Capitalism and "Blithedale": Exploring Hawthorne's Response to 19th Century American Capitalism

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Introduction

On April 8, 1843, renowned American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne sat before his private journal, penning his recollections of Brook Farm, the Massachusetts utopian community experiment in which he had participated for some months. The community, a bold experiment in communal living, was started just two years preceding Hawthorne’s journal writing by Unitarian minister George Ripley as part of the growing Transcendentalist movement. Intensely dissatisfied with an increasingly urban and, arguably, morally depraved lifestyle, Hawthorne had opted almost two years preceding the night he wrote in his journal to join Brook Farm, located in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. Hawthorne arrived at the community on April 12, 1841, choosing to depart about a year afterwards. The experiment, conceived out of a spirit of general disenchantment with the city, had ultimately proven to be an utter financial and social failure, and yet, Hawthorne felt that the experiment in which he had participated needed to be recorded, writing in his diary that night that, “We talked of Brook Farm, and the singular moral aspects which it presents, and the great desirability that its progress and developments be observed and its history written”.1

This wish for a public narrative of Brook Farm came to fruition some nine years after Hawthorne recorded it in his journal, when his oftentimes overlooked novel, The Blithedale Romance was published in Great Britain and the United States. Recognized as being a loosely-fictionalized version of Brook Farm and the occurrences of its participants, it remains one of the most consequential pieces of literature in its attempts to understand and conceptualize the dramatic rise of the city in the nineteenth century United States. Hawthorne skillfully uses the text community to mirror his own experiences at Brook Farm, and in so doing, offers an unparalleled account of societal, reformative answers to the supposed moral transgressions of the city.

Essentially, as a result of the unprecedented rise in urbanism, the U.S. public was left struggling with vastly altered lifestyles and grappling with how the new, urbanized environment would come to redefine their perceptions of pure,

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moral living. Many argued that the city was a place fundamentally void of the strong morals and ethics that defined rural life, a place where profit and commercialism reigned supreme over human decency, with the dollar superseding the fair, ethical treatment of other people. Others pointed to prostitution and the supposed sexual immorality of the urban environment in their indictments of the city.

This paper, then, seeks to explore the problem of popularly-circulated notions of immorality in the city, focusing specifically on prostitution and the ways in which capitalism often took precedence over the humane treatment of others. It will examine how these two ethical dilemmas plagued the American city and caused nineteenth century Americans to deem the city as a place generally fraught with immorality. Finally, it will explore Hawthorne’s particular navigation of these issues by critically examining their impact on the characters of his novel, paying particular attention to the ways in which urban immorality ultimately claimed the life of Zenobia.

The Price of Wealth: Capitalism versus Compassion

In 1984, Princeton University history professor Sean Wilentz published *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*. The text, since heralded as a deeply significant analysis of the working poor in New York City, received rave reviews from historical organizations and societies for being, as the *New York Times* wrote, a “celebrated study of the rise of the working class in the early Republic”.\(^2\) Wilentz’s text is especially useful in expressing the ways in which the desire for monetary gain at the hands of the elect left the working poor of the city destitute. As the novel alludes to in Miles Coverdale’s fleeing of the city for a simpler life, the city was often regarded by nineteenth century contemporaries as a place of over-commercialization, where the quest for financial stability and gain often outweighed the fair and humane treatment of those less fortunate.

Through the publication of *Chants Democratic*, Wilentz joined a growing host of historians and other scholars concerned with the class struggles and inhumane treatment of the nineteenth century worker. His research alludes to the idea that one of the dominating frustrations with the growing U.S. city stemmed from the dehumanizing treatment enacted by the wealthy business owners and managers on the working classes. The city, in its unquenchable appetite for financial gain, was the birthplace of the cramped, stifling and unsafe manufacturing plants known contemporarily as sweat shops. These squalid

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workplaces would come to define nineteenth century cities, and the abhorrent working conditions remain today one of the most stirring images when picturing the flaws of the city. Wilentz writes that the emergence of these factories grew out of the desire on the part of business owners to maximize their profits without investing in such expenditures as ample space or proper ventilation for the comfort of their employees. They were, basically, a prime example of the “financial gain over all else” mentality that populated the cities and earned them the reputation as a place of vice and moral debauchery.

Indeed, Wilentz goes into great detail in his narratives on working conditions within the city, writing at one point of the much wealthier, male overseers of the nearly universally impoverished women workers. He writes, “the great villain of the system was the contractor himself, the ‘sweater’, the ‘remorseless sharper and shaver’, who in league with the cruel landlord fed greedily on the labor of poor women and degraded journeymen”. Conditions like these, as well as the explicit commercialism in the forms of constant, bombarding advertisements sparked the belief that the city was a place focused solely, or else predominantly, on wealth and financial prosperity, without regard to common humanity or the ethical treatment of others.

Further, these displays of immorality were eventually on full public display, free to influence Americans, especially those already in the city. Take, for instance, one account detailed by Wilentz. In an entire section of a chapter called “The Sweated Trades: Clothing, Shoes and Furniture,” he details efforts by investigative journalists to expose the abysmal sweat shop conditions. He writes, “In 1845, the New York Daily Tribune prepared a series of reports on the condition of labor in New York. What the Tribune reporters found shocked them, and they groped for explanations—especially to account for the outrageous under bidding and exploitation that riddled the city’s largest trades”.

An added component to the horrific stories of abuse and unethical treatment of workers resulted from the alleged sex abuse levelled at the women and young girls who staffed the sweat shops. As a result of these abuses of power, the female employees not only contended with the stifling heat, abysmal overcrowding, unsafe conditions and cruel treatment from superiors, but were also seen as sexual prey by many of their superiors. Wilentz writes, “The seamstresses and tailors’ wives-- consigned the most wearisome work (shirt sewing worst of all) and subjected to the bullying and occasional sexual abuse of the contractors— bore the most blatant exploitation”. While Wilentz seems to allude that this form of abuse was the exception, not the rule, it was still widespread enough to merit

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4 Ibid. 119.
5 Ibid. 124.
mention, and the sexual abuse he details furthers the claim that the city’s industrial powerhouses contented themselves with maximizing profit, regardless of the human cost.

Stemming from this debate and the common conception that the city’s emphasis on greed and financial gain for the elite out powered any common sense of humanity or morality is the investigation of the tenement housing system. Extensive research and scholarship, both contemporarily and historically, has been devoted to the tenement houses of urban environments, especially that of New York City. The seminal piece of this tenement scholarship, journalist Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, outlines the various examples he encountered of tenement houses in New York in the late nineteenth century. He wrote of the squalor, cramped spaces (in one instance, Riis expressed the frustration of being in so small a tenement room that he could not fit his camera equipment in it), lack of access to light and ventilation or habitable conditions. Riis detailed his exploits both in text and images, describing the houses as places devoid of “neatness, order, cleanliness” and those of “reckless slovenliness, discontent, privation, and ignorance”.

As a result of these abject conditions, owners enjoyed profits nearly unprecedented in other common business ventures. For instance, Riis reported that, commonly, the rent for these deplorable conditions often amounted to “seven dollars and a half a month, more than a week’s wages”, although some families managed to rent for around five dollars a month, still an exorbitant amount of money for the city’s poor, especially when judged in comparison to the conditions those sums afforded families.

Throughout his collection, Riis argues that the willingness and complacency of the tenants of these houses de-incentivized the owners from taking action to improve conditions. His position is that the owners of the countless tenement houses generally refused to accommodate their tenants with decent living spaces because there was no financial incentive to do so. When, eventually, government officials forced tenement owners to reform their properties to benefit the welfare of the residents, tenement owners across New York City offered intense rebuttals and protestations, with Riis writing that legal reformations came “not without opposition; obstacles were thrown at the officials on one side by the owners of the tenements, who saw in every order to repair or clean up only an item of added expense”. The result of this focus on monetary gain had real consequences on the city’s impoverished people; the abhorrent living conditions, as Riis points out, resulted in so many deaths that the city’s

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7 Ibid. 91.

8 Ibid. 66.

9 Ibid. 69.
mortality rate significantly increased “from 1 in 41.83 in 1815, to 1 in 27.33 in 1855, a year of unusual freedom from epidemic disease”.  

Finally, Riis makes an intriguing connection between these tenement conditions and the other vices that characterized New York City. In his introduction to *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis quotes an official of the Prison Association of New York who, in an 1863 testimony on efforts to determine the causes of the recent crime spikes, said, “By far the largest part—eighty percent at least—of crimes against property and against the person are perpetrated by individuals who have either lost connection with home life, or never had any, or whose homes had ceased to be sufficiently separate, decent and desirable”.  

It was the conviction of this official, which Riis would echo twenty-seven years later in *How the Other Half Lives* that the tenements were not only vices in themselves, but they were also sources of additional vices, including, no doubt, prostitution. Riis felt that “New York made sure at that early stage of the inquiry: the boundary line of the Other Half lies through the tenements”.  

As such, he reasoned that, by the reformation of these centers of vice, the city could begin efforts to reform its immorality on a larger scale. However, these efforts were hampered by owners fearful of losing profit in the process of repairing the broken homes.

In short, Riis’s acclaimed text furthers the commonly-held belief by nineteenth century contemporaries that the city was a place that valued commercialism and monetary gain over common humanity, which certainly presents a moral impasse. From the tenement house owners to those of the sweat shops, each showed the poor rural migrant, fresh into the city, that their value as a human was second to the value of their dollar or work, their ability to further the owner’s agenda; he or she could be nothing more than mere hands in ensuring profit for their wealthy and powerful overseers. The squalid conditions of the tenements and sweatshops demonstrated, in no uncertain terms, that their principal worth was merely to further the financial aims of the already privileged. Further, situations like the tenements or sweatshops fundamentally stripped the urbanite of his or her identity; he or she became nothing more than members of the anonymous horde, relegated to having no real identity as he would in the country, which was a landscape that cherished the individual in a much more profound way than the masses of the city could have. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the rapidly growing and changing city was ingrained in the American conscience as a place where people were little valued aside from being mere ‘hands’ in the factory, as the city’s inhabitants were much more interested in pursuing their own financial greed.

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10 Ibid. 65.
11 Ibid. 5.
12 Ibid. 5.
To be sure, however, the city would occasionally witness bouts where campaigns for more ethical and fair treatment of workers gained traction and prevalence. Wilentz, for instance, lists several societies that emerged in New York mid-century whose exclusive aim was to usher in legislation, policies and practices that would serve to create a more favorable atmosphere for the city’s laborers. The organizations, including the General Society and the American Institute of the City of New York, sought to end indiscriminate firings and the infringement on “equal rights”. Certainly, 19th century New York City was an especially important undertaking, then, given the huge numbers of immigrants pouring into Ellis Island daily. In what has been since recognized as a hyper-classed society, immigrants were widely viewed with condescension and distrust, something the aforementioned societies initially sought to remedy by ensuring protection from the classist and culturally homogenous New York power structure that often attempted to indiscriminately fire or otherwise manipulate immigrant or lower class workers.

Despite the benevolence typically associated with these organizations, however, they were often nothing more than mere vehicles for further capitalist gain. Wilentz writes that “It was not that the Institute men—any more than the General Society, lien-law reformers, or the anti-auctioneers—felt any ambivalence about capitalist expansion: they welcomed it, provided the masters had their share of sound bank credit”. The true aim of these organizations, then, was not to protect the city’s working poor; rather it was to ensure that the financial aims and objectives of the elite, male working class were furthered. For example, Wilentz goes on to write that, “all these groups were interested in making America and the New World safe for craft capitalists” and that “the masters emphasized the need to advance their own interests for the good of the entire trade—not simply to hold on to their opportunities but to enlarge them”. This point is illustrated quite well in the history of The American Institute for the City of New York. The Institute, founded in 1838, was one whose vast majority of members were inventors. These men sought to develop new technologies to mechanize agriculture and production at the cost of the marginalized working class, who would almost certainly find themselves unemployed at every new mechanical development that could replace them. Despite this, the Institute vociferously advocated for the protection of domestic production, and, by effect, American jobs, thus appealing to many of the working-class New Yorkers who in reality were most harmed by the Institute’s other efforts. Thus, despite the argument that lobbying organizations such as these existed to protect the working

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13 Ibid. 151.
14 Ibid. 150.
15 Ibid. 152.
16 Ibid. 152.
classes from the greediness of the city’s wealthy elite, in truth even these groups sought to further their own agenda and line their own pocketbooks, making the city’s struggle between capitalism and common humanity inescapable.

**Sexual Immorality in the City**

Another ethical problem presented itself as the American city continued to prosper: that of the sex trade and prostitution. Early in April 1836, a New York City prostitute named Helen Jewett was murdered in an upscale brothel on Thomas Street. The murder, and the gruesome fashion in which it was enacted, brought with it increased and widespread speculation and investigation into one of the city’s most seedy underbellies: the sex trade. Twenty two years later, in 1858, and likely as a result of the attention garnished by the Jewett murder, Dr. William Sanger’s piece, *The History of Prostitution, Its Extent, Causes and Effects Throughout the World* was published. Sanger embarked on this ambitious project, as contemporary scholar Rebecca Yamin writes, “with the ultimate purpose of curing a perceived societal evil”.17 In many ways, Sanger’s condemnation of the sex trade industry as a social pestilence reflects the pervading sense of rejection of society’s oldest profession, which had seen an overwhelming increase in numbers. Sanger’s rejection of prostitution and sex work was certainly not uncommon, born in part out of the rather prudish Victorian mindset. However, at a deeper level, society rejected this line of work because of the hazards associated with it. Just as women were frequent recipients of abuse, both physical and sexual in the industrial sectors of the city, so too were they abused and commoditized in prostitution. The profession required a certain degree of risk, as the Jewett murder so graphically detailed. Further, it entailed that the woman not be recognized as part of humanity; she was, quite simply, a commodity.

Sanger’s argument, then, hinged on the belief that prostitution was a “moral pestilence”, one that threatened “every man, woman and child in the community”.18 Though intensive legal work was done in attempts to ward off the supposedly unethical profession, the profits associated with it in the city were, more often than not, too sweet to pass by. Yamin, for instance, details an indictment dating back to 1843 in which a New Yorker by the name of John Donohue was charged with operating a brothel in the city. The indictment, which charged that Donohue had operated a “disorderly house, viz.—a rest for prostitutes and others of ill name and fame” went to trial on October 30th. Donohue was found guilty and faced harsh punishment.19

For scores of people across the city, men and women, the prospect of making a quick buck by engaging in prostitution or harboring prostitutes was worth the risk of prosecution, as well as the societal stigma and immorality that Sanger railed against. He hoped, through the statistical components of his work, to be “armed with data” so as to better legally “regulate the pestilence”, recognizing, much to his chagrin, that it would likely be impossible to eradicate it.²⁰ As a result, “the preservation of female honor”, as well as the general morality of the city, were likely to be forever tainted by “those who frequent these haunts of vice”.²¹

For decades, prostitution in the United States had been assessed through the prudish Victorian framework of morality, one that Sanger embodied, and consequently summarily rejected as an acceptable or even condonable trade or industry. Jacqueline Shelton observed in her *Evil Becomes Her* that there was a fundamental shift in the nineteenth century public’s perceptions of the sex trade, moving from the notion that prostitution, while not ideal, allowed men to rid themselves of their innate, savage instincts, to a much less forgiving ideology: one that rejected prostitutes and their trade as being fundamentally void of morality and worthy of deep and immediate reformation. Women, who comprised an overwhelming majority of urban prostitutes, were attributed as having little to no sexual desires, existing purely as vessels for male enjoyment. Thus, it can come as no surprise that prostitutes, visible symbols of female sexuality and failures of morality, were under special criticism in the city. Those opposed to the city and its moral transgressions specifically cited prostitution as one of the principal vices inhibiting good, moral, and all too often, Christian lifestyles.

Adding fuel to this hatred and vitriol of prostitution, and, by effect, the prostitutes themselves, American society, in both urban and rural settings, condemned the sex trade as a sort of catalyst of other forms of societal ills. The context of the mid-nineteenth century U.S. was one of insurmountable poverty, disease, unemployment and ethnic tensions, found a familiar scape-goat in prostitutes like Helen Jewett. It was, as Shelton commented, that “the very profession provided Americans with an explanation, disease, and unemployment among the poorest classes”, and that “Americans accepted prostitution as a ‘necessary evil’ discussed in terms of Victorian morality”.²² In essence, problems of the 19th century U.S., including rampant cholera, smallpox, typhus, and yellow fever epidemics, were pinned on prostitutes under the guise that their contact with others spread those diseases. In other absurd instances, prostitutes took the brunt

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²¹ Ibid. 23
of the blame for corrupting the men with whom they did business or in other ways encouraged moral transgressions.

Still more justifications for condemning the prostitution industry, particularly in the cities, emerged from the ways in which the profession was perceived to challenge the rigid gender roles of the nineteenth century. Rather than view prostitutes as victims of a society bent on the oppression of women, nineteenth century Americans saw these fallen angels as challenges to the established, set and staunchly defended roles of men and women. Prostitution served as one of the few ways in which women in the city could amply provide for themselves and, if applicable, their children, independent of a man. The prostitute’s ability to leave the home and earn wages that were, in many cases, comparable to men of similar classes, served as a hugely damaging detriment to the pre-conceived gender roles. Take for instance, Mary Hall, whom Shelton describes as an entrepreneur of sorts. Hall established a brothel in Washington, D.C. in the late 1830s that soon became a profitable place of business for both the city’s elected elite and common man. While Shelton concedes that Hall and her business were well tolerated in the city because of the way in which Hall was able to profit, her marked departure from traditional gender roles irked many opponents of the city, who argued that the woman’s role was not on the streets, or, for that matter, in the sweat shops; rather, she was to remain at home. Undoubtedly, this concept was especially true for the upper-class women who, in the hyper-patriarchal society of 19th century America, would never have been permitted to work in a sweat shop or run a brothel, lest that employment harm her family’s social standing. In this sense, it seems that upper-class women were curiously inoculated against the immorality of the city, leaving other less fortunate women, often desperate to provide even the most basic and rudimentary needs for herself and her family, to bear the brunt of the social ire. Any departure from these roles was viewed with contempt, another example of the city’s polluting effect on established moral principles and societal expectations.

Hawthorne’s Solution: Examining Utopian Communities and The Blithedale Romance

It was the moral dilemmas like these that prompted Hawthorne and his peers to found Brook Farm. Seeking to escape the stifling sense of capitalism that dominated the American city, Hawthorne and his “knot of dreamers” as he would refer to their fictional counterparts, sought to escape the hectic, overly-commercialized for the more normative simplistic, agrarian lifestyle. They were, in many senses, united in their belief that, as Hawthorne wrote to his wife from Brook Farm in June 1841, “a man’s soul may be buried and perish under a dung-
heap or in a furrow of the field, just as well as under a pile of money”. Their experiences at Brook Farm would eventually evolve into the fictionalized account, The Blithedale Romance. Hawthorne, acknowledging the capitalist and sexual immoralities that manifested themselves in the city, sought to discuss their solution in the novel by establishing characters frustrated by the transgressions of the city in an idealized community: Blithedale. Ultimately, his texts asserts that these transgressions cannot be escaped because they are internalized by those who fled it. These failures to achieve Blithedale’s aims, paired with the dysfunction that wracked the relationships there ultimately led to the dissolution of the community and, most significantly, the death of Zenobia.

The ambitions of the Brook Farm community that would come to inspire Blithedale were, as scholar Maura D’Amore suggests in her Suburban Plots: Men at Home in Nineteenth-Century American Print Culture, an attempt toward the ideal communal lifestyle encouraged by the French philosopher Charles Fourier and his American counterparts, like Albert Brisbane. The intervention that this group sought to enact at Brook Farm, and the one eventually suggested in Hawthorne’s novel was to, “collectively purchase land outside but within reach of major cities in order to live according to a community system, sharing in the mental and physical labor required to reform the world and bring happiness to all classes and individuals”. D’Amore shows that Hawthorne intentionally set out to warn his readers that Blithedale was much more than a loosely-fictionalized account of Brook Farm however, quoting his desire that the community be as a “theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel, where the creature of his brain may play their phantasmagorical antics, without exposing them to too close a comparison with the actual events of real life”. Despite his attempts to divorce his own experiences at Brook Farm and those lived out in his text, the fact remains that both were types of reform-minded interventions. It was their hope, though problematic in practice because of the frustrations the stem from communal living, that a return to a more rural lifestyle, one dependent on community and based on equality and concern for others would purge the deeply-rooted immorality rampant in the city.

D’Amore focuses specifically on a new space emerging in the United States in response to the booming cities: the suburbs. It is her contention that Hawthorne manipulates the Blithedale community to be representative of this new space. The suburb—part large city, part small town—are, according to her, “a space that invites forgetfulness and invites arcadian idealism”. By her

26 D’Amore. Suburban Plots. 91.
estimation, then, these peculiar spaces were seen as divorced enough from the corrupting forces of the city so as to hearken back to the more close-knit and rural communities that Americans had, for so long, resided in. She furthers this claim by writing that, the suburbs were “a requiem on the part of its planners and inhabitants for a way of living, interacting, and perceiving the world that they deem no longer a possibility”.²⁷

Grown out of this spirit and quest for “forgetfulness and acradian idealism”, Blithedale hoped to present a counter to the capitalist and immoral city, but this experiment ultimately proved to be an utter failure. The sins of the city followed the Blithedale participants, creating the sort of discord and selfishness that they sought to avoid. Eventually, this would lead not only to the dissolution of the community, but to the death of Zenobia, who, upon realizing that the immoral spirit of the city was embodied in herself and others at Blithedale, saw no other recourse but to take her own life.

The novel begins with protagonist Miles Coverdale, an urbanite frustrated by the oppressive city, who flees in hopes of ushering in a more pure life at the communal Blithedale. In describing Coverdale’s retreat to Blithedale from the city, Hawthorne writes that the city, “on either side, seemed to press too closely upon us, insomuch that our hearts found barely room enough to throb between”.²⁸ To repel and relieve him of this stifling effect of the city on his soul, Hawthorne states that “when we left the pavements, and our muffled hoof-tramps beat upon a desolate extent of country roads... then, there was better air to breathe”.²⁹ The Blithedale community, then, was conceived in an effort to escape the confining, claustrophobic sense of oppression that the urban environment placed on the human soul and sense of morality. It was the hope of its founders that, by existing physically and spiritually apart from the city, a more idealistic, moral and pure lifestyle could ensue, one unlikely if not impossible to transpire in the urban environment.

Regardless of this attempt to create an ideal community, one free of the frustrations of the city, *The Blithedale Romance* is a novel fundamentally centered on the failures of humanity and failed human relationships. Despite Coverdale and his colleagues’ desire to set up what they refer to as a “paradise”, and escape the dingy, claustrophobic city, Blithedale’s short tenure was eventually wracked with betrayal, dysfunctional relationships, and sins, many of which could be traced back to the city.³⁰

The most poignant image of these betrayals and dissolution of the community comes with the image and eventual fate of Zenobia. Zenobia is given,

²⁷ Ibid. 91.
²⁹ Ibid. 11.
³⁰ Ibid. 10.
undoubtedly, the most profound physical description of any of the characters in the novel. Upon their initial meeting, Coverdale describes her as “identical” with life, “dressed as simply as possible” with hair “dark, glossy, and of singular abundance” and without “ornament, except a single flower. It was an exotic, of rare beauty, and as fresh as if a hot-house gardener had just clipt it from the stem”. These graphic, descriptive details of both Zenobia’s person and her famous accessory, the flower, attempt to depict her, in many senses, as one of the most pure and vivacious characters inhabiting Blithedale. Zenobia, it appears, both through Coverdale’s descriptions and her actions, managed to more successfully achieve the pure lifestyle that all inhabitants of Blithedale sought. The flower, which makes a near constant appearance in Zenobia’s hair, attests to this love of life and the idealized, simplified living Blithedale sought to exemplify.

However, after the betrayal of some of the other inhabitants of Blithedale, principally Hollingsworth, and following her own betrayal of Priscilla, Zenobia lost not only those admirable facets of her life, but also the accessory which symbolized them. After Hollingsworth betrayed Zenobia by revealing that, despite their intimacy, his real love was Priscilla, Zenobia fell into a state of deep depression; by the night’s end, she had committed suicide by drowning herself in the river near Blithedale.

Hollingsworth was not the only one to infiltrate the idealized lifestyle of Blithedale. In another, more explicit representation of the city, Professor Westervelt’s visit with Zenobia at Blithedale likely served as another contributor to her downfall. Westervelt’s private discussion with Zenobia regarded Priscilla, who had served, unwillingly, as a sort of indentured servant to Westervelt. She was abused and manipulated by Westervelt into becoming the “Veiled Lady,” a spectacle that drew men in to pay to watch her. Westervelt, essentially, prostituted Priscilla out, who, in turn, sought refuge and redemption at Blithedale. Thus, when he attempted to convince Zenobia to sell Priscilla out, therefore returning her to service, Zenobia initially resisted, attempting to save Priscilla from the abuse and humiliation that would accompany her return to the life of the “Veiled Lady.” Westervelt, in their private, wooded area, with only Coverdale covertly listening, asked Zenobia, “Why not fling the girl off, and let her go?” Zenobia responded, maternally, that “She clung to me from the first. I neither know nor care what it is in me that so attaches her. But she loves me, and I will not fail her”.

Despite this initial defense of Priscilla and her adamancy that she will not betray her, Zenobia eventually relented, giving the girl over to her captor. In so doing, Zenobia fell victim to the predominate “sins” of the city aforementioned;

31 Ibid. 15.
32 Ibid. 104.
not only did she give Priscilla up for prostitution, but she also tacitly approved of Westervelt’s mission of financial gain above all else, including the care for his fellow humans. The result of her betrayal of Priscilla served as her own moral degradation; she had become, despite all of her efforts, the morally deficient person of the city she sought to escape at Blithedale. Indeed, several critics of the text, D’Amore included, have pointed to Hawthorne’s choice to depict Blithedale as a “Modern Arcadia” and its participants as “A Knot of Dreamers” as indicative of a criticism against the Blithedale inhabitants’ vision as one plagued by class tensions. It would appear, then, through this criticism, that Hawthorne implicitly informed the reader that the influences of the city that will eventually claim Zenobia as a victim would be present in the community despite the reform efforts.

Zenobia’s death, however, was not merely the result of Hollingsworth’s infidelity, Westervelt’s ownership or her own betrayal of Priscilla. Rather, it was the final acknowledgement that she could not escape the selfish, sinful and immoral lifestyle of the city; as a result, she eventually falls victim to the city itself, principally because she is fundamentally an urbanite. It seems that Zenobia, despite valiant efforts to escape the influences of the city, ultimately was futile in her attempts to escape her own urbanity and, thus, moral transgressions. She recognized that Hollingsworth’s deceit and betrayal, paired with Westervelt’s abuse of Priscilla and her own inability to protect her were similar to the sins enacted in the city; that, despite the efforts at Blithedale to live a pure, honest, simple life, Westervelt, Hollingsworth and herself had betrayed that, helping to usher in the moral decline of the community. Thus, Westervelt and Hollingsworth, as images and representatives of the vices of the city, led Zenobia to utter desolation. Convinced by their collective actions that there was no real escape from the selfish, capitalist nature and deceit of the city, she opted to drown herself in the river. She had fallen to the degradation of the city that she had, for so long, sought to avoid.

As a result of these recognitions, Hawthorne portrayed the city as a place whose very nature was to subvert morality and frustrate efforts to live a morally pure and just life. Zenobia’s downfall, traced back to these remnants of the city’s immorality and influences at Blithedale, led her to the ultimate realization that its influences were not contained to the physical space it occupied. Rather, the selfishness and carnality that characterized the city was embodied in its inhabitants, even long after they had left. This resulted in the numerous betrayals that occurred at Blithedale, for Priscilla’s return to a form of prostitution to further the financial aims of Westervelt and the other circumstances that ushered in the decline of the Blithedale community. Zenobia’s eventual fall was not just the realization of her own decline into the city’s influences, but also the desperation

33 D’Amore. Suburban Plots. 99.
upon realizing that the nature of the city forced meaningful change to be nearly impossible to obtain.

In short, Westervelt and Hollingsworth, and, to an extent, Zenobia herself, all embodiments of the city, continuously reminded Zenobia of the deeply immoral aspects of the urban environment and their inability to escape them. Westervelt’s prostitution of Priscilla and Zenobia’s own guilt in selling her out, paired with the deception and infidelity of Hollingsworth, so pained and deflated Zenobia’s attempts at living a more ethical, pure lifestyle, that she saw no recourse other than taking her own life. In the hours preceding her death, Zenobia confides to Coverdale that “I have been on trial for my life”; Blithedale was effectively Zenobia’s last chance at the lifestyle she dreamed of, and when the vices she sought to escape follow her in the forms of Westervelt and Hollingsworth, she realized that the experiment had failed and resorted to taking her own life.34

It is, of course, also necessary to examine Zenobia’s own distinct urbanity. A product of the city, Zenobia was well-regarded throughout it as an exceptionally beautiful woman, one belonging to the higher social classes before her Blithedale sojourn. Her urban lifestyle is perhaps no better demonstrated than in the examination of her family dynamic. It is revealed late in the novel that Zenobia’s father is Moody, also known as Fauntleroy, and her sister is Priscilla. Zenobia remains ignorant of these relations in a type of anonymity that only the crowded nature of the city could afford. While it is true that the city ultimately ushered in Zenobia’s downfall and demise, it was also the facilitator for the relative wealth she experienced. Moody, described as once wealthy but now deeply impoverished, left his daughter Zenobia at a young age. Through the anonymity of the city, she was able to live her entire life rather sheltered from the man and his poverty and enjoy a life of relative financial ease. Thus, the city and its tendencies to strip individuals of their identities, not only served as Zenobia’s eventual killer, but also enables her fortune.

Final Reflections on the City and Blithedale

In closing, it is important to once again consider the motivations behind the aforementioned reform movements. The city, in all of its industrial and capitalist might, was seen by many, perhaps even a plurality of Americans, not just as a place of invention and progress, but also as a place fundamentally void of the strict moral principles that characterized rural living. Whether through prostitution and other manifestations of sexual immorality or through the urban area’s

intensive focus on capitalism and furthering personal wealth, regardless of the human price involved, the city was unquestionably a place that vastly altered the Victorian sense of morality that had previously characterized the United States.

In response to these perceived moral crises, Hawthorne joined a growing crowd of Americans who sought reformation in efforts to purge society of its ills. As part of these efforts, The Blithedale Romance affirmed that the influences and moral transgressions of the city were ultimately inescapable and profound in their impact on its inhabitants. Through the death of Zenobia, Hawthorne posits that attempts to cultivate a more ethical, idealized lifestyle like the one embodied in the Blithedale community were not only futile, but destructive. Her death was the result of her final acknowledgement that any attempts to frustrate or disrupt the city’s sins were futile, that the moral vacuum of the city could not be defeated. Zenobia ultimately realized that this immorality was not merely confined to the physical space of the city; rather, it was embodied and internalized by urbanites, therefore making it impossible to escape even when divorced from the city and placed in a utopian community like Blithedale.
Bibliography


