Canons, Culture Wars and History:
A Case Study of Canonicity Through the Lens of *The Blithedale Romance*

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Readings for discussion:

1. Levine, Lawrence: *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. Ch. 2 on Shakespeare.

2. Roth, Philip: *The Great American Novel.* Introduction/Preface (first 25 pgs or so).

3. *Multi-America: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace*. Introduction by Ishmael Reed.

Introduction

The act of reading a text is twofold. There not only needs to be a text present, but also a reader who understands and interprets that text.[1] One can think of the act of reading as the creation of a second, interpretive text. This second text documents the reader's interpretations of the physical text at hand. While the primary text remains relatively stable throughout time, the second, interpretive text changes with every reading. While these readings are circumscribed to individual readers, the culture and historical situation that the readers exist within also influence him/her.

Michel Foucault proposed that one could look at texts as cultural production. If one were to examine enough texts from any point in time, one could draw out themes and ideas that would define the culture that produced the texts. This method of examining texts as cultural artifact has problems from a literary perspective. It makes the literary critic into a historian and reduces the study of literature to the study of historical artifact. This poses a threat to the entire idea of studying literature as an academic pursuit in its own right.

The method employed in this essay is similar to Foucault's, but the focus is changed. This essay constructs a biography of *The Blithedale Romance*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. More accurately, it constructs a biography of the readers of *The Blithedale Romance.* Instead of examining *The Blithedale Romance* as a representation of 1852, I will examine the different interpretations of *The Blithedale Romance* as representations of the historical periods in which they were produced. By examining the interpretations of the text and how they change throughout time, I hope to expose how historical

circumstance and historically bound modes of thought influence the nature of a text itself, its popularity, and its relationship to the literary canon.

The canon (in this case, the American canon) is a construction. The canon list of texts that are deemed not only of higher quality as literature, but of higher quality as demonstrations of morality and templates for how humans construct experience. These texts are the seminal texts of literary study. From these texts students are supposed to glean potential answers not only to the aforementioned questions, but also to such questions as why we study literature as an academic pursuit. To use John Guillory's term, canonized texts are based on a level of "cultural capital."[2] Those texts that are deemed valuable by a culture are elevated, read, and taught. This value judgement can only be made based on the interpretive text, the interpretive moment in which readers decide whether or not a given text has value.

Literary canon is not only a construction, but a fluid and a deceptive one. The canon has a way of hiding itself and making it look as if it were stable and ever present. It is not immediately apparent to the novice student of literature (such as the high school student I once was) that *Moby Dick* was not a classic in 1852. One would assume that the classics had always been classics and always had readers of classics to read them. Not until one becomes aware of the historical fact of "lost classics" does one even consider that such things could exist.

If a book is a classic, how could it be lost? Is genius not an absolute quality? The answer is that what is considered valuable art is subject to the culture that receives said art. As culture is not stable, literary canon must remain fluid to change with culture. *Moby Dick* was not considered literature because its readers simply could not

comprehend that a high seas adventure about a man chasing a whale could possibly be great art. As I sit writing this, *Moby Dick* has become "sacrilized art."[3] A contemporary reader would not consider it a novel of "high adventure." The contemporary reader is led to believe it is a complex allegorical structure that only the swiftest minds could possibly comprehend. Its status as canonized art has changed both its readership and the way it is read. The process by which *Moby Dick* reached its contemporary status from its initial reception is a long and complicated one that is a result of the way the interpretive text was constructed around it at different times.

The process by which a text moves in or out of the canon is not the work of individuals. Were I to read a novel and decide that what I interpreted from the text was important, it would not necessarily put the text into the canon. In fact, my interpretation may never reach more than one or two other readers, who would most likely have readings of the same novel that differ from my own. Some consensus has to be reached as to what is to be valued in a text and how textual interpretation should be approached in order for any canon to exist in literature at all. While these criteria need not be overly restrictive, they do need to exist.

This is where Stanley Fish's "interpretive communities"[4] come into play. Fish argues that people read texts in different ways based on the context in which they plan on presenting and discussing their response to said text. When dealing with a text in the context of an academic community, one reads and understands that text based on the criteria that s/he believes that community to have. It is through these communities that a consensus is formed on what texts are most appropriate for their goals. This means that

there is not one canon but many canons, each with its own purpose, goals and community to support it.

Community consensus is not the whole of the process, however. After all, I certainly do not have an equal say with Roland Barthes, T.S. Eliot, or even my professors at Oberlin College as to what texts are important and deserve to be canonized. Issues of authority are present within the process of coming to a cultural consensus as to what has cultural value. The bottom line is that the average reader does not come into contact with uncanonized works unless he or she elects to do the digging required to find them. The uncanonized work is the text that goes missing in a library and is never replaced (i.e. Fogle's *Light and Darkness in Hawthorne*, which has been missing from Mudd Library for an indeterminate amount of time and not present in any Ohio-Link library). It takes individual thinkers to revive and restore texts to the level of at least quasi-canonicity in order to make them available to the reading public. These individuals are usual in positions of authority, such as professors, noted academics, and prominent authors. These people hold the power to assign and distribute texts. Publishers tend to listen to people in positions of authority and the power to create syllabi gives the power to distribute texts to multiple people based on one's personal feelings concerning a text. Without Alice Walker's work, Zora Neale Hurston would be lost to the average reader. Professor Sandra Zagarell is greatly responsible for keeping *The Morgansons* in print at all. This is not to imply that there is a cultural conspiracy controlling the canon. No single person can change the canon without the agreement of a reading community. Without cultural consensus, these works would not be available regardless of the value assigned to them by Professor Zagarell or Alice Walker, but without their efforts the

debate would never even emerge as to whether or not a consensus could be formed at all. In other words, the canon is not a self-regulating structure as T.S. Eliot saw it (after all, the Metaphysical Poets did not overtake the Romantics, as he wished them to), but it also has certain built in safeguards. These safeguards keep the canon from being easily toyed with. The ability to destroy uncanonized texts and hide them in the murkiest and dustiest depths of an academic collection acts to complicate the process of including new texts into the traditional canon.

The goal of this essay is to expose how this process works for a single text over an extended period of time. I intend to expose the process by which the canon works in the context of *The Blithedale Romance* and illustrate a process that connects the standing of the text in the canon at any given point in history with the historical and intellectual trends of that moment.

For the reasons cited above, I have divided my "biography" into four distinct historical periods: publication and contemporaneous reputation (1852-1890), the age of High Realism (1890-1940), Formalism/New Criticism (1941-the late 1970s) and Post-Structuralism (the late 1970s-present). My contention is that each of these periods represents a distinct mode of reading and method of interpretation. These methods have a direct effect on how interpretations (or interpretive texts) are constructed. As a text that has remained on the margins of the canon but shifted throughout time, *The Blithedale Romance* will serve as a lens through which the relationship between modes of interpretation and their effect on the canon can be uncovered and understood.

I embarked on my studies of *The Blithedale Romance* hoping to be able to trace its standing inside and outside of all canons throughout its history. I was quickly forced

to realize that this goal was not realistic, nor necessarily possible. I could have gone through endless lists of statistics about printings, copies sold retail, the number of times it appeared on syllabi, library records, etc. Such an approach seemed hopelessly dry. I also feared that it would somehow not capture what I was really after, the "why" and the "how" of the process. I was forced to turn my focus to the academic canon. This canon left me something to study, documentary evidence. Academics left texts in the form of published criticism, which detailed the way in which they constructed, interpreted and understood *The Blithedale Romance.* These texts are physical textual representations of that invisible interpretive text that I wish to study.

The essential assumption of this essay is that each of these readings is more or less "true" for the time period and author that created them. What is being examined and criticized is not the individual interpretations of the text, but the culture that created these interpretations.[5] What is important is not the judgement of whether past readers were "right" or "wrong," but that they were *different* from readers in other historical periods. This difference points to how the canon can change over time and how a text itself can change over time. The degree to which *The Blithedale Romance* was favorable to the values and ideas of each period determined its popularity within the academic canon of that period.

An explanation of why I chose to focus on *The Blithedale Romance* is in order. Truth be told, I chose it because it was the novel on the Hawthorne shelf that I had never heard of. I suppose this is an admission of ignorance in terms of Hawthorne and Hawthorne scholarship. I was surprised to find that of the four major long works[6] Hawthorne wrote there would be even a single one that I had never heard mentioned in

academic discussion. Upon reading it, I was further surprised to find that it seemed far from a sub-par work. It was a work that had a certain value to my eye. It begged interpretation in a way that other works by Hawthorne and other works of its time did not. It was complex, ambiguous, and loaded with thematic and narrative curlicues that I found fascinating. I wondered why others did not. For all of the major works that could have fallen through the cracks of the American literary canon, this one boggled me on a level that few previous novels had.

There are a number of reasons why this is the perfect time to examine the effects of canon on readers and readers on canon. The first is that the groundwork is laid. "Canon theory" is now a category of literary criticism that spans back as far as T.S. Eliot and continues in dialogue and debate to the present. Another reason why this is a perfect moment for examination of canon is that criticism and literary study has reached a point of fragmentation and disunity. Critics and theorists are no longer dedicated to a single method of examination, but are situated at a moment of *bricolage,* where method is not a single "school" but a collection of ideas that can be employed or disregarded based on their utility in understanding a text.

This does not imply that I stand outside a historical period or culture. I am as programmatic and tied to the debates of today as all of the critics represented in this essay were to their time periods. The reason that this essay is not only appropriate but necessary is the status of the canon at present. As a writer, I sit in a moment of canon debate and upheaval that began in the 1970s and will continue into the foreseeable future. This moment has been referred to as "The Canon Wars" by numerous authors. The advent of multiculturalism and post-structuralism threatened traditional canons and canon

ideas. Conservative writers have pointed to this change as "the fall of western culture." Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* and magazine cover-pages such as "Who Killed Plato?" point to a paranoia that the direction the canon has taken is one that destroys the unity of both academic and popular culture. This essay is intended to join works such as Lawrence Levine's *The Opening of the American Mind* as a defense and criticism of the current canon wars. In understanding the canons of the past, some light should be shed on the canon of the present as it moves toward the canon of the future.

This study is necessarily incomplete and bound by some degree of conjecture and personal interpretation on my part. As I could not possibly obtain and read *everything* written about Hawthorne and *The Blithedale Romance* since 1852, there are always going to be places where a nit-picking reader could find holes. In such a study, a researcher is forced to draw significance from not only what s/he has found, but also what is missing. Holes in the record beg for explanations, but these explanations can never truly be more than conjecture, given the fact that one is not working with evidence per se, but rather the lack thereof. Furthermore, in the interest of keeping this piece both interesting and concise, I was forced to only present a fraction of the evidence that I have obtained in my research. The pieces mentioned directly in this essay are intended as examples through which major themes can be traced rather than the whole of the evidence responsible for the formation of the ideas in this thesis.[7]

Blithedale in its times (1852-1890)

In *The School of Hawthorne,*[8] Richard Brodhead makes a convincing argument that by 1860, Nathaniel Hawthorne was a canonized American author. Brodhead believes that many problems in Hawthorne's later works can be directly attributed to his

struggles with the idea of being a creator of American literary classics. As much as his status as a self-conscious creator of classics influenced his art, it was equally influential on the critical and popular reception of his art by the public. Hawthorne's standing as a literary savant and member of high society in his times bore direct effects on the reception of *The Blithedale Romance*.

Before reviewing the reviews, it may be beneficial to look at Hawthorne's standing in the literary community and the historical circumstances under which *Blithedale* was produced. Hawthorne was probably the first American novelist to be an acknowledged genius in his times. He was immortalized in marble busts on public buildings, asked to endorse politicians, and received appointments at home and abroad. He quickly became associated with his status as an American author and presenter of the American ideal to the outside world. Twain, Cooper, and Melville never enjoyed such esteem while alive. The only current author that has been decorated in a similar way may be Don DeLillo, but, as I will explain, Hawthorne's context was much different.

Hawthorne's writing came to fruition in a time when America was in dire need of a representative to put forth to the world as an example of American artistry. His major period of publishing, 1850-1852, coincided with both a time of domestic strife and the beginnings of post-colonial cultural breakage. The end of the War of 1812 marked the first time that America existed without any British troops on its soil. America had been on its own for almost forty years, and was ready to express itself as a pure culture with domestic interests, styles, and artists. America was looking to take hold of something uniquely American that it could export to Europe demonstrating freedom from the colonial yoke. Proof that it was capable of cultivating art based on distinct

characteristics that defined the American character. America was looking for a diplomat, and got one both figuratively and literally in Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Simultaneously, America was on the eve of The Civil War. Hawthorne was among the prominent figures that advocated compromise and careful examination of the issues involved in order to keep the Union united. It is widely documented that Hawthorne was concerned with issues such as slavery, but found abolitionists dangerous and considered them radical warmongers. This midline stance separated him from his contemporaries who were more radical on either side of the political spectrum, such as the Transcendentalists. His work was palatable for everyone in a factionalized society. Before the Civil War, Hawthorne's writing was almost anti-New England compared to his contemporaries, as he took a different (mid-line) stance on so many of the issues, political and social, than other New Englanders. His work did not take on its characteristic New England feel until after victory in the Civil War, when it could be used as a demonstration of why one culture defeated another.

It is interesting to note that Hawthorne was well received both at home and abroad. Hawthorne's works were published as essentially the same texts in both America and Britain. Melville's early works, such as *Typee*, require tables of variants between the American and British editions that span many pages, as there was often a difference of fifty or sixty pages of text between the novel that was published for the American and British reading publics.[9] Both *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables* had been relative blockbusters at home and abroad, despite the fact that Hawthorne himself saw very little of the overall proceeds due to complications with international copyright

laws and bad business management. By 1852, the reading public was ready to receive another Hawthorne classic (the third in three years).

Hawthorne was skeptical about *The Blithedale Romance* from the outset. He sent the manuscript to his friend and supporter Percy Whipple with a very dubious letter claiming that all of the flaws of the novel may not ever be ironed out. It has been widely noted that Hawthorne was not comfortable as a novel writer to begin with, but it seems that he was even more dubious about *Blithedale* than any of his previous endeavors.

The public seemed to answer *Blithedale* with the same kind of ambivalence as Hawthorne. The published reviews were a mixed lot.[10] While very few of the reviews are universally positive, none of them are universally negative.[11] I believe that, at least from the American point of view, it was not acceptable for Hawthorne to have written a "bad" novel at this point in his literary career. For the reasons cited above, America needed Nathaniel Hawthorne. More than that, America needed its image of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the Hawthorne that created great literature that represented America at home and abroad and would help create a cultural rallying point that would keep America together at a time when it was threatening to come undone. For this reason, all of the misgivings critics had with *The Blithedale Romance* are overshadowed by the need to protect Hawthorne's standing as a great novelist.

The Atlantic Ocean marked a divide in the reception of *Blithedale.* The American critics, while careful to maintain Hawthorne's overall brilliance, seemed preoccupied with Hawthorne's harsh treatment of the utopian socialist movement. It was not difficult to read *The Blithedale Romance* as a biography of Hawthorne's experience at Brook Farm with "names changed to protect the innocent." Later excavations would validate

these biographical critics by connecting events and descriptions in the novel with real life experiences recorded in Hawthorne's notebooks. There is a difference between these early critics and the later critics who picked up their torch. For the critics of the 20th century, connecting the characters of *Blithedale* with their antecedents broadened their understanding of the text. The 19th century critics who performed the same activity used it to create a complete understanding of the text. The mode of reading was biographical criticism, and therefore the connections that these critics made often represented their entire understanding of the text.

The first issue that American critics had to contend with was what they felt as an unfair treatment of Brook Farm, the socialistic experiment that Hawthorne used as the setting for his romance. The first concern was the cruel tone and vicious satire of the utopian socialist movement as a whole. Utopian socialism, and especially the Brook Farm experiment, was tied so closely with Transcendentalism that any criticism of the movement was a blasphemous blow to the first indigenous philosophical and artistic movement in the history of a young America. The Hawthorne that was being groomed to be the representative of American culture to Europe could not afford this kind of sentiment. An anonymous *Christian Examiner* review from September 1852 was among the first to accuse Hawthorne of creating a "Misleading 'History' of Brook Farm." His incidents and characters were not "clouded" "obscurely" enough for this anonymous reviewer. He found it too easy to connect the events and characters of *Blithedale* with those of Brook Farm, and therefore found the criticisms in *Blithedale* particularly biting.

The second problem that American commentators found with *Blithedale* was the apparently unfair treatment it made of the real life figures involved in the Brook Farm

experiment. The problem that plagued these critics most was the connection between Zenobia and Margaret Fuller. This comparison is present throughout the history of *The Blithedale Romance* and its readers. At the time of its publication it was most problematic. Fuller had recently died in a tragic accident sinking her boat off the coast of Long Island. Not only had Hawthorne connected Zenobia with Fuller's politics, but even her death (by drowning). At a time where the nation mourned the loss of one of the leaders of the Transcendental and feminist movements, it seemed offensive to give American readers a portrait of her that was jaded, satirical, and nasty with so little effort made to disguise the connection between the real person and her fictional counterpart.

There were other reasons to be critical of *Blithedale*. One was political. *Blithedale* was the first major piece Hawthorne had published since he contributed a biography of Franklin Pierce in order to assist in Pierce's election. As a vocal member of the Democratic Party who had received party appointments in the past, Whigs were not likely to give Hawthorne a shining review. Many of these reviewers took *Blithedale*'s publication as an opportunity not only to attack Hawthorne's work, but his moral worth as a human being. Two reviews of *Blithedale* appeared in *The American Whig Review* in 1852. The first accuses the novel of "Excessive Imperfection in Characters" (vol. 16) and the second levels an accusation of "A Morbid and Suspicious Nature" (vol. 17). A "lack of universal tenderness" and a desire to flaunt the flaws of the novel in front its readers are among the many slings and arrows Hawthorne's political enemies launched at him.

None of these issues were of any importance to the English, however. As a matter of fact, the response in Britain to the book was phenomenal. Browning declared it his favorite Hawthorne book. A review printed in *The Westminster Review* (1852),

commonly attributed to George Eliot,[12] shows how far the issues that plagued the American reviewers were from British concern. She is quick to connect Zenobia to Margaret Fuller and Blithedale Farm to Brook Farm, but does so for the purpose of praise rather than to defame Hawthorne for ill treatment of the issues or lack of imagination as his American reviewers had. She claims that his satire of Fuller and Brook Farm bring the reader closer to what actually had happened on the socialistic farm in West Roxbury than the true biography of the place ever could.

Henry F. Chorley wrote another shining British review declaring *Blithedale* "eminently American" and warned against undue criticism of what he saw as the "New Hawthorne" and his style. He was among the few reviewers to mark this novel as a positive departure for Hawthorne. This new direction promised, in Chorley's eyes, to create interesting books with high moral appeal and great social insight. This review is a triumph for *The Blithedale Romance* and Hawthorne as an American literary diplomat.

The problems critics found in *Blithedale* were reflected in its popular reception. The first American pressing of *Blithedale* was as large as would be expected of a prominent author, the second pressing was relatively small and a third was several years away. It was generally read as a failed novel with some admirable traits. American critics continued to make connections between biographical events in Hawthorne's life with events in the novel. Critics continued reading the first person narrator, Miles Coverdale, as Hawthorne himself. The novel was seen as a lapse in genius that, while readable, certainly need not be a required text of American culture the way that *The Scarlet Letter* was.

By 1876, G.P. Lanthrop felt the need to defend the novel against what he perceived as over twenty years of cruel and undue criticism. In *A Study of Hawthorne,*[13] Lathrop cited a number of reasons why previous critics had been harsh on the novel. He pointed out Noyes' credentials as a socialist who had a vested interest in the novel being discounted as a criticism of utopian socialism. Lathrop devotes three pages of his study to defending the novel,[14] giving a number of interesting symbolic readings of the novel. He presented the idea that Coverdale was not in fact Hawthorne, but rather a method by which Hawthorne could produce self-parody. He also presented the criticism of Brook Farm as a more nuanced and complicated interpretation than the wholesale dismissal of utopian socialism previous critics had read into the novel. While the characters that inhabited Blithedale Farm may have bases in real life, they were characters and were divorced from their progenitors. To Lathrop, *The Blithedale Romance* was an example of Hawthorn in realistic mode while plagued by a dread for the American future. He ends his passage with a laundry-list of compliments concerning Hawthorne's style and characterization.

Other Hawthorne enthusiasts would simply disregard *The Blithdale Romance.* Hawthorne's publisher, the ever self-advertising James T. Fields, left *Blithedale* out of his *Yesterdays with Authors*[15] all together, aside from a mention that it had been written while he was overseas.[16] A quick perusal of the advertisements at the back of an early edition of the book shows that Field's publishing company (now Houghton Mifflin) did not have a separate volume of *Blithedale* in print at the time of publication. In fact, the only way to buy the novel in 1888 was to purchase one of the multi-volume collections of Hawthorne's complete works. *The Scarlet Letter*, however, was singled out to be the

only novel that Houghton Mifflin published as its own edition in the late 19th century. *The Scarlet Letter* had clearly taken a dominant position as the single greatest creation in the Hawthorne library, while *The Blithedale Romance* was buried in the middle of an expensive multi-volume set. In the context of discussion the canon as an issue of accessibility, it is clear that *The Blithedale Romance* had taken a backseat.

Blithedale in the Age of High Realism 1890-1940

What is being referred to as "High Realism" or "Modernism" in this chapter is a period that is difficult to define. First of all, American modernism, both artistically and philosophically, does not necessarily correspond with the same movement in Europe. Secondly, I am defining High Realism/Modernism as a critical period rather than a literary one. The arbitrary decade of the 1940s as a close to this period has been chosen because that is the decade in which F. O. Mattheissen publishes *America Renaissance*, a seminal work for the kick-off of New Criticism. I refer to these dates as arbitrary because the strains of New Criticism begin emerging well before 1941. Likewise, the nature of criticism that I am exploring here is not truly supplanted by New Criticism until the 1950s.

High Realism is the best name to assign to this period. High Realism has much closer ties with the philosophical bent of the writing and criticism of this period than "Modernism," with its connotations that are of a mostly European and retrospective bent. This was an age where value was attached to the real. The outside world in which the reader was present was supposed to be illuminated and understood through the lens of the novel. One must remember that the great authors of this period were Dreiser, James,

Wharton, and later Hemingway and Fitzgerald. This mode of reading examines characters and plot as realistic representations of the outside world. The process of reading literature was an experience of elevation, by which the reader discovers essential truths of life. This was coupled with the 19th century trend of biographical "Great Men" style of criticism, where great novels came from authorial geniuses who were upright moral men translating ideas and experience into novels with high moral messages.

The prevailing cultural mood of this period was one of isolation and consolidation. This era marks the beginning of literary canon as we know it. The institution was developed for a specific set of reasons. The canon began in empire nations such as Britain as a tool for teaching their foreign subjects about their culture and language. In America the problem was domestic. There was a constant flow of immigrants, and not only the English speaking Irish, but also Italians, Eastern and Central Europeans and East Asians on the West Coast. All of these groups were seen as potential threats to a burgeoning American culture. Two World Wars and other military conflicts further intensified the need for a canon as a cultural rallying point for the nation to gather around to support. Patriotism and uniform national identity were difficult to cultivate in a nation that was the proverbial "mixed salad" trying to be a "melting pot." Nathaniel Hawthorne, with his New England consciousness, secular values, gradualism and unique spiritualism was a perfect figure to rally around.

Henry James and William Dean Howells were responsible for ushering in the era of "High Realism" in America. The first American modernists, they made some of the most lasting impressions on the readership of *The Blithedale Romance*. Both wrote novels that related or retold *Blithedale* (James in *The Ambassadors* and *The Bostonians*,

Howells in *The Undiscovered Country*). This in itself is a sign of recognition and respect for this seemingly lesser romance. It also would spawn a cottage industry of literary critics who were interested in comparing and contrasting these texts to the original model throughout the 20th century.

James' *Hawthorne,*[17] published as part of a series of American writers publishing commentary on previous American authors, would prove to be one of the most lasting and influential commentaries on *Blithedale* in the novel's history. James' stature as author and critic were pivotal in the reception and influence of this reading, allowing it to make an indelible mark on later readers and writers. As a mere promotion for Hawthorne's genius, it is hard to think of a better platform. Nor could one think of a better platform to attempt to revive interest in the sunken works of Hawthorne, such as *Blithedale.* James was a fan of *Blithedale* and made a noble effort to put it into the newly developing canon of American letters. Ironically, he did so by praising the realism in the novel. He claimed Zenobia as the most developed and realistic of Hawthorne's female characters. He lamented her death as unnecessary and traumatic, but loved the novel and its realistic depiction of rural life all the same.

Despite praise from James, and later D. H. Lawrence in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, *The Blithedale Romance* did not fare well in this period. The turn of the century was a high time for histories of American and English literature. While none of these failed to recognize Hawthorne as an author of "classic" English language literature, none of them seemed to pay *Blithedale* any mind either. Both Henry S. Pancoast's *An Introduction to American Literature* (1898) and Barrett Wendell's *Literary History of America* (1900, teaching edition published in 1907) fail to mention anything

about *Blithedale* aside from the fact that it was set in Brook Farm, Zenobia was based on Margaret Fuller, and was the last novel of Hawthorne's most productive phase. Van Wyck Brooks, one of the most prominent commentators on New England literature of the 19th century, chose a similar tactic in 1936, talking about *Blithedale* only in reference to the historical fact of its composition and a footnote about Margaret Fuller.[18]

Paul Elmer More's *Shelburne Essays* may shed some light on the disappearance of *Blithedale* from Hawthorne criticism. More, an influential social writer of his times, wrote three anthologized essays on Hawthorne during his career. In these three essays *Blithedale* is only mentioned once as "the slightest and most colorless of [Hawthorne's] novels... and would add little to the discussion [of Hawthorne's value]."[19] *The Marble Faun* seems to have little to do with More's essays either. He chose the Puritan works as the representative and most important works of the Hawthorne canon, most commonly citing *The Scarlet Letter* and "Ethan Brand" as representative works for his discussions. Hawthorne's contemporary novels and stories clearly held little interest for More, or his contemporaries.

George E. Woodberry wrote another book on Hawthorne for the American Men of Letters Series in 1903.[20] Woodberry opens his commentary with the words "least substantial,"[21] which may well be the two most used words of the turn of the century concerning *The Blithedale Romance.* He did not bury the novel as many of his contemporaries did, but gives an in depth plot summary with a number of criticisms that seem symptomatic of the academic/intellectual stance on *Blithedale* at the turn of the century. His reading ties *Blithedale* to the more revered Puritan novels (comparing Hollingsworth to the Puritan Reverend figure, for example), but demonstrates how the

contemporary novel is clearly inferior. He accentuates the borrowed nature of many plot points from Hawthorne's recently published notebooks. The use of real life in realistic novel seems excessively problematic for these critics. These critics expect this fiction to be a higher form of reality than reality itself, making the use of autobiography a cheat. The highest criticism that Woodberry has for *Blithedale* is the accusation of a lack of verisimilitude. The narratives within the narrative are clumsy and *unrealistic* and the death of Zenobia seems to lack a *realistic* motivation. Historical distance allows the Puritan novels to make less realistic claims. The Puritan novels can exploit what is not known in the historical record in a way that a first person narrator in contemporary times cannot. Therefore the fantastic and unlikely cease to be interesting and simply become factual error.

A number of biographical criticisms on Hawthorne appeared during this period, none paying much attention to *The Blithedale Romance.* They all seem to boil down the novel to an allegory about the dangers of philanthropy and a criticism of utopian socialism. A perusal of the index of *The Rebellious Puritan*[22] by Lloyd Morris shows four pages of reference to *Blithedale,* compared to twelve on *The Scarlet Letter* and two on *Moby Dick*, a novel that Hawthorne did not even write. W.C. Brownell found the book too long and too reductionist for his taste.[23] In his book of personal reminiscences of Hawthorne, F.B. Sanborne claims the novel to be in bad taste and criticizing its poor treatment of the Transcendentalists.[24] Herbert Gorman goes as far as to accuse Hawthorne of having written the book as a "half-interested author"[25] and ultimately proclaims the novel "adequate."[26]

For all of those who were set to disparage *Blithedale* as a lesser novel, there were always some critics to defend it as a great but misunderstood novel. Helen Archibald Clarke attempted to dispel some of the greater myths surrounding *Blithedale* in *Hawthorne's Country.*[27] She was among the first critics to make any attempt to separate Hawthorne from Coverdale and Blithedale Farm from Brook Farm. This allowed for a reading that concerned higher fictional goals within Hawthorne's work without eliminating the allegorical from the romance. Coverdale became a criticism of Hawthorne as a self-reflective novelist, and a criticism of the act of writing as an occupation. Zenobia's character was her undoing, not Hawthorne's apparent contempt for Margaret Fuller and desire to kill her in a novel. The fall of Blithedale Farm was due to a group of egoists who could not envision forgiveness or brotherhood toward one another. This became her primary criticism of Hawthorne, that he was a man who could not envision a brighter world in which men and women overcame their own egoism to triumph over original sin.

Newton Arvin's *Hawthorne*[28] also attempted to revamp the contemporary view of *Blithedale.* Arvin puts forth an entire reading of *Blithedale* as an interaction of the forces of love and death as they relate to the failures and traits within each individual character. All of the characters are locked within themselves and have lost their connection to the social world. Hollingsworth is a maniac obsessed with his philanthropic scheme, Zenobia is guilty of a vain pride that results in her death, Pricilla is to weak to do anything but stand in the crossfire, while Coverdale is equally afraid to sacrifice himself in any way to help his friends. Arvin declares *The Blithedale Romance* as the quintessential "anti-romance," where Hawthorne exposes the dark underbelly of

American history with such overwhelming force that no light can penetrate. By all accounts this reading has more in common with the New Critical outlook than that of the time it was written in, which is probably why it did so little to actually change the standing of the novel.

Simultaneously, Europe was looking into Hawthorne with the hopes of finding American culture in American classics. In his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1922), D.H. Lawrence devoted the better part of his second chapter on Hawthorne (the first being exclusively devoted to *The Scarlet Letter*) on *Blithesdale.* Vega Curl's 1931 thesis *Pasteboard Masks: Fact as Spiritual Symbol in the Novels of Hawthorne and Melville*[29] not only cites *Blithedale* in its title, but also makes it the most referenced of any of the Hawthorne works employed as evidence. Both of these works demonstrate a different mode of interpretation from American critics. American academics were still focused on 19th century biographical criticism with the added ideal of realism, both of which work against *Blithedale* as a novel of value.

The New Critical Revolution and the Structure of Blithedale: 1940-the late 1970s

This chapter of the narrative deals with a time of contradictions and turmoil. This period contains a fairly unified critical community was despite huge swings in historical circumstance. It is an era that opens with World War II and ends in the disillusion of post-1960's radicalism. From beginning to end, this was a period where the critical establishment was attempting to create extreme change, first in response to the tragedy and horror of the most destructive conflict in the history of mankind, and later in light of

a rapidly changing liberal society that was attempting to move towards a utopian vision of social equality.

Featured within this era are a plethora of different outlooks and methods of literary criticism, all of which can be lumped under the auspice of New Criticism, American Formalism and later, their European sibling Structuralism. Included within these titles are Marxist commentators, psychoanalytic commentators, feminists, imagists, and religious scholars, to name but a few. The main feature was an overriding belief that the text contained the answers to its interpretations within itself and its forms and structures. Outside reference was seldom applicable to these scholars and even less often seen as a positive influence on the reader. Any text contained within it everything one needed to understand it and therefore the outside reference not necessary. *The Blithedale Romance* was a perfect text for these critics: it was threaded with themes that spanned the length of the novel, the first person narrator made it self contained and essentially circular, and was riddled with symbols and clues that evolved with the narrative. It is no small wonder that all of the problems that had plagued the readers of *The Blithedale Romance* for over two generations began to dissipate and the novel experienced a revival.

F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* is the perfect text to start off a discussion of the place of *Blithedale* in the New Critical canon. Written in 1941, this book was groundbreaking and influential on New Criticism. Matthiessen did not disregard *Blithedale* as one might expect in such a sweeping critical text. Matthiessen attempted to relate *Blithedale* to other texts in the Hawthorne canon and to canonical texts that influenced Hawthorne. Despite claiming *Blithedale* to be the "least allegorical -- and yet the thinnest [of Hawthorne's novels],"[30] Matthiessen manages to argue it into a

canon of literature by drawing parallels in forms and methods used in this novel to others. He associates it with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and describes it as an allegorical tale tracking the fall of Hollingsworth due to his blind pursuit of a single goal. He describes the presence of forces of absolute evil in the novel and compares them to similar forces in more highly regarded Hawthorne writings. He traces color and clothing imagery, such as the flower Zenobia wears, back to the more popular Hawthorne texts and images, such as Hester Prynne's "scarlet letter." Possibly most importantly, Matthiessen links *The Blithedale Romance* to contemporary texts and texts to come. He notes the influence the book had on Melville's *Pierre*, and Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* and *The Bostonians*. From his point of view, the way that *Blithedale* dealt with skepticism, sexuality, microcosm, the unreliable first person narrator, and character development were influential and groundbreaking for American literature.

Jane Lundblad does a similar job of connection by putting Hawthorne's works into the canon of the gothic in her essay "Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Tradition of the Gothic Romance."[31] She proclaims *Blithedale* not as gothic as its two predecessors, but still manages to put the novel into the context of the Hawthorne canon, and the Hawthorne canon into the context of the gothic canon. William Bysshe Stein connects *Blithedale* into a canon of "Faustian" works by Hawthorne, with Westervelt playing the part of Mephistopheles.[32]

The "Dark Lady/ Pale Maiden" theme present throughout much Hawthorne criticism first came into prominence in this period. Hawthorne's "Dark Ladies," always brunettes, are women of sexuality, power and moral strength, endlessly at odds with the social constraints placed on them by a sexist society. Invariably, these women were

punished for their transgressions in the plot of the novel while the reader and narrator praised their strength and honesty. The "Pale Maiden," blond and pale complected, is the Dark Lady's counterpart or mirror image in Hawthorne's writings. These women are ethereal, asexual, and spiritual. Often their bodies are non-extant or hidden and they are feeble and passive. Leslie Fiedler, Jac Tharpe, Nina Baym, Rudolf Von Able, Barbara and Mark Lefkowitz, and Leo B. Levy comprise a short list of critics who wrote on this phenomenon. The dichotomy between the Pale Maiden and Dark Lady in Hawthorne's literature was a particularly juicy morsel for New Critics to sink their analytical teeth into because it not only pervades Hawthorne's writings, but also is invested with many subjects conducive to New Critical discourse. This dialectic links personality traits with color images. It was completely confined within the novel and had no representative narratives that existed outside folklore and literature. It tied to gender and power issues and is thus a perfect pedagogical platform. Feminist critics often focus on this aspect of Hawthorne's writing in attempts to show Hawthorne as an author useful or dangerous to feminism. As for *Blithedale*, Zenobia and Pricilla are a perfect example of a light and dark lady combo and therefore put *Blithedale* on the table for discussion of Hawthorne's heroines.

For example, Harry Levin devotes a portion of his reading of *Blithedale* in *The Power of Blackness* to demonstrating how the light/dark lady dichotomy creates a single heroine split into two bodies.[33] A list of Levin's dichotomies looks like the following: Pricilla/Zenobia; blond/brunette; delicate/spirited; innocence/experience; puritan/oriental queen; waif/womanly; virginity/sexual experience; Lilith/Eve. Levin points out that all of the seeming opposites of these characters begin to erase as one examines all of the

points where they connect. They are half-sisters, both love Hollingsworth, both have been connected in some way or another to Westervelt, and the Veiled Lady.

Some critics began to focus on *Blithedale* as an example of Hawthorne's politics. Irving Howe and Russell Kirk both devoted essays to describing how *The Blithedale Romance* proved Hawthorne to be a fundamentally conservative political thinker. Russell Kirk chose to feature Hawthorne in his collection of mini-biographies of conservative thinkers.[34] He describes Hawthorne as a Democrat but not a democrat, a man with a fundamental disbelief in the moral and intellectual abilities of the common man and an obsession with Puritan morality, which is moral conservatism in the extreme. Two years later, Irving Howe devoted a complete section to *Blithedale* in his *Politics and the Novel* (1957). Howe believes that the failure of Brook Farm was devastating for Hawthorne's moral and social outlook, as his investment in Brook Farm was not only an investment of money, but of spiritual faith in social movements. Howe connects the fall of Blithedale Farm with Hawthorne's fear and skepticism towards the world of reform and the triumph of the conservative forces over the dangerous radical minds in Blithedale Farm. All of the threats to Coverdale's everyday conservative lifestyle are destroyed in this novel: dangerous female sexuality (Zenobia) is killed, conservative femininity (Pricilla) is preserved, and active reform (Hollingsworth) both ruins Blithedale Farm and is ruined itself, without any active participation from Coverdale. Numerous other commentators took the political tract and came up with similar readings and conclusions about Hawthorne and *Blithedale* throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Several other topics concerning the inner workings of *The Blithedale Romance* emerged during this period. The first person narrator, Miles Coverdale, continued to be a

subject of debate. It was of utmost concern to figure out Coverdale's relationship to Hawthorne if one was to ever discover how to understand him as a reliable or unreliable narrator. Some critics, such as Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, chose simply to read Coverdale as a mouthpiece for Hawthorne himself. This was a return to biographical criticism in many ways as it viewed Coverdale's opinions as Hawthorne's with the name changed to protect him from accusations of libel. The other popular reading was that Coverdale was somehow a self-parody for Hawthorne. Roy R. Male forwarded the most influential of these readings.[35] These two readings have poignancy because they center on the meaning of writing from the first person perspective. The debate on narration is still open and these opposing viewpoints and variations thereof remain active in *Blithedale* criticism today.

Numerous critics were involved in these or similar processes and methods throughout this period. The idea was to connect each novel to other pieces of literature in order to determine something essential in literature. Allegory, genre examination, death and sex drives, religious leanings and political views were all points at which different novels could be linked together. This linking worked to save authors such as Hawthorne, whose work becomes increasingly less popular the later it was produced. It also expanded the canon to outside authors by showing parallels between their writings and established canonical authors. The assumption was that there was something fundamentally literary about literature and something fundamentally Hawthornian in all of Hawthorne's works. The job of the critic was to find that connecting point.

The Post-Structural Explosion and the Canon Wars: the late 1970's to the Present

It is well documented that European Structuralism and Post-Structuralism reached America simultaneously. For years Structuralism won out, mostly because it was nearly synonymous with the methods of Formalism put forward by the New Critics. It was not until the late 1970s, by which time the walls between European and American critics were mostly broken down, that Post-Structural analysis began to make its dent on Hawthorne criticism.

The emergence of Post-Structural methods is as important to understanding the relationship between *Blithedale* criticism and the state of *Blithedale* in the canon during this period. The first way Post-Structural analysis impacted *Blithedale* (and the canon) is the acceptance of *bricolage*. Expanding the number of methods readers can use to approach a text necessarily multiplies the number of possible readings of said text. A single overriding method of interpretation marks the previous eras outlined in this essay. These eras had canons that reflected that single method and its underlying values. No longer were readers confined to a limited interpretive toolkit that narrows the texts s/he could have meaningful interactions with.

The "Canon Wars" that began in the early and mid 1970s were highly influential on both the standing of works in the canon and what works critics chose to write on. As I discussed briefly in the introduction and will return to in the conclusion, the last thirty years have chronicled the most vicious and vocal wars over texts in the history of the modern canon. The center of these debates has been the question of what texts can be considered teachable for what means in an age when everything is up for grabs.

The canon wars and the explosion of methods of analysis account for an explosion of Hawthorne criticism over the last 30 years, especially the last ten.

Hawthorne is one of the writers most "threatened" by an open canon as a white male 19th century novelist. As such writers are a dime a dozen, one has to argue that, given an infinite number of texts to read, *Blithedale* is worth expending time and effort on.

One of the effects of multiple reading methods and an expansion of the canon is a shift in critical writing from "criticism" to "theory." The focus for literary critics traditionally was to forward a reading of a text that would further the understanding of the text in question. Now critics are more focused on creating readings that reinforce a reading method than expand the understanding of a single text. The texts they employ in their readings serve as "evidence" of the validity of their method or idea. As the method is supposed to be universal to all textual analysis, the role of the text in criticism has changed from previous eras. The prime example of this shift is Fish's "Interpreting 'Variorum,'" cited in the introduction. Ostensibly, this article is a reading of an obscure Milton poem. Very few readers gain a better understanding of the poem from this essay, however. The essay itself is mainly concerned with interpretive communities and has very little to do with "Variorum" at all. As the text itself is less important than what the theorist has to say about it in the context of literature as a whole, each text employed is an argument for canonicity in of itself. There is a dual message: any text can be read this way and I (the critic) read this text, I choose this text because it is "good" in my eyes. The first message is meant to be a universal truth, while the second is a statement of subjective opinion.[36]

Kenneth Dauber's chapter on *Blithedale* in *Rediscovering Hawthorne*[37] is the perfect example of a critic employing a novel for evidence in order to prove his theory. Dauber uses *Blithedale* in order to present a new theory on reading and understanding

realism and genre. Dauber begins his exploration of *Blithedale* by stating that *Blithedale* is an inverse of *The House of Seven Gables.* To Dauber, *Seven Gables* was Hawthorne's attempt to create a view of reality connected completely to the world the novel was created in, and was a failure. *Blithedale* attempts to rectify this failure by creating a maximum amount of distance between the author and his text while the author maintains as little interest and emotion towards the work itself as possible.

Hawthorne uses a number of conventions in the novel, but refuses to acknowledge their presence. These conventions tie *Blithedale* to its predecessors, while non-acknowledgement of the conventions simultaneously distances them. Dauber's example of this phenomenon is the opening of the book, where Coverdale writes "It has been ten years since..." This evokes Scott's methods for creating distance between his narrator and the events the narrator describes in *Waverly.* The lack of acknowledgement of the gothic convention being employed works as a double bind: it ties *Blithedale* with Scott's gothic while simultaneously disassociating itself with it.

Blithedale operates in a realm between fiction and reality, which makes such coded relationships possible. The reason why such methods work throughout the book is that any given single code of the text works as a double message. Every incident in the plot is an element of every other. From this understanding of the codes of the novel, Dauber can place the novel in a unique situation. It is a novel that is completely cohesive with itself, assuring a relationship between reality and fiction that both unites them and assures their separation. All is simultaneously within and outside the novel. For example, Hawthorne stands outside the novel, but writes in the first person as a character within the novel, who has many of the ideas and traits of Hawthorne but is not

Hawthorne. These relationships demonstrate *Blithedale* as art and not life, but life is ever-present throughout the novel. Hawthorne does not make any effort to disassociate himself from Coverdale or Blithedale Farm from Brook Farm, but not because he wishes to write an autobiography. The status of the novel as art is enough. The reality of the outside world simply does not matter to Hawthorne.

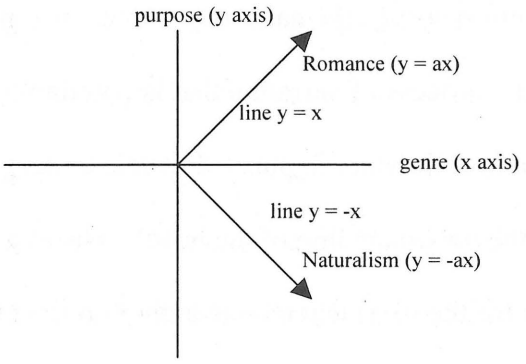
The problem of reading *Blithedale* is a problem of creating a linear narrative out of a circular one. It is a circle created through projection/reaction relationships. This is a process that happens within Coverdale. There is no separation between the events within the novel and the mind of Coverdale. For the reader, the event becomes synonymous with the reporter. The events that Coverdale does not witness exist only within his imagination. These imaginary representations are the reality of these events to the reader. As Coverdale keeps emotional and physical distance from the events he narrates, he becomes a shaper of the narrative rather than a character caught in the flow of a narrative. Yet, as narrator, he is bound to what he observes. Everything that happens in the novel shapes his psyche, which in turn shapes the narrative. Hence, it is not Coverdale who is an unreliable narrator, but the process of narration that is unreliable.

This unique position that Hawthorne puts Coverdale in helps to eliminate Hawthorne as author from the understanding of the novel. The narrator is writing in a time (the present) of events (of the past) leaving the author no time to stand in. Essentially, Hawthorne has written himself out of the novel. The past, future and present all exist in Coverdale's narrative. He has prophetic visions in the narrative but cannot tell from the present whether or nor his prophetic visions are historical fact or being imposed

by his present activity of narration. Without an author to set such questions straight they must remain as ambiguous as Coverdale presents them.

From this information, Dauber is capable of bringing out his first major thesis. He proclaims *Blithedale* to be a "realistic" novel. Dauber makes the claim that realism is something internal to a text. It is the constant interaction and interrelation between elements of the text and the separation between Hawthorne and the text that creates the circle of the text's reality. The first person narrator has an ontological equivalence with the work and therefore narrates the world in which he lives. Dauber notes that this is the first of Hawthorne's novels that does not attempt to validate itself from the outside with the use of documents or historical grounding.

Dauber forwards two more major theoretical ideas in this essay. Much as Dauber redefined realism in this chapter, he also attempts to redefine the relationship between genre and purpose in order to form a new type of genre system for novels. He represents this relationship as a graph.



Purpose is defined as the author's objective and genre is defined as the reader's expectations of the novel, each composing an axis of the graph, y and x respectively. Any given novel can be defined by the interaction of these two forces, as purpose or genre dominate at the expense of the other. In the Romance, purpose and genre perform

mutual coercion. The line y = x represents the perfect interaction of audience and author, where the novel presents the author's moral or ideal (purpose) and the reader is satisfied (genre). If the interaction is positive but purpose dominates genre (lines to the left of y = x), the result is fantasy (Dauber cites Poe as an example). As the line approaches y = 0 and genre takes the upper hand, the result is the sentimental or genre dominated novel (Dauber cites James Fenimore Cooper). Naturalism (such as that of Zola and Dreiser) is any novel where the author turns his back on the coercive powers of his work. Dauber's realism is the y = 0 line where the purpose of the work is the work itself. *Blithedale* is not on the y = 0 line, but rather plays off of the lines above and below it to balance out as an average of 0.

The last major thesis concerns the relationship of signifier and signified. Dauber argues that in *Blithedale*, due to the work's complete inclusion within itself, the signifier or symbol creates an endless chain of possibilities of meaning that all turn out to be as useless as the last. Without getting overly bogged down in Dauber's process and proof, it is enough to say that the realistic self-contained novel cannot create a chain of significance to readers in the world outside the novel.

In writings such as Dauber's, purpose takes a dominance over subject. He could easily have written this theory concerning most any other first person narrative (Henry James comes to mind). Other critics seem to have moved to similar styles of writing. Louise Desalvo proposed a now infamous feminist reading of *Blithedale* in 1987 in which she accuses Coverdale of having killed Zenobia.[38] Within six months of the publication of this piece it became necessary for every critic who wrote on *Blithedale* to mention how absurd this reading was in at least a footnote.

Other critical debates and methods have had free range over *Blithedale* for the last twenty years. What *Blithedale* has to say about socialism, politics, feminism, the nature of narration and the nature of literature itself are all major points of contention in the current critical debate. But, more often than not, the critical debate is one of ethos. These critics are not as concerned with obtaining the correct reading of *Blithedale* (Dauber and Desalvo are both perfect cases) but the correct theoretical approach to studying literature as a whole.

The fact that *The Blithedale Romance* has a place in this debate is very emblematic of the problematic nature of the text itself. As a challenging and occasionally bewildering novel, it is the perfect forum for debate. It leaves enough room for interpretation and enough problems to solve that critics can engage it in order to forward other ideas. It is the perfect trial text for any given theory, as the better theories will fill in the holes while the problem theories will not fit the mode.

Conclusion

The thesis of this essay is a simple one: different people read different texts at different times for different reasons. Presuming that this is true, one can trace themes and trends in historical events and academic thought in order to make certain assumptions concerning why a certain text is more or less popular or esteemed at any given time in history.

I contend that this popularity is based on there being a different text present in these different historical periods. While the physical text stays the same,[39] the reader creates a different interpretive text upon every reading of a given text. This interpretive

text is unique to every reader and every reading, but consistent themes and trends can be found amongst readers in a given culture and historical period, as they are caught in a matrix of cultural pressures and ideas to which they are responding. The general themes of readings for any given time influence a given text's presence inside or outside the academic canon.

Often these pressures can be defined as "agendas." If readers are attempting to forward a method of reading, such as formalism, the value of the text will be based on the quality of the reading of said text using this method. Texts not conducive to formalist analysis will be dropped out of the formalist canon. This text is simply a "bad text" to the formalist reader. The formalist reading process determines a certain kind of interpretation. If this reading/interpretive process reveals nothing, then there *is nothing there*. Until the reader develops different tools for interpretation, the problematic text will remain meaningless. Those who were trained to read this way will have the same results. These readers use the method because that is the only method they are familiar with. It cannot be said that they have anything to gain by either proving or disproving the value of their reading process, but rather are simply using the tools at their disposal. Likewise, texts that are not conducive to the reading method have already been eliminated from the canons these readers have easy access to, and therefore will often be blind to texts their reading methods do not work for.

It is for this very reason that changes in reading methods bring renaissances for older texts that have left the canon. In the 1920s and 1930s *Moby Dick* came up from the depths of history. The 1950s saw a revival of the works of Hawthorne and new attention to his "lesser" works, such as *The Blithedale Romance*. Over the past thirty years there

has been an explosion of revivals. The advent of multiculturalism and the expansion of acceptable reading methods have brought authors out of the depths of history for new debate and new readers. In the African American canon, the main beneficiaries have been Hurston, Chesnutt, Dunbar, and Richard Wright. The feminist and 19th century canons have seen an unearthing of American female authors ranging from "local color" writers such as Mary Stoppard, journalists such as Fanny Fern, and female social commentators such as Edith Wharton. Foucault's method of historical criticism has spawned a new interest in lost writers from all walks of life as readers attempt to gain access to different periods of culture by immersing themselves in their literature.

Jorge Luis Borges once suggested that there are two kinds of "classics": the kind that sit on a shelf in a fancy binding and people talk about but no one reads, and the kind that has vibrant life that brings readers to it again and again. There is a great deal of truth to this statement, and it points to different kinds of canonization. Unfortunately for *The Blithedale Romance*, it is a 19th century novel. Regardless of its standing inside a 19th century American canon, it will never sell as many copies outside of the academy as Ellison's *Invisible Man* or *Lolita,* simply because the non-academic reader has very little interest in such novels. From this point of view, *The Blithedale Romance* has probably not had a large receptive readership since the 1930s.

It is important to remember that the ideas in this essay are generalizations concerning certain periods of time and intellectual trends. Not only could one easily pull up evidence contradictory to these trends (there are always dissenters to any general movement), but one could employ a considerable amount of evidence that I did not include. These four periods and the general themes I have traced through these periods

are only a fraction of the reality of what was going on in any stage in history. A closer examination would most likely reveal more complex and intricate changes over short periods of time. For example, the impact of an event such as World War II on the literary canon and *The Blithedale Romance* was barely touched upon. In other words, this essay is an overview rather than a microanalysis. Given time and materials, one could easily undertake a study of a shorter period. This study would reveal a micro-level demonstration of what I have tried to confront on the macro-level.

Even so, I feel this research has presented a way of confronting canon formation and a way of understanding how intellectual and social trends effect the literary canon. My research demonstrates that *The Blithedale Romance* oscillated in esteem and readership throughout its history. It entered the world as a failure, both artistically and financially. The Formalist critics who found value in it that was not there previously redeemed *Blithedale* in the 1940s and 1950s. By the late 1970s the game had changed again. Academics perceived their texts to be at risk with the expanded canon and attempted to defend important texts, even if it was in a circuitous and occasionally illogical manner.

The American canon is at a critical point at this moment in history. It is opening and closing its doors constantly as critics war about what texts should be included and whether there is a need for canons at all. The sides are not clearly drawn in the community between those who feel canons to be necessary and those who would see them dissolved. The political left includes critics who wish to dissolve all canons and critics who would like to create multiple canons. The left wishes inclusion of texts such as minority literatures and popular forms of writing. Some of these critics view texts as

cultural production and therefore are more interested in how "pulp" texts document popular culture. There are also critics such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., who is attempting to create a canon of African American literature based on a specific set of criteria that create a cultural hierarchy for these texts.[40] At the same time there is a faction of critics on the right wing who find any collapse of cultural hierarchy to be a threat to social stability and the traditional reasons and rationale for studying literature.

American education has much to gain from open canons. Education has benefited from the expansion of acceptable reading methods, giving a wider range of understandings of texts than previously available to times of circumscribed methods. If this is true of method, why should it not be true for material? I would argue that the inclusion or exclusion of a text from a teaching canon should be based on nothing more than its "teachability." Those texts that offer the most to the understanding of "literature" as a concept are the texts that are most important to teach. Just as it would be foolish to exclude a method from a critical discussion if it assists in understanding a text, it is foolish to exclude a text from a classroom if it forwards a theme on which the class is based.

This is the very reason I was so surprised to discover that *The Blithedale Romance* was such a complicated and intricate novel. In Oberlin, I have confronted another canon: the canon of the "uncanonized" or "failed" novel. This trend is not confined to Oberlin. Adventurous academics are constantly examining works to determine why they failed. The discussion of why *Huckleberry Finn* is a failed novel is one that no American undergrad can escape at this point in academic history. The reason for this is the prevailing (and correct) belief that this novel has so many bright and interesting points

that its mere failure to come to a satisfying conclusion should not be the basis for shutting it out of American academics. I cannot help but have similar feelings about *Blithedale.* Despite low points, this novel has so many different themes that connect to different concerns in literature that it overcomes any "failure" that might be attached to it.

Creating syllabi becomes very complicated when the focus is changed from texts that are recognized as classics to texts that have value in the context of a larger discussion. Formerly, a class on 19th century American literature would be a simple syllabus to construct, because the professor would simply pick and chose from the "list" of canonized works. This class would teach *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, the Transcendentalists, etc. This trend changed with the disintegration of the divide between high and low culture and the opening of the canon in the 1970s. Nay-sayers accuse the new syllabus of being a checklist of minority writers in order to cover the "politically correct" bases: one female, one black, one gay male, etc. Needless to say, this is hogwash. I also believe that the formerly standard syllabus has become next to impossible to construct at all. The reason for this is that the older concept of "19th Century American Literature" was based on a belief in a dominant monolithic American Culture (with a capital "C"). The recent "discovery" that "American Culture" represents only White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (usually from New England) has blown the concept of "19th Century American Literature" to pieces. Once one realizes that this culture is only one of many, the number of texts that can be accounted for under a heading such as "19th Century American Literature" increases exponentially. Hence, another word has to be added to the heading. What was once one class becomes many: 19th Century

American Realism, Women in 19th Century America, 19th Century American Slave Narratives, etc.

For a class that is focused on the texts of American literature that are most influential on current fiction and intellectual thought, *The Scarlet Letter* is clearly a better choice for a teaching text than *Blithedale.* However, if one is teaching 19th century American fiction as a phenomenon, either may well be the better choice. For one thing, *Blithedale* offers students fresh ground for ideas. *Blithedale* is also better from the Foucaultian standpoint, as its criticism of the culture it is written about is fairly up front and not buried under a complicated historical narrative. There are many reasons, all very valid, that professors choose to go to *The Scarlet Letter* over Hawthorne's other works in their classes. On the other hand, now it is a choice that must be debated critically, instead of the previous standard where such choices were made almost subconsciously. As members of an academic community, we sit at a point in history where the artistic commentary in *The Marble Faun* may well be more conducive to certain academic settings than the social commentary of *The Scarlet Letter.*

Literary study is benefiting from the open canon. Theorists have access to a wide number of texts to base theoretical work on. Both theory and readership is diversifying without being forced to universalize. In fact, the universal is dying as a concept. There now exist multiple canons, each with multiple methods, and I do not see any of them being mutually exclusive. Were one to read *The Blithedale Romance* as a novel about Brook Farm (as early critics did), one would miss so many of the intricate ideas and joys of the text. At the same time, if one were to completely disregard this method of reading, one would lose a great deal of these intricacies. The only choice to be made is to read

each text in as many ways as possible. If this is the method texts are to be approached, the texts most valuable to the canon are the texts that can be read the most ways to achieve the greatest possible understanding.

This means that the support for *The Blithedale Romance* is more diverse than ever. There are right of center critics who would have it remain in the canon as a piece of "great literature" in the traditional sense. There are also critics left of center who are interested in *The Blithedale Romance* because it is a "failure" worth studying, it has diverse themes and ideas, and is a good platform for theorizing on. From my point of view, *The Blithedale Romance* is an infinitely valuable text. The mere presence of this paper serves to demonstrate the kinds of dialogue this text can create. Any text that can create readings that span from it being an anti-socialist novel to a demonstration of how realism is internal to a textual world can and should be utilized toward a greater understanding of literature.

None of the critics presented in this essay have managed to make *The Blithedale Romance* a household name or brought it into contention for "Great American Novel" status. What has happened, however, is the end of the debate on the "Great American Novel." The concept that a single text could possibly represent America to all people at all times has moved to the level of absurdity it deserves. *The Blithedale Romance* has as much to say about American literature as *Moby Dick*. As do Richard Wright and Philip Roth. I cannot help but think of the introductory section of *The Great American Novel* by Philip Roth as I write this. In this introduction, his narrator ironically synopsizes the five contenders for "GAN" status. The narrator then includes his contender for GAN status, the story of a baseball team that has lost their home field because it has become a military

base for recruitment during World War II. The Rupert Mundys are a baseball team as strange and diverse as America itself. Through their adventures of playing an entire season of baseball as the visiting team in every stadium, Roth examines the problem of homelessness and foreignness in the American identity and the necessity of a mulit-valanced view of American culture. Endemic to this argument is the fact that Roth's *Great American Novel* cannot possibly be what its title claims. No single novel can be "The Great American Novel." "The Great American Novel" is 250 million family stories, all of which contain rises and falls, the heartache of discrimination, and the triumph and failure of attempted assimilation.

The inclusionists have clearly won most of the battles of the canon wars thus far. Charles Waddle Chesnutt can now be found on bookshelves across America, where a decade or two ago none of his books were in print. There is no fear that Chesnutt's work will knock *Blithedale* off the shelves, however. The mere fact that *Blithedale* has remained in print with all of Hawthorne's work is an argument for the success of the open canon. All of the paranoid ramblings that claimed that Hurston would do damage to the traditional canon if included are clearly wrong. The presence of Hurston in the canon has done nothing to eliminate *Blithedale* from it, so it is safe to say that *The Scarlet Letter* and Shakespeare are also safe.

As obvious as this is to me, the rumblings continue that American culture is disintegrating rather than diversifying. The threats from this vocal minority are real. A right wing legislature can draw funds away from state colleges and conservative school boards can pull books off public school syllabi or even ban them. The best defense against the limiting force of these "McIntellectuals," as Ishmael Reed refers to them in

the introduction to the recent essay collection he edited,[41] are projects such as this one. Proof that a WASP dominated high culture based on canons is a concept with barely 100 years of history is proof that what these conservative thinkers are defending is a concept that has no existential value. The concept of "genius" has not disappeared; it has been necessarily modified to fit cultural realities. The main reality is that traditional canons that excluded minority politics and culture were obsolete before they were formed. It simply took a century to figure it out.

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[1] This idea has been traditionally posited as "reader-response theory" and owes its origins to Roland Barthes.
[2] Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation.* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993.
[3] I borrow this term from Lawrence Levine. See: *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America.* Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass.: 1988.
[4] Fish, "Interpreting the Variorum" from *MCT: Second Edition* ed. Lodge, Longman Publishing 1988/2000, pp. 288-306.
[5] To the extent to which such an objective outlook can be possible, of course. I cannot possibly say that I completely hold back judgement on these critical texts. I must admit, many of them are completely absurd and borderline hilarious.
[6] Excluding *Septimus Felton* and the two incomplete novels, as I believe Hawthorne would.
[7] A complete bibliography is included. It is organized chronologically rather than alphabetically for easy reference while reading.
[8] Brodhead, Richard H. *The school of Hawthorne.* New York : Oxford University Press, 1986.
[9] *Typee*, for example, was edited for political content between American and British editions, making the British edition considerably longer than the American, and making the task of contemporary editors of the text very complicated in sorting out which of the versions should be present in current editions.
[10] All reviews quoted appear in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Blithedale Romance* (eds. Gross and Murphy, NY, 1978) and Faust, Bertha *Hawthorne's Contemporaneous Reputation: A study of literary opinion in America and England 1828-1864* (Octagon Books, NY 1939/1968), unless otherwise indicated.
[11] Percy Whipple himself wrote the only universally positive American review of the book. Of course, the value of such statements is dubious given that Whipple was both Hawthorne's friend and an editor of the text he was reviewing.
[12] The attribution to Eliot was made by James D. Rust in "George Eliot on *The Blithedale Romance*" (*Boston Public Library Quarterly,* 7, 1955, 207-15). I have yet to obtain a copy of this article, being somewhat superfluous to my current endeavors, but am very curious to find out exactly how such an argument could be made.
[13] Lathrop, G.P. *A Study of Hawthorne.* James R. Osgood and Co., Boston: 1876.
[14] pp. 192-5.
[15] Houghton Mifflin, Boston: 1888.
[16] Fields' opinions of the novel were fairly negative, despite their absence from this work. In private, he was quoted as begging, "Let us hope Hawthorne gives us no more *Blithedales.*" See Mellow, *Hawthorne in His Times.*
[17] James, Henry. *Hawthorne*, Henry James, New York, Harper & brothers, 1880, English men of letters series.

[18] See Brooks, *The Flowering of New England: 1815-1865* (Garden City Publishing Company Incorporated, Garden City, NY: 1936) pps. 381 and note on 383.
[19] More, *Shelburne Essays: First Series* (GP Putnam's Sons/Knickerbocker Press, NY: 1901) pg. 40.
[20] Woodberry, *Nathaniel Hawthorne,* Houghton Mifflin & Co. Boston, 1903, American Men of Letters Series.
[21] ibid, pg. 227
[22] Morris *The Rebellious Puritan: A Portrait of Mr. Hawthorne* (Harcort, Brace and Co., NY: 1927).
[23] Brownell, *American Prose Masters* (Charles Scribner's Sons, NY: 1909) pgs. 92-5.
[24] Sanborne *Hawthorne and His Friends: Reminiscence and Tribute* (Torch Press, Cedar Rapids, IA: 1908) pg. 55. This is the only reference to *The Blithedale Romance* in the entire book.
[25] Gorman *Hawthorne: A Study in Solitude* (Murray H.H. Biographies Series, George H. Doran Co., NY: 1927) pg 105.
[26] ibid. 107.
[27] Clarke, *Hawthorne's Country* (The Baker and Taylor Co., NY: 1910) pgs. 209-230.
[28] Arvin, *Hawthorne* (Little, Brown and Co., Boston Mass, 1929). see 104-5 and 196-219.
[29] Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 1931.
[30] Matthiesen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford University Press, Oxford: 1941) pg. 248.
[31] from *Essays and Studies in American Language and Literature*, S. B. Liljegren ed. (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass: 1946).
[32] Stein *Hawthorne's Faust: A study of the Devil Archetype* (University of Florida Press, Gainesville, 1953)
[33] Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (Faber and Faber, London, 1958). pgs. 73-77. The list in the follow sentence is compiled from page 75.
[34] Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (Henry Regnery Co., Chicago: 1955) pgs. 218-226.
[35] He saw Coverdale as the nightmare-self of Hawthorne had he not married and remained a detached author/observer of life as opposed to a participant. See: Male *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision* (University of Texas Press, Austin: 1957) chapter 8. For Coverdale see pgs. 143-5.
[36] Disclaimer time: this does not mean that I believe that no one writes criticism anymore and everyone writes theory. Nor do I turn my nose up at those who continue to write criticism rather than theory. I am merely citing what I perceive to be a prevalent trend in literary theory.
[37] Dauber, *Rediscovering Hawthorne* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ: 1977) pgs. 149-192.
[38] Desalvo, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Humanities Press International Inc., Atlantic Highland, NJ: 1987). pgs. 97-128.
[39] With the exception of revisionist editions, the inclusion of footnotes, and tables of variants between earlier editions, etc.
[40] It has been noted that Gate's African American canon is in fact as exclusionary as it is inclusionary. There is no room for a writer such as Richard Wright within the canon perceived by Gates. This is because he is forwarding a single way to reading African American texts and therefore a single set of criteria for what texts should be read. To my mind, this makes Gates as conservative as the forces he is fighting. Not only does Richard Wright have much to add to any discussion of African American writing, but so do Faulkner, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Wallace Stevens. The exclusion of any given text from a canon where it can be seen as pertinent is a limitation on the dialogue that leads to greater understanding.
[41] *MultiAmerica: essays on cultural wars and cultural peace.* Ishmael Reed, ed. New York: Viking, 1997.

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