' behind the stage of the 'drama' of *The Blithedale Romance*.

But, a little bit later, Zenobia makes him aware of the fact that he himself also 'covers' his face with the widest 'mask'. That is, she points out to Coverdale that he has deceived himself, hiding his real motive for joining Blithedale even to himself.

"This long while past, you have been following up your game, groping for human emotion in the dark corners of the heart." <sup>(16)</sup>

And then Zenobia's fiery tongue scorches the heart of Hollingsworth who betrayed her;

"I see it now! I am awake, ... Self, self, self! You have embodied yourself in a project. You are a better masquerader than the witches and gipsies yonder; for your disguise is a self-deception." <sup>(17)</sup>

Zenobia, whose 'clairvoyance' penetrates through the hearts of Coverdale and Hollingsworth to the fate of misty Blithedale, has already made up her mind to kill herself, and, it seems to me, that her last words dig up the entity of Blithedale completely.

"...I am weary of this place, and sick to death of playing at philanthropy and progress. Of all varieties of mock-life, we have surely blundered into the very emptiest mockery, in our effort to establish the one true system." <sup>(18)</sup>

In the event Zenobia drowned herself in the river, just like her father did in wine.

The 'fire' of Blithedale is now virtually extinct. And Blithedale also has virtually collapsed, because one member is guilty of suicide, though it was started to build a guiltless, immaculate society.

Her death resulted from her own 'pride' or hautiness, which caused friction with other people around her, rather than the disappointed love. What an irony! Because, Coverdale said, "...first of all, we had divorced ourselves from Pride, and were striving to supply its place with familiar love."<sup>19</sup>

We are not sure when she knew Priscilla was her half-blooded sister, but her death might be said to be her own 'purification' in the water, repenting of her cruelty to Priscilla.<sup>20</sup>

Hollingsworth, in his turn, is haunted by Zenobia's ghost. Being asked by Coverdale how many criminals he has reformed, he answered; "Not one! Ever since we parted, I have been busy with a single murderer!" [i. e., Hollingsworth]<sup>21</sup>

Priscilla also must walk hereafter dragging the shadow of indirect 'fratricide' with her. But Westervelt, Professor of psychology, must be the most heinous villain who committed the 'unpardonable sin,' for he influenced the fates of the two sisters, and especially made a puppet of Priscilla at his will. He sacrificed her as the subject for his experiment—mesmerism. Coverdale is not exempt from errors, either. He confesses his love to Priscilla many years after the incident. This indecisive man eventually recognized here that he deeply committed himself and played an important role in the tragedy of *The Blithedale Romance*, instead of being a 'detached' narrator or a mere 'spectator.'

He could not settle either in Blithedale or in city life. Even his tracks to and from Boston make a '*vicious*' circle which corresponds to his state of mind, isolated totally from the action.

He explains his tragedy of "the separation of the intellect from the heart" this way;

Though fond of society, I was so constituted as to need these occasional retirements, even in a life like that of Blithedale, which was itself characterized by a remoteness from the world. Unless renewed by a yet farther withdrawal towards *the inner circle of self-communion*, I lost the better part of my individuality.<sup>22</sup> (My Italics)

His hermitage is led in "a kind of leafy cave, high upward into the air, among the midmost branches of a white-pine tree." He confides; "It symbolized my individuality, and aided me in keeping it inviolate."<sup>23</sup> His home on the tree is externalization of his 'self'.

Coverdale, seemingly the antithesis of Hollingsworth, is almost identical with him, by reason that they are both fortified with their own 'ego.' In my opinion Coverdale represents the ideal and Hollingsworth the action, just as though they are only the opposite sides of one person.<sup>24</sup>

As Hollingsworth once told me, I lack a purpose. How strange! He was ruined, morally, by an overplus of the same ingredient, the want of which, I occasionally suspect, has rendered my own life all an emptiness.<sup>25</sup>

Life is a "crytical vortex" or "muddy tide of human activity" into which he hesitated to plunge. He said that "it suited me better, for the present, to linger on the brink."<sup>26</sup>

Hawthorne stresses in the novel that sin is ubiquitous and contagious from person to person like an eddy on the water. We will discover his belief that no one is free of guilt in this world, in the strictest sense, later in *The Marble Faun*. (1860)

Coverdale repents of having done nothing on the brink of the tragical death of Zenobia. I wonder if this guilt-consciousness is one of the reason why he tells the story of Blithedale. In this sense I agree with Kelly Griffith, Jr. that "*Blithedale*, in fact, is Coverdale's attempt to purge through art...the guilt and suffering from his soul"<sup>27</sup>

Thus Hawthorne uses 'fire' and 'circle' imagery here in order to embody his life-theme, purification of sin, as is seen in *The House of the Seven Gables* and many other short stories.



### References

- (1) R. H. Fogle, *Hawthorne's Fictions: The Light and Dark*, (Norman, 1964), pp. 27-28
- (2) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance and Fanshawe*, in *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Vol. III ed., William Charvat et al. (Columbus; Ohio State University Press, 1964), p. 19
- (3) *Ibid.*, p. 16
- (4) See my articles on 'fire' and 'circle' imagery in Hawthorne's other works;  
    "Fire and Circle in Hawthorne's Short Stories, especially on 'Ethan Brand,'" *The Collected Papers of English Literature and Linguistics in Commemoration of Prof. Hiroshige Yoshida*, (Shinosaki Shorin, 1980), pp. 301-310  
    "Fire and Circle: Hope for Purification, in *The House of the Seven Gables*," (*Chushikoku Studies in American Literature* No. 17, March 1981) pp. 38-50
- (5) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *op. cit.*, p. 27
- (6) *Ibid.*, p. 33
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 24
- (8) *Ibid.*, p. 28
- (9) This 'iron' image of Hollingsworth is closely associated with his plan for the reformation of criminals. He wishes to train and cultivate them like he once forged iron.
- (10) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *op. cit.*, p. 19
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 69
- (12) *Ibid.*, p. 45
- (13) *Ibid.*, p. 210
- (14) Even Hester's scarlet letter is thought to be a kind of 'mask'. See the next scene in "The Governor's Hall" from *The Scarlet Letter*.

"Mother," cried she "I see you here. Look! Look!" Hester looked by way of humoring the child; and she saw that, owing to the peculiar effect of the convex mirror, *the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent features of her appearance. In truth she seemed absolutely hidden behind it.* (My Italics)

The scarlet letter covers her figure, defines her life, and restrains her feeling and her action, although she is unwilling to wear it at first. After all, the meaning of 'mask' or 'veil' is closely linked with the significance of symbolism.

- (15) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *op. cit.*, p. 80
- (16) *Ibid.*, p. 214
- (17) *Ibid.*, p. 218
- (18) *Ibid.*, p. 227
- (19) *Ibid.*, p. 19
- (20) The 'water' image, which is subsidiary to the 'fire' image, is often found in Hawthorne's works. It is well-known that he liked water as well as fire, in his life. There are two ways of 'purification' shown in *The Bible*, that is, by fire or by water. We can find

typical examples in *Genesis* in *The Old Testament*, e.g. the fire which burnt down Sodom and Gomorrah, and the flood in the story of Noah.

- ②1) Nathaniel Hawthorne, op. cit., p.243
- ②2) Ibid., p.89
- ②3) Ibid., p.99
- ②4) The next paragraph of Philip Rahv will amplify my point here.

Moreover, as if to spare him further trouble, both females fall in love not with him but with the fanatic reformer, Hollingsworth, who is a mere stick of a character, a travesty as a reformer and even worse travesty as a lover. The emotional economy of this story is throughout one of displacement. *It is evident on every part that the only genuine relationship is that of Coverdale to Zenobia; the rest is mystification.* (Philip Rahv, in "The Dark Lady of Salem," *Partisan Review*, 8, 1941, p.377 (My Italics))

- ②5) Nathaniel Hawthorne, op. cit., p.246
- ②6) Ibid., p.147
- ②7) Kelly Griffith, Jr, "Form in *The Blithedale Romance*," *American Literature*, Vol. 40. (1968), p.25

(This paper is based on a manuscript which I read at a symposium of the 10th meeting of the Chu-Shikoku American Literature Society, held at Hiroshima Peace Memorial Hall on June 27 and 28, 1981.)