

This is a much different paper than
the one on Thoreau.

The Incompatibles

or: Notes on Hawthorne

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Partly heavy 125 #

A basic theme that runs rather forcefully through Hawthorne's "Blithedale Romance" is that of the tragic incompatibility that human beings demonstrate in their vital relationships with one another. We find Hawthorne expressing this social difficulty in many ways -- by the astonishing and oft-times brutal clashes of interests of the individuals, the marked differences of values among them, the physical variations that designate them as individuals, and the sexual dualism of male and female with their respective contradictory traits and characteristics. All these factors, abundantly dwelled upon (sometimes judiciously, critically, or analytically) ultimately show the human being with his most halting flaw -- that of being an individual, confined within the limits of his skin and thus incapable of ever fully knowing another individual. Were it possible for individuals to exist by themselves this might not be so serious, but being that our interdependence is for all practical purposes our only *modus vivendi*, this flaw becomes our major and most calamitous imperfection.

*An idiom
unacceptable
to most
English teachers*

That this idea should come out so well in "The Blithedale Romance" is not too surprising, for when considering the setting of the romance, the Brook Farm, and the collection of individuals who comprised it, it becomes the perfect theme. Here we may witness the interaction of a band of activated individuals whose own personal ideals drive them ~~to~~^{together} for the utopian project and whose continued individualism necessarily foredooms it before it can succeed.

We might see all this in the very characters themselves, as they misunderstand one another, shun ^{each} ~~one~~ another, and eventually drive one another to actions of bitter desperation.

First, let us consider Coverdale -- remarkably reasonable, sincere, passive, sensitive, lonely, repressed, an individual who makes no demands. He, too, is misunderstood, rebuked. He falls in love and never expresses it. He is willing to be wielded by the currents of time, allows himself to flow in the direction of least resistance and somehow manages to retain his integrity of self. His virtue is in not inflicting pain on others, his fault is in refusing to exert himself as a human being to become the good force he is capable of becoming.

Then, Zenobia, the cultured, beautiful woman with a will who becomes will-less; the destruction of her independence is one of the fascinating aspects of the narrative. She allows the

strength of Hollingworth's character to dominate her and by thus surrendering her independence paves the way for her own destruction. Consider her desperate cry:

"Nature thrusts some of us into the world miserably incomplete on the emotional side, with hardly any sensibilities except what pertain to us as animals. No passion, save of the senses; no hold^y tenderness, nor the delicacy that results from this. Externally they bear a close resemblance to ~~the~~ other men, and have perhaps all save the finest grace; but when a woman wrecks herself on such a being, she ultimately finds that the real womanhood within her has no corresponding part in him. Her deepest voice lacks a response; the deeper her cry, the more dead his silence. The fault may be none of his; he cannot give her what never lived within his soul. But the wretchedness on her side, and the moral deterioration attendant on a false and shallow life, without strength~~h~~ enough to keep sweet, are among the most pitiable wrongs that mortals suffer."

How, we wonder, can people become so unknown to one another? What essential property of the mind is missing? If we could read each other's thoughts, would we be the happier for it? Can we come any closer than we have? Can the barriers of the self limits be breached or at least extended?

Hollingsworth is another character of intransigent values. His idealism becomes a fanatical cause. He asks this of his friend: "But how can you be my life-long friend, except that you strive with me towards the great object of my life?"

It is the very coldness of Hollingsworth that ultimately sends Zenobia to death. We accuse him immediately of not recognizing the values of others, of immediately forcing others to surrender their individuality to his absolutism, of not realizing the selfishness of his ideal, the particularity of his own beliefs. Eventually Hollingsworth recognizes his fault but it is only after disaster has shaken him out of his selfishness and confronted him with the reality of other lives intrinsically as worthy as his. He recognizes the responsibility he has when he sees the death of Zenobia as the ~~the~~ fruit of his own influence.

Then Priscilla, the weak, helpless individual, wandering over the sea of ~~other~~ other people's wishes, being shoved by whatever she stumbles into, seeking a haven among the warmer souls, unable to live by herself -- perfectly dependent. Her tragedy is in having to rely on others for all her happiness and pleasure. A complete passivity, aimless, at the utter mercy of the stronger around her. It is a wonder she does not suffer more.

Finally, Westervelt, the unscrupulously false -- whose ability to influence is utilized to its greatest advantage, whose own degenerate values are imposed on others by the conceit of his will and satisfaction.

Thus, we have a brief outline of the principal incompatibles of the romance. None of these people, although their lives become intimately intertwined, none of them bring happiness to one another. In their inequality they cannot know one another. They each dwell in private worlds that hover about closely but which never share mutuality of direction or purpose. They must fight each others' impositions and ultimately destroy themselves. And so, the misunderstood remain so, people love without uttering a word, some die without knowing how or why.

The aftermath is alarming. Each of us cuts his path through existence inflicting damage here and there, making some people miserable, others happy -- but the haphazardness of our course, the hit and miss effect of our lives, indicated how weak our sight is, how uncommunicative our language, how non-transferable our values. The limitations of the self are best seen in our relations with the other selves. How curious it should be to see the world through the eyes of another, for one day, for one minute! How much more we should learn!