

“[F]ilthy, bestial, and abominable corruptions”:  
Reassessing Gothicism and Antebellum Reform in *The Blithedale Romance*

By  
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## Abstract

My essay will explore the narrating character Miles Coverdale as the primary Gothic subject of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), and moreover it will tie in aspects of the Gothic environment, showing how dungeons and dark corners depicted in the narrative correspond with Coverdale as a maddening figure. My claim is not that Coverdale actually loses his sanity, but that he secludes and excludes himself as a response to a constant threat of institutionalization. I will build on the ideas of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), which argues that Gothic structures like castles, tombs, and prison chambers should be read as places of restraint or exclusion. Additionally, I will refer to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject to elucidate the significance of Coverdale as the "radically excluded" subject and (2), in accordance with that, I will draw on Michel Foucault to claim that Coverdale's confinement to the sick-chamber (a make-shift hospital room, as it were) resembles what Foucault describes as "the hospital for the incurably mad" (41). One important aspect of my argument is to show that Coverdale appears monstrous when he is on the loose, an outcast of the community. Ultimately, I will show that Hawthorne appropriates these gothic conventions to present a social critique of institutional reform on the tenet that reform culture had established unattainable ideals and values for individuals like Coverdale. Christopher Castiglia's *Interior States* explains that during the 1840s the focus of reform expanded to include individual vices like drinking and gambling in addition to social injustices such as slavery (8). Through his portrayal of Zenobia, Hawthorne explicitly questions the collective issue of women's rights but, as my essay will explore, he more importantly challenges readers to address the developing problem of regulated identities. Understanding Coverdale as the central Gothic figure of *Blithedale*, then, identifies Hawthorne's larger concerns with the political injustices of reform.

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“[F]ilthy, bestial, and abominable corruptions”:

Reassessing Gothicism and Antebellum Reform in *The Blithedale Romance*

**Introduction**

The center of Gothicism in Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* is open to dispute. Teresa A. Goddu contends that readers should look to the Veiled Lady – whether Priscilla or Zenobia – because her shadowy figure channels the gothic trope of mesmerism (106). The character in the veil has been a key figure in gothic fiction since the late eighteenth century, beginning with Matthew Gregory Lewis’s 1796 novel, *The Monk*. Unlike the Bleeding Nun in *The Monk*, though, Priscilla serves more as an object of desire than a subject of terror. Most often the imagery of veils in gothic fiction communicates a turn from beauty to death. Zenobia is more convincing as a veiled character then, because, though not animated, her corpse resurfaces from the river as “the marble image of a death-agony” (161). Many might even turn to Hollingsworth as the main gothic figure because Zenobia declares him “a monster! A cold, heartless, self-beginning and self-ending piece of mechanism” (150). But I contend that Miles Coverdale more than Hollingsworth, Zenobia, or Priscilla acts as the primary subject of terror in the romance, despite his role as the unreliable narrator. Coverdale’s narration, in fact, should be read as an expression of what critics of the Gothic call the fragmented subject. The romance foregrounds that Coverdale is “simultaneously an insider and an outsider” to the Blithedale community, and a proper reading of his narrative depends on that significant detail (Levine 213). Although he declares himself a poet and a man of the world, the text reveals that Coverdale functions as the monster in the community and that his alienation illustrates a significant matter of identity (re)formation in the antebellum era.

My reading of Coverdale as the Gothic subject may seem strange to some, because gothic romances traditionally depict the narrator as victim of terror, not the agent of it. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), for instance, introduces the narrator as the terrified subject. Reflecting on his arrival at the house, the narrating voice asks, "What was it – I paused to think – what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher?" (199). Throughout Poe's story, the narrator shudders in terror and disbelief at the grotesque environment at Usher's house and at the apparitions within the house. In the same way, the narrating character in *Caleb Williams* (1794) dreads confronting his employer who he imagines keeps a murderous secret, and thereby the narrator's trepidation becomes our trepidation (133). Despite such conventions, critics argue that the gothic is an "aesthetic" (Miles 30) that shifts and moves in response to exigencies "that vary across a culture and change with history" (Gamer 9). In the spirit of Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799), *Blithedale* allows the narrating character to become the grotesque figure from which readers must divest. Identifying Coverdale as a monster and not simply a struggling poet proves that the Gothic aesthetic has shifted from a focus on the grotesque environment – that is informed by images of apparitions, cemeteries, and haunted castles – to a focus on the strange and, oftentimes, deranged perspective of the narrator. Throughout the narrative, Coverdale reveals himself not as the prototypical monster that embodies super-human strength but instead as a dangerous mind to institutional reform and eventually as a voyeuristic intruder who occupies the position of the lurking spectator. His outsider status actually puts him on the fringe of *Blithedale*, always looking inward, a figure that seems to haunt characters and readers alike.

With this unnerving image in mind, I will explore Coverdale as the primary Gothic subject of *Blithedale*, and moreover I will tie in aspects of the Gothic environment, showing how

dungeons and dark corners depicted in the narrative correspond with Coverdale as a shadowy figure. My argument is not simply that Coverdale alienates himself as a response to the pressures of institutionalism but that his occupation at the borders and margins of community threaten a breakdown in order. I will build on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's argument in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* that Gothic structures like castles, tombs, and prison chambers should be read as spaces of seclusion or isolation. Additionally, I will refer to Jacques Lacan's concept of the Name-of-the-Father and Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject to elucidate the significance of Coverdale as an excluded subject and, in accordance with that, I will analyze the transformation he undergoes at the contested site of his sick-chamber (a make-shift hospital room, as it were). One important aspect of my argument is to show that Coverdale appears monstrous when he is on the loose, an outcast of the community. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic approach in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," I will pay close attention to his voyeuristic behavior at the hermitage and hotel room because it is in these secluded episodes that he seems grotesque to the reader. Lastly, I will compare Coverdale to the defining monster of the Gothic canon, the creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), who is figuratively born out of Victor's excessive imagination and who comes to typify the misunderstood other of the nineteenth century. By teasing out the similarities between the creature and Coverdale (who are both narrators *and* voyeurs), I will distinguish the outcast as one who is prone to wonder, "Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?" (Shelley 81). A fearsome figure to others in the community, Coverdale constantly flees toward safety and seclusion and thereby epitomizes the fragmented subject of the Gothic tradition.

Ultimately, I will show that Hawthorne appropriates these gothic conventions to critique institutional reform, suggesting that reform culture had established unattainable ideals and values

for individuals like Coverdale and as a result produced monsters, not improved men. Critics traditionally interpret *Blithedale* as a fictional satire of the author's brief experience with reform culture at Brook Farm, but this narrow reading avoids Hawthorne's broader concerns about institutionalism. As David S. Reynolds contends, "In reading the novel itself, we realize it is about Brook Farm only insofar as Brook Farm was a symbol of larger moral problems posed by antebellum reform movements" (128). The moral problems rested in the deceptively prescriptive nature of reform movements. Susan M. Ryan claims, in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, that there is a "tension between constraint and possibility" at the source of the term "reform" (196). According to Ryan, "The prefix *re-* suggests familiarity, boundedness, and recursion, just as the root *form* denotes structure, whether institutionalism or ideological. And yet reform also conveys a sense of movement and potential," carrying positive meaning for individuals who were optimistic about social progress and change (196). This tension is apparent in the rhetoric of reform literature. A well-known reformer (and some would say, political radical) of the mid-nineteenth century, Theodore Parker appeals to the emotions of his audience by creating interest in social advancements – "The times are full promise" – and by prompting individuals to modify their values and commitments: "To reform and elevate the class of criminals [...] we must educate and refine [all] men" (189). By urging men to refine and develop their minds, Parker and other outspoken reformers imply that men should re-structure their values and curb their personal vices like drunkenness and illicit desire, and anyone incapable to do so is a threat to social progress. Presenting Coverdale as a fragmented subject or monster in the same vein as Frankenstein's creature, then, reveals Hawthorne's larger concerns about identity re-construction, in a manner of speaking, demonstrating that the commitment to reforming individuals is fundamentally destructive rather than constructive.



## Dark Rooms and Dangerous Minds

In order to fully grasp Coverdale as a Gothic subject one must first read his characterization in the context of conventional Gothic tropes. Even though *Blithedale* does not establish an overtly gothic environment, the physical and social settings within the narrative shape our understanding of Coverdale. For critics of the Gothic, spatial and structural metaphors serve to explain what it is about an individual character that makes him fragmented, set apart, or different. In “The Face of the Tenant,” Eric Savoy articulates that the “house is the most persistent site” for the American gothic and that Poe’s *House of Usher* “might be a master text” of the genre (9, 12). What makes structural metaphors especially forceful in Poe’s tale is that the decaying Usher mansion, with its “bleak walls” and “vacant eye-like windows,” resembles the pale and vapid appearance of the characters within (199). Sedgwick explains that critics often point toward divided spaces within a house to show that an “individual fictional ‘self’” is “massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access” (13). According to this paradigm, the subject looks fragmented insofar as he has a necessary but nevertheless severed connection with something outside and, for Sedgwick, this rift creates “doubleness where singleness should be” (13). Poe’s tale is possibly the best example for Sedgwick’s model in the tradition of the American gothic<sup>1</sup> because at the end of the narrative the house literally splits in two and its fragments sink into the tarn. The fissure of the house represents, as Richard Wilbur puts it, “two states of mind,” or more specifically a struggle between the “intellect and the moral sense” (813). The haunted house with all of its decay and fracture, then, suggests a disturbed mind that subtly wavers between rationality and irrationality and that might, at any moment, suddenly fall to pieces.

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<sup>1</sup> The imagery of a collapsing haunted castle can be traced back to the first gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* (1764).

The farm-house in *The Blithedale Romance* is not as bleak and ruinous as the House of Usher, but Hawthorne's use of architecture is arguably just as allegorical as Poe's. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne erects an Usher-like home: Colonel Pyncheon's ghastly portrait links the fate of the family with the fate of the house and to that degree, the narrator tells us, that "if once it should be removed, that very instant, the whole edifice would come thundering down, in a heap of dusty ruin" (141). To be sure, the farm-house in *The Blithedale Romance* looks more picturesque (and blissful) than the architecture in Hawthorne's earlier works, for the house reflects the supposed friendly and positive attitudes of those in the utopian community. For instance, Coverdale admires the "pleasant firelight" emanating through the windows of the farm-house when he arrives (18). But as time passes he and Hollingsworth quarrel about the future of Blithedale and fundamental reform practices and, as a result, Coverdale feels disconnected from the community and so he leaves, explaining that he plans to return. Just as the firelight from the windows slowly dims, so too does Blithedale's "moral illumination" according to Coverdale (20). When he finally returns to the farm months later, he decides to climb into his hermitage – the leafy cave dwelling that grants him his voyeuristic impulses – to overlook the farm acreage, noticing suddenly that the house and fields have been deserted to the extent that the windows swing openly "but with no more signs of life than in a dead man's unshut eyes" (143). The estate looks like an Eden-turned-wasteland and, to illustrate the horror of the scene, he compares the open doors and windows to the uncanny imagery of lifeless eyes on a corpse. Because architecture plays such a prominent role in Coverdale's narrative descriptions, readers should acknowledge how spatial structures relate to the portrayal of Coverdale's own divided mind, in part agreeable and supportive of the community's commitments and yet, at times, seemingly irrational and subversive to the system at Blithedale.

Most important for understanding gothic environment in *Blithedale* are the dark rooms on the farm and in Boston that signal Coverdale's isolation and seclusion from the community, as if the rooms themselves are used to quarantine him from the rest of society. Coverdale's sick-chamber, for example, serves two significant purposes: it is both a place of seclusion and a working correctional facility, almost to the degree that Aylmer's laboratory in "The Birth-mark" looks like a correction center, a place intended for (literally) exorcising Georgiana's physical and moral imperfections. The hermitage and hotel room, on the other hand, serve to cut Coverdale off from his community. That is to say, they are dark, secret rooms that reify his internalized sense of difference and isolation. Hawthorne traditionally uses divided spaces "for the explicit purpose of making divisions visible that would otherwise be experienced as internal," that is, for making internal conflicts concrete and conspicuous (Cameron 415). And Coverdale's narrative is reminiscent of earlier Hawthornean works like "Wakefield"<sup>2</sup> and "The Birth-mark" to the extent that each divided space in *Blithedale* serves the purpose of making visible his fragmented state of mind, a struggle between personal desires and demands of the community. After joining Blithedale (an eponymous sunny valley, one would presume),<sup>3</sup> Coverdale repeatedly retreats to strange, dark rooms because he recognizes his excessive imperfections just as Aylmer and Georgiana acknowledge the birth-mark. His character appears to represent defilement in the face of the "clean and proper" (social) body (Kristeva 73). Like the House of Usher, these dark rooms exemplify Sedgwick's psychoanalytic model insofar as each divided space that Coverdale inhabits underscores his fragmentation.

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<sup>2</sup> In "Wakefield" (1835), the title character leaves his wife and home and takes up a residence in the next street in order to perceive his life from outside. Sharon Cameron states, "Wakefield would ask – can one watch one's life from outside of it? – to the question Hawthorne would make him ask – if one *is* outside one's life is there anything left to watch?" (419).

<sup>3</sup> In the chapter "Until Bedtime," Coverdale and several others form a committee to decide on the name of the community. Zenobia suggests 'Sunny Glimpse,' but they keep 'Blithedale' (27).

In one of the most palpable examples, Coverdale imagines the phenomenon of doubleness (as Sedgwick would put it) manifest in the hotel building in which he stays during his stint in Boston. Although he describes at great length the natural scene outdoors teeming with birds and wild vegetation, he imprisons himself in the back of his room, creepily staring out the window. During one of his long-winded musings, he states,

[T]here is far more of the picturesque, more truth to native and characteristic tendencies, and vastly greater suggestiveness, in the back view of a residence, whether in town or country, than in its front. The latter is always artificial; it is meant for the world's eye, and is therefore a veil and a concealment. Realities keep in the rear, and put forward an advance-guard of show and humbug. (104)

The description of the building does not explicitly terrify insofar as there are no bleak walls or creaky doors as one might expect in a haunted house. But because Coverdale imagines the front of the residence like a veil, the hotel's structure comes across as analogous to an individual that hides "characteristic tendencies" (or facial features) under a piece of cloth (104). According to Sedgwick, the imagery of division is "meaningful only to the extent that the divided space" looks like a fragmented subject (35). The word "veil" may remind readers of the Veiled Lady's ubiquitous presence in the narrative, but I argue that the divided space (front/rear) more vividly points toward Coverdale himself. His abstraction – "Realities keep in the rear" – signifies his literal lingering in the back of the hotel (104). Coverdale is the quintessential fragmented subject because he appears "massively blocked off from something to which he ought normally to have access": in this case, a world outside (Sedgwick 13). He claims to stay inside due to his laziness, but his seclusion seems more like self-imprisonment. Tethered to his rocking chair beside the window, he finds himself *not* "meant for the world's eye" (104).

In keeping with the idea of self-imprisonment, the gothic environment that Coverdale inhabits in *Blithedale* looks like a lonely chamber, a place of concealment where the individual exists apart from others in society. One of Hawthorne's journal accounts in *American Note-books* helps to frame the significance of this lonely chamber image. On October 4, 1840, six months before he would move to Brook Farm, Hawthorne returned to his family home in Salem,<sup>4</sup> contemplating the room he describes as the "haunting chamber" of his youth (222). He writes about the room as if it were a divided space – as if it hedged him into seclusion, a perspective that seems closely linked to the place by the window that Coverdale haunts in *Blithedale*. From this lonely, dark corner Hawthorne writes,

And here I sat a long, long time, waiting patiently for the world to know me, and sometimes wondering why it did not know me sooner, or whether it would ever know me at all, – at least, till I were in my grave. And sometimes it seemed as if I were already in the grave, with only life enough to be chilled and benumbed [...]  
And now I begin to understand why I was imprisoned so many years in this lonely chamber, and why I could never break through the viewless bolts and bars; for if I had sooner made my escape into the world, I should have grown hard and rough, and been covered with earthly dust, and my heart might have become callous by rude encounters with the multitude. (223)

In this journal entry, Hawthorne depicts the room as a divided space – "my grave," "this lonely chamber," "bolts and bars" – and to that end he envisions it as a place of confinement and exclusion. As hyperbolic as it is, this autobiographical account resonates with passages in *Blithedale*. The room at the back window, the cave-like hermitage, and the sick-chamber all call

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<sup>4</sup> Hawthorne was actually born in this house on July 4, 1804.

attention to Coverdale's isolation from the community, a division that young Hawthorne finds chilling.

The first prominent moment of isolation comes on Coverdale's first night at Blithedale. After the community has had supper together beside a roaring fire and after Silas Foster reminds his "brother-farmers" of the extensive work they have planned for the next day, Coverdale retires to his "fireless chamber," realizing he has a feverish cold (28). He describes the experience as if he were hallucinating or, perhaps, enduring two oppositional modes of thought at once: "a fixed idea" lodges in his mind, "like the nail in Sisera's brain," and at the same time, countless other ideas transpire, "combining constant transition with intolerable sameness" (28). What makes this sick-chamber particularly significant is that the formal structure of the divided space already looks like a fractured state of mind, to the degree that the walls of the room divide an immobile Coverdale from the active world outside. Coverdale's description of his "miserable consciousness" or what we commonly call a 'splitting' headache seems visceral and oppressive and for that reason he keeps to his own room for weeks, making concrete what he has experienced internally, a split between himself and others who are committed to the movement. What is more, his headache seems perfectly indicative of the tension that Ryan describes is embedded in the term "reform": "a tension between constraint and possibility" (196). If the house serves as a spatial metaphor of the self, as critics claim, then this dark and fireless chamber reifies Coverdale's unconscious or secret desires and, more importantly, it illustrates his peculiar disassociation from cultural values of the community.

In this way, Coverdale's sick-chamber is not unlike a secret room, which has been a favorite element of the Gothic tradition throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Anne Williams argues that the "imposing house with a terrible secret" was a central characteristic of

the Gothic even in its early, developing years (39). She refers specifically to Perrault's tale of "Bluebeard" and, in this pre-Gothic fairytale, which was adapted in George Colman's Gothic drama *Bluebeard; or Female Curiosity* (1798), the title character leaves his mansion and newlywed wife to go on an important journey to the countryside and, when he departs, he grants her permission to use the entire house except for one room, to which he strictly forbids entrance.<sup>5</sup> According to the story, the wife cannot resist the temptation to find out Bluebeard's secret and upon opening the door discovers, to her dismay, the beheaded corpses of his former-wives. Williams states, "[T]he house with its secret room [...] 'realizes,' makes concrete, the structure of power that engenders the action within this social world" (41). In the case of "Bluebeard," the dominant male figure imposes his will over the inferior female character and, because the house contains walls that restrict and doors that permit, it concretely represents his control over the "subversively curious 'female,'" and therein lies his dangerous secret (Williams 41).<sup>6</sup>

By the same token, the sick-chamber in *Blithedale* metaphorically projects and amplifies Coverdale's unconscious mind. According to Sedgwick, psychoanalytic critics traditionally interpret the spatial metaphor of depth as "a deep central well of primal material, 'the irrational,'" and thus analyze it as "the locus of the individual self" (11). Along these lines, a person can theoretically tap into his unconscious thought process by recognizing secret fears and desires while dreaming or in a state of delirium. But normally the conscious mind, according to Freud, actively represses or hides unconscious thought because such ideas can be socially unacceptable or can bring about painful emotions. During his illness, Coverdale experiences what he calls a "slight delirium" (33), or a state of severe mental confusion, and to such a degree

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<sup>5</sup> Perrault's tale was originally published in 1697, one hundred years before the Gothic era.

<sup>6</sup> In *Blithedale*, Zenobia references the story, telling Coverdale that Priscilla "will make as soft and gentle a wife as the veriest Bluebeard could desire" (155).

that he vocalizes ideas that others consider irrational or fantastical. For instance, he whispers to Hollingsworth, “Zenobia is an enchantress! [...] That flower in her hair is a talisman. If you were to snatch it away, she would vanish, or be transformed into something else!” (33). When Zenobia faintly overhears him, Hollingsworth assures her that nothing Coverdale has to say “has an atom of sense in it” (33). For Freud, “[P]rocesses which are described as irrational are not in fact falsifications of normal processes – intellectual errors – but are modes of activity of the psychical apparatus that have been freed from inhibition” (601). Of course, “Freud does not ‘explain’ Hawthorne,” as Joel Pfister puts it, but rather Hawthorne sets the table for Freudian theory insofar as his illustration of depth and specifically the example of the sick-chamber points toward the “irrational” other of modern psychology and, to that end, the latent ideas of the “irrational” mind are those that perpetually threaten to disturb social order (40).<sup>7</sup>

Coverdale has no trouble accepting Blithedale’s system of utopian values and ideals, but he questions pre-established cultural laws that others find familiar or natural. For instance, it strikes him “as rather odd” that Silas Foster<sup>8</sup> should be concerned with free-market competition and the “possibility of getting the advantage over” people outside the community (17). This pre-existing cultural law – the simple value of work ethic – is an example of what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order: “[T]here has to be a law, a chain, a symbolic order” established by the father (96). For Lacan, the Name-of-the-Father is not an actual father but instead the rules and laws that manage one’s desires and communication within a social group. Even though Coverdale wants to believe in the goodness of authority, he does not acquiesce to the ruling ideologies – competition, diligence, and self-control – which are instilled in the community because they

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<sup>7</sup> See also page 20 of Frederick C. Crews’s *The Sin of the Fathers: Hawthorne’s Psychological Themes* for an insightful point on this topic.

<sup>8</sup> Obviously, Coverdale misinterprets Silas Foster’s reason for joining the Blithedale community (see page 12). But still this example demonstrates that Coverdale questions rigid values.



seem inflexible to him (like a “fixed idea”) and oppressive (“like the nail in Sisera’s brain”) (28). His sick-chamber is the place where he can indulge in his appetite for poetry, solitude, and luxury that individuals like Hollingsworth might otherwise find irrational, or at least antithetical to the lifestyle of the ideal reformed man. Ailing with a fever in his room, Coverdale declines from participating in the most fundamental daily work expected of farm residents. His withdrawal to the bedchamber, then, prominently illustrates his split from dominant values at the Blithedale community, particularly the concept of work ethic.

More importantly, Coverdale discredits himself as a legitimate member of this reform group when he emphatically opposes the ruling ideologies of the community. After Coverdale reads the works of French social theorist Charles Fourier, he shares his favorite passages with Hollingsworth, specifically Fourier’s argument that the ideal community will achieve social harmony by developing a unified expression of individual desires. And as a final point, Coverdale actually suggests that Blithedale should adopt “these beautiful peculiarities” into their own practice (39). Contrary to Fourier’s system, Hollingsworth believes that the ideal community will be perfect when each individual member restrains (rather than delights in) his or her personal desires. This was the popular belief for reform movements at the time Hawthorne went to live at Brook Farm. Christopher Castiglia’s *Interior States* explains that during the 1840s the focus of reform expanded to include individual vices like drinking and gambling in addition to social injustices like slavery (8). That being the case, a common precept in reform culture privileges individuals like Hollingsworth who curb their appetites. Because Coverdale indulges his appetites to drink, smoke, and spy obsessively on women, his behavior is antithetical to the rules that dictate society. He attracts even greater negative attention by soliciting support for Fourier’s system and, as a result, his persona evokes the image of a dangerous mind.

To put it another way, the hidden and animalistic desires that Coverdale shows us in the sick-chamber – from his attraction to Zenobia’s “hot-house flower” (33) to his latent obsession for Priscilla’s embroidery (37) – repulse characters and readers, in the same way that his pale, sickly condition becomes off-putting. His primal drives<sup>9</sup> represent cancer to the society, like a bodily disease that he should purge or abject, not preserve. After the night of “half-waking dreams,” as Coverdale describes it, Hollingsworth enters the chamber and asks him to join the others in the farm, only for Coverdale to reply, “I doubt if I ever rise again” (30). Hollingsworth then sends for a homeopathic doctor who attends to Coverdale for two weeks, feeding him water-gruel and diluted medicine.<sup>10</sup> Instead of recovering quickly, Coverdale explains that he “speedily became a skeleton above ground” (30). His playful expression should be taken as idiomatic, but nonetheless this description disturbs our sense of a healthy body and, by extension, a social body. Psychoanalytic critic Julia Kristeva argues that corpses, filth, decay, and bodily waste horrify us because they have fallen from the Symbolic Order. In other words, having once been part of the subject (“I”), refuse or dead material has been cast off (as abject) and we are repulsed or disturbed by it because it reminds us of our own primal materiality. According to Kristeva, “The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall)” exemplifies the abject in both Gothic fiction and reality because “as in true theater, without makeup or masks, [corpses] *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3). In the throes of his fever, Coverdale imagines himself on the brink of death and, having received homeopathic treatment, he becomes so weak that his material body feels like a skeleton above ground. This striking imagery suggests that, by separating

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<sup>9</sup> According to Freud, primal drives are those instinctual and pre-lingual impulses that seek to satisfy biological and psychological needs.

<sup>10</sup> On January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1842, three months after he left Brook Farm, Hawthorne wrote to his wife Sophia: “Belovedst, my cold is very comfortable now. Mrs. Hillard gave me some homo – I don’t know how to spell it – homeopathic medicine, of which I took a dose last night; and shall not need another” (*TL* 606).

himself from the others, Coverdale has become a ‘fallen’ subject of the community and his presence “disturbs identity, system, and order” and it “calls attention to the fragility of the law” at Blithedale (Kristeva 4).

Therefore, to help us understand Coverdale’s role in the Gothic, we should interpret his sick-chamber as the place of the abject, that is to say, the place where meaning begins to breakdown, where we are confronted with an archaic memory of our own materiality. Savoy explains that the “abject is less a specific ‘thing’ than a location for throwing off the psyche’s *and* a culture’s most basic drives, the ones most in need of repression” (“Rise” 170). The sick-chamber typifies the place of the abject because it is where Hollingsworth rejects Coverdale’s literal death drive<sup>11</sup> and the delights of Fourier’s system. When Coverdale advocates Fourier’s plan, Hollingsworth cries with “utter disgust”:

For what more monstrous iniquity could the Devil himself contrive, than to choose the selfish principle – the principle of all human wrong, the very blackness of man’s heart, *the portion of ourselves which we shudder at*, and which it is the whole aim of spiritual discipline to eradicate – to choose it as the master-workman of his system? To seize upon and foster whatever *vile, petty, sordid, filthy, bestial, and abominable corruptions have cankered into our nature*, to be the efficient instrument of his infernal regeneration! (39 emphasis added)

In the most direct meaning of the term, Hollingsworth “ab-jects” Coverdale’s idea in the sense that he rejects it as repugnant and even spews out an abundance of adjectives – “vile, petty, sordid, filthy, bestial, and abominable” – to demonstrate his disgust with personal delights and,

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<sup>11</sup> The death drive is a term coined by Freud, originally referenced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920): “the idea that instinctual life as a whole serves to bring about death” (46). Coverdale clearly demonstrates this drive in the chapter “Coverdale’s Sick-Chamber,” when he instinctively declares, “Death should take me while I am in the mood” (31).

more importantly, to free himself from an association with them. For Hollingsworth, sensual and animalistic desire (that is, indulgence in sex, eating, and drinking) repulses him because it represents the border between human and animal and between culture and nature. He reacts viscerally by shuddering at and rejecting this in-between “portion of ourselves” (*Blithedale* 39), “the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 3), because it prevents him from defining and distinguishing his own independent (reformed) identity.

Coverdale’s convalescent period is equally horrifying. The close quarters of his sick-chamber are stifling, and he is primarily under the care of a half-crazed philanthropist whose plan it is to reform criminals “through an appeal to their higher instincts” (27). Through the depiction of Hollingsworth who, in part, seems to resemble Theodore Parker, Hawthorne replicates a common element of the Gothic, the role of the mad scientist who uses experiments to operate on the human body, in a manner of speaking. Hawthorne’s “The Birth-Mark” (1835) and Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) provide fitting examples of this convention. In Hawthorne’s short story, a scientist named Aylmer seeks to remove an insignificant birthmark on the cheek of his beautiful wife, Georgiana, calling it the “fatal flaw of humanity” (120). The operation paradoxically concludes when he kills her in attempt to eradicate what he sees as the “symbol of his wife’s liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death” (120). Victor Frankenstein, a student of physiology and natural philosophy, attempts to “banish disease from the human frame” (22) by creating a new human being. But under economic restraint he resolves to make a gigantic creature by stitching together bones and body parts that he collects from charnel houses, a dissecting room, and a nearby slaughter-house. Because the instruments of his operation blur the boundary lines of the human/animal binary (Outka 34), his experiment culminates in an image of such extreme abject horror that it deeply repulses its own creator.

While Hollingsworth is not a scientist or a physician but instead a philanthropist and lecturer who establishes himself as Coverdale's nurse, we can say Hollingsworth operates *like* a surgeon. His puritanical diatribe combined with his demonstrations of brotherly love work hand-in-hand in an effort to purge Coverdale of his sensual passions – “the very blackness of [his] heart” – and for the blatant purpose of making Coverdale a “proselyte to his views” (42). But as Hollingsworth attempts to purge Coverdale's heart of its “vile” sensual desires, he paradoxically re-inscribes the loathsomeness of those desires onto Coverdale's core identity. By associating the human heart (in this case, a metaphor for soul) with a visible part of the body (“the portion of ourselves which we shudder at”), Hollingsworth inverts the soul/body binary, suggesting that man's ineffable sin actually *looks* hideous, as if it stands out like a cankerous sore or boil on the body, and that Coverdale, who delights in sinful appetites, is “monstrous iniquity” incarnate (39). In the antebellum era, “Reformers sought to codify and regulate identities, conceived as a mass of reformable inclinations and drives,” writes Castiglia: “One could not take a drink without becoming a drunkard or engage in ‘solitary vice’ without becoming a masturbator” (9). Hollingsworth's tirade exemplifies rhetoric Hawthorne would probably hear from reformers like John R. McDowall who speak about personal vices as if they can and must be eradicated from a person's behavior.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Hollingsworth later calls Coverdale “an indolent [...] half-occupied man” (93), and the feeling of judgment and rejection gives Coverdale a “heart-pang [...] not merely figurative, but an absolute torture of the breast” (94-5). Hollingsworth categorizes as sins those desires that he finds unpardonable and, in so doing, he identifies Coverdale as a monster or dangerous presence that must be driven out.

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<sup>12</sup> David S. Reynolds explains that McDowall was a well-known and controversial reform figure during the 1830s because he wrote and distributed an “inflammatory weekly, newspaper, *McDowall's Journal* (1833-34)” that contained horrid “reports of whoredom, abortion, child murder, assignation houses, [and] venereal disease” (63).

## Gaze of a Monster

The creature at the center of Shelley's *Frankenstein* epitomized the figure of abject horror in literature of the early nineteenth century and offers an illuminating point of comparison for Coverdale. While the creature looks like a "filthy mass that move[s] and talk[s]" (99), Coverdale's character is reinterpreted as "sordid, filthy, bestial" (Hawthorne 39). From Kristeva's psychoanalytic perspective, filth becomes truly troubling for characters and readers because it represents "the fundamental contradictions that prevent us from declaring a coherent and independent identity to ourselves and others" (Hogle 7). Through the process of abjection, both figures are "radically excluded" to the margins of their respective societies (Kristeva 2). The creature retreats to a small shed in the open country when he is attacked and driven out of a nearby village by the locals and, in a similar manner, Coverdale escapes to his little hermitage in the woods, in part because he feels excluded from the company of Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla. What makes these abject figures so disturbing for the reader, however, is that each takes the position of an obsessive voyeur: Coverdale finds pleasure in looking on Priscilla from his hermitage and in spying on Zenobia from his hotel room in Boston, and the creature gazes on the De Lacey family from his lonely countryside hovel. Like the abominable creature in Shelley's romance, Coverdale flees to the safety and seclusion of his lonely chamber(s) again and again only to gaze creepily on others' lives.

Indeed, these alienated subjects cast a haunting gaze. By first addressing the complex psychological state involved in male voyeurism we will begin to understand the dynamics of social alienation in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century. Laura Mulvey's essay on visual pleasure and narrative cinema draws on the psychoanalytic theory of Freud and Lacan to demonstrate how "pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject" influence two

contradictory pleasures involved in gazing (6). First, scopophilia (pleasure in looking) is Freud's term<sup>13</sup> for a drive that entails taking other people as sexual objects and "subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (8). Second, the pleasure of fascination with the human form extends Lacan's concept of "The Mirror Stage," which argues that a child finds pleasure in recognizing itself as an object in the mirror because the mirror image seems more unified than the fragmented images it perceives in its own bodily experiences. These pleasures, according to Mulvey, contradict one another because the first, active scopophilia, requires the subject to separate himself from the individuals he objectifies and the second, a form of narcissism, demands him to identify with an individual "through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like" (10). Mulvey argues that Hollywood plays on this tension both by making the female on screen a passive, sexualized figure who attracts the attention of the spectator and the on-screen actors and by making the main male protagonist the active "bearer of the look" (12). The spectator identifies with the male movie star, "projecting his look onto that of his like," thus retaining a sense of power and control over the scene (12). The problem Mulvey proposes, however, is that while cinema often invokes a desirable fantasy for the male viewer by objectifying the ideal female figure on camera,<sup>14</sup> this desire returns the viewer (in a paradoxical swing) "to the traumatic moment of [his] birth: the castration complex" (11). That is to say, the female object of desire lacks a penis and this absence triggers, for the male viewer, the primal fear of castration "and hence unpleasure" (13).

Gazing, then, affords both pleasure and considerable anxiety. According to Mulvey, "[T]he male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety," voyeurism and

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<sup>13</sup> See Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) and "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" (1915).

<sup>14</sup> From Mulvey's feminist perspective, the viewer is decidedly male, just as the woman is image.

fetishistic scopophilia (13). In the case of voyeurism, the subject plays the part of a detective (think *The Maltese Falcon*) who seeks to reenact the trauma by investigating the female image and “demystifying her mystery” (13). If he chooses the avenue of fetishistic scopophilia, the subject substitutes the female image with a fetish object so that the female image “becomes reassuring rather than dangerous” (14). Mulvey identifies mainstream cinema as *the* agent that plays on these formations (17). But long before voyeurism would become a spectacle in film noir during the early twentieth century, Shelley and Hawthorne would make the male gaze monstrous by channeling it through the eye of the alienated subject.

In Shelley’s romance, the “hideously deformed and loathsome” creature indulges in voyeuristic behavior to satisfy his fascination in the human form (80). When he escapes to the open country, taking “refuge in a low hovel,” the creature notices that his bleak “asylum” joins a pleasant cottage (71). He looks “through a small chink” in the wall and sees “a young [girl] with a pail on her head” walking outside his hovel (71). When she walks into the cottage, he finds another peephole, “a small and almost imperceptible chink, through which the eye could just penetrate,” to gaze on the small family in the privacy of their home (72). As he watches them in their daily activities – tending the fireplace, playing music, eating dinner – he fascinates most in the physical features of the two men:

Nothing could exceed in beauty the contrast between these two excellent creatures. One was old, with silver hairs and a countenance beaming with benevolence and love: the younger was slight and graceful in his figure, and his features were moulded with the finest symmetry; yet his eyes and attitude expressed the utmost sadness and despondency (73).



The creature idealizes the young man's physique because each of his charming characteristics – “slight,” “graceful,” “the finest symmetry” – represents a complete, unified image of masculinity, and therefore this young man, Felix, serves as a romantic male figure with whom the creature can identify and, as Mulvey puts it, “make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator” (12). Likewise, Coverdale idealizes Hollingsworth's “directness and lack of ceremony” because these characteristics allow him to carry out action, decisively, as he does at the outset when he flings open front door, lifts Priscilla from the wagon, and urges her forward into the house (21). Just as the object in the mirror controls coordination better than our pre-Oedipal, fragmented bodies, Hollingsworth and Felix control the scene in their respective environments and therefore attract the fascination of the narrating spectator.

Whereas the creature recognizes Felix as his like, he takes pleasure in looking at and objectifying an attractive female figure, the young Arabian woman named Safie. Upon arriving at the family's cottage on horseback, she instantly becomes an object of the combined gaze of Felix and the creature. Her character signifies an exotic yet virginal sexuality, which is dramatized by the act of her literal unveiling. Freud claims that concealment of the body “keeps sexual curiosity awake” and that the pleasure in looking, scopophilia, arises out of a desire “to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts” (*Three Essays on Sexuality* 22). Entering the cottage, Safie throws off her “thick black veil,” bearing a “countenance of angelic beauty,” “hair of a shining raven black,” and a “complexion wondrously fair, each cheek tinged with a lovely pink” (78). Her unveiling arouses curiosity and signals the gaze of both Felix and the creature who essentially look at her as a sexual object. The curiosity that Safie's unveiling creates of course resonates with the appeal that the Veiled Lady creates onstage in *Blithedale*. Like Coverdale, the creature finds pleasure in looking at women as objects of his curiosity.

What is more, Safie's background story in *Frankenstein* suggests she has been destined to play the role of a sexual object from the beginning. Before Felix originally meets Safie in fact, Felix vows to help her father escape prison and execution and, as a result, the father promises to give Felix a "treasure which would fully reward his toil and hazard," Safie's hand in marriage (82). The two supposedly fall in love independent of the father's promise, but the romance merely serves as pretext to overshadow her role as a sex object that can be possessed and exchanged, like monetary compensation. When Safie arrives at the De Lacey cottage, Felix commands the action of the scene. He dismounts "his sweet Arabian" from the horse, "dismissing her guide," and upon kissing her hand he leads her into the house (78). Because the creature identifies with and projects his look onto Felix, he can indirectly possess Safie, too (Mulvey 13). That means Felix's control corresponds with the active look of the creature, who focuses on Safie's facial features – beholding her countenance – in the same way film narrative frames an erotic close-up for the voyeuristic pleasure of the male audience.

And yet this pleasure in gazing causes a backlash of anxiety because the fascination the creature finds in the human form is at odds with his own fragmented materiality. The mirror stage, according to Lacan, occurs when an infant's vision outperforms all its other cognitive abilities and motor skills. At this stage, it recognizes an ideal image of itself in the proverbial mirror and, by taking that image (the "I" over there) as superior to its chaotic body, it *misrecognizes* the form outside itself as "the Ideal-I" throughout its maturation process (*Écrits* 2). The mirror stage radically reverses for the creature who, instead of recognizing a more unified, ideal version of his body in the "transparent pool," sees with greater clarity what a monstrous and fragmented body he has (76). Because he recognizes and identifies with the disjointed, misshapen image in his reflection, he fails to have the moment of misrecognition

(*mèconnaissance*). Whereas the typical subject can repress the materiality that disturbs by identifying with a more complete self-image, whenever the creature sees others, he instead turns inward and reflects on his own deformity: “And what was I? [...] When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?” (80-1). Gazing, then, always comes with favorable and unfavorable consequences for the creature who can never look at “the perfect form of the cottagers – their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions” (76) – without receiving the painful reminder that his own appearance lacks these qualities and therefore looks “hideously deformed and loathsome” (80).

Most important in terms of how *Frankenstein* and *Blithedale* relate, however, is that the creature’s narrative, like Coverdale’s, is an expression of and response to his inner anxiety. The elaborate narrative exemplifies the perspective of the misunderstood other who, afflicted with social anxiety, lives in isolation while desiring to enter into communion with others. Not only does the creature make his anxiety intensely explicit – “Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth?” – but he also concludes his narrative with specific request, like a call to action. He directly follows his narrative with a request asking Victor to create another being, one “of the same species [and who has] the same defects” (97), so that he can “feel the affections of a sensitive being, and become linked to the chain of events, from which [he is] now excluded” (100). Victor tells us that the creature is an “eloquent and persuasive” storyteller who nearly convinces him (145). But despite the force of the rhetoric, Victor hesitates to acquiesce because the creature’s appearance challenges his idea of a stable, coherent, and normative European

identity.<sup>15</sup> Whereas Victor is “by birth a Genevese, and [his] family is one of the most distinguished of that republic” (17), he calls the creature a “filthy mass that move[s] and talk[s]” (99). Coming face to face with the product of his own imagination (a filthy workshop in its own right), his “heart sicken[s], and [his] feelings... [alter] to those of horror and hatred” (99). Moreover, the creature’s narrative is a story-within-a-story-within-a-story<sup>16</sup> – like a “deep central well of primal material” (Sedgwick 11) – buried beneath layers of narrative by Victor and Captain Robert Watson, who both glorify the romantic and the sublime. I would argue that Shelley uses this central story to address the voice of the misunderstood other of the early nineteenth century, the prisoner or deviant whose penetrating gaze and “ghastly grin” horrifies us precisely because, like Coverdale, it challenges our own anxieties, showing us the fragments of ourselves we thrust aside or repress in order to establish independent and supposedly well-defined identities (115).

Having argued that the looming male gaze is the primary although understated feature of Gothicism in Shelley’s romance, let us now turn our attention to the role that voyeurism plays in the character of Miles Coverdale. To understand what is monstrous about Coverdale’s gaze, we should first consider the context of spectatorship in urban culture during the mid-nineteenth century. Richard H. Brodhead claims that there was a “historical emergence, at midcentury, of a more massively *publicized* order of entertainment in America” (227). Coverdale plays the role of the compulsive spectator or audience member who finds an immediate buzz and excitement from the widely expanding industry of public entertainment during the antebellum era. He develops a

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<sup>15</sup> After speculating the plea, Victor acquiesces on the grounds that the creature and his mate would leave Europe but, soon after seeing “a ghastly grin” wrinkle the creature’s “lips as he gaze[s]” on him “fulfilling the task” the creature had requested, Victor tears “to pieces the thing on which [he] was engaged” (115).

<sup>16</sup> Sedgwick examines this convention within the Gothic, arguing that the “difficulty the story has in getting itself told is of the most obvious structural significance” (13).

keen interest in the Veiled Lady exhibition and other theatrical shows but, more important, he transfers his fascination with spectatorship to the private, domestic sphere of Blithedale. In fact, he often imagines other individuals at Blithedale – Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla – as glamorous actors and actresses in his own private theatre. Like the creature’s small hovel, then, the dark rooms that Coverdale inhabits – the sick-chamber, the hermitage, and the hotel room – afford him a pleasure akin to watching theatre because each divided space separates him from the “hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically” before him and which plays to his “voyeuristic fantasy” (Mulvey 9). And yet, each eroticized spectacle that Coverdale watches – like the female image on camera – always threatens to “break the spell of illusion” preventing him from achieving any sense of pleasurable control (Mulvey 18).

To start with, Coverdale’s voyeurism is blatant. He takes pleasure in gazing on others as sexual objects, and for the purpose of satisfying his curiosity to see what is essentially private and forbidden. He visits the Veiled Lady exhibition at the outset of the romance, and, while reflecting on the phenomena of her celebrity, he confesses that his interest is in the “enigma of her identity” and the possibility that “a beautiful young lady” lies underneath “the misty drapery of the veil” (7). His delight in peeping arises throughout *Blithedale* again and again, first watching through the tree foliage in his hermitage and then from the window of his hotel room. Each instance reveals his scopophilic impulse to look behind the veil, as it were, and to see Zenobia and Priscilla in their private worlds.

In the same way that Frankenstein’s creature marvels at Safie’s beauty, Coverdale takes exceptional pleasure in gazing on Zenobia’s “admirable figure [...] just on the hither verge of her richest maturity” (13). For Coverdale, her character represents an erotic, “overt sexuality” that he

finds both attractive and mysterious (Herbert 19). At one point, shortly after he settles into his sick-chamber, he gazes at Zenobia's body and describes her features as if she were a work of art:

The image of her form and face should have been multiplied all over the earth. It was wronging the rest of mankind, to retain her as the spectacle of only a few.

The stage would have been her proper sphere. She should have made it a point of duty, moreover, to sit endlessly to painters and sculptors, and preferably to the latter; because the cold decorum of the marble would consist with the utmost scantiness of drapery, so that the eye might chastely be gladdened with her material perfection, in its entirety. I know not well how to express, that the native glow of coloring in her cheeks, and even the flesh-warmth over her round arms, and what was visible of her full bust – in a word, her womanliness incarnated – compelled me sometimes to close my eyes, as if it were not quite the privilege of modesty to gaze at her. (32-3)

Here, Coverdale's obsession with looking brings him to imagine Zenobia as an object on display, a spectacle whose principal duty is to satisfy male desire. As a matter of fact, he explicitly prefers her as a marble sculpture, one that would afford him the pleasure of looking without appearing unchaste. This striking image returns at the end of the romance when Coverdale finds Zenobia's corpse floating in the river and describes it as "the marble image of a death-agony" (161). Like the creature in his countryside hovel Coverdale maintains and satisfies sexual desire by wielding his active, controlling gaze.

While he enjoys gazing on the "womanliness" of Zenobia, Coverdale also satisfies his narcissistic fascination in the human form by idealizing the main male character, Hollingsworth. Mulvey explains that an important element of the cinematic experience for the male spectator is

the screen surrogate or male movie star with whom the spectator can identify and project his look. Hollingsworth clearly fills that role for Coverdale despite his equally important task as the dominant authority figure at Blithedale. Coverdale first describes Hollingsworth's appearance as "very striking," looking "massive and brawny" but also involving an "external polish" that evokes intelligence and "tenderness" (22). The portrayal strongly suggests that what Coverdale sees in Hollingsworth is an idealized version of himself, an image that combines active strength with sophistication. Most important for Coverdale's narcissistic voyeurism, however, is that Hollingsworth possesses a commanding influence over both Priscilla and Zenobia throughout the narrative: "one smile [...] out of the hero's eyes," Coverdale states, could transform their affection into "passionate love" (52). By projecting his look onto that of his imago, and by watching "the play of passions" unfold as if on stage, Coverdale obtains a false sense of omnipotence or control as spectator. According to Mulvey's analysis, the erotic image of a woman attracts "the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film" and, as a result, the two gazes neatly coalesce to achieve an illusion of verisimilitude, allowing the spectator to feel in "control [...] within the diegesis" (12-3). Like the cinematic spectator, Coverdale manages his own "private theatre," a fantasy world in which he can gaze on the figures of women while his ideal self, Hollingsworth, acts out the particulars of his secret desires (51).

But this pleasure in gazing is paradoxical for Coverdale who can never look on others without encountering the imposing threat of anxiety. Hollingsworth for example not only serves as the image and likeness of Coverdale's ideal self but he also represents the face of authority and moral rule at Blithedale. When he excludes Coverdale, calling him "an indolent [...] half-occupied man," the pejorative epithet degrades and even emasculates Coverdale to the extent that

it implies his is a mere fraction or fragment of normative masculinity (93). Hollingsworth's intimidation as a matter of fact makes a prominent impression in Coverdale's mind. He at one point describes how Hollingsworth's "dark and impressive countenance" looks progressively "duskier" and that his frown contorts his brow "with an adamantine wrinkle" (51-52). When Coverdale retreats to his solitude – "in [his] wood-walks, and in [his] silent chamber" – he imagines that he can feel this "dark face frown[ing]" at him again (52). Even when Coverdale secludes himself to the margins of Blithedale, the face of moral law and cultural reform follows him to those places reminding him of his failures to adapt and reform his appetites.

One clear way that Coverdale responds to this anxiety is by disavowing his desire and substituting the image of womanliness with a fetish object. When he retreats to the "rare seclusion" of his little hermitage, he transfers his desire to a fetish, Priscilla's little purses (70). In her critique of the male gaze, Mulvey asserts that one avenue a spectator takes to avoid anxiety is to build up "the physical beauty of [an] object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself" (14). At the outset of his duration in the hermitage, Coverdale elaborates the beauty of his surroundings. As he gloats in the discovery of his newfound "leafy cave" that sets "high upward into the air" (69), he begins to look "out of several of its small windows" (70), distinguishing that his position is "lofty enough to serve as an observatory, not for starry investigations, but for those sublunary matters in which lay a lore as infinite as that of the planets" (71). What the hermitage affords Coverdale is a safe view of his immediate environment including neighbors and friends rather than an observation of the distant sky, so that he can satisfy his desire to look on others without being repudiated by Hollingsworth. He stares at Priscilla and, specifically, her little purses. In *Domestic Individualism*, Gillian Brown argues that Coverdale creates and sustains his desire for fetishes as a defense strategy that allows him to



avoid the threat of castration (118). Instead of gazing directly at Priscilla and remarking on her beauty, Coverdale focuses his attention on “the peculiar excellence” of her silk purses which “to a practiced touch [...] would open as wide as charity or prodigality might wish” (26). Here, we see that Coverdale fixates on the purses and believes them to be objects distinctly satisfying in themselves. As a matter of fact, he proclaims to himself that he “cares for her” precisely because he prizes the “fancy-work” of the purses with which he “deck[s] her out!” (71). Despite his attempt to disavow desire Coverdale only shifts it to other objects related to Priscilla thereby subjecting her, indirectly, to his “controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 8).

And yet the individuals involved in Coverdale’s fantasy continually threaten to break the spell of theatrical illusion. Zenobia and Westervelt, for example, catch him gazing into their drawing room and they immediately return the stare, thus undercutting the control that spectatorship affords him. Initially, Coverdale leaves Blithedale because he feels radically excluded from the others at the farm-house, specifically Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla. He then takes up residence in a hotel room in Boston, only to sit by the window and gaze at families in the opposite boarding-house. Glancing in one window he observes, to his surprise, Zenobia and Westervelt, the strange man Coverdale had once met in the woods of Blithedale, sharing an intimate conversation in a small drawing room within the house. Zenobia walks in and out of view, appearing and disappearing – like the Veiled Lady – and this in-and-out-of-sight action increases his curiosity in the spectacle. Suddenly, Westervelt catches Coverdale watching from his “post of observation” and when “Zenobia appear[s] at the window,” she glares indignantly at Coverdale and then dismisses him “by letting down a white linen curtain” which falls “like the drop-curtain of a theatre, in the interval between the acts” (110). This returned look interrupts the verisimilitude of Coverdale’s theatrical illusion and, more importantly, it strips him

of the power and control that comes with being a distant observer. In fact, this sudden role reversal sends Coverdale into further apprehension. In the same way that Frankenstein's creature recognizes his own deformity, Coverdale turns inward and reflects on the monstrosity of his gaze: "[W]as mine a mere vulgar curiosity?" (111). Instead of staring into a perfectly drawn theatrical picture, a realistic depiction of life at Blithedale, whereby he can easily separate himself from the action and "learn the secret which [is] hidden from" the individuals he likens to actors (111), Coverdale looks into a world that continually gazes back at him, a house of mirrors, as it were, that undermines his scopophilic control and distorts his own self-image.

### **Coda**

In the concluding paragraphs, Coverdale calls himself "a poor dim figure in [his] own narrative," shedding light on Coverdale's role as the primary gothic subject of *The Blithedale Romance* (167). Having lived as an outsider to Blithedale for several months, Coverdale desires to revisit the community, wandering "up and down, like an exorcised spirit that [has] been driven from its old haunts, after a mighty struggle" (133). He exemplifies the abject figure who disturbs other characters because, as both outsider and insider to institutional reform, he occupies a volatile in-between space, a border or boundary, and therefore encroaches upon well-defined meanings of culture and identity, just as an uncanny spirit might. Upon his return to Blithedale he wanders "the outskirts of the farm" only to climb into his hermitage and peep once again on the Blithedale reformers (142). As I mentioned previously in this essay, Coverdale notices that the "windows of the house [are] open, but with no more signs of life than in a dead man's unshut eyes" (143). This unnerving image suggests the cultural order of institutional reform is merely an empty enterprise, a hollow signifier that only asserts its power and authority by excluding the misunderstood other. Coverdale personifies the abject horror of antebellum reform because he

shows individuals like Hollingsworth the indulgences and appetites that they must thrust aside or eradicate in order to remain independent, wholly reformed subjects. And yet, “from [his] place of banishment,” Coverdale’s uncanny presence always challenges or threatens that order (Kristeva 2).

Making the narrating character the central gothic element of the romance, then, is part of Hawthorne’s broader commitment to challenge the restrictive discourse and institutionalism of antebellum reform culture. During the mid-nineteenth century, reformers sought to regulate identities incommensurate with normative or progressive standards, such as the outcast, the prisoner, the drunkard, and the peeping Tom. Castiglia argues that disciplinary institutionalism in the mid-nineteenth century stifled individuals because it “espoused self-management as achievable through habitual exercise and continual vigilance” while also implying that “the forces of addictive appetite were never entirely conquerable” (11). Robert S. Levine claims that Hawthorne’s main concern is that “recognition of otherness, of difference” is needed in antebellum reform (225). My point is that Hawthorne proffers the use of the first-person narrator Coverdale as the voice of the abject monster – that is, the cry of the alienated individual who terrifies others in reform culture because his feverish desire and ceaseless voyeurism constitute the filth that manifests itself on the clean and proper (social) body. In fact, Coverdale’s final confession – “I—I myself—was in love—with—Priscilla!” – horrifies even himself (169). He ab-jects the confession in the literal sense, as if it were unclean and as if he must separate himself from the filth to remain a redeemable subject: “[I]t rises in my throat,” Coverdale states, “so let it come.” This confession, he assures us, is “essential to the full understanding of [his] story” (169). Like the creature’s story-within-a-story-within-a-story, Coverdale’s confession – and, I would argue, *The Blithedale Romance* in its entirety – spooks us precisely because it unearths the

repressed desires that the various institutions of reform sought to categorize and eradicate, the portions of ourselves which we abject in order to preserve a stable sense of identity and culture.

Interpreting Coverdale as the primary gothic subject in the romance helps readers to understand how identities were regulated in the antebellum era. Moreover, it challenges us to think critically about identity construction in the twenty-first century United States, in spite of what may seem like advances in social justice and equality. According to Carla Kaplan, “Identity politics, as it emerged in the United States from the women’s movement, the civil rights movement, gay rights struggles, and the New Left in the 1960s, offered new conceptualizations of recognizing – and valuing – previously denigrated or devalued identities” (124). And yet, as Kaplan contends, such recognition can also prove limiting and even destructive when social groups see identity as fixed, “encouraging narrow solidarities rather than broader identifications” (125). If we recognize identity less as a static sense of belonging and more as a process of construction whereby we are constantly *becoming*, appropriating new and different forms of identification strategically, perhaps we could move beyond these limitations (Kaplan 126). Coverdale anticipates Kaplan’s sentiment when he states, “Our souls, after all, are not our own. We convey a property in them to those with whom we associate, but to what extent can never be known, until we feel the tug, the agony of our abortive effort to resume an exclusive sway over ourselves” (133). His vision of identity is productive in the end because, although his uncanny presence disturbs order and identity at Blithedale, he also shows how residing at the boundaries can allow for an alterable, adaptable sense of belonging.

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