

“HOW COLD AN ARCADIA WAS THIS”:  
TRANSCENDENTALIST COMMUNES  
IN  
*THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE* AND “TRANSCENDENTAL WILD OATS”

by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) and Louisa May Alcott's "Transcendental Wild Oats" (1873) with a two-fold purpose. The first is to put these texts into conversation with one another to highlight commonalities as well as provide insights into each. Both Hawthorne's novel and Alcott's short story are works of fiction set at Transcendentalist communes based on places that actually existed and at which each writer lived: Brook Farm and Fruitlands, respectively. This dissertation considers how the two writers portray attempts to live by Transcendentalist precepts at the fictionalized communities. To explore *The Blithedale Romance* and "Transcendental Wild Oats," this dissertation establishes and applies a framework for analyzing any texts about utopian communities, whether historical and fictional, or whether that fiction is speculative or real-world. The analytical framework involves looking at sets of conflicts or dichotomies that utopian texts tend to confront; the second purpose of this dissertation is to illustrate the application of this methodology. The recurring tensions explored here are those between thought and action, between the individual and society, and between men and women—three binaries that overlap with tensions within Transcendentalism or were of interest to Transcendentalists. The methodology provides a way to examine how two works of real-world utopian fiction, *The Blithedale Romance* and "Transcendental Wild Oats," handle these tensions in depicting life at Transcendentalist communes. Applying this methodology also puts these two texts into conversation with other works of fiction about real-world utopias as well as other works by Hawthorne and Alcott.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the Foreword to the essay collection *America's Communal Utopias* (1997), Paul S. Boyer writes,

From the days of the Puritans to the latest California commune, the impulse to form highly cohesive communities knit together by a common ideology and a shared vision of social harmony has been a constant in American history. While communalism enjoyed its greatest efflorescence in the 1820-1850 era (with a second wave in the post-1960 years), it has never been absent from the American experience. (xi)

In the early 1840s, during the nineteenth century “efflorescence,” two American writers—Nathaniel Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott—each spent six months at a commune. Their communes—Brook Farm and Fruitlands, respectively—were founded by Transcendentalist thinkers to apply Transcendentalist ideals to experimental living arrangements. In 1852, eleven years after leaving Brook Farm, Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Blithedale Romance* and thus became the first American writer, if not the first in the world, to write fiction based on his own experience at an intentional community. Thirty years after leaving Fruitlands, Louisa May Alcott fictionalized her experience in her 1873 short story “Transcendental Wild Oats.”

This dissertation examines *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” with a two-fold purpose. The first is to put these texts into conversation with one another to highlight commonalities as well as provide insights into each. Both Hawthorne’s novel and Alcott’s short story are set at Transcendentalist communes based on those at which

each writer spent time. This dissertation considers how the two writers portray attempts to live by Transcendentalist precepts at the fictionalized communities. To explore *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats,” this dissertation establishes and applies a framework for analyzing any texts about utopian communities, whether historical and fictional, or whether that fiction is speculative or real-world. The analytical framework involves looking at sets of conflicts or dichotomies that utopian texts tend to confront; the second purpose of this dissertation is to illustrate the application of this methodology. The recurring tensions explored here are those between thought and action (or theory and practice), between the individual and society, and between men and women. Other recurring tensions in utopian texts include those between the authentic and the artificial, between the urban and the pastoral, and between success and failure. Although these tensions appear in both *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats,” this dissertation does not address them. Instead, the focus here is on the three binaries that overlap with tensions within Transcendentalism or were of interest to Transcendentalists. Exploring these binaries puts *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” into conversation with one another as well as with other fiction about real-world utopias, and with other works by Hawthorne and Alcott.

The remainder of this introductory chapter first discusses the subgenre of real-world utopian fiction and then moves to discuss the analytical framework used in the three literary analysis chapters. Chapter Two: Background provides an overview of utopian literature and utopian history, and then a survey of scholarship on *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” as well as background on those texts. The

literary analysis chapters each focus on one binary: Chapter Three is Thought vs. Action, Chapter Four is The Individual vs. Society, and Chapter Five is Men vs. Women. Each of these three literary analysis chapters opens by briefly describing Transcendentalist thought on that chapter's central topic. The literary analysis chapters then examine Hawthorne's treatment of the binary before moving to Alcott's treatment of it. Chapter Six, the conclusion, summarizes the analysis and points to directions for future research.

*The Blithedale Romance* and "Transcendental Wild Oats" belong to a literary subgenre that does not appear to have been specifically defined as such. This dissertation refers to it as real-world utopian fiction. Definitions of the utopian fiction genre do not generally include works based on communities that actually existed or types of communities that actually existed, such as Transcendentalist community, Shaker villages, or 1960s hippie communes. Rather, utopian literature is generally seen as a form of speculative fiction. This dissertation expands the category of utopian literature, or highlights an often overlooked subcategory of it, by discussing the generic properties of non-speculative utopian fiction.

Two widely accepted definitions emphasize the imaginative dimensions of utopian literature. In *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, eminent utopian scholar Lyman Tower Sargent defines a literary utopia as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space" (6). Usually, the author presents that society as "considerably better than the society in which the reader lived" (Sargent, *Short Introduction* 6). Similarly, Fátima Vieira's essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopia* claims that "one of the main features of utopia as a literary genre is

its relationship to reality. Utopists depart from the observation of the society they live in, note down the aspects that need to be changed and imagine a place where those problems have been solved” (8). Fiction in which utopias have a tenuous “relationship to reality” may not account for works like *The Blithedale Romance*, “Transcendental Wild Oats,” and the many others portraying communes that are plausible rather than improbable. Like speculative works about utopias, non-speculative or real-world utopian fictional texts also critique mainstream society by contrasting it with alternative societies intended to be better than that in which readers live. Even if the societies in real-world utopian works are not entirely of the writers’ own invention, they are non-existent in that the texts are fictional rather than historical accounts.

Thus, real-world utopian works seem eligible for inclusion within the larger genre of utopian literature. Creators of fiction and films in this real-world utopian subgenre base their works on visits to or knowledge about actual communes, in contrast to fiction or films set in futuristic or other wholly imagined settings. In the best-known example of speculative utopian fiction, *Utopia* (1516), Thomas More uses the Greek word for ‘nowhere’ to name the island society he invents. More’s fantastical community implements solutions to problems he saw in contemporary Europe. Fast-forwarding several hundred years, another example of speculative utopian fiction is Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), envisioning a futuristic world with both ideal and dystopian societies. On the other hand, *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” take place at utopian communities that were somewhere rather than nowhere and are drawn realistically rather than fantastically. Chapter Two discusses other



examples of real-world utopian fiction from the nineteenth century up through this century. Because this subgenre occupies a sort of middle ground between speculative fiction and non-fiction texts, analyzing examples of it like *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” can underscore similarities in much utopian discourse, i.e. the recurrence of particular themes.

These recurring themes can be framed as binaries. Whether utopian texts are novels, short stories, fictional films, documentaries, reality television shows, histories, or memoirs, a useful tool for understanding and comparing them is investigating how they deal with one or more of these binaries. Examining how *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” handle thought vs. action, the individual vs. society, and men vs. women sheds new light on two much-studied texts. At the same time, this dissertation illustrates how a binary-based analytical framework could be used for future analysis of other texts about intentional communities.

Chapter Three: Thought vs. Action, looks at the tension between theory and practice. In fiction as in life, communards face considerable tribulation when trying to translate their ideas into action, implementing what might be vague or overly-ambitious objectives. Founders of fictional and real communes are often educated, middle- or upper-class, or urban people who harbor romantic notions about manual labor. Therefore, utopian narratives frequently dwell on the difficulties facing communards unaccustomed to the work that is essential to the community’s success. Further, many texts depict communards as talking about plans more than actually implementing them. Another subtopic of thought vs. action is the way communards conceptualize their endeavors.

Even at supposedly secular communes such as Brook Farm and Fruitlands, communards think about their project in religious terms, and sometimes associate it with paradise or Eden. Related to this conceptualization is the way that utopian narratives tend to emphasize the development of rituals. These rituals often revolve around food, the production of which is a primary purpose of many intentional communities.

Chapter Four discusses another tension arising at real and fictional communes: between the individual and society. Communards usually strive to put one another on equal footing, but their experiments raise questions about class differences, about asserting individual will, and about the nature of leadership in a milieu where members should be making decisions collectively. Utopian narratives frequently refer to the unavoidability of conflict in communal settings, as well as the threat to individuality. Additionally, when reflecting on tensions between the individual and society, utopian narratives often deliberate on communards' relationship to the world from which they have removed themselves.

Chapter Five: Men vs. Women studies gender roles and gender relations. Intentional communities are often the locus of experimentation with, or friction between, men and women when it comes to dividing labor, assuming or rejecting traditional roles, and entering romantic relationships. One subgenre of utopian fiction is feminist literature that critiques the position of women in contemporary society and imagines societies that would empower women and expand employment opportunities for them. An example is the utopia Charlotte Perkins Gilman imagines in her 1915 novel *Herland*: a society that excludes men entirely. While feminist utopias create women-dominated worlds, real-

world utopian texts like *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” also provoke readers to consider women’s status in alternative societies.

The binaries of theory vs. action, the individual vs. society, and men vs. women are the subjects of the literary analysis chapters in this dissertation because they feature prominently in *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats.” These topics reflect Hawthorne’s and Alcott’s interests, and they were also matters of concern to Transcendentalists, amongst whom Hawthorne lived as an adult and amongst whom Alcott lived as a child in the epicenter of the Transcendentalist movement: Concord, Massachusetts. Alcott was writing in different historical and literary moment than Hawthorne; as discussed in the next chapter, she was influenced more by realism than romanticism. Still, Transcendentalism remained an important influence on her life. As Taylor Stoeckl writes, *The Blithedale Romance* reflects “Hawthorne’s own psychic makeup” as well as “polarities . . . in the lively period of literary and social experiment during which [Hawthorne] flourished” (90). Like Hawthorne, Alcott uses her story to address contemporary social questions of particular interest to her, and like Hawthorne, the context for her communal experience was the “lively period” of Transcendentalism.

Of course, the nineteenth century American Transcendentalist thinkers did not all share one set of specific beliefs or interests. Brook Farm historian Sterling F. Delano observes, “The Transcendentalists themselves insisted throughout that there was never much unanimity of agreement in their separate and progressive views” (*Brook Farm* 4). Likewise, Philip Gura observes in *American Transcendentalism* that the movement had “no central creed” (4). Commonalities, however, did exist. The Transcendentalists were

“liberal Christians:” progressives, mostly Unitarians, who rejected Calvinism (Gura 6). They favored new ideas over received wisdom and shared a Romantic bias for intuition over Lockean empiricism. Transcendentalists tended to embrace the ideas of their most prominent member, Ralph Waldo Emerson, especially the importance he placed on nature and on nonconformity.

Two founding members of the Transcendental Club and major figures in the movement, George Ripley and Bronson Alcott, started utopian communities in Massachusetts to try actualizing selected Transcendentalist ideals. Nathaniel Hawthorne joined Ripley’s Brook Farm at age thirty-seven, and Louisa May Alcott’s father Bronson moved the family to his Fruitlands community when she was ten. Although a central claim in this dissertation is that Hawthorne’s and Alcott’s fictionalizations specifically address the application of Transcendentalist ideals to the communal environment, it is important to note that the founders of Brook Farm and Fruitlands were divided on several theoretical and practical matters. As Delano writes in his “Transcendentalist Communities” entry in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, a different type of “Transcendental impulse” underlay the two communities (250). George Ripley placed importance on “social reform through cooperative efforts” (Delano, “Transcendentalist” 250). Bronson Alcott saw reform as starting with the individual, e.g. through adopting a vegetarian diet. Alcott and Fruitlands co-founder Charles Lane focused attention on the family, believing that societal change should move outward from the individual to the family to a “consociate family”: “a group of like-minded individuals” bound “by a certain intellectual harmony” rather than “biology” (Francis, “Circumstances” 222).

Although Transcendentalism at the two communes did not take identical forms, the ideologies were alike in some respects or in other cases represent opposite sides of the same coin. *Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” reflect these mutual interests.

One intersection in ideology concerns the tension between thought and action. This tension was central to Transcendentalists influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The American Scholar,” his 1837 essay advocating that scholars value physical activity and nature as much as or more than books. The founders of both the real Brook Farm and Fruitlands and their fictional counterparts were thinkers seeking to actualize a philosophy: to make Transcendentalism tangible. The first literary analysis chapter of this dissertation, Chapter Three: Thought vs. Action, explores how Hawthorne and Alcott address the tension between thinking and doing at the fictionalized communes.

Despite differing beliefs about whether reform should start with individuals or groups, both the Brook Farmers and the Fruitlanders pondered the matter. As Robert D. Richardson writes in *Emerson: Mind on Fire*, Transcendentalism’s “social imperative . . . insists first, that the well-being of the individual—of all individuals—is the basic purpose and justification for all social organizations and second that autonomous individuals cannot exist apart from others” (250). Richardson’s words show the unique challenge facing Transcendentalist communes: attempting to forge a coherent, interdependent community while granting primacy to the individual. Although Brook Farm and Fruitlands took different paths toward striking this balance, self-culture “was very much at the heart of both experiments” (Delano, “Transcendentalist” 256). In their fiction,

Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott consider conflicts between individual and community at communes where this binary was of special interest. Chapter Four explores this topic.

The last literary analysis chapter, Chapter Five: Men vs. Women, looks at a topic important to many involved in the Transcendentalist movement. One such person was Sophia Ripley, wife of the Brook Farm founder. Ripley published a feminist article called “Woman” in the 1841 issue of the *Dial*; it receives more discussion in Chapter Five. Better-known is Ripley’s friend, the Transcendentalist feminist Margaret Fuller. The title of Chapter Five continues this dissertation’s pattern of phrasing titles as binaries, and it also alludes to Fuller’s “The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men. Woman versus Women.” This 1843 essay in *The Dial* became the basis for her 1845 book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, a seminal feminist work. Fuller sought to improve women’s status and women’s intellectual growth through the self-culture and self-expression that all Transcendentalists valued. In *The Blithedale Romance*, like Alcott in “Transcendentalist Wild Oats,” Hawthorne shows great awareness of challenges facing women at a Transcendentalist commune. Hawthorne’s attention to this issue may be unsurprising since he had recently given American literature one of its strongest heroines, Hester Prynne. Alcott, a feminist who was active in the women’s suffrage movement and whose career exemplifies independent womanhood, produced much fiction featuring strong female characters as well as exploited women. Both Hawthorne and Alcott are among the first fiction writers to observe that women do not fare well in a communal environment; fictional and nonfictional utopian texts since then have made similar observations.

Studying binaries in utopian texts like *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental

Wild Oats” is just one possible analytical methodology for examining these texts. The methodology, however, seems especially suited to studying American utopian fiction like *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats.” Communal living highlights not only tensions in the American philosophy of Transcendentalism but also tensions that have been present in American culture since the nation’s inception. On one hand, a living arrangement emphasizing equality and cooperation seems in accordance with the democratic principles born in the United States. Paradoxically, however, the notion of equal rewards and mutual responsibility is incompatible with the American image or ideal of success, which lionizes the lone entrepreneur. Expressions like “rugged individual” and “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” have become American clichés because they articulate deeply held cultural values. Many Americans have interpreted Emerson’s concept of self-reliance as justifying reluctance to sacrifice personal desires or prosperity for the good of a group. Further, the American “can-do” spirit is at odds with the intellectualism, inexperience, ineptitude, or naïve optimism that often characterizes communards. Another distinctly American phenomenon is associating utopian projects with Eden. The enduring popularity of communalism in American may stem from the first white settlers’ vision of this country as an Eden, a virgin paradise with the potential to be organized in radically new ways. An example is the Pilgrims’ ideal of their New England settlement as a city upon a hill, a model for conduct. The communal impulse described in this chapter’s opening quotation is a manifestation of the search for paradise in a postlapsarian world, an undertaking for which the New World of America has always been especially conducive.

In his book *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity*, Phillip E. Wegner speaks to the value of studying utopian fiction. Wegner contends that “narrative utopias serve as a way both of telling and of making modern history, and in this lies their continued importance for us today” (xvi). A work of imagination can serve as manifesto or blueprint, motivating readers to reshape their society. Wegner’s book does not specifically address the subgenre of real-world utopian fiction, but his view on the significance of utopian narratives helps validate the study of this subgenre. Like the utopian narratives that envision a perfect world and thereby shed light on the inadequacies of the readers’ own world, narratives based on actual rather than the theoretical experiments ask readers to reflect on visions of an ideal world as well as the difficulty, or even impossibility, of realizing that ideal.



## CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND

This background chapter contains four sections. To give context for *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats,” the first section provides a short overview of utopian fiction up to and during the time Hawthorne and Alcott were writing. Because familiarity with historical context—as well as literary context—can illuminate the study of fiction about real-world utopias, the second section surveys scholarship about utopian communities, particularly America utopian communities, and then summarizes the history of the communal movement up to, at the time of, and since Hawthorne’s novel and Alcott’s story. This history section includes details about Brook Farm and Fruitlands. The last part of this chapter briefly surveys the scholarship about the primary texts and then provides background on *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats.”

Before investigating utopian literature and utopian history, let us consider how to define utopianism. In *Utopias & Utopians: An Historical Dictionary*, Richard C. S. Trahair defines it broadly, seeing as utopian a wide range of “human activities, policies, programs, and schemes” (ix). Trahair’s list includes utopian projects as well as works of utopian writing, including fiction about and plans for utopian projects. The 620 entries Trahair’s dictionary also include such entities as brotherhoods, kindergartens, peace initiatives, political campaigns, and suicide cults. In this broad view, utopians are any people who dream of a better world, or try to build or attain it.

Dreams of utopia pre-date actual utopian experiments. Utopian literature and utopian projects have a circular relationship in which the former has often been the impetus for the latter. People seeking to build actual utopian communities have drawn inspiration

from imagined perfect worlds, sometimes even using speculative fiction as plans for action. As Phillip Wegner writes, “Much more than the rhetorical play or idle day-dreams for which they are too often dismissed, narrative utopias participate in a significant way in the making of their social and cultural realities” (40). Reading about imaginary worlds inspires efforts to realize that vision. This dissertation looks at the next turn of the wheel: the way fiction then portrays real projects, as with *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats.”

### **Utopian Fiction: An Overview**

A brief overview of utopian writing before and during the writing of *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” can help us better understand the literary tradition from which these works arise and from which they depart by focusing on real-world rather than imagined communities. Written utopian works pre-date the sixteenth century when Thomas More coined the term ‘utopia.’ Book 2 of Genesis can be seen as a utopian text because it envisions a perfect world: the Garden of Eden. Elements of Eden are often found in many later visions of utopia, such as a moral code, an absence of corruption, and a dedication to work, all existing in a beautiful natural environment. (Hawthorne and Alcott are amongst the many authors of real-world utopian fiction who compare their communes to Eden, seriously or sardonically). Plato’s *The Republic* also depicts an ideal world. *The Republic* offers specific recommendations for governing and structuring a just and happy society in which citizens find fulfillment through productive work. In 1405, European court poet Christine de Pizan wrote *The Book of the City of*

*Ladies in French*. Anticipating Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, de Pizan celebrates famous women from history and imagines the society in which they would live. That society encourages women to become educated and to use their speaking skills, especially to serve as peacemakers. More's *Utopia*, published in 1516 in Latin and then 1551 in English, established a pattern for what Lyman Tower Sargent calls "the utopian satire using the imaginary-country approach" ("Themes" 276). *Utopia* describes both a perfect world and an imperfect one. In doing so, the book helps establish the binary of eutopia (or good place) vs. dystopia that has shaped so much subsequent thinking and writing about utopias.

*The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (2010) lists more than eighty "key works" of utopian literature written after these early examples (xiv). A notable work is Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), which might have been a sort of blueprint for the New World he played a role in developing. Bacon's Enlightenment ideal is a society that places special value on science. The best known eighteenth century utopian literary texts, including Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), are variants on the "imaginary-country approach" that Sargent discusses. Presenting several imaginary lands in one book, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) employs satire in a way that perhaps permanently colored the idea of utopia with the stain of absurdity. Similarly, two works published in 1759—Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* and Voltaire's *Candide*—both show the absurdity of imagining that a perfect world can exist. Underlying many fictional and non-fictional utopian texts is an implicit hopefulness that a better world is truly possible; Johnson and Voltaire are amongst the writers who mock

this notion. Both *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” alternate between the kind of naïve optimism and the cynicism found in *Rasselas* and *Candide*.

The next century saw an explosion of utopian fiction and non-fiction. Sargent writes, “The nineteenth century was to produce almost three times as many utopias as all previous centuries put together:” about 160 between 1800 and 1887 (“Themes” 277-78). The rise of urbanization and industrialization in Europe and America, as well as the many political revolutions, impelled people to think with particular intensity and specificity about how best to shape the rapidly changing world and forestall disaster scenarios. This was the zeitgeist in which Charles Fourier wrote *The New Industrial World* in 1827, Robert Owen wrote *The Book of the New Moral World* in 1836, and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1848. This was also the era in which Hawthorne and Alcott lived at utopian communities and then wrote *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats.”

In the nineteenth century, fictional texts increasingly spurred real-world action, and real-world communities inspired fiction. Philip Wegner discusses the extraordinary influence of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward, 2000-1887*, an 1888 novel about a man falling asleep in 1887 and waking up to a better world in the twenty-first century. Wegner claims, “Few books in the history of American literature can rival the contemporary success of *Looking Backward*. Along with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* . . . Bellamy’s work stands as one of the most widely read and discussed American books of the nineteenth century” (63). Wegner continues, “*Looking Backward* was shaped by, and in turn shaped, the cultural, social, and political debates of its day”

(65). Bellamy's vision of a future America (including nationalized employment and distribution of goods) prompted readers to join clubs aimed at realizing this vision. Bellamy, however, had not written with the goal of inciting social action; he intended his book as a sort of virtual alternative to "the failure of the Shaker, Oneida, and other experiments to transform the United States" (Segal 29). According to Howard Segal in *Utopias: A Brief History from Ancient Writings to Virtual Communities*, Bellamy saw speculative writing as a "less risky and less costly" than efforts to create utopias "on the actual landscape" (29). Perhaps Hawthorne and Alcott, too, ultimately concluded that intentional communities are better written about than experienced.

Another example of interplay between utopian visions and utopian projects is Étienne Cabet's novel *Travels in Icaria* (1840). It is partly modeled on Robert Owen's real factory and village in New Lanark, Scotland. Cabet's novel, which describes an imaginary country without private property and resulting selfishness, inspired the author and his followers to try implementing Icarian ideals. In 1848, they left France and bought land in Illinois from other utopians: the departing Mormons. Cabet was expelled from the community in 1855, but it lasted through 1898. Whereas Hawthorne and Alcott wrote about communities that had previously existed, Cabet wrote about a community and thereby called it into existence.

Sargent observes dominant themes in nineteenth-century utopian works. He writes, "First, there is a great concern with what constitutes an equitable economic system; normally these works presented some form of socialism or a cooperative system" (Sargent, "Themes" 278). Another theme is the "'woman question,' the whole complex

of issues centered around the rule of women in society” (Sargent, “Themes” 278).

Hawthorne’s and Alcott’s work address both these themes, though they pay more attention to women’s issues than to economic matters.

The subgenre of real-world utopian fiction seems to have appeared in the nineteenth century, with Nathaniel Hawthorne providing the first pieces before writing *The Blithedale Romance*. He wrote two short stories after visiting a local Shaker community: “The Canterbury Pilgrims” (1832) and “The Shaker Bridal” (1837). *The Blithedale Romance* might be the first novel set at a real or realistic intentional community, but Hawthorne’s Shaker stories might be the first works of fiction about a real-world utopia. Although dissimilar to *The Blithedale Romance* in many ways, these stories show Hawthorne’s long-standing interest in communities removed from mainstream society. In addition to *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats,” another text fictionalizing a Transcendental commune is Mary Gove Nichols’ 1855 *Mary Lyndon, or Revelations of a Life*. Nichols had an affair with Henry Wright, who had come from England to Massachusetts to work with Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane to found Fruitlands. The commune features heavily in Nichols semi-autobiographical book because she was on the scene at Fruitlands’ inception. Also, when she wrote *Mary Lyndon*, Nichols was on the verge of planning her own utopian community, Memnonia.

In the same century, Rebecca Harding Davis wrote two fictional works about real-world types of commune. The first is her 1862 novel *Margret Howth: A Story of To-day* in which the communal project only reaches the planning state. In her 1866 story “The Harmonists,” she depicts a Rappite community, part of the Harmony Society sect

discussed in the historical overview appearing later in Chapter Two. William Dean Howells set his 1880 novel *The Undiscovered Country* at a Shaker community in upstate New York. His 1913 novel *New Leaf Mills: A Chronicle* involves a family who moves to the country to start a commune. Marie Howland based her 1874 novel *Papa's Own Girl* on her time at a Fourierist community. Real-world utopian fiction seems primarily an American art form, but English writer Jane Hume Clapperton's 1888 novel *Margaret Dunmore: Or, a Socialist Home* depicts a woman's effort to build a commune in London. Clapperton's book takes place in a city, a rarity for actual and fictional utopias.

Other works of real-world utopian fiction are not necessarily based on the authors' knowledge of a single historical place but use settings that resemble actual types of commune. Mary McCarthy's *Oasis* (1949) for example, takes place at a 1940s intentional community. Her characters are stereotypical New York City intellectuals, some of whom she might have modelled on real acquaintances. T. Coraghessan Boyle's 2003 novel *Drop City* takes its name from a real 1960s hippie American commune in Colorado. Because Boyle's book departs from history and because he paints a largely unflattering picture of communal life, the novel drew ire from many who lived at the real Drop City. Lauren Groff sets her 2012 novel *Arcadia* in a similar milieu: a hippie commune that is a composite of, or is similar to, many utopian experiments of the 1960s. In Kate Atkinson's 2015 novel *A God in Ruins*, a character raises her children at a 1980s commune in the English countryside. Recently, Ed Tarkington's 2016 novel *Only Love Can Break Your Heart* portrays a 1970s commune led by a religious leader who is also a sexual predator.

Real-world utopian fiction includes films as well as written works. One of the first

movies to portray a realistic type of commune is *Easy Rider* (1969). The bikers pick up a hitchhiking communard and take him home; several scenes then take place at the commune. Swedish film-maker Lukas Moodysson's 2000 film *Together* chronicles the entanglements of families in a Stockholm commune. (Notably, and perhaps meriting further study, is that two of the three European works of real-world utopian fiction listed here occur in urban rather than rural locations. The American notion of utopia might be especially bound up with the pastoral.) Another fictional film about a real-world type utopian community is *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (2011). The protagonist escapes from a religious cult of a kind found in today's America and elsewhere; its leader resembles the one in Tarkington's *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*.

The list above is not complete because of the extensiveness of the utopian literature genre. The purpose of the foregoing overview is to help situate *The Blithedale Romance* and "Transcendental Wild Oats." We have seen the tradition of utopian literature from which these works came, looking at texts with the most influence on contemporary and later readers, with the greatest influence on utopian works that followed, or, as we shall see, with the most similarities to *The Blithedale Romance* and "Transcendental Wild Oats." This overview also has paid special attention to works showing the circular relationship between fact and fiction. For the most part, the written word has preceded actuality: readers create projects outlined in utopian publications. This overview has also looked at how real projects have influenced the written word, as is the case with *The Blithedale Romance* and "Transcendental Wild Oats."



### **American Utopian Communities: A Review of Scholarship and Brief History**

Knowledge of the historical context giving rise to Brook Farm and Fruitlands, and thus to *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats,” is as necessary as knowledge of the literary tradition from which they came. The proceeding section first discusses scholarship on historical utopias and then provides a chronology of American utopian projects.

Histories of utopias often begin by noting the earliest examples of communal living. These include Taoist communes in 5th century BCE China, the approximately 4,000 Jewish Essenes of 150 BCE to 68 CE Palestine escaping Greek hegemony, and the Anabaptist Hutterites of central Europe who began collective farms in the 1500s. Introducing the book *America’s Communal Utopias*, editor Donald E. Pitzer goes even further back, paraphrasing Carl Sagan about colonies of stromatolite bacteria that formed for mutual protection three billion years ago (3). While some scholars study utopian projects comprehensively or comparatively, internationally and over time, others focus on a single nation, movement, or community. *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*, edited by utopian scholars Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys, and Lyman Tower Sargent, offers a broad overview although the book’s scope is limited to the West. The essays in this collection first examine ancient and medieval utopianism, follow utopianism to the New World, and consider revolutionary utopias (some of which became dystopias), taking the reader up through the late twentieth century. This anthology also includes visual artworks depicting utopian dreams. For example, the book places a color plate of Adam and Eve in Eden opposite a propaganda poster from the

Soviet Union, reminding us of the enduring presence of utopias and their varied forms (Schaer, Claeys, and Sargent 1-2).

The colonization of the New World opened the door wide to utopian experimentation. As Arthur Eugene Bestor, Jr. writes, “The communitarian idea came to fullest flower in the New World, but its seeds were brought from the old” (20). Europe produced many utopian ideas and many utopian leaders, but as we will see in the next section of this chapter, America was where utopian designs rooted and blossomed. Prominent utopian leaders who came to America include Mother Ann Lee, founder of the Shaker movement; Father George Rapp, founder of the Harmony Society; and Robert Owen, a Scottish industrialist who purchased the Rappite community in Indiana to implement his utopian vision. From France, Charles Fourier’s ideas inspired numerous American utopian communities, including Brook Farm in its later years. Europeans brought their flocks and attracted new followers.

The scholarship on American utopianism is extensive. Amongst the first histories of American utopianism are those written in the nineteenth century by John Humphrey Noyes and Charles Nordhoff. Noyes is himself an important historical figure. After undergoing a religious conversion during the Second Great Awakening, he started the Oneida community in 1848, infamous for unconventional sexual mores. In 1870, Noyes published his *History of American Socialisms*, an overview of secular utopian experiments in America. Nordhoff’s 1875 book, *The Communist Societies of the United States*, covers similar ground. After visiting numerous utopian communities, including the Shakers, the Society of Separatists at Zoar, the Amana Community, the Harmony

Society, and Oneida, Nordhoff details their daily lives as well as their philosophies.

Interest in American utopian history flagged until Arthur Eugene Bestor, Jr.'s 1950 book *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian and Owenite Phases of Communitarian Socialism in America: 1663-1829*. In this study, Bestor observes not only the different philosophies and practices of American communal projects but their similar drive to restructure society. He went on to write a book about Charles Fourier and a book about Alfred Brisbane, the man largely responsible for the spread of Fourierism in the United States. Surveying historical studies of American utopianism, Boyer writes that Bestor "made a promising interpretative beginning in the 1950s, but his work found few successors" (x). The 1980s and 1990s, however, saw a resurgence of scholarly interest in American utopianism. In 1980, Robert S. Fogarty published his *Dictionary of American Communal and Utopian History*. Later that decade, Israeli scholar Yaacov Oved studied 277 American communes, seeking connections between his experiences as a kibbutz member and those of American communards, and seeking to "save the communitarian experience from oblivion" (vii). Oved writes about 70 projects in *Two Hundred Years of American Communes* (1988). Another wide-ranging work from this time period is the essay collection *American Communal Utopias*, edited by Donald E. Pitzer. Noting Pitzer's attempt to remedy the fragmented nature of scholarship about American utopianism, Robert Sutton introduces the first of his two-volume series by stating his intention to further remedy this disjointedness. Sutton's books *Communal Utopias and the American Experience: Religious Communities, 1732-2000* and *Communal Utopias and the American Experience: Secular Communities, 1824-2000*, published in 2003 and

2004, support his contention that “the utopian tradition is an unbroken motif, not an erratic or fragmented experience” (ix). Despite this emphasis, Sutton’s treatment of religious and secular communities in two separate volumes reinforces at least one distinction.

The distinction between secular and religious communes is relevant to study of Brook Farm, the fictional Blithedale, and the real and fictional Fruitlands. Historians classify George Ripley’s and Bronson Alcott’s Transcendentalist utopias as secular. Neither affiliated itself with a particular religious denomination. Neither had official chaplains nor mandatory religious worship or rituals. Hawthorne’s and Alcott’s versions portray them thus. At the same time, Transcendentalism has a spiritual dimension that was not missing from Transcendentalist communes. Many Brook Farmers participated in religious worship, and the belief that oneness with God that can arise from experiences in nature appears in Hawthorne’s novel. As discussed in Chapter 3, both Blithedale and the fictionalized Fruitlands spiritualize their communal enterprise in various ways. For instance, both *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” refer to communards as “pilgrims” (BR 49, TW 36).<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, John Humphrey Noyes, himself the leader of the religious Oneida community, saw commonalities between religious and secular utopias. Writing about the contemporaneous movements of non-secular Revivalism and secular Socialism, Noyes says that “opposed to each other as they

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<sup>1</sup> From here on, I indicate quotes from *The Blithedale Romance* with the abbreviation “BR” and quotes from “Transcendental Wild Oats” with “TW.”

may seem, and as they have been the creeds of their partizans [sic], [they] are closely related in their essential nature and objects, and manifestly belong together in the scheme of Providence, as they do in the history of this nation” (26). Here, he taps into an objective of the Transcendentalist communes: elevating the tasks of everyday life by imbuing them with spirituality and elevating the communitarian endeavor by a framing it as holy mission.

Another recent scholarly work is Jyotsna Sreenivasan’s *Utopias in American History* (2008). Sreenivasan does not posit a general theory about American utopianism but surveys research to date and provides a timeline of secular and religious communal projects. Howard Segal’s *Utopias: A Brief History from Ancient Writings to Virtual Communities* (2013) is also relatively comprehensive. Just as Trahair references an array of projects in his dictionary, Segal’s book connects a range of utopian phenomena, from early ancient utopias to modern world’s fairs to contemporary cyber-communities. He observes the tendency to deride utopian dreams, noting that his book provides a more positive perspective.

Some historical scholarship focuses on women in American utopias. One such work is Carol A. Kolmerten’s 1990 *Women in Utopia: The Ideology of Gender in the American Owenite Communities*. Using letters from women who lived in these communities, she shows the unfulfilled utopian promise of gender equality. The 1993 essay collection *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States* (edited by Wendy E. Chmielewski, Louis J. Kern, and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell) contains articles about women’s lives in utopian communities such as the Shakers, Mormons, Catholics, and

Hasidic Jews as well as Brook Farm, Oneida, and the present-day Farm in middle Tennessee. These historical studies underscore a point made in the literary analysis section of this dissertation: tensions between men and women are common at intentional communities, even if the communities' goals include improving women's status.

Much has been written about the Transcendentalist communes at which Hawthorne and Alcott lived. Personal histories of Brook Farm can be found in collections such as John Thomas Codman's *Brook Farm: Historic and Personal Memoirs* (1894) and Joel Myerson's *The Brook Farm Book: A Collection of First-Hand Accounts of the Community* (1987). Sterling F. Delano's *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* 2004 is an exhaustive, objective history of the project from its origins up through the destruction of the last remaining building, the Margaret Fuller Cottage, burnt by vandals in 1985. Aaron McEmrys' "Brook Farm" entry in the *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography* also covers the community's history and philosophy. Delano writes about Fruitlands as well as Brook Farm in his "Transcendentalist Communities" entry in the *Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, comparing and contrasting the two communes. Richard Francis has written extensively about Fruitlands. He published "Circumstances and Salvation: The Ideology of the Fruitlands Utopia" in 1973, "The Ideology of Brook Farm" in 1977, *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands and Walden* in 1997, and *Fruitlands: The Alcott Family and Their Search for Utopia* in 2010. John Matteson's *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father* won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Biography and Autobiography. All these works offer invaluable information and analysis of the Transcendentalists and thus were

useful resources for this dissertation examining the choices Hawthorne and Alcott made in fictionalizing their communitarian experiences. The dissertation's purpose, however, is not to probe the minutiae of similarities and differences between fact and fiction, as fascinating a study as that would be. Therefore, many resources listed in this paragraph served primarily as background.

Another set of scholarly works about utopian projects are those employing a sociological approach. A seminal study is Rosabeth Moss Kanter's 1972 *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*. Kanter groups utopias into those aiming to follow spiritual values, those aiming to reform society politically or economically, and those aiming to enhance personal growth (3). Although her book is not a history, Kanter sees a chronological progression. She claims that the first type (spiritual) was prevalent in America until 1845, the second type (political and economic) prevailed from about 1820 to 1930, and the 1960s communes tended to fall into the third type (personal growth) (Kanter 8). Some communities, Kanter claims, belong to more than one category. Brook Farm and Fruitlands might fall into Kanter's second and third categories, and thus, according to her schema, they were somewhat ahead of their time.

Fogarty also sets forth categories of communal projects. Writing about post-Civil War utopias, he sees most as led by three types of organizers. To Fogarty, Robert Owen epitomizes one type, the "co-operative colonizers," because Owen believed "secular salvation" or improved "economic and moral condition" could be achieved through "collectively assuming financial responsibility" ("American Communes" 148).

“Charismatic perfectionists” include millennialists or those whose leadership rested upon “personal sanctity, special gifts or power” (148-49). Millennialists typically seek ways to live in the current age that will emulate or hasten a second messianic coming, a new and better age. “Political pragmatists” include “political and social radicals seeking an arena to test and publicize their principles in action”; they came to prominence in the 1880s and 90s with the rise of labor activism and Marxism (150). Governance of Brook Farm and the fictional Blithedale fit the cooperative type epitomized by Owen, but the fictional Fruitlands has elements of perfectionism.

From this scholarship, we can assemble a brief history of American utopian communities, putting Brook Farm and Fruitlands into context. Before looking at the major settlements in this country, let us consider why America figures so prominently in utopian history. Yaacov Oved observes that “since 1735 there has been a continuous and unbroken existence of communes in the United States. There is no equivalent in any of the other countries of the modern world” (3). Scholars explain the rise of American utopianism in various ways. The Pilgrims set the stage, for they were a band of separatists seeking to build an ideal society, a city upon a hill. Later, as Oved writes, with its democratic system and its religious tolerance, the nation’s founders continued striving to “set an example of a perfect society” (5). Oved also argues that the availability of land helped encourage American utopianism. Space for settlement was not only easily obtainable, but the perception of the New World as *tabula rasa* (despite native inhabitants) made that space especially appealing. In *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx observes that many Europeans saw America as virgin territory, beautiful and



bountiful, readily yielding itself to cultivation, an Eden before the Fall. Marx writes, “To depict America as a garden is to express aspirations still considered utopian—aspirations, that is, toward abundance, leisure, freedom, and a greater harmony of existence” (43). Oved names immigration as another causal factor. Immigrants arrived in America to better their economic condition, and, like the Puritans, to escape religious persecution. George Rapp, for example, who founded the Harmony Society about which Rebecca Harding Davis writes in “The Harmonists,” left Germany in 1803 with about 300 families. They sailed to Baltimore to “secure freedom of worship and revive practices of the primitive church” (Trahair 333). The word ‘freedom’ recurs frequently in explanations for utopianism in America. Discussing the image of America as a land of freedom, Bestor observes that “of all the freedoms for which America stood, none was more significant for history than the freedom to experiment with new practices and new institutions” (1). In the same vein, Paul Boyer notes the “freedom from the weight of tradition” stemming from a “comparative lack of hierarchy” and leading to an “openness to social innovation,” so that America was a “particularly congenial environment in which communal experimentation could flourish” (xi). Symbolizing liberty—and indeed, actually offering political and religious freedoms—America became the destination of first choice for utopian quests.

The first American utopian community was probably the Valley of the Swans or Swanendael, also called Horekill, founded by Dutch settlers in Delaware in 1663 and destroyed by the English a year later. In 1694, a German mystic led 40 male Pietists (an offshoot of Lutheranism) to start a celibate, millennial community in Pennsylvania called

the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness. Sutton's *Communal Utopias and the American Experience: Religious Communities, 1732-2000* opens with a chapter on the Ephrata Cloister in Pennsylvania. Started by a German immigrant, Ephrata lasted from 1732 to 1814 and left an artistic legacy including mystical poetry, illuminated manuscripts, and religious music. The Shakers, the subject of Hawthorne's stories "The Canterbury Pilgrims" (1833) and "The Shaker Bridal" (1838) and William Dean Howells' novel *The Undiscovered Country*, arrived from England in 1774 with their leader Ann Lee. Initially called Shaking Quakers because they incorporated dancing and loud declamations into their worship, Shakers were millennialists who espoused celibacy. They established numerous settlements throughout upstate New York and New England, reaching a peak membership of 3,842 in 1850 (Brewer 49). They grew prosperous from manufacturing high quality goods with a distinctive style, especially furniture. Despite steadily declining membership, Shakers were still practicing into the 1990s.

After the Shakers, and often inspired by them, various religious groups, both immigrant and native-born, formed utopian communities. Not all were Christians. For instance, in the late nineteenth century, philanthropists such as Baron Maurice de Hirsch funded the move of Russian Jews to rural America to become farmers, "away from their natural points of settlement in the urban Northeast" (Sutton, *Religious* 105). These Jewish immigrants formed colonies in states as far-flung and relatively undeveloped as South Dakota, Louisiana, and Colorado. John Humphrey Noyes led a notorious Christian group. Members of his Oneida community in upstate New York resembled the Shakers in that they "were millennialists and perfectionists who believed that they could lead a sinless

life by inner illumination while preparing for the Second Coming” (Sutton, *Religious* 67). Unlike the celibate Shakers, however, they advocated sexual activity. In fact, they allowed such activity outside traditional Christian marriage, claiming that Scripture does not limit unions to one person at a time. Another important homegrown American religious utopian movement is the Church of the Latter Day Saints (LDS), or Mormons. In 1820, during the Second Great Awakening in the upstate New York region known as the ‘burned-over district’ because of the intense evangelism there, founder Joseph Smith saw inspirational visions. Fleeing persecution and seeking a promised land, Smith and his converts moved west until settling in Utah, which they saw as a new Zion.

In America, many nineteenth century religious utopias were started or inhabited by German immigrants, in addition to those already mentioned. In 1819, for example, a German group founded the Society of Separatists of Zoar in Ohio. Members of Amana (also known as the Society of True Inspiration), started in Germany, settled in Kansas in 1854, and later owned the appliance manufacturer Amana Refrigeration. Upon arriving in the United States, the Hutterites moved to South Dakota and Montana, where most lived communally. Sutton writes of the Hutterites, “By 1917, 2,000 lived in 17 *bruderhofs*,” or communities (*Religious* 90). They have approximately the same number of members today, although not only in the United States. In 1805, German immigrant George Rapp started the Harmony Society. The group, which adopted celibacy after its move to America, became “widely admired” for its economic success (Oved 71).

The Harmonists provide us a way of transitioning to a discussion of secular utopias. They moved from Pennsylvania to Indiana in 1814, and in 1825, they returned to

Pennsylvania after selling their community to the Socialist activist Robert Owen. A prosperous entrepreneur and mill owner, Owen was also a radical reformer with a profound desire to help working people. His New Harmony was “the first nonreligious, socialist community in the United States” (Sreenivasan xxiii). Although New Harmony only lasted until 1827, it inspired “additional utopian communities that were based upon Owen’s communitarianism” (Sutton, *Secular* 1). These include the Icarian communities based on Étienne Cabet’s novel.

The next wave of secular communes occurred when Charles Fourier’s utopian socialism came to America via Alfred Brisbane’s 1840 book *The Social Destiny of Man*, an English version of the French thinker’s ideas. Taking a large role in promoting Fourierism was *New York Tribune* publisher Horace Greeley. Carl J. Guarneri’s *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* sums up the philosophy that Fourier developed in his years as a “travelling salesman and modest commercial employee” (1). Guarneri writes, “Fourier decided that the cures for the evils of competitive society was the establishment of small cooperative communities to unite persons of all types and classes so successfully that such experiments would spread rapidly throughout the world” (2). Across mid-nineteenth-century America, Fourierist clubs and stores sprang up, thousands joined what Associationist organizations, and twenty-four Fourierist communities, or phalanxes, began between 1842 and 1846 (though only two of these lasted more than five years). This popularity anticipates the club craze of *Looking Backward*, but Fourier’s book was a non-fiction guide rather than a novel.

Perhaps the best-known Fourierist community was Brook Farm, the basis for *The*

*Blithedale Romance*, although Nathaniel Hawthorne's stay there pre-dated its Fourierist phase. Writes Francis in *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden* (1997), "There can be nothing more authentically Transcendentalist than a historical institution that appears on the scene with an air of having produced out of a hat" (35). In 1841, Transcendental Club member George Ripley, having stepped down from his Unitarian pulpit after being favorably impressed by his visit to Zoar, embarked on an experiment in which members invested in joint-stock. At the property George Ripley purchased in West Roxbury, Massachusetts (about 10 miles from Boston), Brook Farm members farmed and ran a successful school drawing many children of non-members. Sterling F. Delano's *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (2004) provides an in-depth look at the community from its origins, to its conversion to a Fourierist phalanx in 1844, and through its dissolution in 1847. Delano observes that Brook Farmers adopted Fourierism partly out of affinity with its principles and partly in hopes of relieving chronic financial problems. Ripley hoped Brook Farm would become a model or showplace of Associationism. To achieve that goal, the community began publishing the Fourierist periodical *The Harbinger*.

Fruitlands, founded by Bronson Alcott and his British friend Charles Lane in Harvard, Massachusetts (about twenty-five miles from Boston), lasted only half a year and had about sixteen members at its peak. Central to Fruitlands was a strict vegetarian diet and avoidance of animal products and animal labor. Delano highlights the differences between Brook Farm and Fruitlands, including size (hundreds came to Brook Farm) and duration (Brook Farm lasted more than six years). As noted earlier, the two communes

did not share the same interpretation of Transcendentalism or the same methods to make Transcendentalism tangible. They did, however, share this important similarity:

Brook Farm and Fruitlands were both inspired as much by the spirit of the age as they were by the transcendental convictions of their leaders, a spirit vividly captured by Emerson in a letter to Thomas Carlyle in 1840: “We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform,” Emerson reported. “Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket.”

(Delano, “Transcendentalist” 255)

Recall the ubiquity of utopian thought in that era; as noted above, for example, Robert Owen of New Lanark and New Harmony wrote his book in 1836, and Marx and Engels wrote their manifesto in 1848. Brook Farm and Fruitlands are part of the larger tradition of American utopian projects and a product of the nineteenth century’s commune fad as well as the only Transcendentalist communes that ever existed. No matter the specifics of their enterprise, American communards have always sought to build their versions of a city upon a hill.

To conclude this history of American utopianism and illustrate the tremendous variety of American utopias past and present, we can look at a sampling of projects from just one region: my current home state of Tennessee. In 1825, one of the first utopian undertakings here was Nashoba, a “daring experiment in racial equality” (Oved 125). Influenced by Robert Owen, Scotswoman Frances Wright bought land outside Memphis to start a community for emancipated slaves, intending to prove free labor more economical than slavery. Wright planned full integration of blacks and whites in the

community's school, and "freedom from religious bondage and a family unit in which sexual relations would not be confined" (Oved 125). Nashoba, which only had about twenty members, closed after two years. Writing about the utopians who settled near Dickson, Tennessee, W. Fitzhugh Brundage reports in *A Socialist Utopia in the New South: The Ruskin Colonies in Tennessee and Georgia 1894-1901* that the Ruskin Commonwealth Association housed 250 members and published an influential socialist newspaper, *The Coming Nation*. Despite being issued from a relative backwater, this periodical was "perhaps the most popular radical newspaper of the day," counting Charlotte Perkins Gilman among its contributors (Brundage 2). In 1880, Thomas Hughes, author of the novel *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, founded Rugby in east Tennessee as a cooperative community for the younger sons of the British aristocracy. "By 1884," writes Trahair, "it had 400 members, forty-two buildings, a church, school, library, and hotel" (348). Despite the promising start, Rugby was defunct by 1900.

We can consider the commune boom starting in the 1960s and 1970s by looking at the Farm. In 1971, a caravan of hippies from Haight-Ashbury landed in middle Tennessee's Summertown. The 150 current residents still focus on organic farming, sustainable housing, and natural midwifery. The Farm changed policies in the 1980s to allow private property ownership and to reduce lifestyle restrictions, such as no longer requiring vegetarianism. Another example of the diversity of American utopianism is the Idyll Dandy Arts (IDA) community near Smithville, Tennessee. The goal stated on its website is to "provide a safer space for queer and trans people to learn rural living skills and connect with a natural space." In a 2015 article about IDA, *The New York Times*

*Magazine* describes it as “a kind of sexually nonconforming Amish country” (Halberstadt 42L). Like the Farm, IDA welcomes the public for performances, workshops, and festivals, including an annual volunteer event called “Work Hard Stay Hard.” A religious utopian group born in East Tennessee, and thriving here and internationally, is the Twelve Tribes Community. Although they are not affiliated with a denomination, their theology is Judeo-Christian. They are known for their controversial belief in corporal punishment of children and for their popular Yellow Deli restaurants in Chattanooga and Pulaski, Tennessee.

American utopian projects have such a rich and multi-faceted history that this chapter could not describe all the scholarship about the topic, all the communal experiments, or even all the types of experiments. The material here should, however, provide helpful background for studying fiction set in American utopian communities. Hawthorne and Alcott lived in an era of widespread utopian dreaming and building. Their participation in utopianism moved them to write fiction about what they saw at the revolution.

### **Review of Scholarship about the Primary Texts**

Choosing to write fiction instead of memoir, neither Hawthorne nor Alcott intended their works to serve as historical or philosophical documents. Nonetheless, studying *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” can shed light on two preeminent American writers’ attitudes toward communalism, particularly the Transcendentalist version of it. The next pages provide an overview of scholarship about each primary text



and then discuss these writers' purposes as well as the relationship between fact and fiction in Hawthorne's novel and Alcott's short story.

The survey of literature about *The Blithedale Romance* will be brief not because scholarship on the novel is scant. The opposite is true: so many scholars have written about the novel that a thorough review of literature would be a book-length project in itself. In contrast, as Claudia Durst Johnson notes about "Transcendental Wild Oats," Alcott's story "has been the subject of very little sustained study" ("Cost of an Idea" 45). For this reason, and because Alcott offered no statement of intentions equivalent to Hawthorne's in the Preface of *The Blithedale Romance*, the discussion of the short story here, which follows the discussion of the novel below, is relatively brief. While I consulted many sources about both primary texts, and I refer to many of those sources in this dissertation, this literature review will note only the seminal works as well as those upon which I relied most heavily.

In analyzing *The Blithedale Romance* and "Transcendental Wild Oats," my primary goal is to build on and further the scholarship. In doing so, I challenge a few perspectives on these works. One commentary about the texts with which I disagree is Hawthorne's own about *Blithedale*. This commentary is Hawthorne's disclaimer in the *Blithedale*'s Preface that the novel does not critique communalism, which I discuss below. Likewise, my project runs counter to critics who claim that *Blithedale* fails to disclose much about life at a Transcendentalist commune. This dissertation aims to elucidate how Hawthorne and Alcott portray Transcendentalist utopianism in fiction and finds that the texts have much to say about the binaries of thought vs. action, the individual vs. society, and men

vs. women. Although I found no sources that share my precise purpose, a number of scholarly works look at some of the same topics and thus helped me better understand and discuss Hawthorne's and Alcott's handling of various aspects of utopianism.

Because this dissertation looks at how Hawthorne depicts an actual episode, biographies provided me with helpful insights. Henry James was born two years after Hawthorne went to Brook Farm, but his *Hawthorne* (1879) sheds light on Hawthorne's time as a communitarian. James' lifetime and milieu overlapped with Hawthorne's, and he shared Hawthorne's fascination with utopianism, as seen in his novel *The Bostonians*. Three years prior to James' biography, Hawthorne's son-in-law George Parsons Lathrop published his *Study of Hawthorne*, though he never met the man. Other useful biographies are Edwin Haviland Miller's 1991 *Salem Is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne* and Brenda Wineapple's 2003 *Hawthorne: A Life* (based to a large extent on Lathrop's book). All of these identify elements of Hawthorne's character and experience that led him to Brook Farm, affected his stay there, and later shaped his thinking about the experience. Lathrop, for example, writes about Hawthorne's discontented state prior to Brook Farm, and the writer's desire to do useful physical labor. Miller provides many details about Hawthorne's labor and about his comrades at Brook Farm. Likewise, the biographers look at the circumstances in which Hawthorne wrote *The Blithedale Romance* eleven years after leaving, considering the book's context and autobiographical elements. For instance, Wineapple hypothesizes that as a married father, Hawthorne used *Blithedale* to look back at his bachelor life and consider paths not taken, a "fantasy of what-might-have-been" (250). Hawthorne's own journals and letters from

Brook Farm shed light on his thinking and his shifting attitudes from optimism to disappointment. Newton Arvin has collected this material in *The Heart of Hawthorne's Journals*, and I made much use of it.

Regarding scholarship specifically on *The Blithedale Romance*, the earliest critics (nineteenth-century contemporaries who reviewed the book right after its publication) focus on the extent to which it accurately depicts real life. This approach includes a reviewer commonly thought to be George Eliot, as well as authors of reviews in various periodicals, including one-time Transcendentalist Orestes Brownson. In the first half of the twentieth century, most literary critics focused on assessing the novel's success as an artwork. Summarizing critical opinion in "Toward a Re-Evaluation of *The Blithedale Romance*" (1952), Frank Davidson observes that F.O. Matthiessen and Mark Van Doren were amongst the critics who "found fault with the story-telling" (383). Davidson claims that Van Doren thought the book had "no outstanding virtues of any kind" (375). Davidson believes these negative assessments stem from incomplete understanding of the book's theme, which he sees the "elusiveness of reality," as indicated by the ubiquity of veils (382). In the first half of the twentieth century, both F.O. Matthiessen and D.H. Lawrence considered topics relevant to this dissertation. Matthiessen addresses Hawthorne's interest in the "isolated individual" (228). Lawrence looks at the novel's treatment of work and of relationships between the communards.

The second half of the twentieth century saw heightened critical attention to *The Blithedale Romance*'s themes and characters, perhaps due to a characteristic of the novel that Irving Howe identifies in his 1957 essay "Hawthorne: Pastoral and Politics." Howe

argues that *Blithedale* shows Hawthorne confronting “many of the problems that would dominate the twentieth century novel: the relationship between ideology and utopia, and the meeting between politics and sex” (Howe 290). Another noteworthy mid-century study is Frederick Crews’ essay “Turning the Affair into a Ballad” in his 1966 book *Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne’s Psychological Themes*. Though his Freudian approach has fallen into disfavor, Crews makes cogent points about Coverdale’s state of mind.

The most recent scholarship has examined Hawthorne in his contemporary context. Leland S. Person’s *The Cambridge Introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne* (2007) looks at the influence of Transcendentalism on Hawthorne. Larry J. Reynolds’ *Devils and Rebels: The Making of Hawthorne’s Damned Politics* (2004) explores Hawthorne’s attitudes toward political issues and thinkers of his time and place. Just as early critics focused on *Blithedale*’s treatment of Brook Farm, later critics returned to considering the book’s handling of utopianism. My dissertation continues this approach by specifically addressing Hawthorne’s depiction of Transcendentalist utopianism, not just his attitude toward communalism in general. Nina Baym’s “*The Blithedale Romance*: A Radical Reading” (1968) argues that “this novel is about the murder (and suicide) of self-expressive energies in the soul” (568). This issue, claims Baym, prevents utopias like *Blithedale* from succeeding. In 1970, Robert C. Elliott dedicated a chapter of his book *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre to The Blithedale Romance*. Elliott finds the book frustratingly vague in depicting Brook Farm, but he offers useful observations about Coverdale’s tone when discussing communalism. In “Sympathy and Reform in *The Blithedale Romance*” (2004), Robert S. Levine argues that “*Blithedale* is

not so disdainful of reform (or sympathy) as it might initially seem” (207). Levine’s central claim aligns with one of my main ideas: Hawthorne does use the novel to comment on utopianism, sometimes favorably.

Peter Coviello takes a different approach: he asks what would happen if we read the book “straight,” accepting Hawthorne’s Preface disclaimer as written (145). In the chapter on *The Blithedale Romance* in his 2013 book *Tomorrow’s Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America*, Coviello posits that the novel uses political questions as cover, “masks of a sort” for dealing with issues of sexual “fear or longing” (146). Note that Coviello does not deny the merit of readings that seek judgments or details about communalism; my reading of is in line with that tradition.

Other works of particular relevance to this dissertation are those that address my literary analysis topics: individual and society, thought and action, and gender roles and relationships. Such studies include Taylor Stoehr’s “Art vs. Utopia: The Case of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Brook Farm” (1978), which helped me examine the novel’s perspective on the individual and society, and on the nature of ritual at Blithedale. Benjamin Scott Grossberg’s queer reading of the novel in “‘The Tender Passion Was Very Rife Among Us:’ Coverdale’s Queer Utopia and *The Blithedale Romance*” (2000) enriches the conversation about romantic relationships in the novel. I also drew from Michael J. Colacurcio’s 2008 search for the novel’s political positions in “Nobody’s Protest Novel: Art and Politics in *The Blithedale Romance*.” He finds, as I do, positions that are “oblique but determined” and “recognizable” (Colacurcio 32). Gale Temple’s 2003 article “‘His Delirious Solace’: Consummation, Consumption, and Reform in

Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*” gave me insight into the novel as a product for “consumers who might be interested in sexually charged romance about life in a reform-oriented commune” (288). Another useful resource was Samuel Coale’s “The Romance of Mesmerism: Hawthorne's Medium of Romance” (1994) because the topic of mesmerism connects to both Chapter Three: Thought vs Action and Chapter Five: Men vs. Women.” Robert Emmet Long’s “Transformations: *The Blithedale Romance* to Howells and James” (1976) also considers the treatment of mesmerism, and it is one of the few studies that, like this dissertation, puts into conversation several works of real-world utopian fiction.

Shifting to survey the literature on Louisa May Alcott, most scholars study her books rather than her short stories. Of all her stories, however, “Transcendental Wild Oats” may have garnered the most critical attention, perhaps because it is semi-autobiographical. The review of literature below, like the review of literature on *The Blithedale Romance* above, is not exhaustive but focuses on the works from which I drew most heavily.

As was the case with *The Blithedale Romance*, biographies illuminated my understanding of Alcott’s fictionalized account of a real episode. Sarah Elbert’s *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott's Place in American Culture* (1987) and Madeleine B. Stern’s *Louisa May Alcott: From Blood & Thunder to Hearth & Home* (1998) provided helpful background as well as insights about how Alcott’s fiction reflects her real experiences. Because John Matteson’s 2007 book *Eden’s Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father* looks closely at the Fruitlands episode—before, during, and after—it was especially valuable. Alcott’s own words were also helpful. A

section of Alcott's published journal called "Early Diary kept [sic] at Fruitlands, 1843" has nine entries from that period of her life.

Critics began examining *The Blithedale Romance* as soon as it was published and have done so since with few pauses, but Louisa May Alcott's work received little scholarly attention until the second half of the twentieth century. At that time, critics became interested in texts that had been ignored or under-estimated because the authors or intended readers were women. Critics like Nina Baym, Judith Fetterley, and Elaine Showalter saw artistry and messages worth studying in fiction written by and for women. Barbara Welter's 1966 survey of literature promoting "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" informed my analysis of "Transcendental Wild Oats," as did Mary Kelley's response to Welter's work in "The Sentimentalists: Promise and Betrayal in the Home" (1979) and then in "Commentary" (1999). Although many scholars study women's utopian fiction, such as Carol Farley Kessler in her "Bibliography of Utopian Fiction by United States Women 1836-1988," unfortunately, "Transcendental Wild Oats" does not get much attention since it is not speculative fiction. This neglect exemplifies the stepchild status of real-world utopian fiction.

Three articles were key to my exploration of "Transcendental Wild Oats." Jean Pfaelzer's "The Sentimental Promise and the Utopian Myth: Rebecca Harding Davis's 'The Harmonists' and Louisa May Alcott's 'Transcendental Wild Oats'" (1989) is another rare example of a study comparing two texts about real-world utopian fiction. Pfaelzer's article helped me shape the comparison around which this dissertation centers, and it gave me insight into Alcott's feminist politics in "Transcendental Wild Oats." In

“By the Light of Her Mother's Lamp: Woman's Work versus Man's Philosophy in Louisa May Alcott's ‘Transcendental Wild Oats’” (1995), Sandra Harbert Petrulionis disagrees with Pfaelzer. Instead of seeing a feminist message emerge within a sentimental story, as she claims Pfaelzer does, Petrulionis argues that Alcott overturned the sentimental form. Kelley's article, mentioned above, helped me participate in this debate. Another article investigating “Transcendental Wild Oats” with the same depth as Pfaelzer and Petrulionis is “‘Transcendental Wild Oats’ or The Cost of an Idea” (1998). In this essay, Claudia Durst Johnson provides context for Alcott's decisions in fictionalizing Fruitlands, and she offers insights about issues like food and work in “Transcendental Wild Oats.”

Two works examine Alcott's attitudes toward labor. Carolyn Maibor's *Labor Pains: Emerson, Hawthorne, and Alcott on Work and the Woman Question* (2004) served as an example of examining Emerson's influence on Alcott's writing, even if I did not use many of her specific findings. Sarah T. Lahey's “Honeybees and Discontented Workers: A Critique of Labor in Louisa May Alcott” (2012) does not look at “Transcendental Wild Oats” but explores Alcott's attitudes toward work during the same period in which Alcott write this story. Therefore, Lahey's essay helped me with the Thought vs. Action chapter.

The foregoing review does not mention all the important scholarly works on Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, Louisa May Alcott, or “Transcendental Wild Oats.” Likewise, it does not mention all movements and developments in scholarship about these writers and their real-world utopian fiction. Rather than providing a complete survey, this review has highlighted works that guided my thinking and writing.



### **Background on *The Blithedale Romance***

Nathaniel Hawthorne moved to Brook Farm when it first opened in April 1841. He was out of work, having left the Boston Custom House. The typical view is that Hawthorne hoped Brook Farm would be the place he could start a life with his fiancée Sophia Peabody. Edwin Haviland Miller, however, posits that the “sojourn at the farm was but another tactic to postpone marriage” (189). Whatever his intentions, Hawthorne bought two shares of Brook Farm stock at \$500 apiece, and then, according to Miller, another investment of \$500. Although he had bought in financially and at least to some extent philosophically, Hawthorne quickly grew dissatisfied with the workload at the farm. The chores were tiring and tiresomeness, depriving him of time and energy to write fiction. He left the commune after six months. In 1845, he sued to recoup his investment. Though he won the case, Brook Farm lacked the funds to pay him.

This outcome must have been a bitter pill for someone who worried about money right up until he died, when he was no longer poor. Hawthorne’s lost investment and disappointing experience surely color *The Blithedale Romance*. Nevertheless, Hawthorne seems to have looked at the project with some favor, or at least, with some respect for its historical and philosophical significance. In 1843, Hawthorne recorded in his journal a conversation with Emerson about Brook Farm in which they talked of “the singular moral aspects which it presents, and the great desirability that its progress and developments should be observed and its history written” (Arvin 114). Maybe Hawthorne’s novel was his attempt to record the “progress and developments” of the experiment in collectivism while also observing its effects on residents.

His novel is not a means of exacting revenge or evening the score. It is also not a means of elaborating on the “good fortune” Hawthorne claims to have had in being “personally connected” with Brook Farm (BR 1). In fact, Hawthorne is emphatic that we should not read the book as a portrait of Brook Farm. Rather, he says in his Preface to *The Blithedale Romance* that he uses the setting only as backdrop. That setting resembles Brook Farm, but it is only a “faint and not very faithful shadowing” (BR 1), and it is not the book’s focal point. The writer considers “the Institution itself” (Brook Farm, and perhaps Transcendentalist communalism) of less importance for “fictitious handling . . . than the imaginary personages whom he has introduced there” (BR 1). He wants neither the place nor the people to be taken as true renderings; readers should concentrate on the character sketches. An 1852 review in *Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany* contrasts *Blithedale*’s Preface to that of *The Scarlet Letter*. The reviewer notes that “The Custom House” purports to authenticate what is clearly fiction, but the *Blithedale*’s Preface disavows verisimilitude.

In the Preface, Hawthorne also claims that he does not intend the book to be a position paper on communalism. Writing about himself in the third person, Hawthorne says, “His whole treatment of the [Brook Farm] affair is altogether incidental to the main purpose of the Romance; nor does he put forward the slightest pretensions to illustrate a theory, or elicit a conclusion, favorable or otherwise, in respect to Socialism” (BR 1). Instead of describing or evaluating communalism, “His present concern with the Socialist Community is merely to establish a theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel, where the creatures of his brain may play their phantasmagorical antics,

without exposing them to too close a comparison with the actual events of real lives” (BR 1-2). As noted a few paragraphs above, Coviello takes this statement at face value. He writes, “Over many decades, and for a range of plausible reasons, Americanist literary criticism has found the notion of Hawthorne’s demurral from conclusiveness especially hard to credit, taking it, for the most part, as still another expression of the book’s sustained and elegant duplicity” (145). He asserts that Hawthorne’s denial that *Blithedale* critiques Socialism is “perhaps the least believed-in sentence Hawthorne would ever write” (145). Setting aside Hawthorne’s disclaimers, and disagreeing with Coviello, I contend that attitudes toward utopianism are discernible in *Blithedale*. This dissertation does not seek to compare “actual events” with “real lives,” but it does find and analyze commentary about communalism, especially the Transcendentalist version.

Many critics who agree that *The Blithedale Romance* provides commentary on utopianism nonetheless criticize it for lacking in particulars. Because Hawthorne uncharacteristically picks a specific and contemporary setting, and because this setting is the object of curiosity, many readers cannot help but want journalistic reporting from *The Blithedale Romance*. This kind of realism, however, is antithetical to a writer of romances, as Hawthorne saw himself. Describing his interpretation of romance in “The Custom House,” Hawthorne writes that objects in a “familiar room” are “spiritualized by the unusual light” and thus “seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of the

intellect” (31).<sup>2</sup> Filtering Brook Farm through this unusual light, the resulting picture can frustrate readers seeking details.

Elliott is one critic who finds the book frustrating. He would prefer that “the allurements of the mysterious had given way in Hawthorne’s mind to a concern for the actual; we would gladly trade veiled ladies and handsome villains with false teeth and snake-headed canes for a Flemish portrait of Brook Farm” (53). Elliott seems to believe Hawthorne owed the public this type of portrait. He argues that because Hawthorne was “a witness and participant in an episode that was real in American history . . . the setting of his book created its own demands; it cried out for detailed, novelistic treatment: for description and solidity of specification and judgment” (70-71). Indeed, continues Elliott, “So little of the actuality of Brook Farm appears in the work that, as Henry James said, the complaining brethren had more reason to feel slighted than misrepresented” (71). James writes in his biography of Hawthorne, “When one thinks of the queer specimens of the reforming genus with which he must have been surrounded, one almost wishes that, for our entertainment, he had given his old companions something to complain of in earnest” (155). The book’s Preface promises a focus on the “imaginary personages” the

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<sup>2</sup> Hawthorne classified books like *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance* as romances. He distinguished them from novels, which require a greater degree of realism. This dissertation, however, occasionally refers to *The Blithedale Romance* as a novel, seeing the romance as a type of novel (i.e. an extended fictional narrative) rather than an entirely different form.

author has created, but even these fictional characters are quite hazy. As Irving Howe says about the construction of the Zenobia character, “Like everything else in the book, Zenobia comes through only in flickers” (295). Whatever critics may wish him to be, Hawthorne is more like an Impressionistic painter than a Breughel. Therefore, the book does not offer a sharply drawn, vivid image of the workaday world and inhabitants of a Transcendentalist commune. Nonetheless, as the literary analysis chapters show in this dissertation, Hawthorne provides a significant number of specifics.

Hawthorne’s statement that he does not wish to “elicit a conclusion” about what he calls “Socialism” (BR 1) has led many critics to complain that he withholds judgment as well as details. For example, Elliott contends, “Hawthorne’s refusal as an artist to confront the political and sociological issues posed by Brook Farm is one of the serious of evasions that make *The Blithedale Romance* tantalizing, slippery, and finally unsatisfactory as a work of art” (71-72). Elliott argues that Hawthorne wanted “both ways at once—the romance of Brook Farm without the commitment that evaluation would have entailed. The evasion provoked some readers to indignation” (71-72). One indignant reader was George Eliot. “Socialism as Mere Scaffolding,” an unsigned review generally attributed to her, faults the novel because it does not “bring out the good and evil of the system” (274). About this abstention from judgment, the reviewer asks pointedly, “Would he paint an ideal slave-plantation merely for the beauty of the thing, without pretending to ‘elicit a conclusion favourable [sic] or otherwise’ to slavery?” (274). One response to her critique would address readers’ presumptuousness in complaining about their unmet expectations. As Elliott admits, critics face a “temptation to write about the

book it might have been rather than the book it is” (82). A second response, and one that is central to this dissertation, is that *The Blithedale Romance* does address benefits and problems of communal life. The commentary is not always direct and is sometimes contradictory, for the book is a romance with an unreliable narrator, but the commentary exists. Hawthorne writes in Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, “When romances do really teach anything, or produce any effective operation, it is usually through a far more subtle [sic] process than the ostensible one” (1). In *The Blithedale Romance*, the commentary is “subtile,” but that does not mean it is absent.

Gerard Nawrocki is a critic who locates such commentary. He writes that despite Hawthorne’s disclaimers, “he did present reasons to elicit conclusions about socialism” (Nawrocki 199). To Nawrocki, the book’s “direct references to Fourier” and the similarities between Fourier’s system and Blithedale “seem to support a conclusion that Hawthorne intentionally designed the novel to support and refute some of Fourier’s principle theories” (208). Nawrocki claims further that the statements in the Preface were merely “to protect those involved with Brook Farm from scandalous implications and to keep readers from drawing conclusions concerning socialism in general” (208). In *The Blithedale Romance*, discussion of communalism includes, but also goes beyond, discussion of Fourierism. The novel presents advantages and disadvantages of communalism, especially the Transcendentalist version, for readers to contemplate.

Elliott, despite his complaints about the book, takes a broader view than Nawrocki about what we can glean about communitarianism from the book. Elliott writes,

Judgment of the utopian experiment at Blithedale does of course emanate from

the book—not however, the kind of judgment that comes from intense scrutiny of the workings of the community: its hopes, tensions, follies, achievements, failures. We see almost nothing of this. Judgment comes instead from scattered comments, mostly unfavorable, of two or three principal characters and from the pervading tone of the work, which is imparted by the narrator, by Miles Coverdale, minor poet, *voyeur extraordinaire*, assiduous parrot of Hawthorne’s journals, dubious spokesman for his creator. (72)

This dissertation examines those “scattered comments,” of which there are actually a sizable number, as well as the “pervading tone.” Elliott asserts that we see little about the commune’s “hopes, tensions, follies, achievements, failures,” but we do. Sometimes we encounter Coverdale’s explicit judgment, and sometimes he reveals biases of which he might be unaware. Furthermore, the book’s scrutiny of communalism is sometimes deep, especially when we remember that *The Blithedale Romance* is a work of fiction rather than a philosophical or historical treatise.

Although the book is a romance, it contains more realistic details and characters than many of Hawthorne’s other works. These autobiographical and other realistic elements drive the desire to read it as factual. James H. Justus writes that in drawing from his time at Brook Farm,

Hawthorne confronted for the first time in his fiction the abundant materials of the present. Its characters, sketchily developed like those in most of Hawthorne’s works, seem less dependent than usual upon figural types and tend to function independently of their vaguely assigned allegorical roles. It is Hawthorne’s only

major fiction whose dialogue consistently reproduces the authentic ring of actual speech. (21)

Given the comparatively realistic style, readers might feel justified in finding resemblance to “actual events of real lives” (BR 2), even though Hawthorne asks us not to do so. Much ink, for example, has been spilled in contemporary and later reviews on the extent to which Zenobia resembles Margaret Fuller. Although this dissertation touches on that topic, my purpose is not to match fiction with fact but to explore some of the author’s decisions when fictionalizing his experience.

Due to the book’s realistic elements and its basis in real life, the impulse is great to read the narrator Coverdale as Hawthorne. As Kent Bales writes, Hawthorne “created a narrator sufficiently like his own self at Brook Farm to make his notebook observations useful in writing *Blithedale*” (42). The two share experiences as well as what Frederick C. Crews calls the “Hawthorne-Coverdale temperament” (375). Both are detached observers. Both avoid firm positions, preferring ambivalence or vacillation; as Bales says, Hawthorne “gave his narrator supposedly radical sympathies but very real reservations” (42). Although narrator and author are similar, they are not the same.

Further, Coverdale is not a reliable narrator. Bales reminds us, “Hawthorne signals in several ways that Coverdale’s judgment is not to be trusted, that his reservations make him unreliable as the historian of a radical experiment” (42). Coverdale’s unreliability contributes to the feel of the romance; his misapprehensions and contradictions may be part of the book’s “phantasmagorical antics” (BR 2). Because his interpretations are difficult to pin down and because his *Blithedale* sojourn does not consistently parallel



Hawthorne's at Brook Farm, Coverdale's views on communalism do not necessarily represent Hawthorne's. The first-person narrator should not be conflated with the writer.

This dissertation reflects on the significance of many, but not all, overlaps in or divergences between Coverdale's and Hawthorne's experiences. For instance, after leaving Blithedale, Miles Coverdale remains a bachelor. In contrast, after leaving Brook Farm, Hawthorne married Sophia Peabody and had three children. This difference raises questions about the novel's standpoint on the individual and society. Maybe Coverdale is just one man constitutionally unsuited for communal life, but maybe Hawthorne wants to show that communalism cannot prevent the alienation that is part of the human condition. Because this dissertation argues that the novel contains discernable attitudes toward Transcendentalist communalism, the literary analysis mines Coverdale's words and actions, and those of the other characters, for evidence of such attitudes.

*The Blithedale Romance* does not tell readers exactly what to think; it presents topics for us to think about. One defining quality of Hawthorne's fiction, along with a tendency toward abstraction fitting his conception of romance, is reluctance to state a firm theory or conclusion. His fiction often does not spell out a clear moral message but poses dilemmas for us to ponder. Justus notes some of these dilemmas in *The Blithedale Romance*. He observes that the book "directly confronts the question, livelier perhaps in antebellum Massachusetts than elsewhere, of "How shall a man live?" . . . it touches upon choices demanded by a reformist culture: material grubbing or spiritual transformation? labor or leisure? commerce or art? urban or rural values? patchwork revision or radical reform? dilettantism or ideology?" (Justus 22-23). This dissertation

considers *The Blithedale Romance*'s stance on whether communes are a good way to live, and some binaries considered in this dissertation correspond with binaries on Justus's list. Although the novel does not do so with the specificity or heavy-handed didacticism that some critics want, *The Blithedale Romance* does describe and appraise communal life and theory. Nina Baym reminds us that "Hawthorne remembers Brook Farm as 'essentially a daydream, and yet a fact'" ("Radical Reading" 546-47). Baym continues, "*The Blithedale Romance* is the literary realization of an imagined world, just as Brook Farm itself was an attempt to realize an imagined world" (547). The novel is also a literary realization of a real world, taking us on a virtual visit to a utopian community, and laying the groundwork for other fiction about real-world utopias.

### **Background on "Transcendental Wild Oats"**

Two years after Ripley began his experiment at Brook Farm, Bronson Alcott took his wife and four daughters to Fruitlands in June 1843. His second-oldest child, Louisa, was ten. Like Hawthorne when he went to Brook Farm, Bronson Alcott was somewhat at loose ends, not quite earning a living. He had started a school based on his own educational reform ideas, but he had to close it after parents raised concerns about his broaching inappropriate topics with children. In England to visit a school modeled on the one he had run, Alcott devised a plan with two of that school's leaders to start a utopian community in America. Englishman Henry Wright defected after becoming involved with Mary Gove Nichols. In *Mary Lyndon, or Revelations of a Life*, Nichols included

characters based on Wright and on his erstwhile friends who went on to found Fruitlands: Alcott and English educator Charles Lane. Thus, these two men are fictionalized in at least two works, for Alcott becomes Mr. Mooney in *Mary Lyndon* and Abel Lamb in “Transcendental Wild Oats,” and Lane becomes Mr. Lang in *Mary Lyndon* and Timon Lion in “Transcendental Wild Oats.”

The Fruitlands commune closed seven months after it opened. Coincidentally, this is about the same amount of time that Hawthorne lasted at Brook Farm. Although both experiences were short, they left Hawthorne and Alcott with ample material to write about—and with some unpleasant memories to tinge that material. The Alcotts’ losses were emotional as well as financial, for the commune’s consociate family doctrine and the stress of the commune’s failure caused turmoil.

Before she wrote her own story about communal living, Alcott probably read *The Blithedale Romance*. Hawthorne and Alcott families were long-time neighbors in Concord who interacted often during Alcott’s childhood and adulthood, and Alcott was an avid reader of classic and contemporary literature. *The Louisa May Alcott Encyclopedia* reports that Alcott “read Hawthorne’s fiction throughout her life and found profound inspiration in his concerns with anxiety, emotion, sin and guilt” (Eiselein and Phillips 130). In numerous works, the *Encyclopedia* continues, Alcott “revises Hawthorne’s characters and themes, drawing especially on *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), and *A Marble Faun* (1860) but also *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), ‘Rappacini’s Daughter’ (1844), ‘The Artist of the Beautiful’ (1844), and ‘The Snow Image’ (1850)” (Eiselein and Phillips 130-131). Although *Blithedale* may have inspired or influenced “Transcendental

Wild Oats,” Alcott does not appear to frame her story as a direct response to it. The specific character types and the storylines differ, as does the tone. Nonetheless, the two works resemble each other in addressing the same tensions that characterize texts about utopias, especially the tensions that characterize Transcendentalist utopias.

Alcott, writing her story about twenty years after *The Blithedale Romance*, stays truer to her actual experience than does Hawthorne. As a romancer, Hawthorne is not bound to what he describes in the Preface to *The House of Seven Gables* as “very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience” (1). “Transcendental Wild Oats,” however, is a product of a different period in history and in literature. Alcott writes “Transcendental Wild Oats” (1873) during the Realism movement in American literature, which ran from the Civil War until about the turn of the century. Among the hallmarks of the style in “Transcendental Wild Oats” are the inclusion of details about everyday life and the inclusion of plausible characters and events. The story’s diction, including the dialogue, sounds more like ordinary speech than does the language of *The Blithedale Romance*. Alcott’s style fits her function, for she did not have the same goal as Hawthorne. Rather than distancing herself from or obscuring real places or people, she is writing memoir, albeit fictionalized. “Transcendental Wild Oats” also has hallmarks of another literary movement of her time: sentimentalism. The Men vs. Women chapter discusses the ways in which the story uses a non-traditional setting to affirm the kinds of traditional values found in sentimental writing.

Although Alcott does not state her intentions for her story as Hawthorne does in *The Blithedale Romance*’s Preface, we know a little about her mission. According to Claudia

Durst Johnson, Alcott first envisioned “Transcendental Wild Oats” as part of a collection. Johnson writes, “In July of 1857, Louisa May Alcott reveals in her journal that she was contemplating a book-length romance based on her family in which her father, Bronson, would play the central role, the various chapters named for important places and events in his life” (“Cost of an Idea” 45). For the project, however, Alcott finished only the short story “Transcendental Wild Oats.” Even though Alcott does not use the word “romance” exactly as Hawthorne does, her story is fiction rather than fact, with license to embellish or otherwise alter real people and places to enrich the storytelling. Although she paints the communal setting realistically and although she comments on communitarianism, she also uses it as backdrop for a human drama, to make points about matters beyond utopianism.

Because the story does not provide explicit purpose statements or disclaimers like those in *The Blithedale Romance*’s Preface, reading it to discern views on Transcendental communalism does not appear to contravene the writer’s intentions. As with *The Blithedale Romance*, however, the story does not always clearly state positions about communalism, and it is sometimes contradictory. As Hawthorne does in *Blithedale*, Alcott uses the narrator and other characters to express and to embody various ideals and challenges of communal living. Rather than the first-person narrator of *The Blithedale Romance*, the story’s narrator is an unnamed objective third person. Although the narrator describes what characters do and say rather than what they think, and though she does not always tell readers what to think, the narrator seems more than a completely disinterested reportorial voice. The intensity of her attitudes toward characters—vilification of some,

sympathy with others—is one indication of personal involvement with Fruitlands.

Likewise, the intensity of her tone—sometimes snide, sometimes sentimental—indicates that she is not an entirely neutral reporter.

The narrators of both *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” complicate the task of identifying positions on communalism. As obfuscating as Alcott’s narrator can be, however, her tone through most of the story establishes that the work is a parody. In Jean Pfaelzer’s words, the story is a “satiric mock-history of Fruitlands” (91). Employing some conventions of serious historical narrative underscores the story’s less-than-serious approach. It satirizes real events and people, and it draws imaginary ones as absurd. To an even greater extent than Coverdale in *Blithedale*, Alcott’s narrator is sardonic and hyperbolic. *The Blithedale Romance* is often called a satire, but the tenor, events, and characters are not comic. Coverdale rarely employs a humorous tone. He is prone to exaggeration, but he is not often funny. Some characters are overblown, e.g. Hollingsworth, but they are not silly. In “Transcendental Wild Oats,” content as well as tone contribute to Alcott’s construction of the satire, for she sketches the commune’s brief existence as a series of comic missteps. The sentimental happy ending with its stylized dialogue (e.g. “while I have my good angel Hope, I shall not despair”) also signals us not to read the work as completely true-to-life (TW 49). This shift from humor to sentimentality is another reason the narrator’s stance is hard to ascertain. Hawthorne’s style as a romancer and Alcott’s style as realist, sentimentalist, and satirist render their subjects abstract and give them less opportunity for straightforward commentary.

Like Hawthorne, Alcott does not paint a minutely detailed Flemish portrait.

Nonetheless, readers eager for a peek at communal life will find “Transcendental Wild Oats” more satisfying than *The Blithedale Romance* because Alcott gives us more particulars. We cannot easily distinguish truth from fiction in these particulars, however. In *Eden’s Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father*, Matteson writes, “The story has long tantalized those eager to know the truth about Fruitlands; it presents facts and fabrications side-by-side, offering no dependable guide as to which is which” (116). This murkiness has not deterred some readers from seeing the story as autobiography. For instance, Matteson notes the “long, poignant paragraphs” about Abel Lamb’s “sanity and madness” at the end of the story (*Eden’s Outcasts* 161). “These paragraphs are fiction,” Matteson says, “but they are the only account of those transformative hours by someone who observed them. For good reason, modern biographers of Bronson have rarely been able to resist quoting them at length” (161-62). Matteson then proceeds to quote those paragraphs at length. Although Alcott’s story “affords a rare glimpse of one of the most intriguing phenomena of nineteenth-century life—the utopian community” (Johnson, “Cost of an Idea” 45), the goal of this dissertation is not to better understand history but to better understand fiction.

This project explores the attitudes toward Transcendentalist communalism that emerge through close reading of two fictional works. Both *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” depict communes in ways that ask readers to reflect on the benefits and drawbacks of communal life, particularly the feasibility of tangible Transcendentalism. The preceding material points to challenges analyzing these works. One challenge is resisting the urge to read them as non-fiction. Blithedale is not Brook

Farm, and the Fruitlands of “Transcendental Wild Oats” is not the farm still standing in Harvard, Massachusetts as a museum, just as T. Coraghessan Boyle’s *Drop City* is not the 1960s Colorado commune of the same name, and the commune in *Easy Rider* is not the New Buffalo Commune in New Mexico where the scenes were filmed. Another challenge of analyzing real-world utopian fiction is reading beyond what the writers might have intended. Hawthorne, for example, states his intention not to judge communitarianism, but his book does include judgments. Fictionalizing communal life, Hawthorne and Alcott raise questions for readers to consider, and they also reveal opinions explicitly and implicitly.



## CHAPTER THREE: THOUGHT VS. ACTION

### Thought vs. Action in Transcendentalism

The tension between thought and action was a Transcendentalist concern, especially for the movement's leading thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson's essay "The American Scholar," in particular, focuses on what Taylor Stoehr calls "the manual / intellectual dichotomy" that concerned the Transcendentalists (92). In "The American Scholar," Emerson extols action, and he expresses concerns about the divide between physical and cerebral activity. In that essay (from which all other quotations in this paragraph are taken), Emerson deplores society's division of men into professions, with scholars as the designated intellectuals. The fragmentation of labor means that people become fragmented: "members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man" (57). Men are not whole, and they are not truly men, for intellectualism effeminizes. Seeing a crisis in masculinity, Emerson writes, "I have heard it said that the clergy,—who are always more universally than any other class, the scholars of their day,—are addressed as women," and "practical men" hear them as using "a mincing and diluted speech" (61). Further, without action, the scholar is "not yet a man" (61). Emerson calls for scholars to overturn the stereotype of them as "valetudinarian" or invalids, "unfit for any handiwork or public labor, as a penknife for an ax" (61). Because of this stereotype, "so-called 'practical men' sneer at speculative men" (61). Emerson sneers at the "bookworm" and views laborers as not justly ennobled (59). He writes, "The

planter . . . is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry” (57).

Promoting action as the “preamble of thought,” Emerson continues, “Drudgery, calamity, exasperation, want, are instructors in eloquence and wisdom” (61). Further, they are “pearls and rubies” to “discourse” (61). Whether or not Emerson followed his own recommendations to improve discourse through drudgery and difficulty, he touches on a theme in much utopian fiction: the glorification of labor and action. He distinguishes between “‘Man Thinking’” and the “mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking” (57). This Thought vs. Action chapter applies the term ‘man-thinking’ to those who focus on ideas rather than action. The depth or originality of that thought, whether it is Thinking or mere thinking, is not central here.

The Brook Farm commune was partly born of desire to rectify the sort of problems Emerson identifies. In a letter to Emerson in 1840, Ripley wrote of the project’s goal “‘to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual’” (qtd. in Delano, *Brook Farm* 61). Ripley’s vision of uniting man-thinking and man-doing appealed to Nathaniel Hawthorne. Brook Farm offered a chance to combine vocational labor with writing, somehow facilitating the latter. Robert S. Levine writes that Hawthorne’s “letters to his future wife, Sophia Peabody, suggest that he may have joined the community with the hope that it would provide him with the quiet and repose of a writers’ community” (211). If Hawthorne expected a proto-Yaddo combined with exercise spa, the quantity and quality of work at Brook Farm soon disabused him of this hope. Delano says Hawthorne “was especially disheartened by the mounds of manure—

which Ripley kept cheerfully referring to as the ‘gold mine’—that needed to be continuously spread around the farm” (*Brook Farm* 56). In contrast, Hawthorne wrote to Sophia calling the manure “that abominable gold mine!” (Arvin 74). Aspiring writer Miles Coverdale experiences similar frustration. This Thought vs. Action chapter shows that the commune cannot unite thinking and doing. Further, this chapter explores how Hawthorne conveys anxieties about being an artist, for Coverdale voices and dramatizes uncertainties about artistic labor.

Like Ripley, the Fruitlands’ founders sought to implement Transcendentalist philosophy. Although they did not specifically call for uniting thinking and doing, the disunity between the two is a theme in “Transcendental Wild Oats.” We read, for example, of Timon Lion’s “idea of ‘being, not doing’” (TW 40). The issue of work was important to Louisa May Alcott, for she became the multi-tasking breadwinner for a family headed by a ne’er-do-well philosopher father. Further, she may have engaged with Emerson’s notion of spiritual fulfillment through work. Examining how Emerson’s ideas inform Alcott’s fiction, Carolyn R. Maibor claims Alcott tried to apply to herself Emerson’s emphasis on “finding one’s vocation” (101). This search is vital for the protagonist of Alcott’s 1873 novel *Work: A Story of Experience*. On the other hand, as Sarah T. Lahey argues, Alcott might reject the glorification of labor. Whether or not Alcott found work ennobling or pleasurable, the topic of labor (particularly women’s labor) recurs in her writing. Chapter Three: Thought vs. Action examines the way characters in “Transcendental Wild Oats” approach labor, which often amounts to avoiding it. As at Blithedale, melding thought and action proves impossible at Fruitlands.

### **Thought vs. Action in *The Blithedale Romance***

Before examining the novel's treatment of specific aspects of Transcendentalist communalism, this chapter looks at the larger picture: how the novel comments on the merits of utopianism. Contrary to the view that *The Blithedale Romance* does not weigh in on utopian ideology, attitudes toward communalism do emerge, even if they are inconsistent, as when the narrator juxtaposes favorable and unfavorable standpoints. This chapter then discusses the commune's failure to translate ideals into action, especially the goal of merging of man-thinking with man-doing, and then moves to considering the danger of becoming overly attached to particular ideals or theory. Another subtopic under "Thought vs. Action" is the communards' infusion of their project with spirituality. Spiritualization includes sanctifying work, associating the commune with Eden, and developing rituals in a not traditionally religious environment.

Examining attitudes toward communalism in *The Blithedale Romance*, this chapter looks at specific comments from Coverdale and Hollingsworth. (Examination of Zenobia's commentary comes in the next two chapters since her objectives involve issues central to *The Individual vs. Society* and *Men vs. Women*.) It is fair to ask whether the book taken as a whole expresses a position on communalism that transcends the "scattered comments" to which Robert C. Elliott refers (72). Positive statements Coverdale makes about communalism might be justification for upending his life to move to a commune, not statements of deeply held philosophical views. Alternatively, they might be remarks we are meant to question because spoken by an unreliable narrator. Some comments might reveal more about the speaker (whether Coverdale or other

characters) than they reveal about the commune. Nevertheless, the comments are worth examining because they add to the overall picture the novel gives of communal life. The ultimate fates of the Blithedale's residents communicate a great deal about the utopian experiment, but so do their speeches about communitarianism.

The narrator's typical approach is to send mixed messages. On numerous occasions, Coverdale defends utopian communalism while also disparaging it in the same passage. He uses two techniques for this juxtaposition: he threads veins of disapprobation through favorable commentary, or he overstates the favorable commentary so as to make it ridiculous. An example of the first technique is when Coverdale remarks that the commune experience "afforded me some grotesque specimens of artificial simplicity" (BR 180).<sup>1</sup> He presents his encounter with such people as amusing, but the words "grotesque" and "artificial" show disdain for his fellow communards. Discussing the commune's demise, Coverdale again undercuts a positive comment with negativity. He says that "if we built splendid castles (phalansteries perhaps they might be more fitly called), and pictured beautiful scenes . . . and if all went to rack with the crumbling

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<sup>1</sup> The binary of artificiality vs. authenticity recurs in fiction about communes, as well as in histories of actual communes. The literature frequently suggests that commune-dwellers are somehow inauthentic, performing their roles. In *The Blithedale Romance*, the preponderance of performances, masquerades, and theatrical metaphors, as well as dreams, enhances the atmosphere of artificiality and even unreality. Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the topic merits further exploration.

embers and have never since arisen out of the ashes, let us take to ourselves no shame” (BR 19). Rationalizing the communards’ commitment to the project, he says Blithedalers need not feel ashamed about dedication to a dream. Then again, the project died and could not be resuscitated. The “fervid coals”—the utopian visions, and the visionaries themselves—have burnt out. Here, Coverdale echoes Henry David Thoreau. In *Walden*, Thoreau writes, “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them” (216). Coverdale admits that the Blithedale blueprint lacked such foundations. In the end, the bubble bursts, the castle crumbles, and the work is lost. The passion and dreams of ideologues come to nothing, but to Coverdale, the project was a worthwhile effort.

Coverdale also undercuts positive commentary by using hyperbole. Elliott describes Coverdale’s inflated language as “mock grandiloquence” (72). An example is Coverdale’s quarrel with Hollingsworth in “The Crisis” about the communal experiment. Fervently, Coverdale speaks of “this fair system of our new life . . . that is now beginning to flourish so hopefully around us . . . . How beautiful it is, and, so far as we can yet see, how practicable! The ages have waited for us, and here we are, the very first that have essayed to carry on our mortal existence in love and mutual help!” (BR 123). Coverdale does not engage in outright commune-bashing, but in statements like this one, his overstatement reveals qualms. Elliott writes, “Occasionally Coverdale takes a positive stance . . . but more characteristically Coverdale laughs aloud in mocking recognition of the ridiculousness of their utopian scheme” (73). The series of exclamation points in the passage above underscores his insincerity. Further, the words “so far as we can yet see”

indicate awareness that these ideals are not really practicable.

Another example of Coverdale's mock grandiloquence is his description of the community so it resembles George Ripley's beatific vision of people banding together to make the world a better place: "It was our purpose—a generous one, certainly, and absurd, no doubt, in full proportion with its generosity—to give up whatever we had heretofore attained, for the sake of showing mankind the example of a life governed by other than the false and cruel principles on which human society has all along been based" (BR 19). The extreme earnestness of tone, and the almost childishly enthusiastic embrace of the cause, highlights the naïveté of those who propose to reverse the course of history. Coverdale sends mixed messages through both his affected tone and the contradictory language. He describes lofty goals that are undeniably worthy, but he recognizes the purpose to be as "absurd" as it is noble and self-sacrificing.

In Coverdale's last weighing of the utopian project, some of his comments continue to blend positive with negative, but the scales tip toward the former. At the end of the book, conceding that the experiment and his role in it are "fair matter for a jest," Coverdale says he understands those who laugh at the project or "ridicule my heroic devotion to the cause of human welfare" (BR 180). Nonetheless, he defends the venture: it "could not . . . so far as I was concerned, be reckoned a failure" (BR 180). One reason he gives is not resounding enthusiasm but is still affirmative: Blithedale "enabled me to pass the summer in a novel and agreeable way" (BR 180). Defining success in such modest terms enables Coverdale to judge his experience successful, for it was an endeavor in "which I had staked no valuable amount of hope or fear" (BR 180). He is downplaying the high hopes

he had after arriving at Blithedale, when he said he was “looking forward to years, if not to a lifetime, to be spent on the same system,” for now he speaks as if he had never really been optimistic about the project or fully committed to it (BR 119). In hindsight, he reframes Blithedale as a successful short-term venture, not a long-term enterprise halted because it did not work out. As Elliott writes, “In his most ambitious moments of assessment, years after the experience, Coverdale makes explicit the duality of his feeling toward Blithedale. The enterprise was folly, he muses, but admirable folly” (73). On the novel’s penultimate page, Coverdale again speaks favorably about the commune. He confesses love for Priscilla, and he also confesses respect for the communal enterprise.

Earlier in the book Coverdale thinks about the possibility of Blithedale’s failure, perhaps foreshadowing it. He says that even if it were to fail, he would not view the time there as “wasted” (BR 58). Instead, he would regard it as “passing enjoyment, or the experience which makes men wise” (BR 58). The Blithedale experiment is an opportunity for growth, and at worst, an opportunity for some fun. After the commune does fail, Coverdale does not disavow this position; he looks back fondly at Blithedale. In contrast, Hawthorne viewed his own half-year at Brook Farm as wasted; he expresses this disappointment in several letters he wrote to Sophia from the commune. For example, on August 18, 1841, he asks her, “Dost thou think it a praiseworthy matter that I have spent five golden months providing food for cows and horses? Dearest, it is not so” (Arvin 75). Hawthorne might have chosen to let Coverdale describe his time at Blithedale as squandered, but as the narrator closes his tale, he emphasizes the commune’s good qualities. Maybe when writing the novel a decade after Brook Farm, Hawthorne



retrospectively reevaluates his experience and uses the Coverdale character to end the discussion of the commune on a relatively high note.

Blithedale's positive attributes linger in Coverdale's memory, which might be Hawthorne's way of getting those positive attributes to linger with readers. Coverdale says, "More and more, I feel that we had struck upon what ought to be the truth. Posterity may dig it up, and profit by it" (BR 226). Unlike Coverdale's earlier exaltations about communalism, this final assertion is not compromised by hyperbole. Rather, these last words are a comparatively temperate judgment. The tone at the end is more benign or forgiving than elsewhere in the novel, and it is more positive than we might expect, given the unfortunate outcomes for the commune and many inhabitants. Bookending the novel are favorable comments about the communal project. Coverdale is sanguine at first and then becomes somewhat disillusioned during his stay. After years pass, he is again positive. Perhaps the closing note is more evidence of Coverdale's unreliability or his inability to commit to a position, but we would still have this impression of the narrator even if his closing comments were negative rather than positive. Perhaps Coverdale or Hawthorne, or both, are touched by the phenomenon of rosy recollection which colors bad memories as less so.

When Coverdale says such a project might succeed in the future but could not do so in the current age, he faults the times rather than the idea. This might be a recurring trope in utopian texts. It is not the utopian plans that are misguided or doomed to bomb; rather, the people of the day are not advanced enough to accept or implement them. When Margaret Fuller speaks of Fourier (discussed in the next chapter), she observes that if

“unready men” attempt to executive his ideas, “they will fail” (74). At the end of Howell’s *New Leaf Mills*, Owen Powell leans toward faulting the project’s philosophy for its failure (154). Noting the failure of similar projects, “he was inclined to regard the communistic form as defective” (Howells, *New Leaf Mills* 154). Nonetheless, he holds onto the belief “if some such conception of society could possess the entire State, a higher type of civilization would undoubtedly eventuate” (154). If the world would only see wisdom, utopia would arise. In the next section of this chapter, we will see Alcott’s narrator blame Fruitlands’ failure on a world that “was not ready for Utopia yet” (TW 47). The texts do not speculate about the time people are likely to be properly primed.

*Blithedale*’s narrator is the novel’s only character who speaks well of the communal endeavor, and though he is flawed and somewhat untrustworthy, he is also the most sympathetic character. Direct critique of the utopian project comes more often from Zenobia and Hollingsworth than from Coverdale. Maybe Hawthorne means us to view Coverdale as too misguided or oblivious to see the faults in utopianism. On the other hand, at the points in the book when they make their anti-commune speeches, both Zenobia and Hollingsworth are mentally unhinged, so we can trust them less than we trust Coverdale. Assigning negative speeches to unbalanced characters, while assigning favorable speeches to the more easy-going and comparatively well-balanced Coverdale, presents communalism in a more favorable light.

Zenobia’s speeches receive attention in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, but Hollingsworth’s negative comments receive attention here because they concern the commune’s general success or theoretical underpinnings. In “The Crisis,” Hollingsworth

says, ““What a wretched, unsubstantial scheme is this, on which we have wasted a precious summer of our lives . . . . I see through the system. It is full of defects—irremediable and damning ones!—from first to last, there is nothing else! I grasp it in my hand, and find no substance whatever. There is not human nature in it!”” (BR 121).

Contrast this with Coverdale, who says he does not view his time at Blithedale as wasted and who sees the community as ““having a solid footing on common-sense”” (BR 121).

The negative opinion here comes from Hollingsworth, an unappealing and unstable character, which discredits the opinion to some extent, as does Hollingsworth’s excessively emotional, vitriolic tone. Still, this speech is an example of the novel weighing in on the commune’s worth. Even if we are not meant to unquestioningly accept Hollingsworth’s viewpoint, this speech shows that—despite Hawthorne’s Preface disclaimer—the book does weigh in on socialism. Hollingsworth’s comments point to the fundamental inability of humans to translate utopian dreams into reality; the theory and ideals are but an “unsubstantial scheme.” Although Coverdale has advocated for the commune in this scene, Hollingsworth will not let the reader take Coverdale’s statements at face value. Hollingsworth challenges Coverdale with this accusation: ““You only half believe what you say”” (BR 121). Hollingsworth’s accusatory words plant doubt in readers’ minds about whether the narrator is truly pro-commune, and if he is, whether we should agree with that stance. The chapter’s title “The Crisis” might refer not only to the clash with Hollingsworth but to a more pervasive crisis of faith in the project.

The novel directly critiques one form of communalism: Fourierism. Hawthorne lived at Brook Farm before its Fourierist phase, but in his fictional account, he places the

commune on the verge of building a phalanstery, a building central to Fourier's conception of the ideal commune's physical and social structure. Communicating his dislike of Fourierism, Coverdale reports that he reads Fourier's works but finds them "horribly tedious" (BR 49). He debates Fourierism with Hollingsworth, mulling "the expediency of introducing these beautiful peculiarities into our own practice" (BR 50). Hollingsworth has only invective and "utter disgust" for "the nauseous villain" Fourier (BR 50). Hollingsworth cannot forgive Fourier for committing "the Unpardonable Sin," the "monstrous iniquity could the Devil himself contrive," which is "the selfish principle" (BR 50). The last item is an odd point of contention for a man whose major shortcoming, as we shall see, is selfishness. Hollingsworth speaks of "vile, petty, sordid, filthy, bestial, and abominable corruptions," probably referring to the sexual liberation Fourier endorsed. Coverdale's and Hollingsworth's analysis in this conversation is superficial rather than penetrating, but *The Blithedale Romance's* mission does not include probing ideological intricacies. The impression emerging from this passage is disapproval of Fourier.

At the end, when Coverdale considers why the commune failed, he shares negative comments about Fourierism, taking a stronger stance than in "The Crisis." Coverdale says Blithedale "proved long ago a failure, first lapsing into Fourierism, and dying, as it well deserved, for this infidelity to its own higher spirit" (BR 226). This remark is amongst the novel's clearest critical assessments. Hawthorne uses Coverdale to make a definitively negative pronouncement about a form of socialism, though not the form Hawthorne actually experienced. Coverdale implies that the commune would have

succeeded if not for the shift to Fourierism; he deflects blame for the commune's failure. He earlier deems the project's theoretical basis to be sound, but Fourierism is a departure from the original communal mission he endorsed.

Blithedale is only minimally Fourierist when Coverdale lives there. Coverdale finds "analogy . . . between his [Fourier's] system and our own," but "there was far less resemblance . . . than the world chose to imagine" (BR 49). Despite Coverdale's distancing of Blithedale's ideology from Fourierism, Gerard Nawrocki argues that "it is reasonable to assume that *The Blithedale Romance* was partially written to respond to Fourier's theory" (202). Nawrocki says Hawthorne knew about Fourierism from "his editorship and reading of *The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* in 1836" (202). He argues that "the discussion between Coverdale and Hollingsworth probably, to a limited degree actually took place between Nathaniel Hawthorne and his wife Sophia Peabody" (207). Sophia, claims Nawrocki, "probably shared Emerson's opinion that Fourier's imagination was in 'universal rutting season'" (207-208). Hawthorne's motive is unclear in having Hollingsworth voice Sophia's position, but perhaps he wants to note the objections to Fourierist libertinism that were in the air at the time, and Hollingsworth is the character best suited to addressing this unsavory topic.

Readers looking for a decisive verdict about communitarianism might be disappointed by the pervasive ambivalence: the inclusion of both positive and negative comments, along with comments that are both. The protagonist's vacillating or unclear views are consistent with Hawthorne's attitudes toward Brook Farm when he was there. Although he gradually soured on the experiment, this was not a steady downhill trajectory. For

example, returning to Brook Farm after a leave in autumn 1841—during which he pondered whether he and Sophia should move there—he wrote her that he would not stay. Then, as Edwin Haviland Miller reports, Hawthorne wrote to Sophia four days later that he had become “‘a Trustee of the Brook Farm estate, and Chairman of the Committee of Finance!!!!’” (197). *The Blithedale Romance* reflects Hawthorne’s vacillation about the merits of the commune. The novel also reflects Hawthorne’s customary avoidance of didacticism, of spelling out clear morals or messages in his fiction. Nonetheless, viewpoints are present. Passages throughout the book, and especially at the end, show that Hawthorne sees upsides of utopianism as well as downsides, sometimes simultaneously.

Hawthorne’s concern in the novel might lie less with the particulars of communitarianism and more with the problems arising when reformers become too attached to any theory. Hollingsworth represents the dangers of *idée fixe*. He exemplifies reformers whose passion for a theory or plan becomes all-consuming, ruinous to the individual and to the community. Much has been written about Hawthorne’s view on reformers. Millicent Bell, for example, writes that Hawthorne is “distrustful of the contemporary reformer personality as instanced either by Hollingsworth or even the passionate Zenobia” (19). Larry J. Reynolds’ *Devils and Rebels: The Making of Hawthorne's Damned Politics* claims that “Hawthorne possessed a constitutional aversion to abrupt change, in whatever form it came—personal, social, political” (14). Reynolds argues, “When individuals in Hawthorne's works suffer from the inability to see beyond their narrow obsessions, it is often an ism—such as Puritanism,

transcendentalism, or abolitionism—that has blinded them” (72). Although this dissertation looks at the attitude toward Transcendentalist communalism conveyed in *The Blithedale Romance*, not at Hawthorne’s general antipathy toward reform movements, it is worth noting the judgment *The Blithedale Romance* passes on utopian reformers, for communes attract these sorts of people. Reynolds’ argument helps explain Coverdale’s ambivalence toward his reformer friends and toward communitarianism in general.

The character of Hollingsworth, one of the book’s two villains, exemplifies the pitfalls of reformist zeal. Hollingsworth’s obsession lies with prison improvement. Observing Hollingsworth constantly sketching plans for his penal institution or building models of it until “his spirit haunted an edifice . . . never yet come into existence” (BR 53), Coverdale concludes that Hollingsworth is “fast going mad” (BR 52). This madness is due to, or evidenced by, Coverdale’s “prolonged fiddling upon one string; such multiform presentation of one idea” (BR 52). Coverdale sees intense commitment to reform as a form of insanity.

Later, Zenobia and Coverdale discuss those who become fixated on an idea. Coverdale describes such people as belonging to ““that class of circumscribed characters who can live only in one mode of life”” (BR 153). Their friend Hollingsworth, says Coverdale, has ““completely immolated himself to that one idea of his”” (BR 153). Although she believes Hollingsworth to be “noble and heroic” (BR 154), Zenobia agrees with Coverdale that “blind enthusiasm, absorption in one idea . . . is generally ridiculous” (BR 153). As we have seen, Coverdale remains ambivalent through his time at Blithedale instead of becoming passionate for or against any theory. The man who fails to engage

might be superior to the zealous reformer, in keeping with Hawthorne's distrust of fanaticism. Coverdale portrays himself as sensibly avoiding rigid dogma when he says of the Blithedalers, "We did not greatly care—at least, I never did—for the written constitution under which our millennium had commenced" (BR 58). Instead, Coverdale hopes that "between theory and practice, a true and available mode of life might be struck out" (BR 58). He accepts the limitations of theory. The phrase "between theory and practice" directly names the tension between thought and action, and it points to the need for a middle ground.

Coverdale's position here seems reasonable, especially compared to Hollingsworth's excesses, but it shows an unsatisfactory wishy-washiness and superficiality. In the debate about Fourierism, the ever-ambivalent Coverdale swings from defending ideas to scoffing at them. He makes a quip not from "any ill-will towards Fourier" but because he "merely wanted to give the finishing touch to Hollingsworth's image" (BR 51). Sycophantically, Coverdale jeers at a philosophy so he can jump on a bandwagon. When he sees "little profit to be expected" in continuing the argument, he "dropt the subject, and never took it up again" (BR 51). Lacking deep allegiance to specific ideals, Coverdale makes jokes, or otherwise avoids antagonism, rather than stalwartly supporting a principle. Toward the end of the book, Coverdale says, "As Hollingsworth once told me, I lack a purpose. How strange! He was ruined, morally, by an overplus of the very same ingredient, the want of which, I occasionally suspect, has rendered my own life all an emptiness" (BR 226). This statement shows some respect for reformism because it can give one's life meaning, but it also underscores the potential harms in being too



committed, or insufficiently committed, to a cause. No characters represent a reasonable middle ground between “theory and practice.”

The previous pages give examples of Coverdale spouting grandiose, unrealistic goals or theories in a manner highlighting their absurdity, deriding Fourierism, and expressing suspicion about those who become overly or inadequately focused on principles. As communards will do, Blithedalers have founded their enterprise on ideas. As their experiment progresses, they find implementation of these ideas to be easier said than done. In *The Blithedale Romance*, as in real settings as well as in other fictional works, realities on the ground test communards’ best laid plans.

Now, we can examine how the communards try to actualize one of their ideals: the uniting of thought and action so important to Transcendentalists. As noted earlier, George Ripley wanted the Brook Farmers ““to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual”” (qtd. in Delano, *Brook Farm* 61). Instead of being the type of incomplete men whom Emerson deplores in “The American Scholar,” the Blithedalers “purposed to offer up the earnest toil of our bodies, as a prayer no less than an effort for the advancement of our race” (BR 19). The combination of physical “toil” with the mental activity of “prayer” in this passage speaks to the blending of thinking and doing as well as to the spiritualization of labor, a topic discussed later in this chapter.

This union of thinker and doer is problematic. One way *The Blithedale Romance* demonstrates this difficulty is through collisions between the worlds of the intellectual and the laborer. One such collision occurs during the Blithedalers’ first night when they confer about names for their community. Their talk reveals their lack of consensus and

also reveals tension between ideas and implementation, between thinking and doing.

When Zenobia suggests “‘Sunny Glimpse,’ as expressive of a vista into a better system of society,” the group rejects it as “rather too fine and sentimental a name (a fault inevitable by literary ladies in such attempts) for sunburnt men to work under” (BR 34). Here, “literary ladies” could represent the thinkers who dreamed up the commune, the soft intellectuals who, from the comfort of their parlors, hatch plans for men laboring outside. In this conversation, Coverdale “ventured to whisper ‘Utopia,’ which, however, was unanimously scouted down, and the proposer very harshly maltreated, as if he had intended a latent satire” (BR 34-35). His reason for whispering is unclear. Perhaps he is timidly expressing high hopes that the place truly will be a paradise. Or, perhaps, as accused, he is satirically noting the improbability of success. He may be expressing optimism and pessimism simultaneously, in keeping with his other contradictory statements. As the name-givers dither, Silas Foster breaks up the conversation. He advises the company to retire, for he “shall sound the horn at day-break; and we’ve got the cattle to fodder, and nine cows to milk, and a dozen other things to do, before breakfast” (BR 35). In this encounter, man-doing confronts and shuts down those who merely think and talk. He reminds them that action matters most at the farm.

Another collision between intellectual and manual endeavors occurs the next morning, Coverdale’s first at the farm. In bed, Coverdale recognizes this “truth” about himself: “the hot-house warmth of a town-residence, and the luxurious life in which I indulged myself, had taken much of the pith out of my physical system” (BR 37). Easy living has softened him. Further, his heated in-town dwelling contrasts with the commune, where

that morning he feels the “wintry blast of the preceding day, together with the general chill of our airy old farm-house” (BR 37). As a literal and figurative chill penetrates “into my heart and the marrow of my bones,” physical and psychic discomfort leads him to wish “that the reformation of society had been postponed” so he would not be partaking in it (BR 37). He recognizes that he lacks the stamina for farm-life and that he prefers indoor occupation: thinking rather than doing. Continuing in this vein, Coverdale catalogues the parts of town-life he regrets sacrificing. This list includes his “centre-table, strewn with books and periodicals; my writing-desk, with a half-finished poem in a stanza of my own contrivance; my morning lounge at the reading-room or picture-gallery” (BR 37). He also misses walking in the city, dining out, and other urban entertainments—but first on his list are items connected to an intellectual life of reading and writing. His book-strewn table is at the “centre” of this existence.

Awakening that first morning at Blithedale, the fever-stricken Coverdale has second thoughts about communal living. Casting about for reasons to quit, he asks if it is a good idea “to hoe, to mow, to toil and mail amidst the accumulations of a barn-yard” if this means he would “take the tough morsel out of some wretch's mouth, into whose vocation I had thrust myself?” (BR 37-38). He is wondering if he should supplant the people who need jobs and can actually do them. This internal debate sounds more like a desperate attempt to justify running from manual labor than a dispassionate meditation on the project's economics. Coverdale is worrying about his unfitness for the laborer's life, not the collateral damage to displaced laborers.

The novel addresses not only Coverdale's fitness for farm life but also the dubious

readiness of other commune members. Looming large with both real and fictional communes is the question of whether they will fail at not only at their abstract objectives but at the more material goal of feeding and supporting themselves, and at coping with harsh conditions. At Blithedale, success seems ill-fated. Hearthside during his first night at the commune, Coverdale considers the “exuberance of the household fire” (BR 22). If the communards were “true farmers” like a “New England yeoman,” they would be “niggardly of each stick” (BR 22). Accustomed to a cushier life, the members treat themselves to a roaring fire, oblivious to the costs of gathering or buying wood—costs they soon must pay with their own sweat. They are profligate urbanites who do not understand the effort required to supply their needs, including the need to survive in an unforgiving natural environment.

Likewise, *The Blithedale Romance* raises further doubts about whether thinkers can transform themselves into effective doers by presenting outsiders’ perspectives on the matter. Blithedale’s neighbors seem to be Emerson’s ““practical men”” who “sneer at speculative men” (“The American Scholar” 61). Coverdale reports that Blithedale’s “next neighbors pretended to be incredulous as to our real proficiency in the business which we had taken in hand” (BR 60). One of the neighbors’ many “slandorous fables” about the communards is the claim that “the cows laughed at our awkwardness at milking-time, and invariably kicked over the pails” (BR 60). According to Coverdale, the neighbors discuss the Blithedalers’ mismanagement of planting as well as mismanagement of livestock, alleging that the communards “hoed up whole acres of corn and other crops, and drew the earth carefully about the weeds” (BR 60). The neighbors further allege that the

communards “raised five hundred tufts of burdock, mistaking them for cabbages,” and that “by dint of unskilful planting few of our seeds ever came up at all, or, if they did come up, it was stern-foremost” (BR 60). In Coverdale’s telling, the neighbors’ slander becomes comically hyperbolic: “They quoted it as nothing more than an ordinary occurrence for one or other of us to crop off two or three fingers, of a morning, by our clumsy use of the hay-cutter,” and they “circulated a report that we communarians were exterminated, to the last man, by severing ourselves asunder with the sweep of our own scythes!” (BR 60). Despite the escalating exaggeration, the first accusations (such as the comments about milking) seem plausible. Perhaps Coverdale chooses to inform readers about the communards’ ineptitude through the device of inflating it and then attributing it to “mendacious rogues” (BR 60). Earlier, we have seen Coverdale worrying about his own suitability for farming, and maybe his reporting of the neighbors’ comments gives voice to those unabated anxieties. Whatever Coverdale’s motivation, reporting the neighborhood gossip reinforces the dominant impression of inept labor.

A common thread in fiction about intentional communities is the ineptitude of residents (often, educated city-dwellers) at practical tasks and at handling deprivation. For example, in William Dean Howells’ *New Leaf Mills: A Chronicle*, the country people look down on Owen Powell for having been a town shopkeeper. The local farmers “could not help despising a man apparently so unfit to cope even tentatively and provisionally with the business he had undertaken” (24). In Lauren Groff’s *Arcadia*, a neighbor reports that when the hippies first settled in upstate New York, ““You were like babies, you could do nothing. You didn’t know how to plow a field”” (267). Similarly, in Kate

Atkinson's *A God in Ruins*, a local farmer describes a comunard as a "'grinning nitwit'" (42). The farmer says he would have thought "'the rich would know better'" when it came to basic labor, but his wife "sagely" and concisely summarizes the situation: "'They don't'" (42). These examples illustrate the urban vs. pastoral binary found in many utopian texts, and they also illustrate the thought vs. action binary because experienced farmers think little of cosmopolitan neophytes with big ideas.

Defying neighbors' expectations, however, the Blithedalers eventually improve at their tasks. Coverdale reports,

After a time, the yeoman life throve well with us. Our faces took the sunburn kindly; our chests gained in compass, and our shoulders in breadth and squareness; our great brown fists looked as if they had never been capable of kid gloves. The plough, the hoe, the scythe, and the hay-fork grew familiar to our grasp. The oxen responded to our voices. (BR 60)

That first night at Blithedale, when the group brainstorms names for the fledgling community, they seek a name to reflect the robustness of "sunburnt men" (BR 34); now they are such men. The comunards can do as "fair a day's work as Silas Foster himself" (BR 60), a high compliment since (as we shall see) Foster embodies man-doing in the novel. After a hard day's work, the comunards "sleep dreamlessly"—mental activity suppressed by demanding labor—"and awake at daybreak with only a little stiffness of the joints" (BR 60). Proud of his own physique, Coverdale imagines himself in the founders' portraits that might one day grace the community. He envisions being painted in rolled-up shirtsleeves "'to show my muscular development'" (BR 120). Contrast this

heartiness with the sort of amputees about whom Emerson worries in “The American Scholar,” or contrast it with the visitors to the commune whose enthusiasm grows “flimsy and flaccid as the proselyte’s moistened shirt-collar with a quarter-of-an-hour’s active labor, under a July sun” (BR 76). Blithedalers become men-doing.

The transformation, however, creates a new problem: doing overtakes thinking. Balance seems unachievable. Writing about what happens when communards try translating plans into action, Alex Gottfried and Sue Davidson refer to a “paradox which becomes apparent as the blueprint is submitted to reality. Even as the theory is being altered by experience, the theoreticians [sic] are being transformed into different quantities. In their labors to be good farmers, they lose much of their identity as idealists and visionaries” (22). Coverdale addresses this problem when he says, “The peril of our new way of life was not lest we should fail in becoming practical agriculturists, but that we should probably cease to be anything else” (BR 61). Although Coverdale’s intellectual life revolves around poetry-writing rather than utopian theorizing, his physical activity limits that intellectual life. As Hawthorne wrote to Sophia from Brook Farm, “this present life of mine gives me an antipathy to pen and ink . . . . In the midst of toil, or after a hard day’s work . . . my soul obstinately refused to be poured out on paper” (Arvin 74). Coverdale finds at Blithedale, as Hawthorne did at his rural commune, that farming does not provide time or inspiration for a life of the mind.

As discussed in more depth in the next chapter, *The Individual vs. Society*, Coverdale needs a private hermitage to maintain his “individuality” (BR 83). Relevant to this *Thought vs. Action* chapter is that he needs the hermitage because without it, his

“thoughts became of little worth” and his “sensibilities grew . . . arid” (BR 83). In a similar vein, he says, “The clods of earth, which we so constantly belabored and turned over and over, were never etherealized into thought. Our thoughts, on the contrary, were fast becoming cloddish. Our labor symbolized nothing, and left us mentally sluggish in the dusk of the evening. Intellectual activity is incompatible with any large amount of bodily exercise” (BR 60). Hard physical work is detrimental to thinking, especially creative thinking.

Coverdale has discovered the impossibility of an Emersonian merging of man-thinking and man-doing. He acknowledges this with a statement intoned like a decree or absolute truth: “The yeoman and the scholar . . . are two distinct individuals, and can never be melted or welded into one substance” (BR 61). Here is an example of the novel overtly critiquing a particular facet of Transcendentalist communalism. Labor at Blithedale is not Emerson’s “preamble of thought” (“The American Scholar” 61). As Stoehr writes about another Transcendentalist who sought to combine thinking and doing, “If Thoreau managed to hear the clang of Trojan armor as he hoed his beans, it was surely because he had not been at it all day” (94). Walden did not require as much labor to maintain as the larger-scale Brook Farm or Blithedale. In *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D.H. Lawrence says that to do “mental” rather than “brute” work, people must “be prepared to step from one pair of shoes to another” rather than “try and make it all one pair of shoes,” but Brook Farm and Blithedale tried to squeeze doer and thinker into a single pair (174).

The idea that communal living can unite thinker and doer appears in at least one other



novel about a real world type of utopia. In Marie Howland's novel *Papa's Own Girl* (1885), characters observe that at their Fourierist community, the labor "would not be a drudgery, but a pleasant exercise" that "would preserve the health of both body and mind" (423). The commune founders believe that collective effort makes work more enjoyable and intellectually stimulating, and they believe physical and mental well-being are not mutually exclusive. The goal of uniting thinking and doing is not held only by Transcendentalist communitarians like George Ripley. At Howland's fictional commune, however, the goal is met.

Coverdale's awareness of the difficulty with this unity is an autobiographical experience that Hawthorne chooses to include in his novel. He does not choose, however, to include his real life solution to "the labor problem": Hawthorne "arranged with George Ripley to be responsible for little or no manual labor after the heavy effort of getting the crops in—to be, in essence, a boarder rather than a member" (94). At that time, writes Stoehr, each Brook Farm member worked about ten hours a day, six days a week. With that expectation, Stoehr continues, "It is hard to understand how the Brook Farmers thought there would be any energy left over for intellectual pursuits" (94). In contrast, the novel shows Coverdale plodding along valiantly with physical labor, not negotiating a lesser workload than his fellow communards. Like the men in "Transcendental Wild Oats," Hawthorne did not feel obligated to give the farm his all and instead prioritized intellectual pursuits. Coverdale, on the other hand, continues to fulfill his work responsibilities, but to the detriment of his writing career. Perhaps Hawthorne's decision to omit this special deal he cut for himself is due to embarrassment about it.

Farm labor creates particular obstacles for the artist living at a commune. Upon arriving at Blithedale, Coverdale confides in Zenobia his plan to “produce something that shall really deserve to be called poetry,—true, strong natural, and sweet, as is the life which we are going to lead,—something that shall have the notes of wild birds twittering through it, or a strain like the wind anthems in the woods” (BR 14). This goal seems consistent with Transcendentalism: channeling nature to inspire thought. The last part of his statement suggests the *Æolian* harp image that the Transcendentalists prized. Coverdale is disappointed, however, when outdoor labor does not inspire him. He relates how Zenobia “gibed” him about this, saying to him, “I am afraid you did not make a song, to-day, while loading the hay-cart . . . as Burns did, when he was reaping barley” (BR 61-62). Coverdale responds, “Burns never made a song in haying-time . . . He was no poet while a farmer, and no farmer while a poet” (BR 62). His retort reiterates the novel’s message that manual and intellectual work are incompatible. In the communal environment, the tension between thought and action entails an extra burden for the artist too fatigued by physical labor to be creative.

Hawthorne uses the novel to stress the special problems facing artist communards, and he uses the communal setting to explore concerns about his own artistic calling. In *The Blithedale Romance*, he confronts a topic that recurs in his work: defending art as worthwhile occupation. In the “The Custom House,” his narrator is troubled about how his ancestors would view writers like himself. The narrator imagines these “stern and black-browed Puritans would have thought it quite a sufficient retribution for [their] sins” that the “family tree” would yield an “idler” like him (7). He imagines his forebears

asking about his writing “what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!”” When he imagines these ancestors viewing his goals or accomplishments as “worthless, if not positively disgraceful,” the narrator is processing his own worries about his endeavors (o7). Hawthorne uses this narrator persona to express reservations about the writing profession, and *Blithedale*’s Coverdale appears to harbor similar reservations about being a poet.

Two of Hawthorne’s biographers discuss his anxieties about a writing career. Brenda Wineapple writes about Hawthorne’s joining Brook Farm, “The union of thinker and worker was irresistible to a man whose conscience still carped about idleness and still considered writing a frivolous pastime, no matter how much he wanted to do it” (147). In his *Study of Hawthorne*, George Parsons Lathrop says that before Hawthorne went to Brook Farm, his “mood at this time was one of profound dissatisfaction at his elimination from the active life of the world.” Lathrop claims that around this time, Hawthorne complained ““with great emphasis”” that he was ““tired of being an ornament . . . I want to have something to do with this material world.”” Lathrop says Hawthorne struck “his hand vigorously on a table, declaring, “If I could only make tables . . . I should feel myself more of a man.”” This corresponds with a note Hawthorne writes from Brook Farm: “It is an endless surprise to me how much work there is to be done in the word; but thank God, I am able to do my share if it” (Arvin 72). He is pleased to find himself capable of useful manual labor. The commune is his proving ground.

The novel stresses Coverdale’s struggle to find this capability. When Coverdale is ill

in bed at Blithedale, before he begins working, he agonizes about his fitness for physical labor, as Hawthorne supposedly did in the table incident that Lathrop reports.

Hollingsworth asks the sick man, ““Have you nothing to do in life . . . that you fancy yourself so ready to leave it?”” (BR 40). In response, Coverdale repeats the word “nothing” to reinforce the idea of triviality: ““Nothing,’ . . . ‘nothing that I know of, unless to make pretty verses, and play a part, with Zenobia and the rest of the amateurs, in our pastoral. It seems but an unsubstantial sort of business”” (BR 40). Coverdale is acknowledging that farming is mere role-playing for him. Further, any poetry he has produced is as insubstantial and artificial as the communal enterprise, without the concreteness of furniture that can take a fist-pounding. Note that the word “unsubstantial” appears often in characters’ assessments of Blithedale.

Later in the novel, Hollingsworth observes, as Zenobia does, that farm work keeps Coverdale from writing. Hollingsworth argues that this is for the best: ““Coverdale has given up making verses now . . . Just think of him penning a sonnet with a fist like that! There is at least this good in a life of toil, that it takes the nonsense and fancy-work out of a man”” (BR 63). The fist grown too strong to wield a pen illustrates the impossibility of melding man-thinking and man-doing. The reference to “fancy-work” recalls Emerson’s fears about the effeminizing effect of scholarship and suggests that Hawthorne shared these fears.

Hollingsworth then accuses Coverdale of not being “in earnest, either as a poet or a laborer” (63). Coverdale is anxious about his artistic calling, and worse, he is not successful at it. Nina Baym writes that “Coverdale is not considered, either by Hawthorne

or himself, to be an artist” (“Radical Reading” 549). Rather, he is “an amateur, a dilettante” who only comes to Blithedale because he “wants to become an artist and feels he cannot become one in society” (549). He cannot succeed as an artist at the commune or off it. In the novel, Hawthorne grapples with artists’ struggle to legitimize their work, to find time for it, and to do it well. Further, by highlighting Coverdale’s inadequacy as an artist, the book paints a disparaging picture of reformist zealotry while concurrently disparaging its opposite: dilettantism.

If the poet Coverdale is quintessential man-thinking, the novel sets up Silas Foster as his opposite, the embodiment of man-doing. We have seen Foster interrupting a brainstorming-session to remind communards of impending farm duties. On one hand, the book does not present Foster (who runs the farming operation) as a role model. As shown in Chapter Four: The Individual vs. Society, this working class man is portrayed as unrefined and even animalistic. When Zenobia taunts Coverdale about not writing poetry, she adds to this unflattering portrait of Foster. She tells Coverdale she can imagine what the poet will become in a few years, with Foster as his “prototype,” using Foster to exemplify slackness of mind (BR 62). Like Foster, Coverdale will come to read only the Farmer's Almanac (BR 62). Mentally unstimulated, like Foster he will fall asleep whenever he sits down, he will “stare at the corn growing,” and he will “have a tendency to clamber over into pig-sties” (BR 63). Vacuity, narcolepsy, and consorting with animals are the depths to which man-thinking will sink if transmogrified into man-doing.

On the other hand, despite these portrayals of Silas Foster, or perhaps as a result of them, Foster represents true manhood. When Coverdale wants to brag about his physical

endurance, he compares it to Foster's. Later, trying to rescue Zenobia in the river, we see a specific example of Foster in action. Although "obtuse . . . were his sensibilities" (BR 211), in this emergency, Foster takes charge and assigns tasks. In the boat, Foster "plied his rake manfully" (BR 214). Foster's competence and masculinity stand in opposition to the effete intellectuals.

Foster does not think highly of Coverdale's dedication to physical labor. After Coverdale announces his wish for a brief leave-taking, Foster states his expectation that Coverdale will leave Blithedale for good. Foster says, "'Here ends the reformation of the world, so far as Miles Coverdale has a hand in it!'" (BR 128). Coverdale protests, declaring that he is "'resolute to die in the last ditch, for the good of the cause'" (BR 128). Disinclined to validate Coverdale's resolve, Foster says Coverdale would die in a ditch "'if there were no steadier means than your own labor to keep you out of it!'" (BR 128). He inverts Coverdale's statement, implying that if hard work were necessary for rescuing himself, Coverdale would be incapable of it. To Foster, Coverdale is a shirker.

Reporting this conversation, the narrator mentions Foster's American work ethic. Coverdale is ready for a vacation, but Foster has "genuine Yankee intolerance of any intermission of toil except on Sunday, the Fourth of July, the autumnal Cattle-show, Thanksgiving, or the annual Fast" (BR 128). Man-doing at the commune is the industrious Yankee. Note that two of the occasions listed as acceptable breaks are those celebrating America: July 4<sup>th</sup> and Thanksgiving. Being American is equated here with hard work. As stated in Chapter One: Introduction, communalism is both consistent with American values and a challenge to them. This scene dramatizes the clash between can-

do spirit and the self-indulgence in American life, in the microcosm of the commune.

Foster's response to Coverdale's leave-taking proposal further impugns the poet's masculinity. The yeoman Foster grumbles,

“Now here's a pretty fellow! His shoulders have broadened, a matter of six inches, since he came among us; he can do his day's work, if he likes, with any man or ox on the farm;—and yet he talks about going to the seashore for his health! Well, well, old woman” added he to his wife, “let me have a plateful of that pork and cabbage! I begin to feel in a very weakly way. When the others have had their turn, you and I will take a jaunt in Newport or Saratoga!” (BR 127)

In Foster's eyes, Coverdale is not just a malingerer but is also a dandy wanting to visit fashionable resorts. As used here, ““pretty fellow”” suggests femininity. At first reading, the words ““old woman”” seem directed at Coverdale, to whom Foster has been speaking up until that moment. Foster's mockery recalls Coverdale's own earlier misgivings about masculinity during his convalescence. At that time, Coverdale rouses himself from his sick-bed because he “decided it was nonsense and effeminacy to keep myself a prisoner any longer” (BR 54). The scene at the table reveals that Coverdale still worries about appearing unmanly, or actually being so.

Coverdale is not the novel's only character associated with the intellectual realm. Silas Foster is an exaggerated version of the doer, but Professor Westervelt is an exaggerated version of the thinker. As a mesmerizer, Westervelt makes his living entirely through brainpower. His profession manufactures no material goods. Furthermore, that profession exemplifies the dangers of a life of the mind. Westervelt's hold over the Veiled Lady

receives further discussion in the Men vs. Women chapter, but mesmerism is relevant here because it undermines the sought-after balancing of thought and action: one person invades and controls the brain of another. As an intellectual, Coverdale is useless to the communal enterprise until he abandons his cerebral efforts. As one who dwells entirely in the cerebral, Westervelt actively threatens the communal enterprise.

In this examination of thinking vs. doing, another sub-topic is the spiritualization of work. Blithedale is secular, as opposed to communes like John Humphrey Noyes' Oneida Community, George Rapp's Harmony Society, the Shakers, or others deeply steeped in religion. Traditional religious worship plays little part in *The Blithedale Romance*. Coverdale describes Sundays at Blithedale as "not ordinarily kept with such rigid observance as might have befitted the descendants of the Pilgrims" (BR 108). He notes that "on that hallowed day, it is true, we rested from our labors," but he believes that only "some . . . went devoutly [sic] to the village-church" or "ascended a city or a country-pulpit, wearing the clerical robe with so much dignity that you would scarcely have suspected the yeoman's frock to have been flung off, only since milking-time" (BR 109). (This last description runs counter to Emerson's conception of the effeminate clergyman.) On Sundays, other communards take walks, or they relax in a barn or in the woods. Coverdale and his three friends customarily spend their Sabbath at rock they call "Eliot's pulpit" (BR 109), where they laze and philosophize. In keeping with Transcendentalism, most Blithedalers apparently look to nature for spiritual sustenance.

Also in keeping with Transcendentalism, the Blithedalers look to physical work outdoors for spiritual sustenance. At first, Coverdale sees such labor as producing



spiritual uplift. Leaving his sickroom to go outside, he experiences “a lively sense of the exultation with which the spirit will enter on the next stage of its eternal progress” (BR 57). Seeing his comrades engaged in farm work suffuses the world with a new joy, meaning, and closeness to nature. He personifies the sun, seeing it as friendly and welcoming. Being out in nature induces in him an almost hallucinatory state: the earth appears “a green garden, blossoming with many-colored delights” (BR 57). In his “new enthusiasm,” he sees men looking “strong and stately” and women looking “beautiful” (BR 57). He says of the workers that “their enlightened culture of the soil, and the virtues with which they sanctified their life, had begun to produce an effect upon the material world and its climate” (BR 57). The phrase “sanctified their life” gets to the heart of the matter: the commune is supposed to make sacred the quotidian.

When Coverdale himself begins working outdoors, it gives him some heightened insight into or connection with the world around him. At first, “gazing casually around,” Coverdale can “discern a richer picturesqueness in the visible scene of earth and sky” (BR 61). He perceives “a novelty, an unwonted aspect on the face of Nature, as if she had been taken by surprise and seen at unawares, with no opportunity to put off her real look, and assume the mask with which she mysteriously hides herself from mortals” (BR 61). The labor becomes the sort of “preamble to thought” to which Emerson refers in “The American Scholar” (61). Coverdale experiences nature as a Transcendentalist, but he cannot sustain this enlightened state. He abruptly shuts down this line of thought, saying, “But this was all” (BR 61). Unlike Emerson’s bare common breakthrough in “Nature,” Coverdale’s immersion in nature does not allow him to fully penetrate its mysteries, to

see all, to become one with God. Working in the fields, he reaps no reward of reverie or mysticism. He cannot keep seeing behind nature's mask.

Coverdale's experience here closely resembles Hawthorne's. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Leland S. Person claims Hawthorne "did his best to spiritualize even the most onerous labor" (5). In line with Coverdale's short-lived joy in nature, Hawthorne writes to Sophia, early in his Brook Farm days, that he sometimes feeling almost "as if I were at work in the sky itself" (Arvin 73). In this same letter, Hawthorne tells Sophia that outdoor manual labor "defiles the hands, indeed, but not the soul" (Arvin 73). Hawthorne suggest that immersion in nature not only fails to impose limits but serves to elevate. Like Coverdale, however, Hawthorne comes to find the outdoor labor oppressive.

Discussing the glorification of work, Coverdale directly addresses the thought vs. action dichotomy. He says, "While our enterprise lay all in theory, we had pleased ourselves with delectable visions of the spiritualization of labor. It was to be our form of prayer and ceremonial of worship" (BR 61). In theory, "Each stroke of the hoe was to uncover some aromatic root of wisdom, heretofore hidden from the sun. Pausing in the field . . . we were to look upward, and catch glimpses into the far-off soul of truth" (BR 61). Once theory is actualized and reality replaces visions, however, the communards do not experience spiritual awakening through labor or being in nature. They do not achieve Transcendentalist oneness with the universe. Coverdale does not speak only of himself here. Rather, he uses first-person plural pronouns, generalizing about what all Blithedalers experience, or fail to experience.

Coverdale further devalues the spiritual side of the communal project by presenting outsiders' view of it. This view is either sarcastic (as with Westervelt), or excessive (as with other visitors' enthrallment with the commune). When Westervelt first visits the community, upon meeting Coverdale, he asks, "'If I may take the liberty to suppose it, you, sir, are probably one of the aesthetic—or shall I rather say ecstatic?—laborers, who have planted themselves hereabouts'" (BR 85). "'Aesthetic'" or "'ecstatic'" labor is at the core of Transcendentalist communalism: to find beauty and rapture through working the land. Coverdale notes, though, that "the Professor's tone represented that of worldly society at large, where a cold scepticism smothers what it can of our spiritual aspirations, and makes the rest ridiculous" (BR 94-95). Coverdale himself comes to share that cynicism about utopian ecstasies when he observes how actual work weighs down the spirit. Coverdale says any such feelings he once might have held "had insensibly been exhaled together with the perspiration of many a hard day's toil" (BR 76). Brute labor crushes more than the intellectual or creative impulse; it crushes the religious impulse.

The enthralled visitors go so far in the opposite direction from skepticism that they also make the "spiritual aspirations" seem "ridiculous" (BR 76). Coverdale finds "absolutely funny what a glory was shed about our life and labors, in the imaginations of these longing proselytes" (BR 76). In these visitor's eyes, the Blithedalers "were as poetical as Arcadians, besides being as practical as the hardest-fisted husbandmen in Massachusetts" (BR 76). Coverdale does not see the commune's labor as poetic or the commune as Arcadian: "We did not, it is true, spend much time in piping to our sheep, or warbling our innocent loves to the sisterhood" (BR 76). Discussing the over-enthusiastic proselytes,

Coverdale returns to the hyperbole he uses to mock disproportionate praise for communalism: “They gave us credit for imbuing the ordinary rustic occupations with a kind of religious poetry, insomuch that our very cow-yards and pig-sties were as delightfully fragrant as a flower garden” (BR 76). Here, he directly references the idea that ordinary work is elevated by virtue of occurring at a commune, and he dismisses it.

Coverdale refers to Blithedale to as an Arcadia, but unlike the visitors, he does so ironically. The term “Arcadia” is often associated with utopian communities to suggest an idyllic, pastoral setting. Because the original Arcadia is the part of Greece that was home to the mythological Pan, the name further suggests nature, people, and deities co-existing harmoniously. Lauren Groff gives this title to her novel, and it is the name of the commune the book is about. Like Coverdale, Groff uses the term ironically, for the commune is hardly harmonious. In Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Margret Howth: A Story of To-day*, one character dismisses as mere caprice the plan to transport workers “into the country to start a new Arcadia” (84). Davis again sardonically refers to Arcadia when the visitor to the Rappite community in “The Harmonists” disdains “these Arcadians” for their materialism (537). Substituting love of food and money for the family relationships their faith forbids is the opposite of Arcadian balance of nature, people, and religion. Coverdale applies the term to Blithedale when the commune is at its least inviting. In his bedroom on his first night, he thinks, “How cold an Arcadia was this!” (BR 36). This thought arises as he looks out at the cold snow, realizes he is falling ill, and senses the “dim shadow of its catastrophe” in the story about to unfold (BR 35). Nature is not benevolent, not capable of producing enjoyment or heightening spirituality. The

commune is not a warm or welcoming; it is neither beautiful nor peaceful.

As noted in the Introduction, utopian communities in America are frequently associated with Eden, stemming from a desire for a prelapsarian paradise in the New World. Some communities try to do as Egeria Boynton says of the Shakers in William Dean Howells' novel *The Undiscovered Country*: "They try all the time to make the other world of this world!"—they try to make a heaven on earth (201). Similarly, the Blithedalers make similar associations with paradise and with Eden when they spiritualize communal life. The references, as with those to Arcadia, are often tinged with irony. Around the fire, Coverdale and his fellow communards "talk over our exploded scheme for beginning the life of Paradise anew" (BR 10). Far from the original Eden in wintry Massachusetts, the Blithedalers seem preposterous in trying to make "a summer of it, in spite of the wild drifts" (BR 10). Their thinking about the commune includes fantasizing that a New England farm can recreate the Garden of Eden.

More references to paradise occur when Zenobia and Coverdale talk about women's work on the commune. He observes that "'the lot of women is just that which chiefly distinguishes artificial life—the life of degenerated mortals—from the life of Paradise. Eve had no dinner-pot, and no clothes to mend, and no washing-day'" (BR 16). Zenobia concurs, but she ridicules the idea of seeing the commune as a paradise. "Mirth gleaming out of her eyes," she tells Coverdale the community will "'find some difficulty in adopting the paradisiacal system for at least a month to come'" (BR 16). Engaging in whimsy, Zenobia asks Coverdale to notice the snow outside and the absence of paradisiacal fruits like figs, breadfruit, or coconut (BR 16). The only flower is the one in

her hair, taken from a greenhouse. She adds, ““As for the garb of Eden . . . I shall not assume it till after May-day!”” (BR 16). Zenobia’s effort to deflate his fantasy does not deter Coverdale from continuing to frame the commune as a paradise found.

He perpetuates the notion by equating Zenobia with Eve. “Irresistibly,” he cannot help but think of her “perfectly developed figure, in Eve's earliest garment” (BR 17). He pictures her naked, as if this impure thought is rendered pure by the Eden-like milieu. Coverdale also sees both Zenobia’s extraordinary sexuality, and his responsiveness to it, as acceptable in a world before the Fall. He says of Zenobia that “one felt an influence breathing out of her such as we might suppose to come from Eve, when she was just made, and her Creator brought her to Adam”” (BR 17). Resembling the original version of womanhood, Zenobia epitomizes it. Comparing her to Eve also associates Zenobia with woman as she existed before sin. The topic of sexuality at the commune receives more discussion in the Men vs. Women chapter, but it receives mention here because Coverdale justifies his lust as untainted since it occurs within a kind of Eden. Although the communards conceptualize their utopia as a wholesome Eden, Coverdale’s thoughts are a corrupting element. He wants to experience paradise, but his will not be chaste.

Trying to recreate paradise on their own terms and trying to sanctify their lives, but not guided by strict Christianity, the communards must develop their own rituals. Stoehr says that “faith and fervor run high in an experimental community, so that there is plenty of excitement and, at least in the early stages, the sense of new purity and powers” (95). As “the spirit recedes,” however, “only the forms of the love feast remain: dietary laws, ritual affirmations, taboos” (Stoehr 95). Stoehr sees that “little if any such complication

risers to the surface of *The Blithedale Romance*, nor was it so very apparent at Brook Farm itself, where the creed was no-creed” (95). At the fictional Blithedale, which resembles Brook Farm in de-emphasizing official creed, only one quasi-religious observance occurs. This is the May-day festival, about which we learn very little. The mention of May-day suggests we will read about pagan rites along the lines of Hawthorne’s 1836 story “The Maypole of Merry Mount,” but we get only scant detail. In Coverdale’s telling, this is the extent of the festival: the “moveable festival” was postponed until the weather improved, and then Zenobia and Priscilla go “a-maying” and bedeck one another with flowers.

Rituals surrounding food are a feature of many utopian texts. The topic receives some mention in *The Blithedale Romance*, though not the same degree as in “Transcendental Wild Oats” or other works. In utopian communities real and fictional, perhaps the communards’ difficulties in producing food inspire them to express appreciation. The rituals might also represent the communards’ desire to spiritualize labor and to seek new forms of religious observance. Before the meal at the commune in *Easy Rider*, the camera scans a series of doleful faces, each set of eyes staring off in different directions until one man gives a somber prayer of thanks. This seems a sad precursor to what will be a meager love feast. Before bikers Wyatt and Billy reach the hippie commune, they eat a meal at a traditional ranch. There, the Catholic pre-meal prayer seems dignified and authentic when compared to the lugubrious, over-earnest thanksgiving at the commune. The novel *Arcadia* also shows a commune’s mealtime ritual that seems equally artificial. Before they eat, “Someone says, *Itakdakimasu*, I take this nourishment in gratitude to all

beings” (Groff 69). The inauthentic quality of these rituals stems in part from the hippies’ cultural appropriation. Another issue is that hippies on intentional communities often do not have much for which to be thankful.

In contrast with the 1960s communes of *Easy Rider* or *Arcadia*, the nineteenth century Blithedale at first rejects traditional meal-time rituals rather than inventing or borrowing new ones. Before Coverdale’s first meal, Zenobia pointedly invites the group to seat themselves “without ceremony” (BR 13). Later, however, a small pre-meal ceremony occurs. When Mr. Moodie visits the commune, Coverdale reports, “We handed him such food as we had, together with a brown jug of molasses and water . . . like priests offering dainty sacrifice to an enshrined and invisible idol” (BR 78). Coverdale suggests that Moodie could use more actual “sustenance” (BR 78). Maybe as in *Easy Rider* and *Arcadia*, the food is meager, so the communards try to fortify it by treating it as holy.

Not guided by traditional Christianity, the Blithedalers must choose the appropriate form of ritual for the community’s first funeral. They opt for conformity to tradition; Zenobia “was buried very much as other people have been, for hundreds of years gone by” (BR 219). Earlier, planning for how they would deal with death on the commune, the

colonists had sometimes set our fancies at work to arrange a funereal ceremony, which should be the proper symbolic expression of our spiritual faith and eternal hopes; and this we meant to substitute for those customary rites which were moulded originally out of the Gothic gloom, and by long use, like an old velvet pall, have so much more than their first death-smell in them. (BR 219)

Transcendentalists were Disciples of the Newness, and here we see the Blithedalers



casting about for a new form of religious service as they plan for a funeral even before a death has occurred. Despite their intention to overturn convention, when Zenobia dies, “we found it the simplest and truest thing, after all, to content ourselves with the old fashion, taking away what we could, but interpolating no novelties, and particularly avoiding all frippery of flowers and cheerful emblems” (BR 219-220). They revert to the “old fashion,” though they reform it by “taking away” some parts. Gone is the frivolity, originality, or spontaneity of the May-day celebration, the outdoor lounging on Sabbath, or the informal meals. Zenobia’s death, one factor precipitating Coverdale’s departure, could mark the end of innocence at the commune. Looking for a new way to live, they find they are not immune to timeless tragedies like heartbreak or death. Thus, they conduct the funeral with time-honored ritual.

One result of the Transcendentalist search for new forms of spirituality is that for some, reform takes the place of religion. Belonging to Blithedale becomes a form of worship, for those who join are “pilgrims” (BR 49) and “saints and martyrs” (BR 57). *The Blithedale Romance* treats reform as religion in “Eliot’s Pulpit,” the chapter that lists communards’ various Sunday activities. The pulpit takes its name from the legend that 200 years, a preacher gave sermons to Native Americans on this spot. On this hallowed ground, Hollingsworth “often ascended” to the pulpit “and—not exactly preached—but talked to us, his few disciples, in a strain that rose and fell as naturally as the wind’s breath” (111). This form of preaching seems Transcendentalist in spirit, being out in nature and attuned to nature, and it moves Coverdale deeply. Coverdale does not describe the content of Hollingsworth’s sermons, which might or might not address his prison

reform agenda. On the day when the chapter takes place, however, with the four friends gathered at the pulpit, Zenobia holds forth on her feminist reform agenda. Her ideas and Hollingsworth's replace the traditional religion once preached at Eliot's pulpit.

A danger of *idée fixe* is that reform becomes creed. Equating reform fervor with religious fervor, Coverdale notes that those whose "ruling passion" is "philanthropy . . . have an idol, to which they will consecrate themselves high-priest, and deem it holy work to offer sacrifices of whatever is most precious" (BR 65). He sees such people as little suspecting how "cunning has the Devil been" in blinding them to the true nature of their "false deity" (BR 65). Coverdale's vehemence here takes his condemnation of reformist zeal, discussed earlier, to new heights. Worshiping ideas and the offering sacrifices makes reformism as sinister as Satanism. Blithedale's no-creed leaves a vacuum that a dangerous kind of reformism comes to fill.

The foregoing section has examined the realm of thought—theory and spirituality—where that realm meets or clashes with the realm of action in *The Blithedale Romance*. It has also looked at how the novel presents the difficulty of translating theory into action, and the dangers of attachment to theory. One theory prevailing at Blithedale is that the commune can produce men-thinking who are also men-doing. Although the "brotherhood of thoughtful laborers" succeeds beyond the expectations of outsiders and beyond those of Coverdale himself, Coverdale fails to maintain an intellectual life, particularly an artistic life (BR 190). Coverdale's experience also reveals anxiety about the artist's work, for contrasted with a true man of action like Silas Foster, the poet appears less masculine. The characterization of the mesmerizer Westervelt, the consummate man-thinking,

reveals further disquietude about a life of the mind. As a Transcendentalist commune, Blithedale must shape its own spiritual ideas and practices. Although communards see work as sacred, especially work done in nature, and though they might cast their community in Biblical terms, as an Eden or paradise, the novel disparages this view.

### **Thought vs. Action in “Transcendental Wild Oats”**

Like Hawthorne’s narrator, Alcott’s narrator does not offer a firm statement about Transcendentalist communalism but is both positive and derisive. As in *The Blithedale Romance*, “Transcendental Wild Oats” considers the challenges of reconciling ideals with reality. At both communes, the ideals are so ambitious as to be unachievable. Members of both communes exemplify the tension between thinking and doing, and the struggle to transform thinkers into farmers. “Transcendental Wild Oats” finds a preference for thinking rather than doing at the fictional Fruitlands, and the story presents the comic and tragic results of that preference. As with Blithedalers, one way Fruitlanders conceptualize their project is as a religious undertaking, infusing the endeavor with spirituality and associating it with Eden. Spirituality at Fruitlands, however, does not manifest in the same ways as at Blithedale. Privileging thought over action, Fruitlanders do not spiritualize work. On the other hand, they focus extensively on spirituality in everyday life, especially in food-related matters.

Like *The Blithedale Romance*, “Transcendental Wild Oats” has a linear narrative; events unfold chronologically. At the beginning of both works, the communards travel to their new home, at which point both the novel and the short story introduce the

communes' goals. Then, the two works relate the narrators' experiences as their community implements those goals, and finally, both pieces weigh the success of the collective. At the outset, the short story gives us more detail on the commune's ideology than the novel does. *The Blithedale Romance*, however, goes on to tackle more specifics than does the short story. Because of its length, the novel is a better medium for ideological commentary.

"Transcendental Wild Oats" conveys misgivings when presenting the community's goals. Like *The Blithedale Romance*, the short story undercuts the worthiness of the goals by expressing them in hyperbolic language. Alcott's narrator lets the founders parody themselves by sharing their own high-flown verbiage. The story presents Fruitlands' founding principles through the commune's manifesto: excerpts from a letter sent to *The Transcendental Tripod* by founders Messrs. Lamb and Lion. This device serves to distance the narrator from the founders' philosophy. Because she does not describe their goals in her own words, she shows no ownership or embrace of them. (The manifesto closely resembles the version actually published in *The Dial* in July 1843.)

These goals are so broad and abstract that the would-be communards seem hardly to know exactly what they wish to achieve, what the final product might look like. Claudia Durst Johnson points out the "contradictory" nature of the fictional commune's goals ("Cost of an Idea" 51). She gives these examples: the founders "declare that they will grow their own foodstuffs, yet they don't intend to 'farm.' They plan to be 'unworldly' but to 'unite' with nature; they want to practice 'self-denial,' yet seek 'felicity'" (51). Other goals are equally contradictory. This includes the intention to "initiate a Family in

harmony with the primitive instincts of man” (TW 37). Unfortunately, “harmony” and “primitive” seem unlikely to co-exist, for primal instincts probably do not include a proclivity toward peace and cooperation. Additionally, disharmony prevails over harmony at the fictional Fruitlands from start to finish. The Fruitlanders want to engage in “purifying of the inmates” through cultivating “the inner nature of each member of the Family” (TW 37). This goal speaks to the crux of the tension between the individual vs. the collective at a Transcendentalist commune. Privileging “the inner nature of each member” is anti-collectivistic and ultimately might not benefit individuals, either. As in *The Blithedale Romance*, the narrator presents the communards’ aims as ill-defined, impractical, grandiose—and thus unachievable and deserving of ridicule.

In *The Blithedale Romance*, Coverdale’s tone, which is sometimes excessively earnest and sometimes sardonic, highlights the absurdity of the commune’s ideals. Similarly, Alcott’s narrator uses tone to cast aspersions. Immediately after *The Transcendental Tripod* excerpt from the Fruitlands manifesto, we read that “this prospective Eden at present consisted of an old red farm-house” and “a dilapidated barn” (TW 37). Contrasting this humble setting with the grandeur of the founders’ vision brings those exalted goals crashing down to earth. The language here—juxtaposing Eden with run-down buildings—resembles Coverdale’s juxtapositions of positive and negative. Later in the story, when the Fruitlands founders disappear at harvest time, the narrator repeats wording from the *The Tripod* manifesto, putting them in quotation marks: “Luckily, the earthly providence who watched over Abel Lamb was at hand to glean the scanty crop yielded by the ‘uncorrupted land,’ which, ‘consecrated to human freedom,’ had received

‘the sober culture of devout men’” (TW 46). This passage comes after a long paragraph in which the narrator puts quotation marks around other phrases the founders use when they preach vegetarianism. Continuing to distance herself from the founders’ philosophies, she uses punctuation to draw clear boundaries between her words and those of others. The quotation marks call attention to the language, accentuating the discrepancy between ideals and reality through a device that anticipates today’s habit of conveying irony or sarcasm through ‘air quotes.’

Both *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” pay particular attention to the first day at the commune when hopes for and commitment to collectivism run especially high. Such scenes are set pieces in many fictional works about communes. In Mary McCarthy’s novel *Oasis*, for example, the communards’ thoughts “of a world small and self-contained, had, that first night, an exhilarating effect” (33). For members of McCarthy’s Neversink community, at first “the presence of very obvious difficulties of a practical sort only enlivened the membership to meet and answer the challenge” (34). At the end, when Neversink does sink, readers cannot help but recall the communards’ naïve optimism at the outset.

Depicting the reformers’ first-night passion, heated but eventually dying, both *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” use fire as a metaphor. Recalling his first day at Blithedale, Coverdale says, “Vividly does that fireside re-create itself, as I rake away the ashes from the embers in my memory,” but “those staunch oaken logs were long ago burnt out” (BR 9). At another point in the novel, Coverdale speaks of the plans “never since arisen out of the ashes” (BR 19). The first night at the commune in

“Transcendental Wild Oats” also has a first-night hearthside scene. In this scene, Abel Lamb’s face shines “with the light and joy of the splendid dreams and high ideals hovering before him” (TW 40). When his wife goes to bed, she leaves the “founders of the ‘Consociate Family’ to build castles in the air till the fire went out and the symposium ended in smoke” (TW 41). (Both Hawthorne and Thoreau similarly refer to imaginary castles when discussing intentional communities.) At the end, when the family prepares to leave Fruitlands, “the last logs blazed on the hearth” (TW 49). Initial optimism about the commune’s promise burns out, signifying that the goals are unattainable, or that the commitment to them is unsustainable, or both.

Alcott uses the fire metaphor similarly in *Work: A Story of Experience*. Speaking of her dreams for a better future, Christie points to two logs and says, “That one smouldering dismally away in the corner is what my life is now; the other blazing and singing is what I want my life to be” (*Work* 17). Christie acknowledges that both will become ashes, “but it does make a difference how they turn to ashes” (17). Furthermore, she hopes her life will “leave something behind besides ashes” (17). With roaring and then dying fires a nightly event in most nineteenth century American homes, the frequent use of fire as a symbol is unsurprising. In both fictional works about Transcendentalist communes, fire represents the hopes invested in tenuous plans.

Both *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” acknowledge communards’ difficulty in fulfilling their ideals. Further, both works withhold a definitive verdict on the merit of Transcendentalist communalism. Though they both mock the dream and the dreamers, and though their narratives end with death of that dream, neither

Hawthorne nor Alcott casts that dream as completely worthless. As we have seen in the novel, Coverdale's attitude vacillates between positive and negative all the way through to the last page. Alcott's narrator's ambivalence takes a different form and path. The short story's depiction of the commune is mostly negative, with virtually no validation of the efficacy or desirability of communal living. The narrator uses the word "failure" three times to describe the project (TW 46, 47, 49). Indeed, an over-arching objective of the story seems to be to indict the real Fruitlands and its founders. Nevertheless, at the end of the story, the narrator switches her position and defends the undertaking.

This defense seems an abrupt and unmotivated change of attitude, for it occurs in the depths of the crisis that the utopian experiment causes. The situation looks hopeless for farm and family. Mrs. Lamb notes that her husband "'gave himself body and soul, and is almost wrecked by hard work and disappointment'" (TW 47). She has lost much, too: "'I gave all I had,—furniture, time, strength, six months of my children's lives,—and all are wasted'" (TW 46). The family is destitute and alone, left "to starve and freeze in an old house, with winter at hand, no money, and hardly a friend left; for this wild scheme has alienated nearly all we had" (TW 47). "All I had" followed by "nearly all we had" reinforces the extent to which the family followed the dream, and the extent of their resulting poverty. The story's verdict on the commune appears to be in.

At this lowest ebb, however, the narrator chooses to change tack, now conveying respect for the reform impulse that wreaked havoc on her family. She says the experiment failed, but she does not fault the dreamer or the dream. Instead, she blames mainstream society, the outside world. She claims that "the world was not ready for Utopia yet, and



those who attempted to found it only got laughed at for their pains” (TW 47). The word “yet” implies that the world will be ready at some point, so the founders’ only mistake was poor timing. She, like the rest of the world, has been laughing at the communards through the story. When Abel Lamb is a broken man, she defends this utopian dreamer against those who would ridicule him.

Standing up for Lamb, the narrator accuses his detractors of showing hypocrisy and not recognizing true goodness. She observes that in past times, men who would “sell all and give to the poor, lead lives devoted to holiness and high thought” would, “after the persecution was over, find themselves honored as saints or martyrs” (TW 47).

Unfortunately, “in modern times these things are out of fashion” (TW 47). Instead, continues the narrator, “To live for one's principles, at all costs, is a dangerous speculation; and the failure of an ideal, no matter how humane and noble, is harder for the world to forgive and forget than bank robbery or the grand swindles of corrupt politicians” (TW 47). The narrator bemoans society’s inability to do more than persecute men like Abel Lamb. Though he is pure of heart and steadfastly dedicated to a holy mission, society views him as less pardonable than a criminal. After pages of sarcasm and critique, the daughter now champions the father whose zealotry led to the near-ruin of himself and his family. The attitude at the end can strike the reader as jarringly inconsistent. Nothing in the foregoing parts of the story motivates or foreshadows it. Just as Coverdale’s vacillation detracts from his positive conclusion about the commune, Alcott’s story’s satirical start renders unconvincing its positive conclusion.

The story’s mixed message echoes the “half-tender, half-satirical tone” the narrator

ascribes to Mrs. Lamb when she delivers the story's closing "Apple Slump" punchline (TW 49). Jean Pfaelzer states that at the end of the story, the historical "accuracy of 'Transcendental Wild Oats' crumbles, and Louisa Alcott surrenders to sentimentality to portray the defeat and the regeneration . . . of the heart of a man who repents his patriarchal ways" (95-96). (This idea receives further discussion in the Chapter Five: Men vs. Women.) With the sentimental ending, Alcott may be catering to the "market's demand for domestic fiction" (Petrulionis 79). Perhaps the contrived nature of Alcott's happy ending in itself indicates the difficulty of translating thought into action. The commune succeeds only in the realm of thought: in an intangibility like a family's newfound unity, or in conceptualizing it as either humorous episode or noble quest, or an improbable combination of the two.

The tension between thinking and doing emerges in the first lines of "Transcendental Wild Oats." Introducing the characters, the narrator tells us about a boy "firmly embracing a bust of Socrates" (TW 36). The boy clutching a philosopher statue represents the male communards who cling to ideas. A few sentences later, Brother Abel Lamb discusses the Fruitlanders' search for truth; here, the narrator describes him as the "philosopher" speaking "from the mud" (TW 38). Lamb is a thinker fixating on ideas while simultaneously straining against nature, against the sort of all-too-real obstacles that farmers face. That he philosophizes from the mud suggests that he is mired or wallowing. He is stuck in his intellectualism, and he is already stymied by the earth that represents the hardships of farm labor.

Through the story, Alcott continues to juxtapose the world of thought with the

physical world. For example, the next day at the farm, the group's furniture arrives, and we learn that "the principal property of the community consisted in books" (TW 41). The communards are more interested in reading material than farm tools. Contrast this with Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance*: he misses the book-covered centre-table at his city apartment, but he leaves it behind. Unlike Hawthorne's Blithedale, the real Brook Farm emphasized intellectual endeavors; amongst its chief activities were reading, conversations, and running a school. Hawthorne, however, chooses to underscore the manual labor at Blithedale, as embodied by Silas Foster with his brain like "'Savoy cabbage'" (BR 62). Perhaps this skewed portrayal serves to justify the shortness of his stint there. Alcott, on the other hand, chooses to draw her fictionalized Fruitlands as emphasizing thinking over doing, which was true of the actual commune.

The first scene of "Transcendental Wild Oats" reveals the thought vs. action tension, and it also suggests that the communards' goals, both philosophical and tangible, are unlikely to be realized. As the group approaches its new home, the "practical wife" remarks that the destination is "a little difficult of access" (TW 38). This comment applies to actualities, the rough terrain and weather impeding the journey to the commune. At the same time, Hope might be referring to the difficulty of reaching higher goals. Picking up on this second meaning, Brother Timon replies, "'Truth lies at the bottom of a well, Sister Hope'" (TW 38). He sees abstract ideals as hard to obtain. Like well-water, the communards' goals are out of easy reach and require daily exertion, but they are essential for survival. To Lion's comment about truth, Mrs. Hope answers, "'That's the reason we so seldom get at it, I suppose'" (TW 38). She sees the futility in

the search, as if aware that the communards are not likely to find a higher truth.

Regarding the truth the Fruitlands founders seek, Sandra Harbert Petrulionis writes, “William Henry Harrison alleges in his Introduction to the 1975 reissue of ‘Transcendental Wild Oats’ that Alcott ‘never grasped her father's ideology’” (70). Petrulionis disagrees, stating that Alcott indeed

grasped the underlying principles of her father's thought. What she never chose to do, however, was to accept them, i.e., to live as Bronson Alcott did, by evading responsibility for his family's welfare and trusting that God would provide (when she saw that He often did not). Alcott instead endorsed her mother's pragmatism when she remarks, “All the philosophy in our house is not in the study, a good deal is in the kitchen, where a fine old lady thinks high.” (71)

In “Transcendental Wild Oats,” the conflict between thought and action often manifests as a conflict between impracticality and practicality, with Lion and Lamb representing the former and Sister Hope representing the latter. As Petrulionis writes, “Alcott judges the ungrounded idealism at Fruitlands through the wry skepticism of Sister Hope. Her insistent pragmatism and refusal to let Lion intimidate her generate a sharp-edged parody at the expense of the male characters” (76). The conversation about access to the farm occurs early in the story, but as we shall see throughout the piece, Alcott repeatedly positions the practical Hope as foil to the impractical dreamers Lion and Lamb.

The contrast between dreamers and practical thinkers is another staple of utopian texts, as is the portrayal of women as better able to cope with the outside world and men as impractical dreamers. An example appears in another real-world utopian work,

William Dean Howells' *New Leaf Mills: A Chronicle*. Like Fruitlands, New Leaf Mills is a small enterprise the leader hopes, unrealistically, will grow. Instead, as his dream crumbles, the wife must bolster her disappointed husband. Like Mrs. Lamb with Abel, the wife in *New Leaf Mills* "had always had to fortify him for his encounters with the world" (150). Like Mrs. Lamb, Owen Powell's wife is the one with the "practical mind" (150). Perhaps the women see the realities of the commune's inadequacies because they are best-positioned to see the hardships for the commune's children. As one female communitarian complains in Groff's *Arcadia*, "'This isn't a better life, this isn't anything but poverty and hard work and not enough money to buy the kids winter boots'" (54). If labor is divided such that men are not responsible for child-care or producing or procuring clothing, they can dream without worrying about practicalities, about families' immediate needs. In Jane Hume Clapperton's *Margaret Dunmore: or, A Socialist Home* (1888), the commune is successful, unlike those in so many factual and fictional texts. Maybe this is because, unlike the male dreamers who typically start utopian projects, Dunmore is "a very sensible girl" (34). A survey of speculative and non-speculative utopian fiction might show that communities led by women, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, are most likely to succeed.

Both "Transcendental Wild Oats" and *The Blithedale Romance* present the dark side of reformist idealism, however lampoon-worthy their communal plans. Before coming to accept and praise Abel's commitment and sacrifice, the story's narrator seems to share Coverdale's concern about the perils of reformers becoming overly attached to theory of any sort. In *Blithedale*, Hawthorne creates the character of Hollingsworth to illustrate the

dangers of *idée fixe*. Timon Lion and Abel Lamb serve this purpose in “Transcendental Wild Oats.”

We see Lion’s temper matching Hollingsworth’s when others do not share their ideals. In “Transcendental Wild Oats,” when Jane Gage eats fish, Lion “publically reprimanded” her (TW 44). Later, when Moses brings oxen to the farm, “Great was Dictator Lion’s indignation at this lapse from virtue” (TW 42). As true believers in their causes, Hollingsworth and Lion grow enraged when opposed. In contrast to Lion, Abel Lamb’s name reflects his gentle and innocent temperament; he is more prey than predator. Nevertheless, Lamb shares with Lion an unbending adherence to ideals. Alcott models Lamb on her father, a man whose defining quality was fidelity to his principles. Bronson Alcott proposed the title “The Cost of an Idea” for his daughter’s written account of their family’s experiences. He might have wanted to highlight his high-minded sacrifices for the sake of his philosophy, but in “Transcendental Wild Oats,” the Lamb character illustrates the consequences of over-attachment to theory, and specifically, the cost to his family of his dogmatic utopianism.

The narrator refers to Lamb as “the enthusiast” to show his passion for the commune plan (TW 38). This term recalls Zenobia and Coverdale’s conversation in *The Blithedale Romance* about Hollingsworth and the folly of “blind enthusiasm, absorption in one idea” (BR 153). One passage in “Transcendental Wild Oats” reports that “Abel Lamb simply revelled [sic] in the Newness, firmly believing that his dream was to be beautifully realized and in time not only little Fruitlands, but the whole earth, be turned into a Happy Valley” (TW 43). As with the Blithedalers, the Fruitlanders believe that their small

experiment has world-changing potential. When the Fruitlands commune collapses at the end of the story, Lamb's situation is especially dire because his dogmatism leaves him few options. The narrator says Lamb's "principles would not permit him to do many things that others did" (TW 47). Remaining are a "few fields where conscience would allow him to work," but his options are still limited, for "who would employ a man who had flown in the face of society, as he had done?" (TW 47). Where he might deign to work, those employers would not hire a rebel. Left with no choices, "this dreamer, whose dream was the life of his life, resolved to carry out his idea to the bitter end . . . . Better perish of want than sell one's soul for the sustenance of his body" (TW 47). Flouting society's rules and adopting his own, and overly attached to a dream (it is the very "life of his life"), Lamb renders himself unemployable (TW 47). Perhaps Alcott's father envisioned that his daughter's account of Fruitlands would show him as admirable, a martyr. Instead, Lamb appears disturbingly imprudent, and then he becomes an object of pity. Because he would rather kill himself than compromise, he lies down to die. He waits "with pathetic patience for death to cut the knot which he could not untie . . . . Days and nights went by, and neither food nor water passed his lips" (TW 48). His suicide method furthers the story's thinking vs. doing dichotomy, for he tries to die through torpor, through inaction.

A recurring element in real-world texts about utopias is a smooth-talking leader whose skill is speech-making rather than action. With a con-man's style, these characters strive to sell the commune to new converts and to keep the faith among the converted. This stock character does not appear *The Blithedale Romance*, but "Transcendental Wild Oats"

gives us two such salesmen in Lamb and Lion. Traveling to preach their utopian cause, they captivate listeners. This includes the boat passengers who pay their fares and the householders who host them. To bolster those already living at the commune, Lamb and Lion stress their ambitious plans and present potential problems in a positive light.

In *Mary Lyndon, or Revelations of a Life*, Mary Gove Nichols portrays Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane as talkers in ways quite similar to Alcott's portraits in "Transcendental Wild Oats." (Nichols disliked the two men because of their treatment of her lover Henry Wright after he began his affair with her.) The name of Nichols' Bronson Alcott character, Mr. Mooney, suggests both lunacy and spaciness; he is a moongazer. Mooney speaks convincingly and in a "charming" manner of his "beautiful faith" in the Fruitlands plan, including "the apple that was to grow rich and red as wine . . . and all plums and berries that were to bless the land, and make it one vast garden, feeding a family of brethren" (202). In his speech, Mooney "mingled hard, theoretical facts most judiciously with his fancy pictures of loving results" (202). Mr. Lang, the Lane-like character, then speaks to the same crowd. Nichols says Lang's speech was "what some one [sic] has aptly called 'the wholesale swindling of rhetoric,'" but he nonetheless "produced the effect he wished" (203). In Groff's novel, we meet the same type of big talker, "building the community with smooth sentences until the others can also see the fields bursting with fruits and grains" (6). Sometimes, characters in real-world utopian fiction just talk without a clear purpose; they are not recruiters, ralliers, or workers. Kate Atkinson's *A God in Ruins* describes visitors to the commune who were always "sitting around smoking dope and talking. And talking. And talking. They were supposed to 'contribute'



by helping with gardening or general maintenance but that rarely seemed to happen” (59). These figures in a twenty-first century novel about a 1980s commune seem direct descendants of Alcott’s fictionalized Fruitlanders.

As happens for the Blithedalers, the Fruitlanders cannot accomplish the Transcendentalist merging of man-thinking and man-doing. One form of disjunction between words and actions is the way the communards pursue farming. As is often the case with communards, they have romantic notions about manual labor but lack aptitude, focus, or motivation. Nonetheless, having gambled on their success on it, the stakes are high. Failure will result not only in loss of basic needs like food and shelter but also the loss of their dream and the attending shame of proving right those who predicted failure. As Emerson famously remarked after visiting Fruitlands, ““They look well in July. We shall see them in December”” (qtd. in Matteson, *Eden’s Outcasts* 139). Recognizing the communards’ lack of skills and trouble with actualizing ideas, Emerson insinuates that failure is inevitable. His remark neatly encapsulates the pessimism of outsiders (like Blithedale’s neighbors, and those of other fictional communes) when considering the promise of a utopian project.

Such pessimism frequently appears in accounts of real and fictional communes. In art as in life, communards are forever on the defensive, needing to prove the viability of their plans. The utopian plans seem doomed from the start in “Transcendental Wild Oats” as well as in Mary Gove Nichols’ *Mary Lyndon*, William Dean Howells’ *New Leaf Mills*, and Mary McCarthy’s *Oasis*, and for the hippies in *Easy Rider*. In Ed Tarkington’s *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*, the cult leader’s suicide does not surprise us, and neither

does the resulting dissolution of the New Nazareth community, now probably “rusted over and deserted” (114). In *America’s Communal Utopias*, Donald E. Pitzer recommends a “developmental approach” to history that “offers escape from the unfortunate ‘success-failure’ pattern of earlier studies, which only considered communal groups ‘successful’ if they maintained their communal bonds for a long time” (13). Pitzer says Rosabeth Moss Kanter and others “used twenty-five years as a yard-stick” (13). Instead, Pitzer believes, we should look at what groups accomplished or how they fared during their time together, however long. Like historical narratives, though, fictional narratives about utopias seem to favor storylines that ultimately nosedive.

At Fruitlands as at so many other utopias, the plans are not viable. Indeed, the communards seem to engage in magical thinking about their prospects. At the start of the story, the narrator notes that the farm has only ten “ancient apple-trees,” but the founders nonetheless hold “a firm belief that plenteous orchards were soon to be evoked from their inner consciousness” (TW 37). On another occasion, when Abel speaks of the intention to raise cotton so communards will not have to wear wool (an animal product), he is “blissfully basking in an imaginary future as warm and brilliant as the generous fire before him” (TW 39). This is same kind of the first-night fire featured in *The Blithedale Romance*. Wishing to build a paradise, Abel has “the devoutest faith in the high ideal which was to him a living truth” (TW 37). The founders do not doubt that their aspirations, however marvelous, will be realized.

One Fruitlander, Brother Moses, seems aware of the gulf between ideas and implementation. The “practical patriarch” Moses asks how the founders will farm their

ten acres without animal assistance, which they plan to do in accordance with their views on animal rights. Moses observes, “‘Ef things ain't 'tended to right smart, we shan't hev no crops’” (TW 39). Brother Abel responds that he and the others intend to spade the land, uttering this with “such perfect good faith that Moses said no more” (TW 39). The Fruitlanders rely on the power of thought, on what Pfaelzer calls “the rhetoric of noble labor” (95). They seem to believe that dreams can come true based on talk alone, without any logical basis or physical exertion.

As the communards begin farming, we see many examples of their inability to apply their philosophies. First, their eagerness to start farming soon wanes. The narrator tells us that “the band of brothers began by spading garden and field; but a few days of it lessened their ardor amazingly” (TW 42). They resemble the visitors who visit Blithedale to play peasant for a day but quickly tire. We learn further that “blistered hands and aching backs suggested the expediency of permitting the use of cattle till the workers were better fitted for noble toil by a summer of the new life” (TW 42). The reality of hard work leads the would-be farmers to quickly abandon what are supposed to be their foundational principles.

Disregarding Moses’ advice, the communards do not tend to farming “right smart.” As the narrator of “Transcendental Wild Oats” says of the communards, reinforcing the prevalence of big but empty talk, “These brethren . . . said many wise things and did many foolish ones” (TW 46). One misstep occurs when the communards bring cattle to work the fields. That is, the “philosophers”—men caught up in thought—believe they are using oxen “till it was discovered that one of the animals was a cow” (TW 42). In this

single move, they violate their principles about animal labor, and they show they can succeed at neither their own farming methodology nor the usual type. In their botched attempt to farm, they “found when about half through the job that each had been sowing a different sort of grain in the same field” (TW 42). This “mistake which caused much perplexity, as it could not be remedied; but, after a long consultation and a good deal of laughter, it was decided to say nothing and see what would come of it” (TW 42).

Discovering their incompetence, they choose to ignore its potentially serious impact, laughing at their ineptitude. That they ultimately “say nothing” seems uncharacteristic of these talkers; perhaps at some level, they realize the limits of words.

Instead, they fall back on magical thinking. Although they plant a garden with “a generous supply of useful roots and herbs,” they refuse to “profane the virgin soil” with manure, so “few of these vegetable treasures ever came up” (TW 42). This is exactly the kind of error Blithedale’s neighbors expect to see, falsely broadcasting that Blithedalers’ sowing yields no plants (BR 60). What is untrue at Blithedale is true at Fruitlands, and the Fruitlanders continue to blunder. They plant an orchard and graft trees, but due to the “entire ignorance of the husbandmen,” this is done in an “unfit season” (TW 42). Despite these fiascos, they “honestly believed that in the autumn they would reap a bounteous harvest” (TW 42). The communards maintain an optimism belied by facts on the ground.

A recurring theme in utopian texts is optimism about the results of farming despite inability to do it. The Fruitlanders’ attitude recalls *Easy Rider* when Wyatt and Billy watch communards sprinkle seeds from outstretched hands. Wyatt observes, “There's nothing but sand. They ain't going to make it.” The desert soil has not been tilled or

irrigated, and no farm implements are in sight. Clearly, a harvest cannot result from the haphazard seeding atop parched earth. This incident in a 1960s biker movie dramatizes the sort of amateurish planting Louisa May Alcott witnesses at a nineteenth century commune. More sympathetic than the neighbors in *The Blithedale Romance* or *New Leaf Mills*, the Arcadia commune's neighbors in Groff's novel decide to help the hapless hippies. In this, *Arcadia* echoes the American legend of the first Thanksgiving in which Native Americans generously feed the starving Pilgrims. In utopian fiction and history, the indigenous or local people are often better-suited for farming and self-sufficiency than the utopians; these natives will show scorn but might occasionally show pity.

Another example of the Fruitlanders' ineptitude involves "the vexed question of light" (TW 41). The communards address this need by buying bayberry wax for candles. They then discover that nobody knew how to make these candles. The problem might be a metaphor for lack of enlightenment. Truth comes to seem as elusive as Hope suggests during the ride to the farm. The candle-making episode is further evidence that men-thinking cannot become successful men-doing, that philosophers cannot become farmers.

At Fruitlands, the labor is bungled or few want to do it. As Petrulionis writes, "The story insightfully lays open Transcendentalism's dilemma: who will provide the necessities of life in a society where the primary goal is intellectual stimulation?" (71). Likewise, Johnson sees in the story a "self-indulgent idleness rather than responsibility and labor" ("Cost of an Idea" 51). At Blithedale, man-doing rises triumphant, but doing comes to suppress thinking. At Fruitlands, however, many communards never transition from thinking to doing. The most egregious instance occurs when the crops must be

harvested, but “some call of the Oversoul wafted all the men away” (TW 46). This is a dig at Transcendentalism, for fixating on that philosophy trumps physical labor. Not only is the Transcendentalist ideal of merging thought and action impossible to achieve, but Transcendentalism actually impedes action.

Managing the harvest, Hope saves the day. The story portrays her labor as exemplary, but this does not mean that all women are doers while all men are not. The other grown woman at Fruitlands, Jane Gage, is “lazy” (TW 44). Specifically, “sleep, food, and poetic musings were the desires of dear Jane's life, and she shirked all duties as clogs upon her spirit's wings. Any thought of lending a hand with the domestic drudgery never occurred to her” (TW 44). When Gage asks whether Fruitlands uses “‘beasts of burden’ . . . Mrs. Lamb answered, with a face that told its own tale, ‘Only one woman!’” (TW 44). Hope's rejoinder is oft-quoted because it encapsulates the exploitation of women at Fruitlands, and thus it receives further discussion in *Men vs. Women*. Hearing Hope's comment, “Jane took no shame to herself, but laughed at the joke, and let the stout-hearted sister tug on alone” (TW 44). Sisterly solidarity with Hope's plight does not move Gage to action. The story has a feminist message in showing Hope as embodiment of a doer, but Gage shows that shirkers come in all genders. The story does not simplistically accuse men of slackerdome while acquitting women of it.

Petrulionis comments on Pfaelzer's position that “Transcendental Wild Oats,” like “The Harmonists” by Rebecca Harding Davis “shows what happens when women relinquish control over their sphere to men, who attempt to incorporate it within their patriarchally inspired and led utopias” (70). To Petrulionis, the issue is not that men

govern women's work but that men refuse to work. Petrulionis says, "'Transcendental Wild Oats' does more than posit domesticity versus utopia. It shows how, by founding a utopia on the pretense of living simply and spiritually, the men can completely escape from all responsibility, both domestic and otherwise" (70). Another perspective on this debate is that Alcott does more than differentiate between men's and women's work, or between their levels of commitment to working. The work ethic does not divide neatly along gender lines. We have seen this with Gage. As we will see, Brother Moses and Forest Absalom are assiduous men.

Hawthorne and Alcott each present characters who illustrate the thought vs. action dichotomy. Silas Foster is man-thinking; he represents practice rather than theory. Representing excessive intellectualism, Westervelt is destabilizing; he is a menace.<sup>2</sup> In Alcott's story, at one end of the spectrum are Brothers Lion and Lamb, and at the other end are Brother Moses, Forest Absalom, and Sister Hope. Even if none of the thinker characters in "Transcendental Wild Oats" are as blatantly or intentionally malevolent as

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<sup>2</sup> Alcott relished the creation of Gothic villains like Westervelt in thrillers she published as A.M. Barnard. In her other fiction, however, she does not include the type of unrealistically evil figures Hawthorne sometimes brings into his romances. Rather, as implied in the distinction in Madeleine B. Stern's book title *Louisa May Alcott: From Blood & Thunder to Hearth & Home*, Alcott does not mix the sensationalism of the first with sentimentalism of the latter. "Transcendental Wild Oats" is a tale of hearth and home, unconventional as that home may be.

Westervelt, they are nonetheless deeply deficient. Like Westervelt, Lion is an entirely unsympathetic figure who engages in mental manipulation. Lamb may be gentle, but his inaction has destructive effects, so he is also a destabilizing force.

In *The Blithedale Romance*, Coverdale is an example of man-thinking, and the novel positions Silas Foster as his opposite, the epitome of man-doing. Like Foster in *Blithedale*, Brother Moses White in “Transcendental Wild Oats” represents man-doing. As noted above, Moses is the first to question Fruitlands’ approach to farming. At the commune, he “placidly plodded about, ‘chorin’ raound,’ as he called it” (TW 43). He resembles Silas in being a man of few words. Not caught up in theorizing, he concentrates on work and on saving “the community from many a mishap by his thrift and Yankee shrewdness” (TW 43). Note that Silas and Moses are both described as “Yankee.” They fit the stereotype of the hard-working American. Unlike the other communards, they are no-nonsense but with know-how.

One scene illustrates particularly well the difference between Moses and the other Fruitlanders. When Abel Lamb holds forth on utopian plans before the fire on the first night, a “mild snore seemed to echo the last word of Abel's rhapsody, for Brother Moses had succumbed to mundane slumber and sat nodding like a massive ghost” (TW 40). That one man talks while the other sleeps differentiates the intellectual dreamer from the earthy farmer concerned with workaday matters. Further, the farmer, unlike the preacher of abstention, is comfortable abandoning himself to bodily urges. Moses’ willingness to drift off recalls the scorn that Zenobia heaps on Silas Foster for drifting off at “odd moments,” making “nasal proclamation of the fact” (BR 62). Foster and White can let



unconsciousness overtake them.

Moses, living up to his name, looks “like an old-time patriarch, with his silver hair and flowing beard” (TW 43). This description of Moses, which is a second reference to him as “patriarch” (TW 39), emphasizes his age. This “paternal old soul” regards the “younger men as promising boys on a new sort of lark” (TW 39). Johnson connects this description to the story’s title. She notes that Lion and Lamb are “sowing wild oats”; they are “self-indulgent and irresponsible young men who are on a metaphysical lark” (“Cost of an Idea” 51). Being enraptured by thought and being incompetent at work is a sign of immaturity. *The Blithedale Romance* effeminizes men who do not work. “Transcendental Wild Oats” infantilizes such men.

Alcott introduces the character of Forest Absalom to make a similar point about doing vs. thinking. The narrator describes Absalom as follows: “He it was who helped overworked Sister Hope with her heavy washes, kneaded the endless succession of batches of bread, watched over the children, and did the many tasks left undone by the brethren, who were so busy discussing and defining great duties that they forgot to perform the small ones” (TW 43). The narrator contrasts Absalom with those too busy talking about work to do any work. She also characterizes Absalom as a role model, for he “worked like a beaver, setting an excellent example of brotherly love, justice, and fidelity by his upright life” (TW 43). Unlike the other “brethren,” Absalom is “the silent man” (TW 40) who “preserved his Pythagorean silence” while working diligently (43). Receiving only two mentions in the story, this character seemingly exists solely to show that talking instead of working is not inherent in men’s characters. Instead of

distinguishing between men and women in regard to work, the story distinguishes between thinkers and doers.

Further reinforcing the thinking vs. doing binary is a passage about Abel Lamb that follows the one above about Absalom. The narrator writes that Lamb “worked with every muscle of his body, for he was in deadly earnest. He taught with his whole head and heart; planned and sacrificed, preached and prophesied” (TW 43-44). The narrator never tells us to what concrete purposes Lamb applies his muscles. His are abstract and intellectual activities. Absalom washes, bakes, and watches children, but we get no such details about Lion’s physical work, suggesting that he does none. Lamb’s “deadly earnest” effort draws from the “head and heart,” the non-physical realm where intentions reside. The philosopher is unsuited for, or places himself above, manual labor.

The practical Sister Hope also serves as a contrast to the impractical thinkers Lion and Lamb, particularly the latter, her husband. We learn that Mrs. Lamb “merely followed wheresoever her husband led,—‘as ballast for his balloon,’ as she said, in her bright way” (TW 44). She knows she must offset her husband’s dreaminess, his lack of grounding. We see contrast again in the discussion of the lamp-shortage, a problem that most adversely affects Sister Hope. While “the inner light was sufficient for most of them,” Hope needed actual light because “evening was the only time she had to herself” (TW 41). Yet she does not take this solitary time for personal development, for Transcendentalist self-culture. Hope might read during this time or rest “tired feet,” but mostly she continues to work (TW 41). In the evening, Hope’s “skilful [sic] hands mended torn frocks and little stockings” (TW 41). The narrator elaborates on the

mother's ongoing industriousness "through all the metaphysical mists and philanthropic pyrotechnics of that period," for "'mother's lamp' burned steadily, while the philosophers built a new heaven and earth by moonlight" (TW 41). Hope's diligence calls further attention to Lion's and Lamb's thinking and dreaming.

Both *Blithedale* and "Transcendental Wild Oats" use communards' hands to illustrate the men's unfamiliarity with manual labor, symbolizing the tension between thinking and doing. In *The Blithedale Romance*, communards develop their physiques as they become accustomed to farming, and Coverdale observes that their "great brown fists looked as if they had never been capable of kid gloves" (BR 60). Likewise, Hollingsworth remarks that Coverdale "penning a sonnet" no longer looks possible with his work-roughened hands (BR 63). At Fruitlands, however, when Moses hears of the plan to spade rather than use animal labor, he shakes his head "as he glanced at hands that had held nothing heavier than a pen for years" (TW 39). Notably, Mary Gove Nichols makes the same observation about the Fruitlanders' hands in her 1855 book, well before Alcott does in "Transcendental Wild Oats." In *Mary Lyndon, or Revelations of a Life*, the commune founders are asked how they planned to till the land. Nichols' narrator reports, "'Spade culture,' was the answer. The soft white hands of the speaker . . . caused a general smile" (203). Although Alcott writes of Sister Hope's "skilful hands" (TW 41), the story never gives any indication that anyone else's hands show strength or dexterity, or grow more suited to labor. Most Fruitlanders do not seem to engage in enough physical labor to bring about physical transformation.

Like some of the commune's founders, some visitors to Fruitlands (such as Jane

Gage) do not embrace labor. Some visitors “came to look on and laugh,” like Blithedale’s neighbors and like Emerson’s practical men who sneer at thinkers (“The American Scholar” 61). Other visitors arrive at Fruitlands not to scoff but to escape work: to stay on at the farm as if it were a vacation resort. Unlike the fictionalized Brook Farm where proselytes are described as at least attempting field-labor, visitors featured in “Transcendental Wild Oats” seek to “be supported in poetic idleness” (TW 42). These visitors resemble the sort of layabouts to whom Emerson refers in “The New England Reformers.” In this 1844 essay, published shortly after Fruitlands ended, Emerson questions whether a utopian community “will draw, except in its beginnings, the able and the good; whether those who have energy, will not prefer their chance of superiority and power in the world, to the humble certainties of the association; whether such a retreat does not promise to become an asylum to those who have tried and failed, rather than a field to the strong” (226). The sort of people drawn to action, or capable of it, will work outside the confines of a commune, while communes will become havens for losers.

One reason Fruitlands fails to meet the labor challenge is the commune’s policy that people should gravitate to their preferred occupation. As the narrator writes, “The rule was to do what the spirit moved” (TW 46). This axiom leads to Lion and Lamb following the call of the Oversoul when “they left their crops to Providence” (TW 46). Promoting choice in occupation aligns with the fundamental tenet of Fourierism that communes should allow members the freedom to choose one’s work, which in turn should positively impact productivity. In fiction and reality, Fruitlands was not a Fourierist community, but choosing one’s work is an essential feature of the fictional Fruitlands. Lion describes the

approach: “Each member is to perform the work for which experience, strength, and taste best fit him . . . . Thus drudgery and disorder will be avoided and harmony prevail” (TW 40). In fact, the outcome of this approach is exactly the opposite of what Lion predicts, even if the resulting “drudgery” is not his.

Responding to Lion’s statement about performing only preferred tasks, Sister Hope asks him, “What part of the work do you incline to yourself?” (TW 40). She probably anticipates an answer revealing Lion’s disinclination to work, for she asks this “with a humorous glimmer in her keen eyes” (TW 40). (Sister Hope, like Zenobia, is sharply attuned to others’ foibles, and like Zenobia, she often expresses amusement at them.) Lion replies to Hope that he does not yet know what work he will do, but “shall wait till it is made clear to me. Being in preference to doing is the great aim, and this goal comes to us rather by a resigned willingness than a wilful [sic] activity, which is a check to all divine growth” (TW 40). Dodging the question, he invokes the Transcendentalist emphasis on spiritual development. The narrator reports Lion’s similarly evasive tactic during the previous year when he had lived with the Lambs: “Brother Timon had so faithfully carried out his idea of ‘being, not doing’” that Hope had “found his ‘divine growth’ both an expensive and unsatisfactory process” (TW 40). With the phrase “‘being, not doing,’” the story explicitly names the thought vs. action dichotomy.

The fictional communes of Blithedale and Fruitlands illustrate the impossibility of achieving the Transcendentalist ideal of uniting man-thinking with man-doing. At Blithedale, doing overtakes thinking. This imbalance limits intellectual pursuits, especially the writing Coverdale yearns to do. At Fruitlands, the situation is the opposite

for the male communards who privilege philosophizing and are able to make that their focus (though this is not the situation for women, as shown in Chapter Five: Men vs. Women). Alcott again observes the difficulty of balancing thought and action at a commune when she writes of the work-averse Lion's experience after leaving the cerebral atmosphere of Fruitlands. Lion "was absorbed into the Shaker brotherhood, where he soon found that the order of things was reversed, and it was all work and no play" (TW 47). At another sort of utopian community, balance also proves unobtainable.

At the fictional Fruitlands, as at Blithedale, a manifestation of the thought vs. action tension is the infusion of the project with spirituality. This involves the sanctification of work, the implementation of doctrine-driven rituals, and the association of the commune with Eden. The real Fruitlands was not quite as secular as Blithedale. As Pfaelzer states, "Fruitlands emerged as Bronson Alcott's and Charles Lane's practical attempt to reconcile the spiritual and reformist tendencies of transcendentalism" (92). On the one hand, Fruitlanders do not belong to a specific Christian sect like the Shakers or Harmonists. Comparing the historical Brook Farm and Fruitlands, Sterling Delano writes, "Neither Brook Farm nor Fruitlands was inspired by, nor was in any way pledged to, specific religious doctrines or dogmas" ("Transcendentalist" 12). On the other hand, "Transcendental Wild Oats" depicts the Fruitlanders spiritualizing many aspects of life at the commune, from work to schedule to eating. Indeed, the communards seem to be striving toward a kind of Perfectionism. Though their beliefs are not as extreme as those of Oneida Community members or other millennialists, the Fruitlanders seem to believe that living perfectly (in accordance with an idiosyncratic definition of perfection) is the

path to godliness. Writing about Charles Lane's and Bronson Alcott's views, Pfaelzer uses the seeming oxymoron "secular religious prescription" (93). This phrase also applies to the fictional Fruitlands, where spirituality permeates and shapes everyday life through firm rules. "Transcendental Wild Oats" repeatedly uses the language of religion to describe communal life. For example, the founders write in *The Transcendental Tripod* that the commune will be "'pledged to the spirit alone'" (TW 37). The founders' description of the farm as "'consecrated to human freedom'" shows its thoroughgoing religious mission and a belief that the commune is sacred ground (TW 37). The reference to the founders as "modern pilgrims" further builds the impression of the commune as holy place (TW 36).

Petrulionis writes that the Fruitlanders' "'New Eden' advocated spiritual fulfillment through agrarian toil and a vegetarian diet" (69). We have seen that Blithedalers seek spiritual sustenance in work, a "form of prayer and ceremonial of worship" (BR 61). The Fruitlanders imbue the idea of farming with spirituality, even if they are not keen on actual farm work. One of their founding principles is to do other than "ordinary secular farming," as if some kinds are spiritual but some are not (TW 37). In *The Transcendental Tripod*, the founders explain their conception of non-secular farming: "Fruit, grain, pulse, herbs, flax, and other vegetable products, receiving assiduous attention, will afford ample manual occupation, and chaste supplies for the bodily needs. It is intended to adorn the pastures with orchards, and to supersede the labor of cattle by the spade and the pruning-knife" (TW 37). The stress on pure materials, procedures, and resulting crops shows the Fruitlanders to be so concerned with the spiritual realm that bodily needs seem an

unfortunate obligation. To satisfy the base demand for food, they try to produce their food in a way that defiles neither body nor land. Their orchards will exist not just to feed people but to beautify the consecrated ground. The founders write, “‘This enterprise must be rooted in a reliance on the succors of an ever-bounteous Providence, whose vital affinities being secured by this union with uncorrupted field and unworldly persons, the cares and injuries of a life of gain are avoided’” (TW 37). The reference to affinity with Providence shows the connection between work and worship. This union is available only to those focused on the spiritual rather than material world. To be worthy of God’s provision, the communards must commit to their own spiritual purity in an unsullied environment.

Alcott does not use the story to glorify work as a spiritual activity. The Fruitlands founders view farming as a potentially sacred occupation, but they do not appear to view their chores as a form of worship or an opportunity for enlightenment. “*Transcendental Wild Oats*” could be an example of Sarah T. Lahey’s contention that Alcott’s later fiction “investigate[s] and criticize[s] the nineteenth century’s ‘busybee’ work ethic, acknowledging its powerful allure yet always striving to challenge its belief in the categorical contentment of those whose hands are never idle” (153). Lahey takes issue with what she sees as the standard view of Alcott, i.e. that Alcott embraces Emerson’s ideal of becoming spiritually fulfilled through work. (Carolyn Maibor, for example, finds evidence of Emerson’s influence on Alcott in this regard.) Instead, Lahey contends that Alcott’s writing about labor often “locates a negative potential within even the most uplifting forms of work” (134). As a child, Alcott was struck by her mother’s drudgery,



and as an adult, she worked hard to feed the family, often taking jobs she detested. Even when Alcott became a writer and editor, jobs for which she was suited, she worked tirelessly while enduring chronic physical pain. Because her family depended on her, she could not quit. It is little wonder that her fiction does not always sing the glories of labor. Lahey uses *Flower Fables* (1854), *Little Women* (1868), and *Work* (1872) to support her claim about the attitude toward work in Alcott's later writing, but Lahey's argument also fits "Transcendental Wild Oats." This 1878 short story, written after the last pieces that Lahey examines, shows Alcott continuing to question the virtues of American work ethic as well as the Transcendentalist notion of physical labor as edifying.

Alcott's critique shares similarities with Rebecca Harding Davis. As Sharon Harris writes in *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism*, Davis "demonstrates how an economic system aborts human potential" (29). Taking issue with Transcendentalism, claims Harris, "Davis rejects such 'heady' abstractions and recognizes a rapacious industrialization that corrupts nature and crushes the human spirit" (29). Alcott is less concerned than Davis about how the Transcendentalists see nature as helping humans fulfill their potential. Nonetheless, Alcott shares Davis's view that labor is not necessarily uplifting. Both Davis and Alcott were realists, writing in an era when work was no longer romanticized.

Neither *The Blithedale Romance* nor "Transcendental Wild Oats" depict the glorification of labor we might expect to occur at Transcendentalist communes. At Blithedale, Coverdale's initial delight in farm work as ecstatic or enlightening is (as quoted earlier) "exhaled together with the perspiration of many a hard day's toil" (BR

76). Alcott's story condemns slackers, but she does not depict those who pick up the slack as occupying an enviable position. Hope's work ethic is impressive, but she nonetheless sees herself as an exploited beast of burden. The men who dabble in work are not ennobled nor does their experience inspire them, or others, to do more work.

Alcott also shows us in "Transcendental Wild Oats" that stressing the spiritual can lead to a dangerous de-emphasis on doing work, as when the men heed "the call of the Oversoul" (TW 46). This becomes especially apparent when winter arrives at the commune: "With the first frosts, the butterflies, who had sunned themselves in the new light through the summer, took flight, leaving the few bees to see what honey they had stored for winter use. Precious little appeared beyond the satisfaction of a few months of holy living" (TW 46). Contrasting the communards with worker bees, the narrator employs the busybee metaphor that Lahey finds in other Alcott stories. In "Transcendental Wild Oats," pursuing holiness instead of productive labor results in punishment rather than reward, for it will cause the communards to go hungry. The story presents neither hard work nor its opposite as desirable, but at least work results in food.

The sought-after union between people and Providence at Fruitlands means that a monastic asceticism regulates everyday communal living. As proclaimed in *The Transcendental Tripod* manifesto, "'The kingdom of peace is entered only through the gates of self-denial'" (TW 37). The rhythm as well as the simplicity of daily life is like that of a convent or cloister. The Fruitlands schedule calls for the communards to

rise at dawn, begin the day by bathing, followed by music, and then a chaste repast of fruit and bread. Each one finds congenial occupation till the meridian

meal; when some deep-searching conversation gives rest to the body and development to the mind. Healthful labor again engages us till the last meal, when we assemble in social communion, prolonged till sunset, when we retire to sweet repose, ready for the next day's activity. (TW 40)

Again, the narrator uses word “chaste” to describe food; eating is solely for survival, not sensual pleasure. While “congenial occupation” suggests self-indulgence, perhaps in opposition to the principle of “self-denial,” all else aligns with the “deep-searching” and the abstemiousness of a monastery. In this regard, Fruitlands resembles religious communities such as the Ephrata Cloister, Oneida, and Shaker villages in that all developed rituals to fit their own theologies. A shared principle is that physical self-denial leads to spiritual purification, and that spirituality should permeate all activities. At Fruitlands, Transcendentalist self-culture has much in common with spiritual practices at religious utopias. The Fruitlanders state in their newspaper announcement that their plan “contemplates disciplines, cultures, and habits” conducive to cultivating individuals’ inner natures (TW 37). Family members should dedicate themselves to study and improvement to gain salvation through correct living. The Fruitlands plan allows amusement, as even the austere and celibate Ephrata Cloister in early 18th century Pennsylvania included music-making in the daily schedule. As at a place like Ephrata, and unlike other communes typically classified as secular, “instruction” and “worship” are central at Fruitlands.

At Fruitlands, communards do not appear to seek the joy or enlightenment in nature consistent with Transcendentalism. This contrasts with the Blithedale communards.

Many Blithedalers spend Sabbath outdoors rather than in church, and when Coverdale experiences an ecstatic moment at the commune, it is after he emerges from his sickbed “into the genial sunshine” (BR 57). At Fruitlands, however, the community’s spiritual center will be its library. As mentioned earlier, chief amongst the communards’ possessions are books, to be housed indoors. The narrator reports that “to this rare library was devoted the best room in the house,” and in this “sanctuary,” the community is to “meet for amusement, instruction, and worship” (TW 41). As at a monastery, an indoor sanctuary will be central to the institution. Interestingly, one Transcendentalist-type of nature experience receives a mention (though fleeting) in Louisa May Alcott’s real-life Fruitlands journal. The ten-year-old girl’s simple, succinct language could be a child’s version of Emerson’s bare common moment in “Nature”: she recounts that she “ran on the hill till nine, and had some thoughts,—it was so beautiful up there” (“Fruitlands”). Writing her short story as an adult, Alcott includes no references to this kind of euphoric immersion in nature.

Instead, Alcott’s story depicts nature as hostile, as an impediment to the commune. For instance, when the consociate families arrive at Fruitlands and Sister Hope first beholds her new home, “The old red house with a hospitable glimmer at its windows cheered her eyes; and, considering the weather, was a fitter refuge than the sylvan bowers some of the more ardent souls might have preferred” (TW 38). The building is more inviting than the outdoors, and the narrator notes the impracticality of the “ardent souls” who see nature as benign or welcoming. In this passage and in the previous descriptions of the unyielding mud, the narrator seems, like Herman Melville, to cast aspersions on

the naïve Transcendentalist view of nature. Pfaelzer writes, “The land, like the women, is neither compliant nor supportive. It too resists mastery, misuse, and violation” (95). The narrator reinforces nature’s callousness when she speaks of a Fruitlander who “retired to the wilderness . . . to try his plan where the woodchucks were without prejudices and huckleberry bushes were hospitably full. A sunstroke unfortunately spoilt his plan, and he returned to semi-civilization a sadder and wiser man” (TW 43). This character’s misadventure seems a direct comparison to Thoreau’s happy experience of living off the land at Walden Pond.

The Fruitlanders’ form of religion recalls Taylor Stoehr’s observations about “the forms of the love feast” in communal life: the “dietary laws, ritual affirmations, taboos” (95). At Blithedale, reform seems to replace traditional religion, but at Fruitlands, reform is bound up with religion. This link is particularly true of dietary reform. The real and fictional Fruitlanders were vegans, though that term was not then in use. In keeping with their proscription of animal labor and animal-based clothing, they did not eat animal products. The story’s narrator addresses the topic of diet perhaps more than any other utopian reform, and food seems a fitting symbol for the tension between thought and action at communes. Food is the product of action, if a commune successfully converts theory to practice. Furthermore, food represents the joining of the physical and spiritual worlds, which can be either decadent or improving. As we have seen, food at Fruitlands is supposed to be “chaste,” of a quantity and quality compromising purification. In the story, the founders discourse at length about their food philosophy. Abel Lamb indicates that it is a spiritual as well as intellectual matter: “In these steps of reform, we do not

rely so much on scientific reasoning or physiological skill as on the spirit's dictates” (TW 40). Lamb follows this by saying he shall not “stimulate with tea, coffee, or wine” nor “consume flesh” because he “value[s] health” (TW 40). Abstinence is not solely for one’s well-being while on earth; it has “relation to our eternal welfare” (TW 40). Sinless eating, he seems to say, is the way to heaven.

Johnson writes about one much-mentioned food at the fictional Fruitlands: the apple. This fruit has rich and varied associations in literature and art, ranging from sin to health. Johnson states,

The apple of Eden is constantly in the background of this wrong-headed attempt to establish an unfallen world, “without the possibility of a serpent entering in,” where only “chaste” foods, thoughts, and actions are allowed. The most chaste of foods are the apples that will come from the ten old trees . . . because they are unscathed by brute or human labor. (“Cost of an Idea” 52)

According to Johnson, apples are also important symbols in the story because of Bronson Alcott's lifelong “obsession” with them (52). She writes, “He philosophizes about them, writes of his cultivation of them, records to whom he presents them as gifts, records the apple harvest every year, names his Concord property Orchard House (not too far removed from ‘Fruitlands’), and pastes treatises on apples in his journals” (52).

“Transcendental Wild Oats” closes with Sister Hope suggesting “Apple Slump” as a more fitting name for the farm than “Fruitlands” had been (TW 49). To Johnson, Alcott engages here in “merciless ridicule” in order to “reduce both icons, father and apple, to ‘slump’ or mush in the final lines” (“Cost of an Idea” 53). Johnson argues that “the apple

emerges as an emblem of the spirit made palpable, impossible of attainment in the experimental community” (52). That it slumps at the end signifies the failure of a community dedicated to purity and to recreating Eden.

The narrator expresses resentment toward the dietary reform. In discussing food, she is at her most sardonic or judgmental while at the same time providing a number of specific details. Readers of *The Blithedale Romance* may complain that its author offers insufficient detail about life in an experimental community, but Alcott satisfies such demands in her catalogues of the commune’s food. We learn the contents of Fruitlands’ kitchen: “cakes of maple sugar, dried peas and beans, barley and hominy, meal of all sorts, potatoes, and dried fruit. No milk, butter, cheese, tea, or meat appeared” (TW 41). That “even salt was considered a useless luxury and spice entirely forbidden by these lovers of Spartan simplicity” indicates the unreasonable stringency (TW 41). At the commune, the apples are pure, but other foods become forbidden fruit. Another catalogue details the meals: “Unleavened bread, porridge, and water for breakfast; bread, vegetables, and water for dinner; bread, fruit, and water for supper was the bill of fare ordained by the elders” (TW 41). The repetition of “water” suggests monotony and minimalism as well as insubstantial nourishment. The narrator emphasizes the lack of choice, for it is the “elders” who make and enforce the rules. In *The Vegetarian Crusade: The Rise of an American Reform Movement, 1817-1921*, Adam D. Shprintzen comments on Alcott’s “sour memories” of Fruitlands’ food experiment. Shprintzen claims Alcott “did not share her father’s dedication to dietary reform, preferring meat as a child despite her father’s warnings and eating meat as an adult” (53). The story’s rancor could stem

from Alcott's memories of childhood deprivation.

Her discussion of food is not without humor, though. She writes that Sister Hope sees the funny side of the commune's food reform, for "ten years' experience of vegetarian vagaries had been good training for this new freak, and her sense of the ludicrous supported her through many trying scenes" (TW 41). The narrator probably uses "freak" in the archaic sense of a capricious idea, but the word also connotes entertainingly bizarre behavior. The word "vagaries" indicates quirky or whimsical eccentricities. The word "ludicrous" shows the narrator passing negative judgment on fundamental principles and practices while at the same time acknowledging the lighter side of them.

The language describing food often reinforces the ties between eating and religion at Fruitlands. For example, "No teapot profaned that sacred stove, no gory steak cried aloud for vengeance from her chaste gridiron" (TW 41). The narrator repeats the word "chaste" on several occasions, as we have seen, as well as its opposite: "profane." The words "sacred" similarly connects food to spirituality. The narrator twice uses the phrase "lapse from virtue": when animals are brought for plowing (TW 42), and when Gage eats fish (TW 44). Applying religious words to everyday items and acts shows the absurdity of sanctifying food. Here, Alcott appears to be following the pattern of "undercutting the sublime with the ridiculous" that Johnson sees her using throughout the story ("Cost of an Idea" 50). The juxtaposition in the phrase "sacred stove" is one example.

Just as the narrator undercuts the sublime with the ridiculous, Sister Hope often undercuts the sublime with the practical, as when she comments early in the story on the difficult access to the farm. Another instance occurs when Brother Lamb says, again



linking food to religion, ““Every meal should be a sacrament, and the vessels used should be beautiful and symbolical”” (TW 39). He says he has shopped for a silver service, but finding it too expensive, gets “some graceful cups and vases of Britannia ware” (TW 39). Sister Hope, remarking that this type of tableware is hard to keep bright, asks “with a housewife's interest in labor-saving institutions” whether “whiting be allowed in the community” (TW 39). Brother Lion dismisses her pragmatic concerns as “trivial questions” to be “discussed at a more fitting time”—presumably, not during holy meal-time (TW 39). Lion overlooks the hard work required to execute his vision of spiritual practice. Sister Hope tries to bring Lion back down to earth from the spiritual ether.

Although spending time in nature does not appear to be a form of worship at Fruitlands, eating habits there align with Transcendentalist views of nature. Discussing the preponderance of purslane in the meals at Fruitlands, the narrator writes that “the disappointed planters ate it philosophically, deciding that Nature knew what was best for them, and would generously supply their needs, if they could only learn to digest her ‘sallets’ and wild roots” (TW 42). Here, the word “philosophically” could refer to the diners’ stoicism, but the adverb also suggests careful contemplation of their food. The idea that nature knows best is Transcendentalist, and a Transcendentalist reverence for nature underlies the Fruitlanders’ veganism. Thoreau, too, was a vegetarian in his time at Walden. His diet paralleled the simplicity and clean living he sought, in tune with nature. Brother Timon explains the Fruitlands diet: ““neither sugar, molasses, milk, butter, cheese, nor flesh are to be used among us, for nothing is to be admitted which has caused wrong or death to man or beast”” (TW 39). Just as nature should not harm people, the

counterfactual holds true: people should not harm nature, whether profaning the soil or hurting animals. As he issues this pronouncement, Brother Timon “burnt his fingers with a very hot potato” (TW 39). Through this little detail, the narrator undercuts the sublime, hinting that nature might not be always benevolent or worthy of reverence.

For the Fruitlanders, veganism is another theoretical principle to be translated into action. Preaching vegetarianism in their travels, Lion and Lamb “resisted all temptations of the flesh, contentedly eating apples and bread at well-spread tables, and much afflicting hospitable hostesses by denouncing their food and taking away their appetites, discussing the ‘horrors of shambles,’ the ‘incorporation of the brute in man’ and ‘on elegant abstinence the sign of a pure soul’” (TW 45-46). This passage is another instance of the narrator quoting the commune leaders to highlight the farcical nature of their remarks while distancing herself from them. Lion and Lamb take a perverse pleasure in spoiling other people’s enjoyment in eating, and they do so without offering realistic alternatives. At these tables where Timon and Abel spout off so self-righteously, “When the perplexed or offended ladies asked what they should eat, they got in reply a bill of fare consisting of ‘bowls of sunrise for breakfast,’ ‘solar seeds of the sphere,’ ‘dishes from Plutarch’s chaste table,’ and other viands equally hard to find in any modern market” (TW 46). Again, the philosophers float in the ether of theory. Their ideal diet, like so many of their other ideals, cannot be easily implemented—or implemented at all.

Jane Gage’s story further illustrates the difficulty of implementing lofty principles, for her transgressive eating leads to her expulsion from the Eden of Fruitlands. The narrator reports that “the poor lady hankered after the flesh-pots, and endeavored to stay herself

with private sips of milk, crackers, and cheese, and on one dire occasion she partook of fish at a neighbor's table" (TW 44). A child tattles on Jane, who then receives Timon's reprimand. When the "penitent poetess" sobs that she only ate a "little bit of the tail," Timon counters, "'Yes, but the whole fish had to be tortured and slain that you might tempt your carnal appetite with that one taste of the tail'" (TW 44). This incident shows the stringency of the doctrine, tolerating not even the tiniest infraction, and inflating its significance. That the informant was a child (the narrator notes "the naughty satisfaction of the young detective"), and that the children laugh at Lion's treatment of Jane, may indicate perils of excessive attachment to doctrine (TW 44). The children appear brainwashed. Mercilessly helping enforce their elders' dictates, they are cruel and disrespectful to an adult. Or, perhaps the implication is that the adult behavior they see at the commune (by rule-makers as well as rule-breakers) is laughable, unworthy of respect.

At Fruitlands, eschewing clothes made from animal products is another form of self-denial and self-purification, and another form of respect for nature. We learn that "cotton, silk, and wool were forbidden as the product of slave labor, worm-slaughter, and sheep-robbery" (TW 45). The hyperbole, like that with which the founders discuss meat-eating, discredits the philosophy. When sensible Brother Moses asks about shoes, Lion responds, "'We must yield that point till we can manufacture an innocent substitute for leather. Bark, wood, or some durable fabric will be invented in time'" (TW 39). He cannot say how or when new footwear will be created, but he believes it will happen. Lion, "who liked extreme measures," says that until this new substance materializes, "'those who desire to carry out our idea to the fullest extent can go barefooted'" (TW 39). To satisfy

the founders' principles and spiritualize a mundane matter like clothing, "A new dress was invented" (TW 45). The narrator says, "Some persecution lent a charm to the costume, and the long-haired, linen-clad reformers quite enjoyed the mild martyrdom they endured when they left home" (TW 45). The unfashionable, uncomfortable clothing is self-denial that can lead to salvation.<sup>3</sup>

Another manifestation of spirituality at Fruitlands is the evoking of Eden. This same association occurs with Blithedale, and it is a recurring metaphor in discourse from and about real and fictional communes. The apple connects Fruitlands to Eden, and furthering this connection are the references to earthly paradise that bookend the story. Arriving at the farm, the communards behold a "prospective Eden" (TW 37). Here, Abel Lamb desires "to plant a Paradise, where Beauty, Virtue, Justice, and Love might live happily together, without the possibility of a serpent entering in" (TW 37). At the end of the

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<sup>3</sup> Many real-world utopian texts use communards' clothing to show tension between the artificial and the authentic. Communards play at being farmers, or they are just plain playing, like the masquerading Blithedalers. Viola's husband in *A God in Ruins* wears patches on jeans that do not need patching, pretending to be poor, while Viola wears her fanciful hippie costume of "an antique petticoat" and "long-sleeved bodice" even on a hot day at the beach (Atkinson 51). Her outfit recalls the Blithedalers' clothes. At first Coverdale and his companions wear an array of outdated attire into the fields so that they are "a living epitome of defunct fashions," but they soon "flung them all aside" to adopt the clothing of true farmers (BR 59).

story, “One bleak December day . . . the exiles left their Eden and faced the world again” (TW 49). Leaving the farm, Abel looks back at this “lost Paradise” and mourns his “happy dream,” the idea that could not be realized (TW 49).

Although *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” deal with many of the same subtopics pertaining to thought vs. action, one issue Alcott’s story does not confront is the unique set of difficulties the artist faces on a commune. Many of the protagonists in Alcott’s fiction are girls dealing with their desire to write, notably Jo in *Little Women*. On the other hand, we could consider Alcott’s act of writing and publishing this story to be an indirect statement about the effect of communal living on the artist. While her father, commune founder Bronson Alcott, never achieved success as a published writer, the grown Louisa May Alcott took “charge of the written Word which had been associated with him, but which he had a habit of profligately squandering in ‘talk’” (Johnson, “Cost of an Idea” 47). At the commune, as we have seen, Bronson’s fictional counterpart Abel Lamb engages in much talk and little action of any kind, whether farming or writing. The indolence Alcott saw at Fruitlands might have inspired her to be productive and to turn words into a saleable commodity. Earning a living through words and supporting the family, she accomplishes what her philosopher father could not. Hers is the final word on, and action in, the utopian experiment of Fruitlands.

As this chapter has shown, neither Hawthorne nor Alcott give readers a clear-cut valuation of Transcendentalist communitarianism. The overall impression is that many of these ideas are far from perfect, even inane, but the overarching goals are not entirely worthless. When criticisms or perceived criticisms come from outsiders rather than a

commune insider, both narrators bristle at the attack and defend the endeavors. As Alcott portrays Fruitlands in “Transcendental Wild Oats,” the founders’ goals are unfeasible, and in fact, can be dangerous. *The Blithedale Romance* also presents tension between thought and action at a commune, but, to Coverdale’s dismay (and unlike the situation at Fruitlands) action prevails. At Fruitlands, Lamb’s naïveté, dreaminess, misguided optimism, and unyielding attachment to principle ultimately prove as harmful as Lion’s rigidity and severity. The story upholds the value of practicality and hard work over philosophizing, even if that hard work is not personally fulfilling or spiritually elevating.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE INDIVIDUAL VS. SOCIETY

### The Individual vs. Society in Transcendentalism

Although Transcendentalists did not agree on all matters, Sterling F. Delano notes their shared interest in reform. Quoting from Perry Miller's *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology*, Delano writes of an "important 'coincident persuasion'": an "insistence 'that Transcendental metaphysics led inescapably to a social philosophy and to a critique of existing institutions'" (*Brook Farm* 7). Transcendentalists debated whether self-culture or collective projects would be the better way to critique or to reform the mainstream. Philip F. Gura frames this as a debate between "self and society" (209). For Brook Farm founder George Ripley, collectivism rather than self-culture was the preferred avenue. Fruitlands founders Charles Lane and Bronson Alcott also wanted reform, but they saw change as originating within individuals.

Ripley left his Unitarian pulpit in 1841 (as Emerson had done in 1832). Ripley's purpose was to start "a new ministry of social worship: 'for the purpose of Christianity is to redeem society as well as the individual from sin'" (qtd. in McEmrys). Ripley believed that a reformed society would abolish slavery and provide better opportunity for education and employment. In his "Brook Farm" entry in the *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, Aaron McEmrys continues, "As much as the other Transcendentalists approved Ripley's vision of heaven on earth, they differed as to whether human progress was best made through individuals or in community." For instance, Emerson and Fuller "gave moral support to Brook Farm," but "they believed

that society was best transformed one heart at a time” (McEmrys). Advocates of self-culture contended that societal transformation would come after, and as a result of, individual transformation.

Fruitlands founders Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane tended to see individual reform as the precursor to wider reform. According to Richard Francis in “Circumstances and Salvation: The Ideology of the Fruitlands Utopia,” Alcott and Lane believed that “to have a perfect society we have to have perfect men” (216). Achieving this would involve families, which in their view were instrumental for “large-scale improvement of society” (219). They believed societal change should move outward from the individual to the family to a “consociate family”: “a group of like-minded individuals” bound “by a certain intellectual harmony” rather than “biology” (222). Then, a “new order will crystallize” (220) so that eventually the “‘family’ is coextensive with society as a whole” (222). Alcott and Lane chose Fruitlands as the place to implement this transformation of the family. “Transcendental Wild Oats” uses the term “consociate family” only once, and without explaining it, probably to steer clear of matters suggesting sexuality. To readers, the term might have conjured up the radical arrangements of other nineteenth century communes: celibacy, as with the Shakers, or free love, as at Oneida. Although the consociate family doctrine receives no discussion in “Transcendental Wild Oats,” the story does address the privileging of individuals over family or society.

Both George Ripley and Bronson Alcott tried to entice the venerable Ralph Waldo Emerson to join their communities. Emerson declined. Delano quotes from Emerson’s letter to George Ripley: “‘I think that all I shall solidly do,’ Emerson says, ‘I must do



alone” (*Brook Farm* 37). Affirming this stance, Emerson writes in “New England Reformers,” “Remember that no society can ever be so large as one man.” In this essay, Emerson also expresses qualms about the burgeoning utopian movement to which the world was “awaking” (227). For instance, he sees utopian reformers as believing their experiments will “be magic”: “Men will live and communicate, and plough, and reap, and govern, as by added ethereal power, when once they are united” (227). In contrast with what he paints as reformers’ unrealistic expectations for collective efforts, Emerson argues that reform “must be inward, and not one of covenants, and is to be reached by a reverse of the methods they use. The union is only perfect, when all the uniters are isolated . . . . Each man, if he attempts to join himself to others, is on all sides cramped and diminished of his proportion” (227). “New England Reformers” warns of the inevitable constraints that a collective imposes. Emerson recommends that people work “alone, to recognize in every hour and place the secret soul,” which will be more productive than working with others (227). He dismisses the notion that a collective can become greater than the sum of its parts, doing more good than individuals.

Henry David Thoreau also had reservations about collectivism. About his friends’ commune projects, he says, ““As for these communities, I think I had rather keep a bachelor’s room in Hell than go to board in Heaven”” (qtd. in Myerson, *Cambridge Companion* 193). The year Brook Farm began, a few weeks after Ripley’s farewell sermon, Thoreau wrote in his journal, “True reform can be undertaken any morning before unbarring our doors. It calls no convention. I can do two thirds the reform of the world myself” (*Journal* 247). Three years later—which was one year after the founding

of Fruitlands—instead of joining either commune, Thoreau embarked on his Walden experiment. His deliberate life emphasized solitude over community. Thoreau’s move to Walden applies Emerson’s observation in “Experience” (written the year before) that “in the solitude to which every man is always returning, he has sanity and revelations” (212). Seeking solace and enlightenment through focus on self, Thoreau rejects the collectivist impulse of his friends at Brook Farm and Fruitlands. He goes in the opposite direction: to an intentional community of one.

Margaret Fuller had more interaction with Brook Farm than either Emerson or Thoreau. She visited frequently, she sent her mentally challenged brother to the Brook Farm school, and when ill in 1842, she seriously considered moving there (Higginson 181). Biographer Thomas Wentworth Higginson claims it was “an experiment which had enlisted some of her dearest friends,” and “she found at Brook Farm a sort of cloister for occasional withdrawal from her classes and her conversations” (179). Biographer Megan Marshall reports that Fuller visited Brook Farm often enough to have a room of her own in the Hive building (187). Fuller endorsed the community but would not join it, and Marshall lists several reasons for this decision. Marshall quotes Fuller as saying she might have joined the community if she “had ‘a firmer hold on life’—that is, had the money to invest” (186). Funding was not Fuller’s only issue, however. Marshall notes that though “Margaret published two long essays endorsing the Brook Farmers’ aims in successive issues of *The Dial*, written by Elizabeth Peabody,” Fuller (like Peabody) preferred “city life over rural confraternity” (186). For Fuller, Brook Farm’s drawback could have been that it was in the countryside, or that it was communal, or a combination.

Additionally, Marshall claims Fuller did not join Brook Farm because she “had come to believe that ‘Utopia is impossible to build up’ on earth” (187). John Matteson’s biography of Fuller also offers reasons for her refusal to join Brook Farm: “There was apparently a fatal disjuncture between her own inclinations and those of the community. Seeking above all to learn the mysteries of her own spirit, Fuller was subtly out of phase with an association that cared more about finding ‘harmony with the common mind’” (217). Fuller embraced self-culture, seeing it as the best way for women to improve themselves and their status. Along with Emerson and Thoreau, she had a philosophical preference for self-culture over collectivism as well as a personal distaste for communal living. Her Transcendentalism was not the Transcendentalism of the Brook Farmers.

### **The Individual vs. Society in *The Blithedale Romance***

McEmrys observes that Brook Farm “represented both a test of Transcendentalist dreams and a challenge to Transcendentalist individualism.” Into this breach over how best to change the world stepped Hawthorne, not a Transcendentalist himself, but living in their midst. The Transcendentalists questioned whether to privilege the collective or the individual, and they also questioned the extent to which Brook Farm encouraged collectivism vs. individuality. Some argued that individuality reigned at the commune. For example, a piece by Charles Lane in the 1844 issue of *The Dial* claims, “Brook Farm does not involve either a community of money, of opinions, or of sympathy. The motives, which bring individuals there, may be as various as their numbers” (351). Lane might be

showing leftover resentment about his own Transcendentalist utopia, but his statements accord with Coverdale's description of Blithedale's residents as united only by their disaffection with society. Likewise, Lane's observation that the Brook Farmers "who congregate merely for the attainment of some individual end, must weigh heavily and unfairly upon those whose hearts are really expanded to universal results" accords with Coverdale's failed friendship with the selfish Hollingsworth (351). An unsigned review of *The Blithedale Romance* in *Brownson's Quarterly Review* claims that Brook Farm "drew together a strange group . . . of wild and lawless spirits of all sorts, weary of the restraints of society, and anxious . . . to give free scope to all the impulses, passions, and whims of their undisciplined natures. Of course it soon failed" (561). The description of free spirits better fits the Fruitlanders than the more conservative Brook Farmers, but this perspective holds that the latter were a motley crew. The Norton Critical Edition of *The Blithedale Romance* says this piece was authored by Orestes Brownson himself who, despite his earlier support for Brook Farm, came to "consider such communities as 'humbug'" (Gross and Murphy 271). Between the publication of Lane's piece and Brownson's review, an article in an 1845 issue of *The Liberator* describes Brook Farm as successfully uniting like-minded people. The writer says the commune is "a collective body of enlightened and virtuous individuals, with mind to mind, and shoulder to shoulder, moving on deliberately in steady and progressive union" (180). Inserting himself into this debate about the success of collectivism at Brook Farm, Hawthorne uses the novel to ponder the relationship between self and society, and the extent to which a community can truly become communal. The novel's consideration of the topic is not just

a consequence of its currency at the time Hawthorne was at Brook Farm and when he was writing about it, however. In much of Hawthorne's fiction before and after *Blithedale*, concern with the place of the individual in society is a central issue.

*The Blithedale Romance* engages with this issue in two ways. One way is to consider the benefits of collective endeavor. Chapter Three: Thought vs. Action discusses the novel's attitudes toward utopian communitarianism in general, and this Individual vs. Society chapter considers the novel's attitudes toward one dimension: collectivism. Another way the novel engages with the individual vs. society dichotomy is through the attention it pays to the classism and the questionable level of egalitarianism at the commune. The novel also explores the dangers of communalism, including conflict between members, and alienation from them as well as from outsiders. Through the Coverdale and Hollingsworth characters, the book examines the difficulties of subsuming individual goals to collective goals. Although *The Blithedale Romance* does not talk as much as "Transcendental Wild Oats" or other utopian fiction and non-fiction about the nature of leadership on a commune, this topic receives some attention and is thus addressed in this chapter.

In praising the communards' courage and purpose shortly after his arrival, Coverdale discusses the collective in terms that recall Emerson's contemplation of the individual. For instance, in admiring the Blithedalers' courage in withdrawing from the mainstream, Coverdale uses language similar to Emerson's discussion of individual self-reliance. The Blithedalers, Coverdale says, are men who "give utterance to their wildest visions without dread of laughter or scorn on the part of the audience" (BR 18). Purposely or not,

this echoes Emerson's comment in "The American Scholar" about the "loss and scorn" that will ensue from breaking with the mainstream (64). In "The American Scholar," Emerson notes the "ease and pleasure of treading the old road" rather than forging one's own path (63). Echoing this, Coverdale says of the Blithedalers, "We had left the rusty iron framework of society behind us; we had broken through many hindrances that are powerful enough to keep most people on the weary treadmill of the established system, even while they feel its irksomeness almost as intolerable as we did" (BR 18). Both Emerson and Hawthorne emphasize the courage needed to break out of the well-worn groove, though Hawthorne here applauds a group for doing so rather than an individual.

Climbing off that treadmill, continues Coverdale, "We had stepped down from the pulpit; we had flung aside the pen; we had shut up the ledger" (BR 18-19). The repetition of "we" and the listing of accomplishments serve to underscore the capability and desirability of a group. This repetition and list also imply that individuals need not struggle alone. Leaving the pulpit could refer equally to Emerson as to Ripley, with their different perspectives on self-culture and social reform, but Ripley stepped down to join a group. By applying to the community Emerson's recommendations for the individual, the novel indicates that the communards have already achieved something important: united in purpose, they have forged themselves into an individual entity, a single mind. The chapter of *The Blithedale Romance* in which the above passages appear is entitled "A Knot of Dreamers" (BR 14), and "knot" suggests the solidarity of a tight-knit, strong unit. This positive presentation of the collective counters Emerson's promotion of the individual and his distrust of groups. Hawthorne might not have intentionally inserted

himself into the argument about self-culture vs. collective action as avenues to reform, but the foregoing material indicates that he deliberated on the matter and that he saw some value in the collective.

On the other hand, Coverdale's characteristic ambivalence, seen in Chapter Three: Thought vs. Action, also emerges in his discussion of collectivism. At one point, for example, planning his vacation from Blithedale, Coverdale describes the commune as a bubble. This metaphor conveys both the benefits and drawbacks of a collective. Justifying his leave-taking, Coverdale says, "Our great globe floated in the atmosphere of infinite space like an unsubstantial bubble. No sagacious man will long retain his sagacity, if he live [sic] exclusively among reformers and progressive people, without periodically returning into the settled system of things" (BR 130). The image of a self-contained, iridescent world floating untethered is appealing. Bubbles, however, are "unsubstantial": flimsy, short-lived, ephemeral. While one attraction of the bubble is the opportunity to "live exclusively" amidst the like-minded, a secluded cloister can limit intellectual development. He repeats the word "unsubstantial," the same word Hollingsworth uses to denounce the enterprise.

Further, a bubble like Blithedale can carry its inhabitants too far from the "settled system of things," too much into the stratosphere of the impractical. Coverdale wishes to get away from the reformers and progressives so he can "go and hold a little talk with the conservatives . . . who still, in this intangibility and mistiness of affairs, kept a death-grip on one or two ideas which had not come into vogue since yesterday-morning" (BR 130-31). He calls these conservatives "respectable old blockheads," another combination of

opposing words, showing that his feelings about them are as mixed as his feelings about reformers. On the one hand, their solidity contrasts with the “intangibility and mistiness” of the Blithedalers’ newly minted and trendy ideas. On the other hand, the conservatives are stolid as well as solid, for they hold onto received ideas with a “death-grip,” a phrase echoing Emerson’s contempt for the “sepulchres of the fathers” in “Nature” (27).

Coverdale contends that his vacation is an effort to “correct himself” by gaining a new perspective. He is ambivalent about the commune but still seeks to refresh and reinforce his commitment to it.

Coverdale’s contemplation of collectivism could be read as a conversation with Transcendentalists of Blithedale’s day. Considering the value of a collective, Emerson adopts a snide tone in “The New England Reformers” when writing about what a group can supposedly accomplish: “Four persons lift a heavy man from the ground by the little finger only, and without sense of weight” (227). Coverdale’s exaggerated exaltations about “mutual aid” can seem similarly snide (BR 19). Emerson’s and Hawthorne’s observations could almost be a back-and-forth exchange with an 1845 piece in *The Liberator* portraying Brook Farm as a model collective. Emerson delivered “The New England Reformers” as a lecture to William Lloyd Garrison’s American Anti-Slavery Society in March 1844. Eight months later, in November 1845, *The Liberator*—the paper Garrison co-founded—hails the commune as “a collective body,” a “union” and asks “what difficulties can they not surmount, what obstacles can withstand them? If, for example, I meet with a stone which I am unable to remove from its position, an associate is by to assist me in the effort, and thus two can accomplish what one alone was totally



unable to attempt?” (180). This seems a re-working of Emerson’s remark, stripping it of acerbity. In turn, Coverdale’s insincere-seeming effusiveness about the collective could support Emerson’s depiction of it as over-rated. Emerson and Hawthorne are naysayers, while *The Liberator*’s “Associationist” has a higher opinion.

A specific critique of collectivism emerges in the novel when Coverdale exposes problems with the purported egalitarianism. In a socialist community, individuals are supposed to band together for the common good, and they are supposed to be on the same footing. At various points in *The Blithedale Romance*, Coverdale considers whether the commune’s residents really treat one another as equals. He is aware of inequities between men and women, as Chapter Five shows. This Individual vs. Society chapter shows that he is also aware of the classism underlying a theoretically classless society, what he frequently and sarcastically calls a ‘brotherhood and sisterhood.’ *The Blithedale Romance* challenges the idea that a Transcendentalist commune erases class or class prejudice. In Hawthorne’s fictionalized commune, as in mainstream society, people from different classes do not mix comfortably.

One example of classism occurs after Zenobia first meets Priscilla. Zenobia says dismissively that Priscilla “‘is neither more nor less . . . than a seamstress from the city; and she has probably no more transcendental purpose than to do my miscellaneous sewing, for I suppose she will hardly expect to make my dresses’” (BR 31). Zenobia does not perceive a mere manual worker as having an intellectual side. She believes Priscilla best-suited to remain a servant, though not a servant to be entrusted with skilled or artistic labor. Zenobia’s superiority toward Priscilla resurfaces later in the novel when she

mentions Coverdale's apparent lack of attraction to the girl. Says Zenobia, "'I wonder, in such Arcadian freedom of falling in love as we have lately enjoyed, it never occurred to you to fall in love with Priscilla. In society, indeed, a genuine American never dreams of stepping across the inappreciable air-line which separates one class from another. But what was rank to the colonists of Blithedale?'" (BR 156) Zenobia refers to the firmly established class divide that persists in a supposedly democratic nation. The sarcastic tone of her question signals that she sees this same classism at an ostensibly egalitarian commune. Kent Bales writes of Zenobia's treatment of Priscilla, "Since by supposed conviction and radical rhetoric all Blithedalers are brothers and sisters, Zenobia's deliberate cruelty to Priscilla violates the community ethic, a violation the worse because Priscilla is a blood sister" (45). Zenobia's refusal to see Priscilla as intelligent or artistic, and her rudeness to her under-privileged sister, shows that the collective is not a family of equals, nor a family of any type.

Right after arriving at Blithedale, Coverdale sees the difficulty of eradicating, or even crossing, class lines. He meets Mrs. Foster, and with her are two young women who look "rather awkward withal, as not well knowing what was to be their position in our new arrangement of the world. We shook hands affectionately all round, and congratulated ourselves that the blessed state of brotherhood and sisterhood, at which we aimed, might fairly be dated from this moment" (BR 13). At Blithedale, members of different classes do not know how to behave with one another and do not fully understand their place in the new order. The word "blessed" is more "mock grandiloquence," to borrow Elliott's term (72), for the brotherhood and sisterhood falters even in a mundane encounter instead

of functioning in a praiseworthy manner.

Reinforcing the impression of uncomfortable mixing of classes is Coverdale's description of that first meal. Zenobia invites the group to "the first practical trial of our theories of equal brotherhood and sisterhood" (BR 23). Again using the word "awkward," Coverdale writes, "We all sat down—grizzly Silas Foster, his rotund helpmate, and the two bouncing handmaidens, included—and looked at one another in a friendly but rather awkward way" (BR 23). Note that he describes each of these people with a derogatory adjective. The class-mingling leads to self-conscious, stilted behavior when an "oppressive" silence overtakes the gathering (BR 24). The working class diners bear the brunt of the awkwardness. Coverdale observes, "The laboring oar was with our unpolished companions; it being far easier to condescend than to accept of condescension" (BR 23). That he sees them as "unpolished" shows the falseness of calling them "companions." Sitting down with lesser folk, "We people of superior cultivation and refinement (for as such, I presume, we unhesitatingly reckoned ourselves) felt as if something were already accomplished towards the millennium of love" (BR 23). This statement unsparingly derides the upper class guests' self-satisfaction about eating with people of inferior status.

During the meal, Coverdale keeps musing on the difficulty of crossing class lines. He asks himself whether the upper-class communards would "have taken our places among these good people" if not "for the cherished consciousness that it was not by necessity but choice" (BR 23). As Barbara Packer writes about this scene in *The Transcendentalists*, the "'equanimity' with which the aristocratic Blithedaleers bore 'the hardship and

humiliations of a life of toil' owed much to their knowledge that they could choose at any time to leave their humble surroundings and return to lives of comfort" (136). Coverdale is embarrassed about his prejudices and privileges as well as his condescension. He continues, "If ever I did deserve to be soundly cuffed by a fellow mortal, for secretly putting weight upon some imaginary social advantage, it must have been while I was striving to prove myself ostentatiously his equal and no more" (BR 23-24). He bemoans his inability to bridge the class divide. Packer claims that "many of the Brook Farmers testified to the sense of excitement they got from crossing class boundaries" (136). To his credit, Coverdale gets no thrill from slumming. His self-awareness is particularly and perhaps unusually acute when he recognizes his own gracelessness in the situation.

Despite Coverdale's discussions of class issues, and though he recognizes and is dismayed by his own condescension, at times he might be more elitist than he realizes. Whether Hawthorne intentionally created this gap is unclear, but the result is a character whose self-awareness about classism has limits. Coverdale explicitly critiques the lack of true egalitarianism in the collective, but his failure to recognize his own classism shows how deeply entrenched are such attitudes. A well-meaning communard cannot easily overcome his own bias. A communal environment that forces class-mixing cannot redress this shortcoming in human nature. An example of unwitting snobbery is Coverdale's mention of drinking tea at the first dinner "out of earthen cups to-night, and in earthen company" (BR 23). His observation imparts a lack of humanity to those it describes, for he sees them as the same lumpen clay as the earthenware. This contrasts with the fine, delicate "porcelain" or "silver" to which some Blithedalers are accustomed, and to which

(as Coverdale notes) they could return whenever they chose (BR 23). *In Whitewashing America: Material Culture and Race in the Antebellum Imagination*, Bridget T.

Heneghan writes of this dinner at Blithedale, “Although the narrator recognizes the hypocrisy involved, he cannot escape the social distinctions marked by the simple dishes used” (xi). The tableware represents “an antebellum use of material goods that identified and created social identity . . . when an evolution in dishware had developed to encourage the link between class and race and the things one used” (xi). Rather than the porcelain that British manufacturers had recently begun distributing, Silas Foster’s earthen dishes “belong to an outdated style and buff color that, along with his ‘sun-burnt’ complexion, visually segregate him from his guests” (xii). This likening of Foster to dark dishware, along with references to Foster and Hollingsworth as dark-skinned and vulgar, are barely perceptible glimpses of racism in this novel about white characters, associating class bias with race bias.

The narrator also unwittingly displays elitism when he calls attention to Foster’s proletarian manners. The farmer’s behavior is as primitive as his earthenware. At dinner, “grim Silas Foster” was “pouring out his own tea and gulping it down with no more sense of its exquisiteness than if it were a decoction of catnip . . . and in all other respects behaving less like a civilized Christian than the worst kind of an ogre” (BR 29).

Coverdale previously describes Foster as “grizzly” and as communicating with people “as if he were speaking to his oxen” (BR 18). The passage above furthers the image of him as subhuman. Like most other working class figures introduced at the novel’s beginning (except Hollingsworth and Priscilla), Foster mostly fades into the background

as the novel progresses. This indicates their insignificance to Coverdale; once he has made his points about class, they cease to register with him.

Hollingsworth, too, is a common man Coverdale compares to an animal. Coverdale's first impression of the blacksmith is in "his shaggy great-coat all covered with snow," looking "quite as much like a polar bear as a modern philanthropist" (BR 25). A few pages later, Coverdale mentions Hollingsworth's "shaggy head," and like Silas Foster, Hollingsworth has a "dark complexion" (BR 27). After the first evening's dinner, Coverdale reports that Hollingsworth "would glare upon us from the thick shrubbery of his meditations, like a tiger out of a jungle" (BR 34). In Coverdale's estimation, Hollingsworth never possessed more "external polish" or "mere courtesy of manner" than a "tolerably educated bear" (BR 27). Coverdale's descriptions reveal his perception of yet another working class person as inferior and brutish. Coverdale finds a similar brutishness in people outside the commune. Responding to the community's plans for raising livestock, Coverdale thinks, "Pigs! Good heavens! had we come out from among the swinish multitude for this?" (BR 20). Characterizing people as porcine, Coverdale condescends not just to his fellow communards but to those whom the Blithedalers purportedly hope to reform. The notion of brotherhood and sisterhood encompasses common people neither inside nor outside the commune.

The subject of class appears often in real-world utopian fiction. This is another instance of *The Blithedale Romance* setting the stage for later works. In fiction as in life, when different classes try to blend at a commune, difficulties can ensue. Fictional characters like Coverdale, and possibly the authors who created them, reveal their

snobbery. In Rebecca Harding Davis' *Margret Howth: A Story of To-day*, the commune's main purpose is to improve the lot of working people, but Mr. Howth tells Dr. Knowles the plan "will fail" because of its focus on the "lowest class" (24). Davis's story "The Harmonists" notes that George Rapp "did not look through his own class for equal intelligence and culture with himself of whom to make converts" (532). The non-communitarian characters who meet Rapp's followers show their disdain for these recruits as the "dregs of society" (535). One says Rapp knew the "crookedness and weakness of the natures he was trying to elevate" and that "many years of Rapp's culture would be needed to spiritualize German boors" (532). To the characters who make such statements, and perhaps to Davis herself, Father Rapp's followers are clearly inferior. In Marie Howland's novel *Papa's Own Girl*, the communitarian plan also involves inviting in and thus elevating working people. Their supposed betters cannot fathom how the class-mixing will transpire, or they find it ludicrous. Thinking about an upcoming social event, for instance, one young woman "was anxious to see how young men who actually worked all day would deport themselves in white kid gloves;" she anticipates "rare amusement" (526). In novels where classes mix, classism cannot be suppressed, whether the authors intentionally show it or unconsciously perpetuate it.

*Papa's Own Girl* comments on the effect that classes should have on one another when mingling. The founder of Howland's fictional Fourierist community, a titled European aristocrat, see himself as a "leveler" because of his efforts to educate and otherwise improve the lot of working people (537). He says, "The more I associate with laborers, even those who have had little advantage of schools, the more I am struck with

the saving virtue that is in them” (537). In his view, the company of these noble savages elevates the upper classes, rather than the other way around. At Brook Farm, in contrast, as Barbara Packer writes in *The Transcendentalists*, “Behind the boasted egalitarianism of Brook Farm—members of the finest Boston families working and eating side by side with mechanics and servants—lay an unquestioning snobbery, which took it for granted that the manners of the lower classes would be refined and softened by such contact” (136). Brook Farm and *The Blithedale Romance* are products of their time: an era before the labor reform movement during which Howland depicts upper class people as benefitting from exposure to common people. Although Coverdale is ashamed of his attitude and behavior, he cannot help but patronize the commune’s lower class members and perhaps feel that he is doing them a favor with his presence.

Although Hawthorne appears quite concerned with egalitarianism, he does not deal directly with questions of leadership. Other works of fiction about real-world communes take much interest in the powerful personalities who start the project, gather acolytes, or fight for control. Heading communes in *Drop City*, *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, *Arcadia*, and *Only Love Can Break Your Heart* are charismatic, domineering leaders who abuse their power, especially through sexual relationships. In *Arcadia*, the leader seems to take his pick of the commune’s women, but this is not his only abuse; at one point, a male communard accuses him of ignoring community consensus and instead issuing ““diktats”” (87). These leader characters seem modeled on real-life figures like Charles Manson, or like Father Yod, the leader of a 1970s California commune who took twelve wives from among the membership. Yod and his followers are the subject of the 2012



documentary *The Source Family*. In “Transcendental Wild Oats,” the critique of egalitarianism includes observations about Timon Lion’s authoritarian leadership. At the opposite end of the spectrum are feckless men like Abel Lamb who resembles the incompetent community founder in William Dean Howells’ *New Leaf Mills: A Chronicle*. In utopian texts, neither extreme of leadership—strong or weak—proves effective. In fact, in historical and fictional utopian narratives, shortcomings in leadership are often blamed for the projects’ failures. Blithedale might be the rare exception among utopian texts by not addressing leadership directly, but perhaps this gap could be a statement in itself.

In *The Blithedale Romance*, maybe we find no major leader characters because the question of leadership is not germane to Hawthorne’s fictional narrative, or maybe because it did not interest him. Another possibility is that the de-emphasis on leadership serves as a positive comment on egalitarianism: although the rank-and-file members do not have equal standing, no leader stands above them all. Yet another possibility is that the gap serves to show us how one powerful figure, Zenobia, has *de facto* influence but is not a *de jure* ruler. John C. Hirsh reads Zenobia as a type of leader, observing, “She is constantly identified as a queen . . . her queenliness indicates her emotional centrality to the Blithedale community, which she rules not with Hollingsworth’s power, but with her own natural and energetic responsiveness” (142). An example of Hirsch’s claim could be the May-day celebration; Coverdale thinks it may have been “declared a movable festival” through “Zenobia’s sole decree” (BR 53); in his memory, she calls the shots. Painting her as a strong presence who lacks a designated leadership role thus calls

attention to women's limited roles at Blithedale.

Still another possibility is that, by excluding a strong leader figure, Hawthorne is commenting on George Ripley's weakness. Silas Foster, "tutor at husbandry," comes closest to being Blithedale's leader (BR 13). In Foster, however, Hawthorne has constructed a character very different from George Ripley, activist and writer as well as farmer. The novel presents Foster as un-unintellectual. Additionally, he is too earthy to be a leader, and at the same time, too spectral. When Coverdale first meets Foster, the "uncouth" farmer has been at work; "steam arose from his soaked garments, so that the stout yeoman looked vaporous and spectre-like" (BR 18). Foster is a strange mix of substance and insubstantiality, characteristics that singly and in conjunction render him unfit for leadership.

Minimizing Foster's role and drawing him as very different from Ripley, Hawthorne avoids the possibility of direct comparison, thus sparing Ripley from scrutiny. Thus, the absent leader could be a form of allusion to Ripley's weak leadership that his contemporaries observed. For example, Margaret Fuller doubted his abilities; Matteson claims she thought Ripley "too impetuous" with inadequate "insight as to principles" (*Fuller* 215). Delano argues that Ripley was a primary cause of Brook Farm's demise. Although "Ripley always had the very best intentions . . . he was nearly as ill prepared for the Brook Farm venture as Amos Bronson Alcott" was for Fruitlands (Delano, *Brook Farm* 319). The lack of attention to leadership in *The Blithedale Romance* could indicate that Ripley was a cipher in some respects. Not trying to fictionalize Ripley at all could have been a move to protect Ripley's reputation. Further, that Coverdale does not blame

the commune's failure on poor leadership could be another way of protecting Ripley.

In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne explores other complications with communal living, in addition to intractable inequality and a leadership deficiency. One set of difficulties corresponds with Hawthorne's treatment of community and alienation in many other works, including those written before his Brook Farm stay. Many of Hawthorne's fictional characters are torn between the advantages and disadvantages of community membership. Several times in *The Blithedale Romance*, as noted earlier, Hawthorne extols the collective, in which individuals remove themselves from the rest of society and enter into an especially close relationship with fellow beings. On the other hand, *Blithedale* also raises doubts about how individuals co-exist within a collective.

Discussing the recurring theme of alienation in Hawthorne's work, F.O. Matthiessen contrasts Emerson's attitude toward the individual's internal life with those of the so-called dark Romantic writers: Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allen Poe. Exalting the individual, Emerson's "highest revelation is that God is in every man" (Matthiessen 8). In contrast, the "possible tragic consequences of isolation, the haunted reverberations of the soul locked into its prison, were the burdens of Hawthorne and Poe" (8). Matthiessen observes that both Hawthorne and Melville were "impressed . . . by the terrifying consequences of an individual's separation from his fellow beings" (443). *The Blithedale Romance* considers these consequences. As the next pages show, the novel emphasizes Coverdale's desire to belong while simultaneously needing privacy and a discrete inner life. *Blithedale* also depicts the struggle of residents to balance individual goals with collective goals. Both Coverdale and Hollingsworth are consumed by

ambitions distracting them from the communitarian project and isolating them from others. Coverdale wants to write poetry, and Hollingsworth has an Ahab-like monomania for prison reform. Hollingsworth also resembles Melville's Bartleby in that he prefers pleasing himself rather than fully complying with community priorities.

In Hawthorne's best-known novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, published four years before *The Blithedale Romance*, disobeying community rules leads to the protagonist's punishment. The mark of shame pinned on Hester Prynne has the "effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself" (47). Her isolation, however, produces at least one benefit: she gains freedom, for "the scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread" (182). Prynne could have left the community that judges her and marks her as 'other,' but she opts to remain, carving out space on its fringes. *The Scarlet Letter* takes no firm position on society and isolation but considers the value and harm in each, and dramatizes the challenge of finding balance—a balance Prynne actually seems to achieve, unlike Coverdale. The 1835 short story "Wakefield" also illustrates Hawthorne's fascination with self and society. The protagonist walks out of his marriage with no warning, watching his abandoned wife from afar before returning twenty years later. The narrator confronts the ramifications of this self-inflicted alienation: "by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever" (75). Leaving the mainstream or separating oneself from others, or from a close relationship, is dangerous. These are just two works in which Hawthorne presents liminal figures negotiating their relationship to community. Outsider protagonists also appear in some of his best-known

works, including “My Kinsman, Major Molineaux” (1831), “Young Goodman Brown” (1835), “Ethan Brand” (1850), and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851).

*The Blithedale Romance* provides a setting especially well-suited for investigating the nature of community: both the entanglements a commune produces and the problems arising when individuals do not fully engage with the commune. Indeed, Taylor Stoehr claims that *The Blithedale Romance* was Hawthorne’s “most serious attempt to grapple with these opposing and contradictory magnetisms” of community vs. isolation (90). (Other “magnetisms,” according to Stoehr, are faith vs. cynicism and life vs. art. Binaries abound in *The Blithedale Romance*.) The communal situation complicates the matter of community. Commune residents withdraw from mainstream society, but at the same time, they are thrust into unusually close relations with others. At Blithedale, intimacy creates conflict. Additionally, *The Blithedale Romance* confronts the necessity of surrendering individual aims for the greater good, for a commune to succeed. Community membership entails sacrifice, but in turn, it does not necessarily protect individuals from “the haunted reverberations of the soul locked into its prison” (Matthiessen 8). Although Matthiessen does not refer to *The Blithedale Romance* in this passage, his words aptly describe Coverdale’s suffering.

At a commune, intense togetherness often generates conflict. Being in “close affinity with the passions, the errors, and the misfortunes” (BR 189) of other people means that “an unfriendly state of feeling could not occur between any two members, without the whole society being more or less commoted and made uncomfortable thereby” (BR 129). Coverdale reports, “If one of us happened to give his neighbor a box on the ear, the tingle

was immediately felt, on the same side of everybody's head. Thus, even on the supposition that we were far less quarrelsome than the rest of the world, a great deal of time was necessarily wasted in rubbing our ears" (BR 129). The tight quarters and connections make communards especially attuned to one another's emotions. Coverdale sees the good in this closeness, for the "nervous sympathy" was "apparently betokening an actual bond of love among us" (BR 129). The downside, however, is that closeness becomes "rather inconvenient in its practical operation" (BR 129). Extreme intimacy begets love, or is evidence of such love, but it also begets argument and hurt, and it generally complicates human interactions.

The topic of conflict recurs in texts about utopias. Often, these texts perpetuate the assumption that conflict is inevitable within a collective. As D.H. Lawrence says about *The Blithedale Romance*, "of course" the communards "fell out like cats and dogs" (112). Marie Howland, in her novel *Papa's Own Girl*, reverses this assumption. Her purpose is to promote Fourierism, so she writes about how the fictionalized commune is "scientifically adapted to the true laws of social harmony" such that people work together "quietly, regularly, and satisfactorily" (507). Further, amongst the residents "there is plenty of suggestion and lively discussion, but there is no discord. Even the narrowest and most selfish have learned that the happiness and continued prosperity of the individual lies in, and is indissolubly interwoven with, the happiness and prosperity of the whole" (507). She insists that individuals will come to see how their well-being is secondary to and dependent upon the group's well-being. Coverdale's discomfort also contrasts with the Shakers in William Dean Howell's *The Undiscovered Country* who

live in one building. Howells' Shakers "crowd together for comfort and encouragement" (346); they find this behavior "an instinct" (346) and are "peaceful" without "bickerings" (322). Whether communards benefit or suffer from togetherness, texts about utopias often discuss how tight living conditions shape relationships and affect individuals. While many real-world utopian texts feature in-fighting, including *Arcadia*, *Drop City*, and *A God in Ruins*, Howland and Howells shows us that this is not a compulsory element of the fiction. Nonetheless, Howland and Howell seem as compelled as Hawthorne and other writers to address conflict, even though they try to anticipate and counter prevailing beliefs about the inevitability of strife.

In addition to the problem of conflict at Blithedale, another aspect of communal life troubling Coverdale is the difficulty of preserving self in the close community. In these lines, he talks about the problem of conflict as well as the problem of maintaining self-identity: "The bands, that were silken once, are apt to become iron fetters, when we desire to shake them off. Our souls, after all, are not our own" (BR 179). Commune members become so intertwined that they are virtually handcuffed to one another as if in a prison. Closeness can irritate, but worse, "we feel the tug, the agony, of our abortive effort to resume an exclusive sway over ourselves"; closeness can rob individuals of their jurisdiction over their very souls (BR 179). Here, Coverdale's hyperbole seems to express real anguish rather than demeaning an idea by overstating it.

Conflicts as well as struggles for self-determination are problems at a commune, as is a fundamental disunity. Coherence is not easily accomplished. One dimension of the challenge, as we have seen, is bringing together members of different classes. Another

conflict between individual and group at a commune is bringing together people with dissimilar personalities. Coverdale says, “On the whole, it was a society such as has seldom met together; nor, perhaps, could it reasonably be expected to hold together long. Persons of marked individuality—crooked sticks, as some of us might be called—are not exactly the easiest to bind up into a faggot” (BR 58). Coverdale recognizes that a community of misfits and malcontents is unlikely to succeed. He writes, “Our bond, it seems to me, was not affirmative, but negative. We had individually found one thing or another to quarrel with in our past life, and were pretty well agreed to the expediency of lumbering along with the old system any further” (BR 58). They are like-minded in that they share dissatisfaction with the mainstream, but “as to what should be substituted, there was much less unanimity” (BR 58). The commune attracts people unhappy in or with the outside world, but the commune has no easy solutions for redressing society’s shortcomings or the resulting disaffection. Further, the “negative” bond of discontent is not an ideal basis for unity. Outcasts do not easily fit themselves into any type of society.

Our narrator discusses disunity when reporting on the arrival of new commune members. He says that these “recruits to our little army of saints and martyrs . . . were mostly individuals who had gone through such an experience as to disgust them with ordinary pursuits” (BR 57). With the phrase “saints and martyrs,” Coverdale is referring to the tendency to spiritualize a utopian project. The phrase also indicates that communards are those who do not fit in with mainstream society. They are above it because of their saintliness but also mistreated or victimized by it. Coverdale also refers to the pleasure and relief experienced when people at odds with society can find their



own kind at the commune: those who are similarly marginalized. He writes that when the new Blithedalers were “comparing their minds one with another they often discovered that this idea of a Community had been growing up, in silent and unknown sympathy, for years” (BR 57). His description of the group resembles the consociate family that Fruitlands sought to create, individuals united by intellect rather than biology.

Benjamin Scott Grossberg addresses the issue of binding crooked sticks. He notes that “the problem with Blithedale is not simply that Hollingsworth's vision is incompatible, but that all the characters' visions are” (24). Grossberg finds “a loose consensus among critics” that “Blithedale fails because of an incompatibility of vision, whether Hollingsworth alone be the cause, or whether such incompatibility be endemic to utopian thinking” (4). He writes further, “The problem with the community is not the failure of its vision, but the failure of its members to agree on a unified vision. Just as Blithedalers find fault with each suggestion of a name for the community during their first night together, they implicitly find fault with the vision each brings to make their utopia a reality” (23). Blithedale might fail for reasons other than lack of “unified vision.” Coverdale, for example, blames the conversion to Fourierism. Certainly, however, “incompatibility” looms large as a culprit in the commune’s demise. Despite the goal of harmony, personal objectives can never be in perfect accord.

Coverdale and Hollingsworth each have a personal agenda that undermines his commitment to the collective. Coverdale shows his disapproval of Hollingsworth’s selfish aims, but he does not see his own as equally selfish and thus potentially destructive to the community. Coverdale praises Blithedale’s pluralistic goals, but at the

same time, his motive for joining the commune is singular: to produce poetry. Early on, he includes himself in the “we” who have “flung aside the pen,” yet he moves to Blithedale to take up the pen. Hawthorne makes Coverdale a writer, as he was when he joined Brook Farm, but his character’s profession does more than develop the book’s autobiographical aspect. The occupation of poet is essential to the construction of Coverdale as a solitary, inwardly focused character, the loner in the midst of a group.

Coverdale withdraws from the collective in various ways, besides prioritizing poetry and besides his actual leave-taking interval from Blithedale. Another act of withdrawal, Coverdale’s escape to a “hermitage,” is both mental and physical (BR 91). Coverdale says, “Though fond of society, I was so constituted as to need these occasional retirements, even in a life like that of Blithedale, which was itself characterized by a remoteness from the world” (BR 83). For these “retirements,” he seeks a private physical space conducive to private mental space. He finds a “hollow chamber of rare seclusion . . . an admirable place to make verses” or “to meditate an essay for the Dial” (BR 91-92). In addition to reading a Transcendentalist journal, Coverdale experiences nature there in Emersonian fashion, for in his solitude, “the many tongues of Nature whispered mysteries, and seemed to ask only a little stronger puff of wind to speak out the solution of its riddle” (BR 92). He engages in the intellectual activities of writing, reading, and meditation as well as a baser sensory pleasure: smoking a cigar (BR 92). Despite these happy pursuits, he associates his retreat with death. The hollow is formed by “decay,” and it is an “aerial sepulchre of its own leaves” (BR 92). Seeing grape-laden vines, he daydreams about surprising the community with the fruit, but his vision has “some of the

crushed ones crimsoning my brow as with a blood-stain” (BR 92). In this imagined scenario, Coverdale becomes another Hawthorne character bearing the visible manifestation of inner guilt. The stain would reveal his secret, that he sneaks away from the group, stealing space and time for himself.

Despite his covertness and his guilt, Coverdale is not alone in wanting private space at Blithedale, and such privacy does not seem to be censured. Coverdale mentions the Phalanstery, then in the planning stages, “where the great and general family should have its abiding-place” (BR 119). Even with a large communal dwelling available, “Individual members, too, who made it a point of religion to preserve the sanctity of an exclusive home, were selecting sites for their cottages, by the wood-side, or on the breezy swells, or in the sheltered nook of some little valley” (BR 119). The community appears to tolerate residents’ preference for a modicum of isolation. This brief discussion of housing, rare particulars about communal life, shows the communards testing the boundaries between public and private domains as well as the limits of togetherness. Coverdale’s words portray the need for a secluded home as an immutable and honorable part of human existence. “Point of religion” and “sanctity” speak to the importance of a refuge far from the madding crowd.

Oppressed by communal living, Coverdale is compelled not only to find private space but also to retain private ownership over something. He writes that his “hermitage was my one exclusive possession while I counted myself a brother of the socialists” (BR 92). As a room of his own, “It symbolized my individuality, and aided me in keeping it inviolate” (BR 92). Coverdale, whose name suggests the very kind of “sheltered nook of

some little valley” sought by some communards (BR 119), says this about his alone-times: “Unless renewed by a yet further withdrawal towards the inner circle of self-communion, I lost the better part of my individuality. My thoughts became of little worth, and my sensibilities grew as arid as a tuft of moss” (BR 83). These lines speak to one of Coverdale’s main problems at the commune: maintaining his sense of self amidst the throng. He cannot sacrifice all to the collective. He cannot set aside his yearning to have something all his own, his desire to write poetry rather than devote himself wholly to communal farming, his intellectual acuity, or his innermost self.

Although Coverdale enjoys the seclusion of his hermitage, when he is there, he still thinks about and even longs for company. As he pines in the pine branches, this longing adds another dimension to his struggle with alienation and community. A few chapters prior to the one in which he describes his treetop nook, he says, “In the midst of cheerful society, I had often a feeling of loneliness” (BR 65). Surrounded by supposedly like-minded people, he does not feel one with them. He does not feel at peace with alone-ness, either. This uneasiness contrasts, perhaps purposefully, with the Emerson’s definition of a “great man” in “Self Reliance”: one “who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” (Of all Hawthorne’s characters, Hester Prynne might come closest to displaying this kind of greatness.) Coverdale says he brings no guest to his hermitage “because, after Hollingsworth failed me, there was no longer the man alive with whom I could think of sharing all” (BR 92). Gloomily abandoning the prospect of male friendship, he does not yet despair of finding female companionship: “Had it ever been my fortune to spend a honey-moon, I should have thought seriously of

inviting my bride up thither” (BR 92). Perhaps this shows how Hawthorne pined for his fiancée Sophia Peabody when he was at Brook Farm.

One manifestation of Coverdale’s alienation, or one cause of it, is his detached view of others. Coverdale relates to his comrades with what Frederick C. Crews calls “aesthetic distance” (375). Coverdale does not see others as real people in the here and now. After admitting his loneliness in the chapter “Hollingsworth, Zenobia, Priscilla,” Coverdale says, “For it was impossible to be sensible that, while these three characters figured so largely on my private theater, I—though probably reckoned friend by all—was at best a secondary or tertiary personage amongst them” (BR 65). He acknowledges his disconnection and also acknowledges that it is partly self-imposed. It indicates the degree of remove at which he stands in the commune, for Coverdale (as Hawthorne apparently did at Brook Farm) positions himself as an observer. Stoehr says of Coverdale, “It is because he regards his friends as actors in a drama taking place on the private stage of his own imagination, that he cannot become one of them and enter into their feelings directly” (101). Coverdale seems most interested in people as subjects.

We see this aspect of Coverdale’s character when he precipitates his crisis with Hollingsworth by chattering about how later generations will view the first Blithedalers. The founders, Coverdale imagines, will be remembered as “mythical personages, or exceedingly picturesque and poetical ones, at all events” (BR 120). Seeing himself and his friends as subjects of art, he envisions their portraits hanging in a public hall. The communards also will be the subject of “a romantic story,” of “legends,” of “an Epic Poem” (BR 120). Upbraiding Coverdale for this train of thought, Hollingsworth notes

that the communal experiment has served only to give Coverdale “a theme for poetry” (BR 121). Rather than fully involve himself, Coverdale will merely write about what he observes, objectifying his comrades.

Hollingsworth is not the only character who mentions the artist’s detachment. On Coverdale’s first night at Blithedale, Zenobia says this about Priscilla: ““Since you see the young woman in so poetical a light . . . you had better turn the affair into a ballad”” (BR 31). Coverdale rises to the bait, perhaps purposefully deflecting Zenobia’s caustic tone by responding with sincerity. He says, ““It shall be woven into the ballad”” (BR 31). This, indeed, is what he ultimately does, in the form of the novel he narrates. Much later in the book, when Coverdale comes upon a heartbroken Zenobia, she says, “Ah, I perceive what you are about! You are turning this whole affair into a ballad. Pray let me hear as many stanzas as you happen to have ready” (BR 205-6). Coverdale hushes her, saying, “Heaven knows what an ache is in my soul!” (BR 206). She does not believe him capable of feeling real pain, only aesthetic appreciation of it.

This novel again brings up the idea of separation and aesthetic distance when Professor Westervelt questions Coverdale about Zenobia and Priscilla. Coverdale replies that Zenobia has closer friends than he (BR 90). Coverdale then reflects on the nature of his connection to the women and how much interest he should pay to Westervelt’s pursuit of them. He says, “My own part, in these transactions, was singularly subordinate. It resembled that of the Chorus in a classic play, which seems to be set aloof from the possibility of personal concernment” (BR 90). He is the “calm observer” whose “office” it is “to give applause, when due, and sometimes an inevitable tear, to detect the final

fitness of incident to character, and distil, in his long-brooding thought, the whole morality of the performance” (BR 90). Here, Coverdale sums up his stance and role in the commune: to stand back and then write, dispensing judgment.

Coverdale’s voyeurism is not solely in the service of art; it is habit. James L. Machor describes Coverdale as having a “dilettantish curiosity” (31). Leslie A. Fiedler calls him a “peeping tom” (227). To Crews, Coverdale is uncertain about whether his purpose is to forge intimate relationships or “pry coldly” into their secrets, and thus he “half-intentionally alienates all three of his potential intimates” (376). Coverdale becomes a “literary snoop” because he cannot lessen his distance from others, not the other way around (Crews 376). In his city hotel, Coverdale positions himself as he does when hiding in his hermitage: “I felt a hesitation about plunging into this muddy tide of human activity and pastime. It suited me better, for the present, to linger on the brink, or hover in the air above it” (BR 136). His spying on Zenobia and Priscilla from across the road is an intensification of his usual mode of studying people, of his habitual distance.

The topic of alienation allows us to consider one way Hawthorne fictionalizes his own experience. As Stoehr writes, “Hawthorne was known as a recluse among his friends” (98). Delano gives us a detail of Brook Farm life illustrating Hawthorne’s reclusive behavior there. Apparently, one of Hawthorne’s favorite places there was an old couch under the stairs where he would read and “combine society and solitude . . . while he quietly observed—like the protagonist Miles Coverdale . . . the comings and goings of his housemates” (Delano, *Brook Farm* 50). Considering “the degree to which Coverdale’s problem was also his creator’s,” Matthiessen reminds us that “Coverdale is not

Hawthorne any more than Prufrock is Eliot” (228). Nevertheless, “in each case the author has exorcised a dangerous part of his existence by treating it with irony” (Matthiessen 229). Hawthorne is interrogating his own tendency to withdraw. As Brenda Wineapple writes, he “regards himself as displaced and out of time, a spectator never quite able to get what he wants” (250). Setting the novel at a commune allows Hawthorne to ponder his own internal isolation during and after Brook Farm. At the start of *The Blithedale Romance*, it seems as if communal life could be the antidote to this tragic aspect of the human condition. We learn from Miles Coverdale that it is not.

Coverdale questions his connection to the collective and places himself apart from its members while simultaneously battling a fear of exclusion. He faces one of Hawthorne’s preoccupations, what Matthiessen describes (quoted earlier) as “the terrifying consequences of separation (8). Like Carson McCullers’ protagonist in *The Member of the Wedding*, Coverdale seeks what Franky Addams calls “the we of me”; he wants desperately to belong (144). Returning to Blithedale after his leave-taking, Coverdale expresses the plaintiveness of someone increasingly aware of his disengagement and isolation. First, he renounces his ties to the group: “Hollingsworth, Zenobia, Priscilla! They glided mistily before me, as I walked. Sometimes, in my solitude, I laughed with the bitterness of self-scorn, remembering how unreservedly I had given up my heart and soul to interests that were not mine. What had I ever had to do with them?” (BR 189). He had begun to forge friendships, but these connections now seem shadowy and thin. He laughs at himself for the ease with which he had sacrificed self-interest for dedication to a collective. Coverdale both desires and fears separation.



Continuing this negative train of thought, he asks himself, “And why, being now free, should I take this thralldom on me once again?” (BR 189). The spell has ended, and he cannot recapture the sense of belonging. He sees the connections created through communal living—the “affinity with the passions, the errors, and the misfortunes of individuals who stood within a circle of their own”—as “both sad and dangerous” (BR 189). He is appalled that he once bound himself so closely to others. The “knot of dreamers” could now symbolize the dangers of entanglement.

At the same time, freedom from entanglement brings loss. Coverdale may no longer care about his friends, but likewise, they might cease to care about him. Re-entering Blithedale and trying to resist the ties that bind, at the same time, he starts to hope he can “melt into the scene, as a wreath of vapor melts into a larger cloud” (BR 191). Slipping back in proves impossible. The Blithedalers are having a costume-party from which he is excluded. As he approaches, “‘Hush!’ I heard the pretty gypsy fortuneteller say. ‘Who is that laughing?’ ‘Some profane intruder!’ said the goddess Diana” (BR 195). The communard in goddess’s garb repeats the word “intruder,” confirming Coverdale’s estrangement. Like Wakefield, having stepped aside, Coverdale is losing his place.

Robert S. Levine comments on Coverdale’s disengagement. Levine claims that sentimental reform novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are powerful because they evoke sympathy with others. *The Blithedale Romance*, however, deals with this “basic tenet of 1850s sentimental culture” by asking whether sympathy connects self to others and thus contributes to social reform, or if sympathy serves to “create barriers between the self and other” and thus inhibits reform (Levine 208). Levine’s conclusion, which seems

consistent with claims that Hawthorne maintains an ambivalent attitude toward utopianism, is that *Blithedale* “is participating in the sentimental project of the 1850s of imagining the other in terms of the self, while at the same time developing a critique of that project” (210). Although Coverdale exhibits some sympathy with others, such as Moodie, he remains mostly impassive. The book retains an “insistence on the reality of recalcitrant otherness” (Levine 226). Coverdale might simultaneously want reform and fear it, but if it involves real attachment and sympathy, he will shy away from it. This echoes a realization Hawthorne shared with Sophia from Brook Farm as he contemplated his future there, and their future together. His letter says, “I am becoming more and more convinced, that we must not lean upon the community. Whatever is to be done, must be done by thy husband’s own undivided strength” (Arvin 76). In turn, whether or not Hawthorne knew of Emerson’s letter to Ripley, he echoes Emerson’s comment, “‘I all I shall solidly do, ‘I must do alone’” (qtd. in Delano, *Brook Farm* 37). At the commune, Hawthorne learns what Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller already knew about themselves: some people are better suited to self-sufficiency than interdependence.

At the Transcendentalist commune, belonging to a group ultimately eludes Coverdale when he leaves it for good. His story ends with him alone. In the final pages of the book, he reports that he is “a bachelor, with no very decided purpose of ever being otherwise” (BR 226). By joining a collective, Coverdale tried to change the course of his life, yet his commune sojourn proves only a mere interruption or brief detour. Drawing his tale to a close, however, Coverdale expresses a yearning to rejoin the collective. He will “sometimes fancy that I should direct my world-weary footsteps thitherward, and entreat

them to receive me, for old friendship's sake" (BR 226). His confession of love for Priscilla ends the book with the sadness of an old man who never could form deep or lasting bonds. Since Hawthorne married soon after leaving Brook Farm, Coverdale's bachelordom does not match Hawthorne's experience. Rather, Hawthorne's fictional character gives us a picture of unremitting loneliness, unrelieved by the collective and possibly exacerbated by it. Paradoxically, he still longs for it, seeming to wish that communal living had worked out for him.

To what extent does Coverdale's isolation imply shortcomings in communal living rather than the defects of one man? Crews writes, "*The Blithedale Romance* is not so much a theoretical refutation of utopianism as an implied confession that the Hawthorne-Coverdale temperament is unsuited for real enterprises of any sort" (375). The novel, however, presents more universal problems beyond those of one man. Coverdale's trouble fitting into the collective does not exemplify what a single communard or a single tortured artist experiences. Rather, Coverdale exemplifies the reality that people are crooked sticks: differently formed, with rough edges that keep us from being easily bound together with others.

Coverdale is not the only character straining against mutual obligation to the communal enterprise. Hollingsworth also has a personal agenda setting him apart and limiting his relationships. Hollingsworth's fierce commitment to his agenda can be read as a derisive comment about reformist zeal. It is also another example of how people erect barriers between themselves and others. Coverdale indulges in a lengthy rant about "men who have surrendered themselves to an over-ruling purpose" that "finally converts

them into little else save that one principle” such that they “have no heart, no sympathy, no reason, no conscience” (BR 65). Coverdale does not specifically mention his own thwarted friendship with Hollingsworth, but this passage explains why it ends, for over-zealous reformers “will keep no friend, unless he make himself the mirror of their purpose” (BR 65). Instead, such people “will smite and slay you, and trample your dead corpse under foot, all the more readily, if you take the first step with them” but then stray from “their terribly straight path” (BR 65). He likens his erstwhile friend’s treatment of him to murder. Any initial interest Coverdale showed in prison reform intensifies the extent to which Hollingsworth later spurns him.<sup>1</sup> Coverdale condemns all causes leading to “all-devouring egotism” (BR 66), but he does not acknowledge that this also applies to himself, since his driving purpose is poetry (BR 66). Through these communards who are self-interested and self-involved to a degree incompatible with community, the novel thus suggests this is a common human flaw, not unique to Coverdale.

The book first introduces the Hollingsworth character through Zenobia, who tells Coverdale about the man soon to arrive at Blithedale. She muses about the as-yet-unmet Hollingsworth, ““Do you suppose he will be content to spend his life, or even a few months of it, among tolerably virtuous and comfortable individuals like ourselves?”” This alerts us that Hollingsworth does not fit easily into the collective. Eventually, Coverdale

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<sup>1</sup> Coverdale follows this passage by admitting it has “both . . . truth and its exaggeration” (BR 66). The contradictory combination of “truth and exaggeration” could apply to much of Coverdale’s commentary in the novel.

learns the reason for Hollingsworth's uncomfortable relationship with communalism.

Coverdale says, "I began to discern that he had come among us, actuated by no real sympathy with our feelings and our hopes, but chiefly because we were estranging ourselves from the world, with which his lonely and exclusive object in life had already put him at odds" (BR 51). Hollingsworth is attracted to Blithedale because it contains others similarly out of sync with society—other crooked sticks.

Hollingsworth also comes to Blithedale to convert the project for his own ends.

Coverdale develops a "horrible suspicion" about Hollingsworth's care for him during his illness: that Hollingsworth nursed him only to make him a "proselyte" (BR 53).

Coverdale has discovered how Hollingsworth values personal goals more than human connection. He realizes Hollingsworth has a "closer friend" than any person: "the cold, spectral monster which he had himself conjured up, and on which he was wasting all the warmth of his heart . . . It was his philanthropic theory!" (BR 51). Coverdale confronts Hollingsworth about the prison plans, begging him to allow the communards to defend themselves. Bartleby-like, Hollingsworth replies, "'It does not suit me . . . Nor is it my duty to do so'" (BR 123). He places his mission above his comrades.

This encounter foregrounds the clash between personal and collective aims. Coverdale asks Hollingsworth, "'And will you cast off a friend for no unworthiness, but merely because he stands upon his right as an individual being, and looks at matters through his own optics, instead of yours?'" (BR 125). Coverdale's critique contains a contradiction, for he has his own personal goals. Nonetheless, faulting Hollingsworth for rejecting an independent thinker, he raises the same sort of question that Mary Gove Nichols'

character Mr. Lynde asks about the commune proposal. Lynde points out, “If there is no government but self-government, am I to be governed by the Idea of another, if it is not mine?” (204). Lynde is highlighting the tension between individual and society at a Transcendentalist commune. Like Hawthorne, he suggests that a balance is not possible. Unrealistic as the collective aims might be, residents must nonetheless commit to them for a commune to flourish. A collective cannot endure if a house divided. In “The Crisis” chapter, the prison reformer demands of Coverdale, “Be with me, or be against me!” (BR 125). Coverdale has two undesirable choices: he can retain “exclusive sway” over himself, or he can “fetter” himself to another (BR 179). The sort of disunity and discord Hollingsworth sows can be its undoing, but the togetherness a commune enforces can be the undoing of individuals. Nina Baym argues that Hollingsworth is Blithedale’s “true subversive, in a manner only superficially depicted by his maneuvering with respect to the Blithedale property. He brings to the farm the very principle it has been established to escape: subordination of the individual to the state” (“Radical Reading” 558). He expects communards to fall in line with him, and he literally wants to turn the farm into a prison.

In *The Blithedale Romance*, a major critique of the communal project is the underlying selfishness of its participants. When Zenobia condemns Hollingsworth for his egocentricity, the prison reformer is “aghast, and greatly disturbed by this attack,” crying, “Show me one selfish end, in all I ever aimed at, and you may cut it out of my bosom with a knife!” (BR 201). Zenobia utters what is perhaps the novel’s most damning statement about communalism: “It is all self! . . . . ‘Nothing else; nothing but self, self, self! . . . . I see it now! I am awake, disenchanted, disenthralled! Self, self, self!’” (BR

201). Her time at Blithedale has shown her that a utopian community cannot eliminate selfishness, and this selfishness threatens the community. *The Blithedale Romance* reveals that a collective living cannot cure alienation. Another sad truth, and irony, is that humans can destroy the collective out of self-interest.

In discussing the theme of the individual and society in *The Blithedale Romance*, of paramount importance are questions about equality, conflict, individuality, and alienation. A final subtopic in this broader category is the relationship between the commune and the outside world, for the word “society” in this chapter includes the world inside a commune as well as beyond its boundaries. Like the topic of leadership, this is a topic to which *The Blithedale Romance* does not dedicate much space. In this, it contrasts with other real-world utopian fictional works like *Drop City* and *New Leaf Mills* that deal at length with communards’ interactions with outsiders. The subject does, however, receive occasional mention in *Blithedale*. In Thought vs. Action, as we have seen, the neighbors mock the communards’ attempts to farm. Earlier in this chapter, we have seen Coverdale’s reference to leaving behind the “rusty iron framework of society” (BR 18).

Additionally, we see the difficulty of leaving the mainstream when Coverdale departs from town and travels through the storm to Blithedale. On that journey, when a passerby rebuffs the friendly greetings that the communards extend, Coverdale responds, “The churl! He understood the shrill whistle of the blast, but had no intelligence for our blithe tones of brotherhood. This lack of faith in our cordial sympathy, on the traveller's part, was one among the innumerable tokens how difficult a task we had in hand for the reformation of the world” (BR 12). This outsider cannot understand the communal

mission or imagine himself as part of a brotherhood. Coverdale then recognizes that proselytizing will not be easy. Coverdale's annoyance at the outsider's inability to grasp the utopian promise is consistent with his reference to the "swinish multitude" outside Blithedale (BR 20). Emerson writes of the "loss and scorn" that nonconformists must endure. Coverdale has trouble swallowing outsiders' scorn, but he has scorn for them.

Coverdale also shows little fondness for Blithedale's guests. Although he refers to them as the "amiable visionaries" and notes that they "sympathized with our theories" (BR 76), he does not respect them. They are cowardly because they will not join the commune until assured of its success. He mocks their enthusing about the "glory" of Blithedale life, an enthusiasm vanishing after they do a little labor themselves (BR 76). Coverdale implies that the daytrippers are inferior to the commune residents in physical strength as well as resolve and commitment.

Another way Coverdale draws lines between outsiders and insiders is to comment on financial dealings, which is yet another comment about Transcendentalist utopian philosophy. One goal of which Coverdale approves is that the communards will seek "profit by mutual aid, instead of wresting it by the strong hand from an enemy, or filching it craftily from those less shrewd than ourselves" (BR 19). Almost immediately, though, to his chagrin, he sees this promise broken. Silas Foster's proposal to raise pigs, noted earlier, strikes Coverdale "as rather odd, that one of the first questions raised, after our separation from the greedy, struggling, self-seeking world, should relate to the possibility of getting the advantage over the outside barbarians in their own field of labor" (BR 20). Robert C. Elliott notes that "like Frederick Engels," Coverdale "reflects on the anomalous



position of a utopian community forced to compete for its livelihood with the world it has rejected” (75). This is further evidence of Coverdale’s ambivalence, for he is “proud at one moment to be on the point of progress as it thrusts out into chaos, shrewdly skeptical the next” (Elliott 75). Wrestling with the proper way for a socialist community to negotiate with outsiders, Coverdale observes that “as regarded society at large, we stood in a position of new hostility, rather than new brotherhood,” and this would remain the case “until the bigger and better half of society should range itself on our side” (BR 20). He realizes that “so pitiful a minority” as the Blithedalers are “inevitably estranged from the rest of mankind” (BR 20). Within and outside the commune, alienation is inescapable.

On matters related to the individual and collective in *The Blithedale Romance*, the novel asks more questions than it answers. Hawthorne, through his narrator, abstains from an up or down vote on communalism, but the questions themselves reveal problems. At Blithedale, certain forces prove unconquerable, e.g. class prejudice, the drive for individuality, and capitalism. Coverdale’s reservations about communal living are consistent with the privileging of the individual over the collective that runs deep in American culture, where citizens should be ruggedly self-reliant. Such reservations could also reflect Hawthorne’s own worries about preserving self while staving off alienation. The book presents attitudes toward collectivism that shift between extremes of favor and disfavor, and it expresses disappointments that dispel initial high hopes. Still, in spite of serious qualms, the disillusionment with the Transcendentalist utopia is never complete.

### **The Individual vs. Society in “Transcendental Wild Oats”**

Some overlap can be found in Hawthorne’s and Alcott’s treatment of tensions between self and society. The two writers consider whether true egalitarianism can occur at an intentional community. Their focus differs, however: Hawthorne examines classism, but Alcott does not. Instead, to a much greater extent than Hawthorne, Alcott addresses the nature of leadership in a supposedly egalitarian environment. Perhaps Alcott’s experience as a powerless child at Fruitlands makes her more sensitive to the exercise of power. Both Hawthorne and Alcott contemplate individuality. Both see their fellow commune-members as crooked sticks who can never quite fuse, and who come into conflict. Alcott’s concerns about the position of the individual differ from Hawthorne’s in some ways. Her narrator does not express the anxieties about alienation, self, and belonging that plague the poet in *The Blithedale Romance*. Rather, her interest in alienation focuses on how communards become isolated from the outside world.

Unlike Blithedale, Fruitlands has clear and strong leadership. “Messrs. Lamb and Lion” issue the proclamation in *The Transcendental Tripod* announcing the project plans (TW 37). Although Lamb is co-author of the commune’s manifesto and ostensibly a co-founder, Fruitlands’ dominant leader is “Director Lion” (TW 40). The narrator calling him “Dictator Lion” (TW 42) is telling: clearly, some animals are more equal than others at the Fruitlands farm, and one rules. Lion seems to resemble the type of leader Robert S. Fogarty sees at “charismatic perfectionist” communities; these rely on an individual’s “personal sanctity, special gifts or power” (“American Communes” 149). The narrator says, “Timon Lion intended to found a colony of Latter Day Saints, who, under his

patriarchal sway, should regenerate the world and glorify his name forever” (TW 37).

This description prefigures the twentieth century second-wave feminist usage of “patriarchy” to describe male-dominated institutions and systems. It also associates Lion with Mormon leader Joseph Smith, who gathered acolytes and led them on a harrowing cross-country journey to a new Zion. Continuing the characterization of Timon Lion as a leader with little regard for his followers is that his first name recalls the notoriously misanthropic ancient Greek philosopher.

In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne does not designate a leader as such, perhaps to avoid fictionalizing Ripley or perhaps to suggest Ripley’s ineffective leadership. In contrast, Alcott chooses to exaggerate Lion’s dominance. The narrator reports, for example, that “Brother Lion domineered over the whole concern; for, having put the most money into the speculation, he was resolved to make it pay” (TW 43). Jean Pfaelzer writes that Alcott’s “portrait of Lane as the villain is oversimplified and inaccurate” (96). Claims Pfaelzer, Lane was not as worried about his monetary investment as the story implies. Instead, he “willingly provided the money to set up the community in the first place, and had paid off some of Bronson's debts, although possibly in lieu of rent to the Alcotts with whom he lived for several months before they launched Fruitlands” (96). Furthermore, Lane stated, ““Let my privation be ever so great, I will never make any property claim on this effort. It is an offering to the eternal Spirit”” (96). Pfaelzer claims Lane followed through with his pledge. In this promise, he says, ““I have not more right than any other person,”” affirming a commitment to egalitarianism and fairness that Alcott does not choose to include in “Transcendental Wild Oats.”

In Alcott's story, the leadership is heavy-handed. This is especially so in the matter of diet, a primary arena for the exercise of power at Fruitlands. A set of elders creating and enforcing laws is tyrannical rather than egalitarian. The elders' insistence on veganism is also at odds with individuality. Despite the commitment to "inner natures" professed in *The Transcendental Tripod*, individual preferences are only tolerated to a point: the point at which those preferences would contravene the leaders' preferences. Consider Jane Gage's individual taste for eating fish. Hers is a personal choice she is forbidden to indulge. As stipulated in the founding principles, communards are supposed to practice "self-denial," but this is just plain denial if ordered from above rather than chosen. The narrator's hyperbole when describing Jane Gage's infraction—"flesh-pots" and "dire occasion"—indicates Jane's wrongdoing was trumped up rather than truly terrible (TW 44). The dietary rules inflict most harm upon those with limited freedom or agency. As the Thought vs. Action chapter shows, the narrator continually expresses her distaste for the unpleasant blandness and tedium of the food. Chapter Six: Men vs. Women shows that the diet creates special hardships for Mrs. Lamb, the community's cook.

Adam D. Shprintzen writes about vegetarianism at the real Fruitlands as way of connecting self and society. This is consistent with Charles Lane's and Bronson Alcott's belief that societal reform should start with individuals. Shprintzen says,

The Fruitlands ideals sprang from a belief in the power of personal choices and their communal benefits. Lane and Alcott believed that only through "personal reform" could larger social and political evils be eradicated. Personal and localized reform had the dual benefits of creating moral exemplum for others to

follow while simultaneously implementing practical steps for change (49).

Shprintzen sees these ideals as typical of vegetarianism in 1840s America. At that time, a vegetarian diet was “individualistic in its practices” but “inherently collectivist in its attempts to build and foster a community of individuals practicing the same lifestyle choices” (52). Shprintzen notes further that nineteenth century American vegetarians believed that their movement would only be successful “if the diet was practiced by a community of likeminded individuals” (52). In this paradigm, individuals seek not only to improve their own health or resolve their own moral concerns. Rather, their actions should improve society and thus should be performed within a community. Therefore, individuals must not stray from following strict rules. At the fictional Fruitlands, Jane Gage’s fish-eating leads to her humiliation and subsequent departure. Her failure to conform cannot be tolerated. Perhaps, too, her sanction is so severe because she serves as evidence to be disposed of; a communard eating fish proves that Fruitlands is not morally exemplary. Gage is proof of the commune’s inability to influence people, even those living among such upstanding behavioral models.

The subject of individuality is also a feminist issue in “Transcendental Wild Oats,” and therefore it receives more discussion in “Men vs. Women.” The story, however, also takes a non-gendered look at the position of the individual within the commune. Tensions between individual and collective are especially pronounced at a Transcendentalist commune where the underlying philosophy advocates self-culture and nonconformity. “Transcendental Wild Oats” illustrates the problems in an environment relying on interdependence but prizing individuality and self-expression.

Sandra Harbert Petrulionis writes about Alcott's handling of the individual vs. society in "Transcendental Wild Oats." Petrulionis claims, "Alcott indicts not just the utopian application of Transcendentalism but the underpinnings of the Romantic philosophy that extolled individual spiritual development over the practical challenges of reforming society" (79). Describing this philosophy, Nina Baym writes about the Romantic tendency to celebrate

the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America. This promise is the deeply romantic one that in this new and, untrammelled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition. Behind this promise is the assurance that individuals come before society, that they exist in some meaningful sense prior to and apart from societies in which they happen to find themselves. The myth also holds that as something artificial and secondary to human nature, society exerts an unmitigatedly destructive pressure on individuality. ("Beset Manhood" 132)

"Transcendental Wild Oats" depicts the challenge of creating an environment that allows individuals this "complete self-definition" in "specific social circumstances." The founders want to "initiate a Family in harmony with the primitive instincts of man," but the Romantic view of man is that he instinctively rebels against the constraints of such a society. Although Fruitlands is a "new land" of its own, it is a society nonetheless. In its intentionality, it is "artificial," and with its firmly fixed rules, it is poised to apply "destructive pressure on individuality." The commune appears inherently incapable of fostering the kind of American romantic individuality Baym describes.

“Transcendental Wild Oats” also shows that a commune cannot simultaneously cultivate the collective and the individual. Presumably to realize the founding goal of cultivating individuals’ inner natures, “Each member was allowed to mount his favorite hobby and ride it to his heart's content. Very queer were some of the riders, and very rampant some of the hobbies” (TW 42). In accordance with Transcendentalism, individual communards are encouraged to be nonconformists. Alcott’s narrator spends considerable time describing some of the “strange spirits” who flocked to Fruitlands to take advantage of the commune’s freedom of self-expression (TW 42). A long section portrays characters who could be Blithedale’s crooked sticks. The narrator dedicates a paragraph to each character, portraying each in his own separate section. The page of stacked but uneven paragraphs thus becomes a visual representation of how such individuals are not easy to “bind up into a faggot” (BR 58).

With the same fondness for catalogues that leads her to list the foods eaten and not eaten at Fruitlands, the story’s narrator lists oddball communards. One character opts to forego clothing entirely. Another is a youth who “startled new-comers by blandly greeting them with ‘Good-morning, damn you,’ and other remarks of an equally mixed order” (TW 42-43). Nurturing and expressing one’s inner nature is “purifying” (TW 37), which apparently justifies the free flowing profanity. For the swearing man who believes “language was of little consequence if the spirit was only right,” his self-expression takes precedence over others’ right to be treated politely (TW 42). Yet another “irrepressible being” contends “that all the emotions of the soul should be freely expressed, and illustrated his theory by antics that would have sent him to a lunatic asylum, if, as an

unregenerate wag said, he had not already been in one” (TW 43). He acts according to his moods: high spirits lead him to climb trees or leap about, but “when doubt assailed him, he lay upon the floor and groaned lamentably” or “wept aloud” (TW 43). Thoughts are the primary currency at Fruitlands, and “when a great thought burst upon him in the watches of the night, he crowed like a jocund cockerel, to the great delight of the children and the great annoyance of the elders” (TW 43). He, too, seems engaged in self-purification through extreme self-expression. Airing his inner nature, his selfish wants trump other people’s desire not to be annoyed. Another communitarian also manifests his break from the mainstream through unusual and excessive form self-expression: this “musical brother fiddled whenever so moved, sang sentimentally to the four little girls, and put a music-box on the wall when he hoed corn” (TW 43). Distinguishing him from the others is that he manages to indulge individual preferences while doing a chore.

Privileging individuals over the group occurs when the grain ripens. With all hands needed for the harvest, the men disappear. Placing their desires above those of the collective, they abandon it, and consequently, it fails. This incident recalls Zenobia’s bitter proclamation that Blithedale is “nothing but self, self, self!” (BR 201). In “Transcendental Wild Oats,” self-interest destroys community. The Fourierist notion Timon Lion endorses, that “each member is to perform the work for which experience, strength, and taste best fit him,” is impractical for a successful commune. Individual Fruitlanders may, in Thoreau’s words “hearken to their own drummer” (*Walden* 217), but not keeping pace with one’s companions makes more sense in a hut than in a commune.

Another area in which individuality predominates at the commune is that of children’s



education. The narrator reports that “each adult member took a turn at the infants; and, as each taught in his own way, the result was a chronic state of chaos in the minds of these much-afflicted innocents” (TW 44). The repetition of “each” emphasizes the privileged place of individuals in the collective. Allowing people to follow their inclinations in the matter of education, without a coordinated plan, leads to pandemonium. Those bearing the brunt of this practice are the children, the most powerless communards.

Alcott’s novel *Little Men*, a sequel to *Little Women* published the same year as “Transcendental Wild Oats,” offers a model of education that seems a response to the chaotic approach at Fruitlands, which centers on adults’ personal whims. Jo Bhaer and her husband run a school called “Plumfield,” a variation of “Fruitlands.” The Bhaers’ school appears to exemplify Alcott’s vision of how children should be educated. In a chapter called “The Boys,” Alcott lists and describes many of the students, piling up crooked sticks as she does when describing the Fruitlanders. Plumfield nurtures and respects the boys’ individuality. Further, the school appears to follow another Transcendentalist principle, for “self-knowledge, self-help, and self-control were more important” than books (*Little Men* 544). Despite its emphasis on self-culture and nonconformity, however, the Plumfield school is orderly. Schedules are regular, and decisions are careful. Plumfield’s pedagogy is consistent with Transcendentalism without Fruitlands’ haphazardness. The pedagogy prioritizes children’s individuality rather than that of the adult educators.

At the fictionalized Fruitlands, with so much value placed on individual preferences, conflict would seem inevitable. At Blithedale, intimacy creates conflict. In Alcott’s story,

outward conflict receives less attention, though it occurs in a few cases. Jane Gage, as we have seen, stirs conflict. Chapter Five: Men vs. Women discusses Sister Hope's rebelliousness. Brother Moses questions some of the founders' practices, but we hear of only one he defies: using a yoke of oxen at Fruitlands (TW 42). His offense does not earn him the same sanctions Jane receives because the farmers realize that "the work must be done" (TW 42). In fact, Moses' successful mutiny seems to increase his clout, for "the recreant brother continued to enjoy forbidden draughts in the barn" (TW 42). The woman who acts out is censured, but a man breaking similar rules about animal mistreatment is not; he even draws power from getting away with a brazen misdeed. His ongoing rebellion does not escape notice; however, it is a "dark proceeding" causing "the children to regard him as one set apart for destruction" (TW 42). Nonetheless, though his act of defiance marks him, it does not destroy him. He is not exiled or even demoted.

Although Alcott does not address the topic of alienation to the same extent or with the same focus as Hawthorne, the topic receives attention in "Transcendental Wild Oats." The story's concern is not primarily with communards' alienation from one another but the Fruitlanders' alienation from the rest of the world. The separation from society begins during the journey to the commune; the difficulties dramatize the difficulties of separating from society. These difficulties also underscore the communards' determination and show a perverse pleasure obtained from suffering for the sake of their cause. As the "modern pilgrims journeyed hopefully out of the old world, to found a new one in the wilderness" at Fruitlands, "the wind whistled over the bleak hills" (TW 36). They take a "cart-path that wound along a steep hillside into a barren-looking valley" to a

destination that, as we saw earlier, is difficult to access (TW 38).

Like the trope of a commune's first night when optimism burns brightly, the journey to the commune has become a fictional staple. Louis Marin writes,

From the time of More's book [*Utopia*] and for centuries later, utopias tend to begin with a travel, a departure and a journey, most of the time by sea, most of the time interrupted by a storm, a catastrophe that is the sublime way to open a neutral space, one that is absolutely different: a meteoric event, a cosmic accident that eliminates all beacons and markers in order to make the seashore. (414-15)

In what might be the first novel based on a real-world utopia, Hawthorne starts his tale with an arduous journey. The commune is not an island reached by sea, but it is removed from civilization, down "a desolate extent of country road" (BR 11). To get to Blithedale, Coverdale rides with four others through a snowstorm. The journey to Fruitlands has what the narrator sarcastically calls "the pleasing accompaniments of wind, rain, and hail" (TW 36). As the Fruitlanders' expedition continues, "The rain fell in a despondent drizzle, and twilight began to fall" (TW 36). The dark and stormy night foreshadows the story's end and also highlights the hardships the pilgrims are willing to endure to leave society. Although not as catastrophic as the events Marin finds in utopian literature, the weather in both *The Blithedale Romance* and "Transcendental Wild Oats" signifies that nature is somehow mirroring, or even altered by, the earthshaking step of leaving civilization. The Blithedalers and Fruitlanders seem to enjoy this first experience of adversity. Despite the bad weather, one of the Fruitlands' founders "gazed as tranquilly into the fog as if he beheld a radiant bow of promise spanning the gray sky" (TW 36).

This is reminiscent of Coverdale's trip to Blithedale when one companion remarks, "'I maintain that this nitrous atmosphere is really exhilarating'" (BR 12). Hawthorne indicates awareness of the journey trope, writing in his journal, "'I reflect that the Plymouth Pilgrims arrived in the midst of storm'" (Arvin 68). The snowstorm in his novel subtly connects Blithedale to Plymouth. This association might fit with Coverdale's ambivalence toward the commune, for it elevates Blithedale as noble and as historically important, and it also casts aspersions, for both groups of Americans pilgrims went awry.

The journey trope also appears in other works set at real-world types of communes. In Mary McCarthy's *Oasis*, at the novel's beginning, we read of a "party of mechanized pilgrims guiding their family cars up the rutted road to Utopia" (20). She, too, connects her characters with America's early settlers. In *Easy Rider*, after the bikers pick up the hitchhiker, what follows is an extended sequence of the riders travelling through the bleakest landscapes shown in the movie. The sun-baked expanses of Western desert are akin to Coverdale's "desolate" road in the wintry New England countryside. In *Drop City*, T. Coraghessan Boyle's hippies drive a caravan of vehicles from California to Alaska (reminiscent of those who moved from Haight-Ashbury to The Farm in Tennessee), encountering legal and logistical troubles on their way.

The ending of "Transcendental Wild Oats" also comments on the topic of separation or alienation from the outside world. In *The Blithedale Romance*, Coverdale's fundamental disappointment lies with the commune's inability to dispel the human condition of alienation. Having separated himself from mainstream society to join an alternative society, he finds himself alone even within that knot of dreamers.

“Transcendental Wild Oats” does not address alienation within the Fruitlands society but the Lamb family’s alienation from the rest of the world. At the end, the commune is collapsing, and the family is in desperate straits. As quoted earlier, Mrs. Lamb notes how the Fruitlands scheme “has alienated” the family from their former life (TW 47). Upon trying to return from Fruitlands, the family finds that “every door was closed, every eye averted, every heart cold” (TW 47). As quoted earlier, Abel Lamb still has some employment options his conscience would permit him to pursue, but nobody is likely to hire someone “who has flown in the face of society” (TW 47). As in Hawthorne’s “Wakefield,” the Lambs learn that people “are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole” that when they step aside, they might forfeit their places (75). Like Wakefield, they discover that those who dare to leave the mainstream might become “the Outcast of the Universe” (75). Lamb’s crime is worse than refusing to engage in the types of work other men will do; he has flouted society’s expectations.

Emerson says in “The American Scholar” that nonconformists must be willing to endure “loss and scorn” (63). The Lambs experience this to a magnitude greater than Emerson ever did, and they suffer greatly for it. Nonetheless, in keeping with the conventions of sentimental fiction, the story ends with the family closer than ever. The narrator expresses esteem for the father, and the mother forgives him and redoubles her support. Although standing apart from society, the family stands together. The narrator must articulate what she believes society ought to tell Abel Lamb, but which it will not do. She believes the message should be this: ““We all make mistakes, and it takes many experiences to shape a life. Try again, and let us help you”” (TW 47). Instead of receiving

assistance, instead of receiving respect for the courage to try something new, the family receives society's cold shoulder. They cannot be forgiven for withdrawing.

*The Blithedale Romance* draws lines between outsiders and insiders by considering trade relations, but "Transcendental Wild Oats" does this indirectly. Writes Claudia Durst Johnson, "Like most utopias, Fruitlands was designed to be a renunciation of the economic system on which the nation rested, especially as it concerned land ownership and the accumulation of capital" ("Cost of an Idea" 49). Only one passage in the story describes this philosophy and the way Fruitlanders engage with the larger economic system. When Lion and Lamb travel, "they walked, if possible, begged the loan of a vehicle, or boldly entered car or coach, and, stating their principles to the officials, took the consequences" (TW 45). The narrator tells us that "their dress, their earnest frankness, and gentle resolution" helped them get free rides (TW 45). When they were unsuccessful, the "hard usage" with which they met gave them yet more "satisfaction of suffering for their principles" (TW 45). They get this same type of gratification through the martyrdom of wearing uncomfortable clothes or eating sparse meals, spurning the benefits of a modern economy. The communards take advantage of the outside world's amenities, like transportation, but they will not pay for what they take. To their credit, however, when they break the rule about paying fares, they seem willing to endure the outcome.

One occasion illustrates the way Fruitlanders negotiate capitalism. Needing a boat ride, Lion and Lamb "artlessly offered to talk, instead of pay" (TW 45). Because the boat has sailed and these passengers have no money, the boatman has no choice but to accept the type of payment they offer, a transaction on their terms: "Brothers Lion and Lamb

held forth to the assembled passengers in their most eloquent style” (TW 45). The narrator notes “there must have been something effective in this conversation, for the listeners were moved to take up a contribution for these inspired lunatics” (TW 45). To the outsiders, the communards may be operating somewhat within the rules of capitalism: they sing for their supper, earning rides by trading labor and a commodity of value, i.e. inspirational talk. Although this yields “a goodly sum,” the communards will not participate in the mainstream economy. When the boat captain presents them with money the passengers have collected, “the reformers proved that they were consistent even in their madness, for not a penny would they accept, saying, with a look at the group about them, whose indifference or contempt had changed to interest and respect, ‘You see how well we get on without money’; and so went serenely on their way” (TW 45). They model their anti-capitalist principles. In their serenity they act as if unaware that boats would stop running if everyone stopped paying.

Perhaps not coincidentally, this scene resembles a story about Charles J. Guiteau, the man who assassinated President James Garfield in 1881. After spending six years at the Oneida Community, Guiteau became an evangelist, traveling the country by train. Biographer Candice Millard reports that Guiteau felt he deserved to forego paying for transportation because of his higher calling. According to Millard, “When the conductor asked for his ticket, Guiteau would simply explain that he was doing God’s work and had no money for train fare” (53). Maybe this was a common occurrence amongst itinerant preachers in nineteenth century America. Or, maybe communes of the time—the real Oneida, and the real and fictional Fruitlands—condoned or even encouraged residents to

freeload off the system in order to improve it.

The episode on the boat in “Transcendental Wild Oats” shows the communards trying to reform society. Their approach, the passage suggests, favorably impresses witnesses and thus might be a step towards converting others. In *The Blithedale Romance*, the commune is supposed to “show mankind the example of a life,” but the book never describes communards taking their message abroad (BR 19). In “Transcendental Wild Oats,” communards do proselytize. Despite the founders’ emphasis on self-culture in the story, they also show commitment to societal reform. This starts with their announcement in *The Transcendental Tripod*. Then, Lion and Lamb travel around preaching veganism. When the Oversoul calls them away, it is to preach.

*The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” both consider a primary challenge facing communes: balancing individual and group interests. This tension takes on particular significance in America, which often values the individual over the group, and particular significance in a Transcendentalist commune, which values nonconformity, self-culture, and self-expression. The two works of fiction both examine egalitarianism, conflict, alienation, and relationships to the outside world, though they focus on different aspects of these issues. Both works feature characters who illustrate how individuals do not easily meld into a group, and how individual wills do not readily bend to the will of a group.



## CHAPTER FIVE: MEN VS. WOMEN

### Men vs. Women in Transcendentalism

The so-called ‘Woman Question’ was not a primary concern of the Transcendentalist movement. Most Transcendentalists were not opposed to the cause, however. In “‘If They Have a Moral Power’: Margaret Fuller, Transcendentalism, and the Question of Women's Moral Nature,” Jamie S. Crouse writes, “Transcendentalism, on the whole, though in varying degrees, was supportive of women's rights” (269). Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, and Theodore Parker, for example, “clearly encouraged women's development and the expansion of their involvement in society” (269). The most prominent female Transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller, was also a prominent feminist. This “Men vs. Women” chapter addresses issues of particular importance to Fuller, including work, expression, ideals of womanhood, the balance of power in relationships, and sexuality.

Admittedly, analyzing how real or fictional Transcendentalist communes implemented Emersonian principles is not the same as analyzing these communes’ implementation of Fuller’s principles. Fuller’s feminist views were not as foundational for Transcendentalism as Emerson’s philosophies. Additionally, Emerson’s ideas about thought and action, and about individuals and society, lay at the core of the two Transcendentalist communes in a way that Fuller’s ideas did not, even if Emerson only half-heartedly supported the utopian projects his ideas inspired. Although women’s issues and gender dynamics did not top the agendas at Brook Farm or Fruitlands, these matters

were not entirely peripheral. The Transcendentalists who formed these utopian communities were disciples of the Newness, seeing shortcomings in traditional institutions and seeking various types of reforms.

Sophia Ripley, married to George Ripley, was a player in the Transcendentalist circle who engaged with the Woman Question. In 1841, the same year Brook Farm opened, she published an essay in *The Dial* called “Woman” about the need for women’s rights reform. In this piece, Ripley disparages beliefs that accord with the Cult of True Womanhood, opposing societal demands that women be “good, quiet, and gentle” and “attend exclusively to their domestic duties” (314). Ripley decries women’s powerlessness: “In our present state of society woman possesses not; she is under possession” (315). The publication of Ripley’s essay in *The Dial* indicates the Transcendentalists’ openness to her ideas. (Margaret Fuller was *The Dial*’s editor at that time, and despite any partiality she might have shown for material consistent with her own beliefs, surely she chose articles that would appeal to the journal’s subscribers: other Transcendentalists.) Ripley’s call in *The Dial* for women’s rights in reform probably influenced the Brook Farmers, or at least gave them food for thought. “Woman,” based on a presentation Ripley gave at one of Fuller’s Conversations, certainly influenced Margaret Fuller, who in turn expanded on Ripley’s ideas in her own publications.

Fuller contemplated whether communal living could improve women’s status. In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, she notes the potential of communalism to provide growth, freedom, and equality to women. Her decision not to join Brook Farm was probably foremost a function of personal lifestyle preferences, as discussed in the

previous chapter, but it could also indicate a belief that the commune was not especially beneficial to women.

Considering how women might fare in the communal environment, in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller looks specifically at Charles Fourier's positions. Seeing Fourier as an "apostle of the new order, of the social fabric that is to rise from love, and supersede the old that was based on strife," Fuller approves of his emphasis on placing "Woman on an entire equality with man" (73). She finds connections between her own advocacy of opportunities for women and Fourier's advocacy of "freedom for individual growth" that will give women "the needed means of self-help, that she might dignify and unfold her life for her happiness, and that of society," as well as "that independence which must result from intellectual and practical development" (73). Fuller, however, expresses reservations about Fourier, including whether "the methods he proposes should not prove the true ones" (73). In the form of direct address, she evinces skepticism about his vision: "And thou, Fourier, do not expect to change mankind at once, or even 'in three generations,' by arrangement of groups and series, or flourish of trumpets for attractive industry" (74). She ends her discussion of Fourier on a positive note: "Yet we prize the theory of Fourier no less than the profound suggestions of Goethe. Both are educating the age to a clearer consciousness of what Man needs, what Man can be; and better life must ensue" (74). Both *The Blithedale Romance* and "Transcendental Wild Oats" contemplate whether their fictionalized Transcendentalist communes reach the type of potential Fuller pondered. Both works show this does not occur.

Agreeing with Sophia Ripley's bleak assessment of women's situation, Fuller viewed

the Transcendentalist practice of self-culture as a path to women's empowerment. As David M. Robinson writes, Fuller's work "focuses on the central intellectual commitment of the transcendental movement, the belief in the possibility of 'self-culture' or the continual spiritual growth of the soul, to diagnose, and prescribe a remedy for the condition of women" (84). Furthermore, Fuller recognized and celebrated women's ability to achieve in various arenas. At the end of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller writes this about the jobs women might pursue: "If you ask me what offices they may fill; I reply—any . . . let them be sea-captains, if you will. I do not doubt there are women well fitted for such an office, and, if so, I should be glad to see them in it" (102). As this chapter shows, Fuller's "let them be sea-captains" rallying cry corresponds with Hawthorne's and Alcott's consideration of limited occupations for female communards.

Women's well-being was not Margaret Fuller's sole interest, for she saw improving women's condition as ultimately benefiting men, too. Such benefits could be found in the right type of relationship. Fuller writes about male-female relationships solely in the context of marriage, which was the assumed goal or destiny for nineteenth century women. As Robinson explains, "Since Fuller understands how completely woman's sphere is tied to marriage, she devotes a lengthy discussion to the questions of what marriage is and what it ought to be" (252). In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller first describes three types of marriage that are less than ideal. In a "household partnership" which is merely "good, as far as it goes," husbands seek the kind of "'capable, sweet-tempered' wife" that Ripley writes about in "Woman" (Fuller 42). Another type, "not a pleasing subject of contemplation," is "mutual idolatry," which can

weaken and narrow both partners (Fuller 42). On the same level is “intellectual companionship” (Fuller 42), a marriage in which a couple connects “mind to mind,” on “equal terms” as “partners in work and life” (Fuller 47). The ideal is the “religious” relationship, which incorporates other types but is a sort of journey or pilgrimage toward a common goal (Fuller 48). Relationships in *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” are not constructed for the purpose of illustrating Fuller’s categories. Still, male-female couples in both works exemplify various marriage types and show Hawthorne and Alcott reflecting on the nature of marriage. Like Fuller, they question the power dynamics and the benefits to both parties, even if their fiction does not frame the issues exactly as Fuller does. This Men vs. Women chapter analyzes the extent to which the novel and short story portray Transcendentalist communes as fostering optimal relationships.

Fuller, known as much for the Conversations she organized as for her writing, emphasized women’s need to find avenues for expression. Robinson argues that to Emerson as well as to Fuller, self-expression is paramount. Robinson quotes Emerson as positing that “the man is only half himself, the other half is his expression” (250). Further, Robinson sees Emerson as “lamenting that ‘adequate expression is rare’” (250). Although the struggle for expression is what Robinson calls a “common predicament,” he claims Fuller saw “thwarted expression as a problem belonging uniquely to women” (250). In line with Fuller’s concerns, *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” depict women struggling to find their voices.

This chapter also examines a related topic: expectations for women’s behavior,

especially given the prevailing nineteenth century vision of ideal women. In her seminal article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” Barbara Welter identifies that paradigm as “divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (43). According to Welter, these were the attributes “by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society” (43). Fuller does not directly discuss the True Womanhood paradigm, but her advocacy of broader employment opportunity is at odds with the ideal of domesticity, and her encouragement of women’s self-expression and empowerment is at odds with the ideal of submissiveness. The “household partnership” type of marriage, which Fuller does not recommend, parallels True Womanhood. Even at Transcendentalist communes, women seemed bound by this paradigm, but both Hawthorne and Alcott evince disquiet about it.

Another topic this chapter explores is sexuality, a subject to which Margaret Fuller paid more attention than did other Transcendentalist writers. Discussion of sexuality in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* primarily involves endorsement of abstinence. John Matteson writes in *The Lives of Margaret Fuller*, “Her task was the liberation of the human spirit, and she believed that promiscuity was a form of enslavement, chaining both men and women to an inferior concept of themselves. So long as women were treated as bodies rather than genderless souls, Fuller argued, their spiritual destinies could never be fulfilled” (266). Fuller understood the systemic forces governing women’s sexuality, and the social construction of it as sinful. As John Matteson says about Fuller’s visits to women imprisoned for prostitution, she wondered whether “chastity was merely an appurtenance of social standing imbued with only that degree of value which one’s

fellows were inclined to acknowledge” (264). Like Fanny Fern writing in the 1850s about prostitutes at the Blackwell’s Island prison, Fuller blames men for fallen women’s plight rather than the women themselves. Fuller laments the “degradation of a large portion of women into the sold and polluted slaves of men” (78). She connects sexuality with lack of freedom, with bondage, whether women cede autonomy by yielding to passion or otherwise falling victim to powerful, exploitative men.

Readers of *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” probably associated communal living with radical sexual behavior, either Shaker-type celibacy or Oneida-style free love. Hawthorne’s allusions to sexual tensions are subtle, but they are present nonetheless. He could have been trying to satisfy or stoke prurient curiosity, or he might simply be reporting what really happened at Brook Farm, although historical accounts concur that sexual mores at the commune matched those of mainstream mid-nineteenth century America. Alcott’s story contains no reference to impropriety. Her readers, probably girls and women, would have been less likely than Hawthorne’s readers to seek titillation. Further, if Alcott were aware of the sexual politics at Fruitlands (she may have been in the dark), she might have been disinclined to air dirty laundry in semi-autobiographical writing. Thus, for several possible reasons, “Transcendental Wild Oats” contains only hints of Fruitlands’ family reform ideology.

At the real Fruitlands, the sexual politics of the consociate family were unconventional, even if in theory rather than practice. Some scholars suggest that an attempt to practice these politics could have sabotaged Fruitlands. Matteson writes that “the precise terms upon which Bronson contemplated dividing the family are unclear”

(158). Possibly, Matteson says in *Eden's Outcasts*, Lane might have been “arguing for conjugal privileges” with Abba, or “no less likely, he was urging Bronson and Abba to abstain from relations with each other” (158). Another possibility is that Lane sought to engage Bronson Alcott in a homosexual relationship. Bronson may have “meant for his wife and daughters to decamp entirely, leaving him and Lane to reconstruct Fruitlands as a single-sex monastery” (158). For whatever reason, as Fruitlands verged on dissolution, so did dissolution threaten the Alcott’s marriage.

Although women’s issues were not of utmost importance to most Transcendentalists, the fictional accounts of Brook Farm and Fruitlands pay a great deal of attention to them. Carol Farley Kessler writes, “A major concern in nineteenth-century utopias by women is women's awareness of the constraints that domestic responsibilities place upon women's social equality” (2). This awareness is also central in later works like Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1915 *Herland* and Marge Piercy’s 1975 *Woman on the Edge of Time*. *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” prove that in nineteenth century American literature, concerns about women’s equality were not limited to speculative utopian fiction, and such concerns were not limited to women’s fiction.

### **Men vs. Women in *The Blithedale Romance***

The surprising amount of coverage given to women’s issues in a nineteenth century novel written by a man might be the direct result of Hawthorne’s friendship with Margaret Fuller. In his book *Hawthorne’s Fuller Mystery*, Thomas R. Mitchell argues



that Fuller influenced or “disturbed” Hawthorne “so much that to one degree or another he wrote some of his most powerful fictions in an attempt to solve the ‘riddle’ of her life” (10). Although Mitchell’s claim about Fuller’s effect on Hawthorne could be overstated, evidence that Fuller’s life and work affected Hawthorne can be found in *The Blithedale Romance*’s depictions of women at the commune. Mitchell posits that Fuller was “more than simply a partial model for the most complex and provocative women characters.” Rather, she “was to an important extent the origin of their very conception, the problem at their heart” (Mitchell 10). At the heart of *Blithedale*, we find much consideration of issues important to Fuller. Hawthorne seems to follow Fuller’s lead by considering opportunity in employment, women’s struggle for voice, expectations for women’s behavior, equality in relationships, and sexuality.

Before moving to discuss woman’s issues in *The Blithedale Romance*, it is worth noting that some of Zenobia’s qualities and positions, along with her death by drowning, have encouraged comparisons to the real Margaret Fuller. Scholars of *The Blithedale Romance* often seem to feel obligated to address this comparison, even if their purpose is to reject the notion that Zenobia is a fictionalized Fuller. This is the case with Henry James in his biography of Hawthorne and Nina Baym in “*The Blithedale Romance: A Radical Reading*.” Although Baym claims the “the two women share no traits” (“Radical Reading” 563), Fuller and Zenobia have much in common: their powerful personalities, their eloquence, and their feminism. To Baym’s chagrin, critics persist in connecting Zenobia with Fuller, but “Priscilla is specifically, and rather elaborately, linked to Margaret Fuller in the novel” (563). This occurs when Coverdale asks Priscilla if she ever

saw Miss Fuller, remarking that Priscilla reminds him of that friend, a letter from whom he now holds (BR 48). Thus, Fuller receives explicit mention in the novel. Emerson is another Transcendentalist who receives mention. In the same chapter in which Coverdale mentions Fuller, Coverdale says he reads “interminably in Mr. Emerson’s Essays” (BR 48). Coverdale might leaf through Emerson and find it boring, but he receives personal correspondence from Fuller, showing a stronger connection to her than to Emerson. Coverdale directly links Priscilla (rather than Zenobia) to Fuller, but more importantly, he indicates that Fuller shapes his thinking about at least one woman at the commune.

Chapter Three: Thought vs. Action and Chapter Four: The Individual vs. Society consider how *The Blithedale Romance* critiques various aspects of communalism. Significantly, the novel’s very first critique pertains to women’s work. In the arrival scene, Zenobia welcomes Coverdale and those with whom he has traveled to the farm, saying that tonight she will play hostess, a woman’s role, but the group will “begin our new life from day-break” (BR 16). The first question from one new arrival about that new life involves the division of labor: “Have we our various parts assigned?” (BR 16). Zenobia’s response focuses on the gender implications of this question: “We of the softer sex . . . will take the domestic and indoor part of the business, as a matter of course. To bake, to boil, to roast, to fry, to stew,—to wash, and iron, and scrub, and sweep,—and, at our idler intervals, to repose ourselves on knitting and sewing,—these, I suppose, must be feminine occupations, for the present” (BR 16). Accompanying the foregoing statement with a “mellow, almost broad laugh,” she good-naturedly accepts women’s place. The qualifier “for the present” indicates that this division will be only at the outset

of the experiment (BR 16). Resigned but not bitter, Zenobia observes that the commune will not immediately overturn traditional roles but will carry on with them (BR 16). As Zenobia continues, however, she expresses hope that ““by and by, perhaps, when our individual adaptations begin to develop themselves, it may be that some of us who wear the petticoat will go afield, and leave the weaker brethren to take our places in the kitchen”” (BR 16). Benjamin Scott Grossberg observes that Zenobia’s “utopian plan for Blithedale” involves what she “makes clear” in this speech: “she hopes men and women in this new society will choose their vocations by ability, not gender roles” (5). Here, Zenobia articulates the benefits Fuller sees in Fourierism: all communards can gravitate to preferred jobs. Despite Zenobia’s forward thinking, she expresses the bias of her times towards women’s work: it will be suitable only for “weaker” men.

At this first presentation of feminist ideas, Coverdale seems sympathetic toward women relegated to traditional domestic labor. On the other hand, his expression of this sympathy shows an inability to visualize real change. He frames his response to Zenobia as facetious fantasy in which domestic labor will simply become unnecessary at a commune. Coverdale says, ““What a pity . . . that the kitchen, and the house-work generally, cannot be left out of our system altogether!”” (BR 16). Zenobia does not take offense at Coverdale’s levity or failure to comprehend. With “mirth gleaming out of her eyes,” she answers him in the same light-hearted spirit, saying she fears ““we shall find some difficulty in adopting the Paradisiacal system, for at least a month to come”” (BR 16). She speaks affably, but she aims to correct Coverdale’s obtuseness about serious challenges at the commune. Asking him to look at the winter weather, the “snow-drift

sweeping past the window,” she tries to bring him back to the here-and-now (BR 16).

She wants him to see the real world that is not a paradise free of housework.

Zenobia continues to turn the conversation away from Coverdale’s prattling about paradise, reminding him of the work that is women’s lot. Saying she needs to help with supper, she asks Coverdale if he could be happy with the ordinary food she has brought, as opposed to ““delicacies of Adam's supper-table”” (BR 17). Planning ahead for supper with ““the instinct of a housewife”” indicates her low expectations for immediate feminist reform at the commune. The basket of food she carries from her old life into her new one symbolizes female communards’ ongoing responsibility for housewifely duties.

From this point forward in the novel, the pattern for women’s labor at Blithedale seems set. That first night, Coverdale reports, “The whole sisterhood now went about their domestic avocations, utterly declining our offers to assist, further than by bringing wood for the kitchen-fire from a huge pile in the back-yard” (BR 17). He says “avocation” rather than ‘vocation,’ as if domestic labor were a preference or a pastime. The men offer to assist with the kitchen fire, but they do not offer to completely relieve women of their tasks. They could be making a half-hearted attempt to do women’s work, or they could be making a sincere effort to share it. Whatever the men’s motivation, the women only allow them to help with the part of the job that lies outside the house. A nineteenth century commune does not easily transform traditional gender roles.

That first evening, Silas Foster says, ““We shall never make any hand at market gardening . . . unless the women folks will undertake to do all the weeding” (BR 20).

(Later that night, he raises the topic of pig-sales, and later still, he sends the communards

to bed; his job includes speaking hard truths.) Foster's phrasing implies that weeding is an undesirable but necessary task. This clean-up job, rather than the literal or metaphorical breaking of new ground, belongs to women. Further, women must do all of it; men will not sully their hands or their dignity. In these first-night conversations at Blithedale, we see no equal opportunity matching Fuller's or Zenobia's visions. Rather, at Blithedale, equal opportunity is immediately abandoned when thinking becomes doing, or it is a secondary goal to be addressed only after others are met. Through the rest of the book, we never see women's status improving or even changing. Coverdale uses inclusive language in his references to the brotherhood and sisterhood, but that language does not represent real equality.

After the first night, Coverdale remains unable to frame the labor issue in terms of fairness or opportunity. Lying sick in bed, he thinks about Zenobia's charms while noting that the gruel she cooks is "wretched stuff" (BR 45). He wonders why she could not allow another woman to take charge of it, for "whatever else might be her gifts, Nature certainly never intended Zenobia for a cook" (BR 45). (The modifying clause starting this last sentence is probably misplaced. Most likely, Coverdale is referring to Zenobia's gifts and not Nature's, but perhaps he is anthropomorphizing Nature with the feminine pronoun or even questioning the Transcendentalist idea of a perfectly functioning Nature.) Coverdale dislikes the idea of Zenobia limited to kitchen work because he finds her too beautiful and noble for common labor, and too incompetent to do it well. Thus, he exhibits both elitism and sexism.

Near the end of the novel, in the chapter before Zenobia commits suicide, we receive

confirmation that Fourierist self-selection of labor never occurs at Blithedale during Coverdale's stay. Despairingly, Zenobia tells Coverdale, "'Of all varieties of mock-life, we have surely blundered into the very emptiest mockery in our effort to establish the one true system'" (BR 209). She is disillusioned for many reasons, but her next comment shows specific dissatisfaction with work assignments. Saying she is "'done'" with the commune, she proceeds, "'Blithedale must find another woman to superintend the laundry, and you, Mr. Coverdale, another nurse to make your gruel, the next time you fall ill'" (BR 209). She names three forms of work—washing, nursing, and cooking—that she had to perform, and that the commune will inevitably assign to a woman after she leaves.

As the first novelist to write about a real commune, Hawthorne might be the first man to investigate the gap between the goal and the reality of expanding women's work options in utopian communities. This goal has long been a feature of women's utopian fiction. Christine de Pizan's 1405 *The Book of the City of Ladies* invents a community that elevates women, as does Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* and feminist speculative utopian fiction of the 1970s, such as Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. In contrast to these idealized utopias, the separate spheres of labor in *The Blithedale Romance* resemble those at many actual communes. For example, at the Ephrata Cloister in 18<sup>th</sup> century Pennsylvania, jobs were as strictly segregated as the dormitories at this celibacy-promoting community: women spun, wove, sewed, and gardened while men worked the mills and other machinery. More recently, at Israeli kibbutzim, women often have been responsible for domestic work. The 2012 documentary *Inventing Our Life: The Kibbutz Experiment* calls attention to this.

Although working communally in a shared kitchen, laundry, or children's house can lighten the load for some and can free others from those duties, domestic chores typically remain women's purview at kibbutzim. Sexist division of labor existed even in the radical Diggers collective active in Haight-Ashbury in 1967. (The Diggers participated in the protests and performance art characterizing the Summer of Love, and they gathered discarded food for the Haight's hippies.) A 2013 article quotes one observer, Joe McDonald (lead singer of the psychedelic band Country Joe and the Fish) on the role of women in the movement. McDonald reports hearing women in the Diggers' kitchen saying, "'*They're out fighting the fucking revolution? And we're making goddamn dinner again?*'" (Weller 68). The California commune Black Bear Ranch, founded in 1968, is an exception to rigidly gendered work. In the 2005 documentary about Black Bear Ranch, *Commune*, many interviewees report that in the community's first days, women refused to be restricted to women's work. *Commune's* repeated references to this refusal underscore the rarity of women taking on men's jobs in intentional communities, even in revolutionary times and places like 1960s California. Writing a century earlier, Hawthorne makes similar observations about women's place in a supposedly new order.

Two real-world utopian novels handle the topic in surprising ways. *Margaret Dunmore: or, A Socialist Home* is a nineteenth century novel questioning the perpetuation of gendered labor. A "matter of grave consideration and lively discussion" among the communards is whether their "new order" will have "any broad distinctions between masculine and feminine employments" (91). One recalcitrant man will not do work he sees as feminine, but at least one others is willing to try sewing, cooking, and

related chores. We might expect to find a similar overturning of gendered labor in Lauren Groff's novel about a 1960s commune, written in 2012. Her communards also consider the division of labor at the start of their enterprise. The leader asks the "womenfolk" if they are "ready to clean and polish and varnish and scrape and sand and take care of the kidlets and operate the Bakery and Soy Dairy and Laundry and cook and clean and chop wood and do the everyday stuff we need done to keep we Free People going strong while all this work's happening" (12). With only one muttered dissent, "the women cheer" (12). *Arcadia* clearly presents women's work as a lesser contribution enabling the important 'real' work to get done, but most women accept the traditional roles. Whether real-world utopian fiction depicts communes rejecting or maintaining traditional workloads, a common feature of such texts is that communards discuss the matter, usually at the outset, as *The Blithedale Romance* does. "Transcendental Wild Oats" is different in this regard. It expresses objections to gendered labor, but the main question is if men will work at all, not what kinds of work women should do. Even if most fictional communes do not offer redress for women (or for men who might not prefer the heavy lifting), they at least acknowledge that it is an issue a commune should examine, and they suggest that gendered labor is not ideal.

At the real Brook Farm, women did traditional women's work. In *Blithedale*'s first-night kitchen conversation, though, Hawthorne has Zenobia express more discontent with this than did Brook Farm's female communards. Writes Sterling F. Delano,

One of the distinguishing features of the Brook Farm life is that women . . .

neither complained nor were critical of the community's domestic expectations or



requirements, which was not the case with at least two of the four other antebellum New England communities. *The Journal of Commerce*, for example, would never have said about Brook Farm, as it did about the Northampton Association, that ‘almost all the ladies’ in the community were ‘unhappy and dissatisfied with their situation’—sentiments certainly also shared by Abba Alcott at Fruitlands, since virtually all of that community’s domestic responsibilities rested on her shoulders. (*Brook Farm* 379)

Although Zenobia is initially optimistic about the possibility of reform, and although Coverdale is flippant, the novel’s paints women’s plight as objectionable. Hawthorne, a man who spent only six months at Brook Farm, might have called more attention to the inequity of gendered work than did the women who lived there. Further, as noted above, the first reservations he raises in the novel regard women’s work.

Another women’s issue *The Blithedale Romance* addresses is self-expression. Zenobia is the female character who speaks most often in the novel, and her advocacy of feminist views is one of her defining qualities. We hear few words from Priscilla, the only other woman with a speaking part, and none from Mrs. Foster, the only other named female character. Although the book frequently quotes Zenobia, the content of her speeches as well as her experiences at Blithedale indicates that the commune does not especially encourage women’s voices or activism. The “Eliot’s Pulpit” chapter, in which Zenobia makes her longest political speeches, shows that the commune has attracted at least one feminist reformer and provides her space to advocate her views. On the other hand, the community is an enclosed world in which reformers talk only to one another. At Eliot’s

Pulpit, Zenobia “declaimed with great earnestness and passion” to the audience of Coverdale, Priscilla, and Hollingsworth (BR 111). Three listeners in an intra-communal environment, however, is hardly a public forum.

In her talk, Zenobia echoes Fuller’s ideas about self-expression. She bemoans “the injustice which the world did to women, and equally to itself, by not allowing them, in freedom and honor, and with the fullest welcome, their natural utterance in public” (BR 111). Unfortunately, the injustice seems to continue even at the commune, for her listeners are not sympathetic. Hollingsworth shows outright hostility. Priscilla, the other woman present, is unconverted. She listens with a “disapproving” look in her eyes, and afterward, she asks “with simplicity” if what Zenobia has said is true (BR 113). Although Zenobia speaks freely, honestly, and passionately, she accomplishes little.

Zenobia’s style of public address resembles Fuller’s *Conversations*. These gatherings were “based on the principle of shared wisdom rather than on the speaker-listener model of the classroom or lyceum” (Robinson 249-50). At the commune, however, Zenobia does not find an environment conducive to idea-exchange that empowers other women or persuades men. Her pulpit oratory decries women’s lack of voice, but she does not seem unduly surprised or disappointed that she does not get a respectful hearing even from the other communards. Zenobia says at Eliot’s Pulpit that she wants to live longer so she can “lift up my own voice, in behalf of woman’s wider liberty” (BR 111). She dies soon after, her hopes unfulfilled; she has been ignored and then silenced. Although the commune has not overtly restricted her expression, it has not been a springboard for promoting women’s speech or women’s rights, and its indifference is deadly.

Earlier in the novel, in his sick-bed internal monologue, Coverdale refers to Zenobia by the demeaning term “stump-oratress” (BR 41). His response to Zenobia at Eliot’s Pulpit shows this same disparaging attitude toward her speech. Donald Ross contends that in the pulpit conversation, Coverdale offers “a radical position on feminism in a blatant and insincere attempt to win her admiration” (1015). Zenobia seems aware of Coverdale’s insincerity, whether or not she is aware of his motive. When she catches Coverdale smiling after her first statements, she asks him, ““What matter of ridicule do you find in this, Miles Coverdale? . . . . That smile, permit me to say, makes me suspicious of a low tone of feeling, and shallow thought”” (BR 111). As Hollingsworth does elsewhere in the novel, another character serves to raise doubts about Coverdale’s commitment to reform. In this case, at issue is Coverdale’s commitment to women’s rights, and the depth of his scrutiny.

Rather than accepting Zenobia’s characterization of him as “shallow,” Coverdale explains himself. He tells us that his smile did not come “from any unworthy estimate of woman, or in denial of the claims which she is beginning to put forth” (BR 112). He claims to esteem women, yet he goes on to say he is “amused and puzzled” that even “intellectually superior” women will “disquiet themselves about the rights or wrongs of their sex” when emotionally unsettled (BR 112). He explains that women “are not natural reformers, but become such by the pressure of exceptional misfortune” (BR 112). Coverdale claims he could “measure Zenobia’s inward trouble, by the animosity with which she now took up the general quarrel of woman against man” (BR 112). In this view, women are incapable of drawing conclusions about right and wrong based on

abstract reasoning but instead draw from personal responses born of pain. Coverdale attributes the intensity of Zenobia's oration to the "inequalities of temper" she has undergone since her encounter with Westervelt. He describes Zenobia as delivering her speech with "nothing short of anger" and then "with a flash of anger in her eyes" (BR 111). To Coverdale, Zenobia's revolutionary fervor comes from the intemperate emotionality he apparently believes women prone to feeling.

In the "Eliot's Pulpit" chapter and throughout the novel, Coverdale, with his typical ambivalence, alternately supports, rejects, or conveys discomfort with Zenobia's promotion of her feminist agenda. In the "Coverdale's Sick-Chamber" chapter, he observes that Zenobia's "poor little stories and tracts never half did justice to her intellect . . . . I recognized no severe culture in Zenobia; her mind was full of weeds" (BR 40-41). Baym writes that Coverdale's comment, in which he is "praising the intellect even as he deprecates the form it has found to express itself," shows that "unquestionably Hawthorne does not think much of Zenobia as a feminist" ("Radical Reading" 554). Silas Foster dispatches women to weeding the garden, and Coverdale dismisses Zenobia as stuck in intellectual weeds. Continuing to study Zenobia from his sick-bed, Coverdale says, "It startled me, sometimes, in my state of moral, as well as bodily faint-heartedness, to observe the hardihood of her philosophy; she made no scruple of oversetting all human institutions, and scattering them as with a breeze from her fan" (BR 41). The startling effect of Zenobia's casual "oversetting all human institutions" seems consistent with Hawthorne's aversion to revolutionary change. It is also a direct admission from Coverdale of his own comparatively weak or wavering allegiance to ideals. He has joined

a community whose goal is to overthrow tradition, but he lies in bed, frightened by another communard's vociferous advocacy of change.

Finding no welcome reception at the commune for her activism appears to quash Zenobia's once ardent drive for self-expression and for a public forum. A few chapters later, as Coverdale prepares to take his break from Blithedale, he asks Zenobia if she wishes him "to announce . . . your purpose to deliver a course of lectures on the rights of women" (BR 131). With a "half-melancholy smile," Zenobia responds, "Women possess no rights . . . or, at all events, only little girls and grandmothers would have the force to exercise them" (BR 131). She has given up. Accepting that women like herself have no power to speak and act on their own behalf, she loses the will to try.

Zenobia's unwillingness to speak extends to her personal life as well as her political or public life. In this same conversation, as Coverdale prepares for his leave-taking, Zenobia tells him that she considered making him her "confidant" but decided against this (BR 131). She does not want to act like "one of those good little handmaidens, who share the bosom-secrets of a tragedy-queen" (BR 131). Zenobia believes her secrets fit only for confession to "an angel or a madman" (BR 132). She sees her distress as unworthy of serious contemplation or of any reasonable person's help in resolving it.

Toward the end of the novel, when she is on the brink of suicide, Zenobia's voice deserts her entirely. She tells Coverdale of her plans to depart the commune, and to do so without seeing Hollingsworth. Then she asks Coverdale to be her messenger. When he asks for the message, she replies, "True;—what is it? . . . After all, I hardly know. On better consideration, I have no message" (BR 208). Zenobia is at a loss for words. First,

she asks Coverdale to compose the message, authorizing a man to speak for her: “‘Tell him—tell him something pretty and pathetic—anything you please, so it be tender and submissive enough’” (BR 208). Then she exhibits the sort of irrational emotionalism of which Coverdale earlier found her guilty, saying, “‘Tell him he has murdered me! Tell him that I’ll haunt him!’” (BR 208). She exhibits a lack of control very different from the Zenobia who artfully parried with Coverdale in the kitchen, declaimed at Eliot’s Pulpit, and held her listeners rapt with the legend of “The Silvery Veil.” She follows her lines about murder and haunting with words recalling Hamlet’s command to Ophelia before her suicide: “‘I intend to become a Catholic, for the sake of going into a nunnery’” (BR 210). By killing herself, Zenobia’s final statement to the world takes the form of a destructive, nonverbal gesture driven by displaced emotion. The one-time writer, speaker, story-teller, and advocate of self-expression leaves no suicide note. This withholding is a steep drop from her well-crafted and forthright communication at the novel’s start. Consider Zenobia’s condemnation of Priscilla’s silence early in the book. When Priscilla arrives in the kitchen, Zenobia reacts angrily to her muteness: “‘What does the girl mean?’” cried she, in rather a sharp tone. “‘Is she crazy? Has she no tongue?’” (BR 27). At the novel’s end, it is Zenobia who has gone crazy and has lost her tongue.

The submissiveness Zenobia wants to show Hollingsworth is in keeping with the ideology of the Cult of True Womanhood: the expectation that women obey and serve men. No matter how revolutionary Blithedale intends to be, women cannot escape this oppressive paradigm. Even Coverdale, who is sometimes sympathetic to women’s issues, or pretends to be, articulates some principles of True Womanhood. On the other hand,

*The Blithedale Romance* does display some disapproval of the ideology. This occurs through the villainous Hollingsworth espousing its tenets and through Coverdale showing some uneasiness about women's submission.

At Eliot's Pulpit, Hollingsworth heavy-handedly promotes submissiveness. Zenobia asks Hollingsworth, "Do you despise woman?" (BR 113). He answers, "No!" and explains his position: "She is the most admirable handiwork of God, in her true place and character. Her place is at man's side. Her office, that of the sympathizer; the unreserved, unquestioning believer" (BR 113-14). Gale Temple writes of Hollingsworth's speech, "The purpose of women, in this view, is to keep men inspired by providing a reservoir of belief, an ever-present mirror in which men can recognize a driving image of an always deferred and other-oriented self-actualization" (297). Women are to be helpmates, to enhance men's sense of superiority and authority. Expounding further, Hollingsworth says, "Man is a wretch without woman; but woman is a monster—and, thank Heaven, an almost impossible and hitherto imaginary monster—without man as her acknowledged principal!" (BR 114). Women who do not submit to their male masters are monstrous. Affirming Coverdale's belief that women turn to reform as a consequence of being spurned, Hollingsworth goes on to say that women's "taking the social stand" happens when "poor, miserable, abortive creatures . . . only dream of such things because they have missed woman's peculiar happiness" (BR 114). If women do not get the sort of happiness they should want as per the Cult of True Womanhood, they must seek fulfillment outside the home. Activism becomes their outlet.

Hollingsworth thinks some women fall into this trap "because Nature made them

really neither man nor woman!” (BR 114). Here, he offers a twisted version of Fuller’s notion of indistinct gender boundaries. Fuller writes, “There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman” (69). Hollingsworth reacts to this notion with disgust. He calls such women “petticoated monstrosities” and claims he would “upon my own sex to use its physical force, that unmistakeable evidence of sovereignty, to scourge them back within their proper bounds!” (BR 114). Again, he sees misbehaving women as gruesome, and he also sees them as deserving violent subjugation. Coverdale sees Hollingsworth as animalistic because of his working class roots and appearance, but Hollingsworth sees untraditional women as an even lesser kind of other: preternatural, mutant, demonic. Hollingsworth concludes by saying, “The heart of true womanhood knows where its own sphere is, and never seeks to stray beyond it!” (BR 114). After emphasizing the need for women to be distinctly feminine, and after advocating female submission and male chauvinism, Hollingsworth directly references the Cult of True Womanhood. He assumes women’s natural instinct is to conform to it.

As with other ideologies, Coverdale is inconsistent or ambivalent about True Womanhood. Even if Coverdale expresses concerns about submissiveness, as we will see, he shows support for another element of the True Womanhood paradigm. This occurs when he speaks at about women’s spirituality. At Eliot’s Pulpit, Coverdale says, “Heaven grant that the ministry of souls may be left in charge of women!” (BR 113). God meant women for ministry because they are “endowed . . . with the religious sentiment in its utmost depth and purity, refined from that gross, intellectual alloy, with which every masculine theologian—save only One, who merely veiled Himself in mortal



and masculine shape” (BR 113). Coverdale believes God gave women special purity and piety, embodied by the Virgin Mother. (He seems intimidated by God the Father, preferring a sweeter, more accessible female intermediary.) The ideal woman that this passage references is not ruined by “gross” intellectualism. The Newness of Transcendentalism fails to reform Coverdale’s conventional view of women’s spiritual nature or temperament, or the conventional view that women should handle men’s spiritual development.

At Eliot’s Pulpit, Coverdale continues to embrace positions in line with the Cult of True Womanhood. Doing so, he adopts the same jokey tone with which he imagined the disappearance of housework, and the same hyperbole with which he often undercuts political statements. He says, ““I should love dearly—for the next thousand years, at least—to have all government devolve into the hands of women . . . how sweet the free, generous courtesy, with which I would kneel before a woman-ruler!”” (BR 112). The glibness with which Coverdale proclaims his desire to kneel before women indicates that he does not truly believe in women’s superiority, as does his statement that government would “devolve” into women’s control. His wish to place women on a pedestal is problematic not just because the overemphasis makes it ring insincere. As twentieth century feminists came to realize, seeing women as superior rather than equal is not to women’s advantage. For example, in “The Weaker Sex & the Better Half: The Idea of Women's Moral Superiority in the American Feminist Movement” (1977), Emily Stoper and Roberta Ann Johnson observe that many

first and second wave feminists have argued that women are superior to men and

therefore the world would be a better place if women were given their full share of power and public influence. Women's superiority presumably was manifested in a host of virtues: wholesomeness, altruism, purity, compassion, nurturance, authenticity—as opposed to the corresponding allegedly male qualities of debauchery, selfishness, corruption, coldness, aggressiveness, emotional repression. For over a century, many feminists saw women as the sweet saviors on whom the salvation of the world depended. (193)

Stoper and Johnson warn of the dangers of reverse stereotyping: “Once women admitted that there was a significant difference between the sexes, the argument could be reversed once more and used against them again” (205). For instance, “Woman's uncorrupted nature . . . might make her too soft in hard negotiations and too naive in policy-making” (205). The qualities of the True Woman make her superior to men in some ways, but these same qualities, such as purity, preclude her entering or being effective in the sphere of power.

Coverdale purportedly wants women to take charge of the government. Belying this position are his overstatements and his underlying implication that women are too pure for the dirty business of government. Replying to Coverdale's statement, Zenobia (as she does in the kitchen that first night) takes the debate down to Coverdale's superficial level. “Laughing,” she says of his endorsement of a female ruler: ““Yes; if she were young and beautiful . . . But how if she were sixty, and a fright?”” (BR 112). Zenobia recognizes Coverdale's inability to see women as worthy of leadership, and she recognizes his fixation on women's appearance. Her jocularly suggests that she forgives this inability,

or that, like him, she also does not envisage society permitting women to become leaders.

According to Stoper and Johnson, a perspective related to placing women on a pedestal is seeing women as “counterweight to men’s qualities” (194). They note that Margaret Fuller held this view, for she “argued that masculine was energy, power, and intellect; feminine was harmony, beauty, and love; woman had to be fully developed to hold up her side of the ‘preponderances’” (194). In *The Blithedale Romance*, Coverdale’s exultation of women’s special qualities corresponds with Fuller’s. Perhaps revealing weaknesses in Fuller’s philosophy, this attitude also corresponds with ideals of True Womanhood, seeing women as what Stoper and Johnson call “sweet saviors” (193).

Despite Coverdale’s unquestioning acceptance that women should be pious, pure, and domestic, he does not seem to share Hollingsworth’s stand on submissiveness. Rather, Coverdale refers to Priscilla, “the very woman [Hollingsworth] pictured,” as “the soft reflection of a more powerful existence” as she sits at Hollingsworth’s feet (BR 114). Coverdale’s description of Priscilla as a “parasite” indicates his disapproval of Hollingsworth’s view that women should rely totally on men (BR 114). Zenobia shares Coverdale’s view of Priscilla’s submissiveness, for she “rather contemptuously” exclaims, “‘Poor child! . . . She is the type of womanhood, such as man has spent centuries in making it’” (BR 113). While Coverdale’s and Zenobia’s disdain for Priscilla could stem from the unrequited love they each harbor, here they criticize the girl for embodying Hollingsworth’s reactionary ideal of womanhood. Although the novel offers some critique of True Womanhood, a Transcendentalist commune is apparently not the place for women to smash the template.

Another constraint from which the commune cannot free women is the expectation that marriage is their destiny. The novel makes clear this expectation in a conversation between Coverdale and Zenobia. Coverdale again displays his incomplete understanding of the limitations of women's situation by blithely remarking that women "are always happier than male creatures" (BR 55). When Zenobia tells him to revise his opinion, this is another instance of Zenobia speaking "contemptuously" (BR 55). She feels free and confident enough to express derision, to speak disrespectfully to a man. (The novel calls attention to Zenobia's voice, to her self-expression, by frequently employing adjectives and adjectives to describe the timbre of her statements.) In this scornful tone, she asks Coverdale, "Did you ever see a happy woman in your life? . . . How can she be happy, after discovering that fate has assigned her but one single event, which she must contrive to make the substance of her whole life?" (BR 55). The Transcendentalist commune does not alter the standard, and unhappy, trajectory of a woman's existence: toward the "single event" of marriage which must be her sole aim. Expectations for women's behavior at the commune do not differ from those in the outside world.

Marriage at Blithedale is not particularly appealing if we use Fuller's framework to assess these relationships. Fuller considers various types of marriages in terms of uplift and balance of power for both partners. Blithedale romances, however, seem shaped by ideals of True Womahood. As communal life gets underway in the novel, the only married couple to whom we are introduced is the Fosters. We read little about their marriage, but it appears to be household partnership, not an ideal type. Each sticks to his or her typical tasks and roles. Mrs. Foster is not shown as speaking, even in response to

Mr. Foster's remarks directed to her when he chastises Coverdale for wanting a vacation. If Silas Foster is not drawn as George Ripley, neither does Mrs. Foster resemble the feminist Sophia Ripley.

The marriage we learn them most about is that of Priscilla and Hollingsworth. Near the novel's end, Coverdale visits Blithedale. He finds Priscilla walking with Hollingsworth such that "the powerfully built man showed a self-distrustful weakness, and a childlike, or childish, tendency to press close, and closer still, to the side of the slender woman whose arm was within his" (BR 223). Priscilla, who is apparently holding up Hollingsworth, displays "a protective and watchful quality, as if she felt herself the guardian of her companion, but, likewise, a deep, submissive, unquestioning reverence, and also a veiled happiness" (BR 223). This relationship resembles Fuller's marriage category of mutual idolatry, which weakens and narrows the spouses. Both Priscilla and Hollingsworth have grown feeble and overly dependent on one another. Although Priscilla seemingly has won the upper hand, like Jane Eyre over Mr. Rochester, she is submissive and reverent like the True Woman. Baym writes, "Though she adores him, Priscilla can never be Hollingsworth's wife or friend. In the beginning she is his child, and at the end she is his nurse. And she is fulfilled in her role as caretaker and guardian to the broken Hollingsworth, thus literally realizing the idea that a degrading conception of woman implies a degradation of man" ("Radical Reading" 564). That the degradation of women ultimately degrades men fits with Fuller's philosophy. Although Hollingsworth's condition might seem a well-deserved comeuppance, it results in an unfortunate power configuration. Hollingsworth becomes passive, and Priscilla remains

passive. Neither has sufficient backbone to advance self or partner.

As the novel progresses, *Blithedale's* spokesperson for equality, and the symbol of women's potential, is cowed by her love for Hollingsworth. Zenobia, trying to win Hollingsworth, feels she must reduce herself to mutual idolatry rather than pursuing the kind of intellectual companionship or religious partnership that Fuller advocates. After Hollingsworth calls for women to be submissive, Zenobia obeys. Early in the novel, Zenobia cuts an imposing figure, her compelling and charismatic personality eclipsing that of the other named women: Priscilla and Mrs. Foster. Although she holds no formal leadership role, she is outspoken and self-assured. Through the novel, Zenobia loses her confidence, composure, and forcefulness, becoming increasingly subdued. She loses the contest for Hollingsworth's love, and she loses her voice and influence. The commune not only fails to help her flourish, it kills her.

At Eliot's Pulpit, we see the first cracks in Zenobia's armor when she does not stand up to Hollingsworth. After Hollingsworth's proclamation that the "heart of true womanhood knows where its own sphere is," Coverdale expects Zenobia to feel the same indignation he does toward a "despot" issuing an "outrageous affirmation . . . of masculine egotism" that "deprived woman of her very soul" (BR 115). Although Coverdale Zenobia should rise here "to be the champion of her sex," to his "surprise," she "only looked humbled" (BR 115). Her tears "were wholly of grief, not anger" (BR 115). She responds with feminine crying rather than feminist decrying. Chastened, Zenobia accepts Hollingsworth's chauvinist pronouncements, "'Well; be it so . . . I, at least, have deep cause to think you right. Let man be but manly and godlike, and woman

is only too ready to become to him what you say!’” (BR 115). The once-regal Zenobia subjects herself to Hollingsworth’s sovereignty. Earlier, Coverdale proclaimed himself ready to kneel before a female ruler, and now Zenobia is ready to bow down to a man.

Coverdale reacts to Zenobia’s newfound docility in the age-old tradition of men wondering why women tend to reject the sensitive guy. He smiles “bitterly” at his “own ill-luck”: the two women prefer Hollingsworth, who has charmed them by “some necromancy” (BR 115). Wondering why “women almost invariably behave thus,” he asks whether this is due to “their nature” or “the result of ages of compelled degradation” (BR 115). He is raising another age-old question: nature vs. nurture. Either women are hard-wired to submit, or the legacy of women’s oppression is their attraction to domineering men, thus perpetuating their debasement. Even at a commune, men and women cannot position themselves as equals. Communal living cannot undo biological destiny or historical patterns.

At the commune, Zenobia can air her feminist views, but Coverdale does not take them seriously, Hollingsworth rebukes her, and Priscilla remains unmoved. The novel further lessens Zenobia’s power and her commitment to feminism by having her fall for the man representing “authoritarian domination” (Baym, “Radical Reading” 558). Hollingsworth thinks women should be dominated and controlled, perhaps like the prisoners who interest him—or maybe he wants to improve prisoners’ lot but does not see women as equally downtrodden and needing his aid. Falling for Hollingsworth seems both a symptom of Zenobia’s debasement and a further cause of it. Analyzing Zenobia’s inexplicable attraction to the domineering Hollingsworth, Michael J. Colacurcio writes,

If the compromising logic of his *Life of Franklin Pierce* cost Hawthorne the friendship of many persons of the abolitionist persuasion, his decision to push his would-be emancipated women hard enough to fall hopelessly in love with an unrepentant male chauvinist cannot have pleased any observant member of the feminist community. Coverdale may propose, however hypothetically, a generous feminism as against Hollingsworth's fiercely conventional definition of woman's "place" and "office" and "sphere" . . . but Zenobia herself will come almost immediately to forswear it all. (22)

Even if Coverdale recognizes and perhaps sympathizes with women, the commune does not improve women's status or opportunities. Further, it is not an environment encouraging or emboldening women to help themselves. She calls for empowering women, but then she undermines her own destiny and message.

Zenobia's death is the ultimate proof that the commune is not the place for women to thrive. Perhaps, however, even if society is not entirely to blame for her ruin, she is not entirely responsible, either. Considering the theory that Coverdale (an unreliable narrator) kills Zenobia, Colacurcio writes, "The best thing that could possibly happen to Zenobia is in fact to be murdered by Coverdale; for otherwise she would inevitably figure as one more victim of some profound form of female self-betrayal" (22). Nevertheless, whether she dies by suicide or murder, she lacks agency. Either one man kills her, or another's "necromancy" drives her to ruin. The commune extinguishes Zenobia's reformist passion, her voice, her self-determination, and her life.

Another manifestation of male dominance and female submission in *The Blithedale*



*Romance* is the presence of mesmerism. The “Thought vs. Action” chapter considers Hawthorne’s fascination with and distrust of mesmerism. The mesmerist Westervelt illustrates the dangers of over-emphasizing a life of the mind, a danger the commune seeks to temper by combining man-thinking with man-doing. Samuel Coale writes about “Hawthorne’s moral objections to the psychological powers of mesmerism, its master/slave potentials” (283). John C. Hirsch writes that Zenobia’s “cruelty in telling the story ‘The Silvery Veil’ is a warning to both Hollingsworth and Priscilla of the dangers of human bondage against which the Blithedale demand for individual freedom, both intellectual and emotional, contrasts sharply” (142). Mesmerism thus complicates the novel’s consideration of the individual, for one person gains power over another, and does so by penetrating the innermost self. Mind control is the opposite of the freedom and equality that a commune is supposed to promote.

Mesmerism also serves in the novel to exemplify power imbalances in male-female relationships. The mesmerist is typically a man controlling a woman, using her as his mouthpiece. Samuel Coale lists the male mesmerists in Hawthorne’s fiction: “Maule and Westervelt, Aylmer and Rappaccini, and to a lesser degree Holgrave and Hollingsworth” (276). To Coale, each exhibits “cold, intellectual, Faustian powers” (276). Although not a mesmerist by profession like Westervelt, Hollingsworth is amongst those who exercise mind control over women. Presumably, Coverdale is not serious when he speaks of Hollingsworth’s “necromancy,” but some truth underlies his remark for Hollingsworth’s magnetic appeal somehow compels women to consign themselves to him (BR 115).

Coale also argues that Priscilla embodies “Hawthorne’s use of the medium as female

stereotype,” representing “the passive, receptive creature” (276). As the Veiled Lady, Priscilla functions like a ventriloquist’s dummy, mouthing another’s words. Says Coale, including quotations from Ann Braude’s *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (1989),

The woman suggested negativity in her susceptibility to magnetic and spiritual powers, and quite easily “nineteenth-century stereotypes of femininity were used to bolster the case for female mediumship . . . purity, piety, passivity, and domesticity,” despite the fact that there were almost as many male mediums as there were female. From such gender-specific and psychological roles emerged Hawthorne's broader themes of domination, emotional bondage, the reciprocity of slavery, and the battles between Freudian law and desire on the battlefield of the ego. (277)

Just as the mesmerist represents an especially sinister version of man-thinking, the mesmerist’s submissive victim represents an extreme version of women brainwashed by the Cult of True Womanhood. One such woman is the subjugated Priscilla. Claims Baym, “As seamstress Priscilla represents the whole range of exploited feminine roles in society, all of which, from wife to prostitute, were viewed by feminists as examples of economic subjection of woman to man. As the Veiled Lady, Priscilla stands for the feminine ideal” (“Radical Reading” 561). Colacurcio considers the possibility that Priscilla may have been a prostitute, her silk bag business symbolizing the sale of her body. Whether or not Hawthorne intentionally draws Priscilla as prostitute, Westervelt functions as pimp, marketing Priscilla to the public and pocketing the profits.

Robert Emmet Long sees Priscilla as predecessor to characters in William Dean Howells' and Henry James' novels about real-world utopias: characters victimized by mesmerists. Long writes, "Howells has adapted Hawthorne's material, and interpreted his characters in terms of modern realism" (557). Long claims further that "Howells's characters prepare for James's in *The Bostonians*" (557). Both Egeria Boynton in Howells' *The Undiscovered Country* (1880) and Verena Tarrant in James' *The Bostonians* (1886) act as the medium in their fathers' spiritualist performances. Mesmerism in these novels is "symptomatic of a larger evasion of fundamental reality" (Long 556). Its appearance in non-speculative fiction about communes serves to associate utopian reform with inauthenticity: shams, hoaxes, and dream-states.

Furthermore, mesmerism is just the first form of male power to which these female characters are subject. Under the spell of powerful men, the hypnotized women voice the messages they are fed. Once liberated from the mesmerists, they fall under the spell of other overbearing men. Freed from Westervelt, Priscilla marries Hollingsworth. One captor replaces another, perhaps due to Hollingsworth's "native power," a frightening ability to attract and influence even someone as strong and discerning as Zenobia (154). In *The Undiscovered Country*, after Ford sees Egeria performing at a séance with her mesmerist father Dr. Boynton, Ford "decides to expose its fraudulence publicly. From that moment he enters into contention with Dr. Boynton, which continues through the rest of the novel, and is, in fact, a contest to see which of them shall dominate and possess Egeria" (Long 557). Ford wins; Egeria is transferred from one man to another. Long writes, "Ford is Howells's version of Hollingsworth, who rescues Priscilla from the

wizard Westervelt, with the difference that Ford, rather than being a crank philanthropist, is a crank journalist” (557). In *The Bostonians*, Verena’s journey to Basil Ransom from her mesmerist father Selah Tarrant takes a detour when she comes under the sway of a woman, Olive Chancellor. The novel portrays Chancellor, a lesbian, as a variation on the archetypal domineering man. Susan Wolstenholme writes about the way in which “Selah, Olive, and Basil successively form the center of Verena’s energy as she is ‘converted’ from one to the next” (585). In creating these characters and relationships, Howells and James pick up on *Blithedale*’s implication that individuals—especially women—can be manipulated, spouting any lines given them, whether messages from the spirit world or reformist views. Men bend women to their wills, often for their own nefarious purposes.

Regarding the statement *The Blithedale Romance* makes about male dominance over women on the commune, we must remember that Westervelt is an outsider. His presence in the novel could indicate that the world outside the commune, rather than inside, puts women into pseudo-slavery. On the other hand, the mesmerist could represent the way outside forces inevitably creep into and contaminate the commune. Priscilla escapes Westervelt only temporarily at the commune, for he (embodying men who commodify women in the outside world) reaches her there. This is another way the commune fails to be a safe haven from ubiquitous, pernicious male domination. Further, Priscilla’s post-Veiled Lady life with Hollingsworth at Blithedale shows that women are dominated inside as well as outside the commune, even if the form is subtler. When Coverdale finds her walking with Hollingsworth during his last visit to Blithedale, she is still “submissive,” and her happiness is “veiled” (BR 223). Unable to fully reveal herself,

Priscilla lacks the opportunity for self-expression. Shrouded, she is cut off from the world. Her attachments to men keep her in this position.

Priscilla is not just a victim of domineering men; she is also a victim of another woman's malice. Zenobia betrays Priscilla to Westervelt to try clearing a path to Hollingsworth. Foreshadowing this treachery is Zenobia's first encounter with Priscilla, in which she talks cruelly about the girl. Zenobia's attempt to injure her sister and her suicide, the ultimate self-injury, shows us that we are not supposed to think much of Zenobia's feminism, her commitment to empowering women. Perhaps Zenobia's character is meant to exemplify the shortcomings of feminism or feminists. Perhaps the deterioration of Zenobia's behavior toward other women, from her initial contempt for Priscilla down to her own self-extermination because of unrequited love for a man, is meant as evidence that the communal environment is not conducive to women's well-being. Rather, the interweaving of lives can cause complications or distractions that derail the journey to female uplift. At Eliot's Pulpit, Coverdale suggests that women only take on reform when their emotions run too high or are misdirected, but maybe the commune somehow keeps women from being effective activists for their cause. The novel might be questioning the commune's ability to foster feminist ideology rather than the ideology itself.

An investigation of men vs. women in *The Blithedale Romance* must address a final topic: sexuality. The geometry of the attractions between the four principals, more complex than a mere love triangle, illustrates the amplified sexual tensions at the commune. *The Blithedale Romance* acknowledges that the closeness of communal living

can inflame desire as well as conflict—and it sometimes brews a mixture of both. The novel's references to sexuality are somewhat oblique, consistent with other glossed-over specifics in the book and with the Victorian restraint of other nineteenth century American fiction. Nonetheless, Colacurcio calls *Blithedale* a “daringly suggestive novel,” noting that the text “may be studiously chaste, but its urgent subtext . . . is unblushingly sexual” (25). In this, the novel exemplifies the Victorian era's fascination with sex that often lies beneath the superficial reticence of its literature.

Coverdale discusses his sexual desires, but the desires he admits both involve married women. His appreciation of Zenobia's sexual appeal is bound up with speculation about her marital status. He wonders if she is a virgin or “a woman to whom wedlock had thrown wide the gates of mystery” (BR 44). A subject about which he “very impertinently . . . perplexed myself with a great many conjectures, was, whether Zenobia had ever been married” (BR 42). A few pages later, he returns to the subject, for “irresistibly that thought drove out all other conclusions, as often as my mind reverted to the subject” (BR 44). If Zenobia is not a virgin and thus would not be defiled by his impure thoughts, he is freer to fantasize about her. Fixating on the question of her prior sexual experience, he remains locked into conventional thinking, for he presumes that such experience would have been gained only within a legitimizing marriage. Zenobia complains about the unfair expectation that women must marry, and Coverdale's thoughts about Zenobia show that he does not question the inevitability of marriage, just as he cannot envision fundamental restructuring of women's work.

Coverdale is attracted to married women: Zenobia, if she has been married, and Priscilla, after she is married. Donald Ross observes that until Coverdale's closing confession, the novel gives "no evidence of Coverdale's acting or speaking as if he loves Priscilla" (1014). Only after Coverdale sees her bound to Hollingsworth does he express his love for her. After women marry, any sexual appeal they exude is no longer illicit, so Coverdale can comfortably feel attracted to them. His attraction to a married Priscilla, however, is not exactly the same as his attraction to a married Zenobia. If separated or widowed, Zenobia is available, but Priscilla's marriage makes her unavailable. This renders him safe from the possibility of pursuing her, or acting on desire. After his time at Blithedale, he closes off the possibility of a romantic or sexual relationship. Fantasizing about Zenobia might have turned into a real pursuit, but fantasizing about Priscilla is a non-starter, a dead-end. The commune reinforces his alienation from society, and from women in particular.

Communal living, where close quarters create the "nervous sympathy" that heightens sensitivity to slights, also heightens the propensity to form romantic attachments (BR 129). This is true of Coverdale's commune. Grossberg writes, "Coverdale both explicitly and implicitly characterizes Blithedale as a utopia of sexual desire" (6). Grossberg notes the narrator's repeated contrasting of the commune with his "bachelor apartments" and his "bachelor-rooms" (6). Grossberg continues, "The effect is to align location with desire: he will evacuate his 'bachelor-rooms' in order to occupy what clearly must not be bachelor rooms, that is, a location associated with fulfilled desire" (6). Coverdale, however, cannot form an attachment even in such an active space.

Exploring sexuality at the commune, Hawthorne may have been capitalizing on readers' desire for eroticism. Gale Temple sees *Blithedale* offering readers "vicarious adventure into an exotic and sexually charged realm" (291). Temple contends that Hawthorne's interest in reform "is less an effort to arrive at a final solution to social ills than a vehicle for privatized novelistic entertainment" (288). In this view, the novel aims to satisfy the public's demand for salacious revelations about a commune. Writes Temple, "Coverdale romanticizes the whole Blithedale affair, turning it into a commodity that will appeal in its libidinal and voyeuristic intrigue both to his own imaginative fancy and to that of his potential readers" (302). Readers' anticipation of thrills would have come from the knowledge that "nearly all the communes founded in the 1830s and 1840s had, at least implicitly, some quarrel with the trans-personal implications of the nuclear family" (Colacurcio 25). This quarrel manifested in a variety of ways. On the spectrum of nineteenth century American communes, John Humphrey Noyes' Oneida Community stands at the most permissive end. At the other end stand celibate communities like the Shakers and George Rapp's Harmony Society. Brook Farm and its fictional counterpart Blithedale fall in the middle: conforming to contemporary norms, residents were neither promiscuous nor celibate. Aaron McEmrys writes that at Brook Farm, sexual behavior was "almost uniformly 'proper'" by the standards of the day. Residents of "Brook Farm endorsed marriage and observed a strict code of sexual conduct. Nevertheless, "Critics frequently charged the movement with sexual promiscuity, or 'free love' . . . . The charges, unjust as they were, took their toll on Brook Farm's boarding school, the primary source of income. Parents living outside the community, reading and hearing about



‘depravity,’ withdrew their children” (McEmrys). The idea of free love at might have horrified mid-nineteenth century Americans, including Brook Farm’s possible patrons, but curiosity about transgression probably drew readers to *The Blithedale Romance*.

The novel considers Fourierist libertinism, as we have seen, using Hollingsworth as a vehicle for condemning it. Hollingsworth’s irate outburst about Fourier reminds the reader about the transgressive sexual policies underlying some commune projects. Coverdale matter-of-factly reports that “the footing on which we all associated at Blithedale was widely different from that of conventional society” (BR 67). While this was unlikely to resemble the unrestrained sexuality that Noyes or Fourier espoused, this footing “seemed to authorize any individual, of either sex, to fall in love with any other, regardless of what would elsewhere be judged suitable and prudent. Accordingly the tender passion was very rife among us, in various degrees of mildness or virulence, but mostly passing away with the state of things that had given it origin” (BR 67). Coverdale observes that falling in love was quick and easy, even if the resulting competition for affection was “likely to be no child’s play” (67). The passage hints at sexual liberation, of passion breaching standards of suitability and prudence. Likewise, when Zenobia asks why Coverdale never fell for Priscilla “in such Arcadian freedom of falling in love as we have lately enjoyed,” we see hints of uninhibited desire. Note that her question contains the words “free” and “love.” She connects Blithedale to *Oneida* and its ilk. Representing unfettered sexual desire in the novel, she is the character best-suited to doing so.

At the commune, the intensified passion and sexual attraction extends to same sex couples. Several critics examine queer attraction in the novel, including Grossberg,

Lauren Berlant, and Peter Coviello. In “‘The Tender Passion Was Very Rife Among Us:’ Coverdale’s Queer Utopia and *The Blithedale Romance*,” Grossberg writes, “Coverdale’s Blithedale is a place of queer desire and queer gender, a place where the discrete categories of man, woman, heterosexual and homosexual are set up to be undermined” (7). Grossberg sees the hermitage as evidence of this, for Coverdale’s description of it is “explicit in its erotic connection” (12). At the hermitage, Coverdale tells us, a wild grapevine “of unusual size and luxuriance” had wrapped itself around “three or four neighboring trees” (BR 89). These trees could represent the relationship of central characters (three in addition to Coverdale, and four if he is included). The result of the vine’s entangling is “a perfectly inextricable knot of polygamy” (BR 89). To Grossberg, “What defines the hermitage also defines Coverdale’s utopia: ‘entanglement’” (12). The hermitage, symbolizing Coverdale’s guilty desire to spend time alone, could also symbolize another guilty desire: to be bound together sexually with various men and women, possibly in combination.

Berlant comments on Coverdale’s statement that communal life allows any people of “of either sex” to “fall in love with any other” (BR 67). To Berlant, this implies “that in the real world men fall in love exclusively with women, and vice versa” (37). At Blithedale, however, this is not the state of affairs. Berlant contends that Coverdale is immediately attracted to Hollingsworth. Similarly, Colacurcio finds plausible “the claim that, like both the women, [Coverdale] too was in love with Hollingsworth” (17). Coverdale uses animal metaphors to describe Hollingsworth, yet he finds in the blacksmith “a tenderness in his voice, eyes, mouth, in his gesture, and in every

indescribable manifestation, which few men could resist, and no woman” (BR 27).

Perhaps Coverdale is one of these men who finds Hollingsworth irresistible. Berlant claims that the “Hollingsworth love plot begins during Coverdale's illness. Released from his own worldly ‘effeminacy’ . . . Coverdale finds Hollingsworth's ‘more than brotherly attendance’ inspiring, heartwarming” (37). Grossberg writes, “Coverdale queers Hollingsworth when the latter becomes a nurse” (9). Because work assignments are rigidly gender-based, doing women’s work is gender-bending. As the novel closes, the lonely Coverdale confesses his love for Priscilla, but Grossberg sees this as “simultaneously a revelation of queer desire and an escape to conventional desire, as Priscilla fits nineteenth-century expectations of a desirable woman” (23). Priscilla is unthreatening because she is easily manipulated by men, and she lacks Zenobia’s overt sexuality, flamboyant style, or staunch opinions. Coverdale can use his purported love for Priscilla to beard his homosexual attractions.

Coviello connects sexual attraction at Blithedale with the idea of freedom. He argues that Coverdale is drawn to Blithedale because of the promise of “a freedom to speak, look, imagine, and perhaps actually to live according to pleasingly remapped parameters of intimate life” (153). Blithedale might offer its residents the opportunity to engage in sex outside of marriage, as seen in Zenobia’s flirtation with Coverdale, or to engage in a homosexual relationship, as seen in Hollingsworth’s overtures. Coverdale, however, meets these possibilities with “tremors of shame, of panic, and increasingly with something like terror” (159). He does not pursue Zenobia, and he expresses love for Priscilla only when she is married and thus off-limits. He transmutes his affection for

Hollingsworth into anger and disgust. A commune offers liberation from convention, but such liberation frightens Coverdale. As Coviello writes, it is unpleasant for Coverdale “to be cut loose from the familiar moorings of self-definition, to be set down with an environment charged more with possibility than with constraint, to be confronted with the chaos of an unstructured world with no protective membrane of customary practices and beliefs and rituals” (165-66). Closing himself off to possibilities for freedom in sexual choices, heterosexual and homosexual, could represent the narrator’s aversion to the lawlessness characterizing much communitarianism.

In this first work of fiction set at a commune, Hawthorne depicts an environment in which various types of passions run wild, including homosexuality. *The Blithedale Romance* thus anticipates the way sexual permissiveness would become a staple of future real-world fiction, whether for the commercial reasons Temple notes or because it is a convenient metaphor for all types of freedom or nonconformity. As seen in texts like Moodysson’s film *Together*, Boyle’s *Drop City*, and Groff’s *Arcadia*, open sexual relationships may free the spirit and mark a break with the mainstream, but they also create complications and can ultimately cause more isolation than connection.

Also touching on sexual mores are Hawthorne’s other fictional works set at actual communes, the two stories he wrote after daytrips to Shaker villages. Hawthorne probably did not connect “The Canterbury Pilgrims” (1832) and “The Shaker Bridal” (1837) with *The Blithedale Romance* as three works in the subgenre of real-world utopian fiction. He might not have seen the similarities between the Shakers and the Transcendentalists. Despite many differences between the Shaker stories and *The*

*Blithedale Romance*, the three works reveal common attitudes toward utopianism; this merits further study that is beyond the scope of this project. One commonality relevant here is that all three texts describe communities that challenge conventional sexual practices. Writing about Shaker communities, Hawthorne deplores the repression resulting from the enforced celibacy. In the wedding scene that closes “The Shaker Bridal,” the bride falls dead because “her heart could endure the weight” of the “desolate agony” of a celibate marriage (560), of being only “brother and sister in spiritual love” (559). In “The Canterbury Pilgrims,” a pair of young lovers flee a Shaker village run from a life of “cold and passionless security” (165). In contrast, *Blithedale* fomented too much passion which proves as fatal as bloodless or asexual love, for it leads to Zenobia’s death. Further, Coverdale never benefits from this passion. He is not invited into, or fails to pursue—perhaps due the fear Coviello notes—a romantic or sexual relationship that would alleviate his alienation. The imbalances in and misdirection of romantic feeling and sexuality are yet other ways that the Transcendentalist commune disappoints. Entering and leaving *Blithedale* a bachelor, Coverdale might as well have gone to a celibate Shaker community.

Colacurcio argues that though *The Blithedale Romance* came at the “the same political moment” as reform novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the novel seems not entirely clear about what it is for” (1). Nonetheless, Colacurcio notes that “it certainly entertains the urgent question of ‘woman in the nineteenth century’” (1). The foregoing material has considered how *The Blithedale Romance* engages with this question. *Blithedale* explores women’s work at a commune, showing that the Transcendentalist commune does not

offer meaningful reform fitting with Fourierism or with Margaret Fuller's ideals. In fact, the Cult of True Womanhood is alive and well at Blithedale. Female communards are expected to do traditional women's work, to marry, and to behave like traditional women: pious, pure, and submissive. Further, Coverdale might have hoped that relationships with women would be healthier and more accessible to him at the commune than outside it, but they simply are not. Male friendship or romance eludes him at the commune, too. Despite the potential for human connection in various forms, alienation persists on the commune. Passions are unfulfilled or dangerous, and couples are doomed.

### **Men vs. Women in "Transcendental Wild Oats"**

Nathaniel Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott fictionalize a communal setting to work through personal preoccupations. In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne confronts his enduring concern with alienation. In "Transcendental Wild Oats," women's issues are central. Jean Pfaelzer writes that in "Transcendental Wild Oats," Alcott confronts her concerns about the "dominance of society over the individual" especially "over the female individual" (86). Chapter Four: The Individual vs. Society explored the fictional Fruitlands privileging of individuals, but Men vs. Women will explore how Alcott uses "the utopian topos to expose the tensions of the larger culture in which men define the future" (Pfaelzer 87). Like Hawthorne, Alcott considers whether a Transcendentalist form of utopia can fix problems found in the larger society.

The feminist message of "Transcendental Wild Oats" has been the subject of more

scholarship than any other aspect of the story. This Men vs. Women chapter adds to the scholarship by comparing the treatment of gender issues in “Transcendental Wild Oats” to the topic’s treatment in *The Blithedale Romance*. Whether or not Hawthorne intended to do so in *The Blithedale Romance*, his novel addresses many of the same issues as Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Fuller, however, did not figure as prominently at Fruitlands or in Louisa May Alcott’s life as she did at Brook Farm or in Hawthorne’s life. (As a young woman, Fuller worked for Bronson Alcott at the Temple School while residing with Bronson and Abba; she did not part with the Alcotts on good terms although they continued to travel in the same Transcendentalist circles.) Writing “Transcendental Wild Oats” almost thirty years after the publication of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Alcott does not shape her characters or her narrative in response to Fuller. Nonetheless, Alcott’s short story considers issues that Fuller addresses in her treatise: women’s work, expression, ideals of womanhood, the balance of power in marriage, and more subtly, the topic of sexuality.

Pfaelzer asserts that Alcott’s story, like Davis’s “The Harmonists” (1866), “exposed the patriarchal assumptions within the reformist tendencies of romanticism” (85). As discussed earlier in Chapter Four: The Individual vs. Society, Nina Baym describes the quintessential American romantic narrative in which men seek “self-definition” outside of societal constraints (“Beset Manhood” 132). One such constraint is women. Baym claims that in the classic American myth, “The encroaching, constricting, destroying society is represented with particular urgency in the figure of one or more women (133). Women are not only precluded from epic journeys of self-discovery abroad or even at

home, but they hold back the men who seek those adventures. “Transcendental Wild Oats” offers an alternative perspective to this standard storyline; we read of a woman holding down the fort while men pursue their grand destinies. Alcott depicts the Transcendentalist commune as fostering Romantic individualism for men, but not for women. In Pfaelzer’s words, “Society, whether utopian or real, was a male creation” (86). Alcott’s Transcendentalist commune was no exception.

Margaret Fuller saw the possibility that communalism could open occupational opportunities for women. Like the outside world, however, the fictional Fruitlands does not give women this opportunity. Sandra Harbert Petrulionis says Alcott “exposes Transcendental utopian ideals as a further perpetuation of the sexual division of labor” (70). At Blithedale, communards at least discuss whether job assignments will be gender-based. Although Blithedale’s women keep traditional domestic jobs during Coverdale’s time there, Zenobia says this will change. The fictional Fruitlanders, in contrast, never even question the division of labor along gender lines. If conversations about gendered work happened at the real Fruitlands, Alcott’s fictionalized account does not relate them.

Rather, the question, as seen in Chapter Three: Thought vs. Action, is whether men will engage in any labor at all. Petrulionis notes the real Fruitlanders’ belief that communal living would reduce everyone’s workload. She writes, “Embodying traditional nineteenth-century New England roles, the men at Fruitlands were to toil in the fields and the women to tend the hearth, but both tasks were to be minimized so that, as a consequence, the usual gender delineations would be relaxed” (Petrulionis 69). The idea that domestic work would somehow wither away in a utopian community recalls



Coverdale's facetious remark to Zenobia in the kitchen; he finds it a pity that the utopian scheme cannot miraculously eradicate the need for domestic labor. His comment is humorous because it proposes a far-fetched scenario: a future in which women escape housework. The real Fruitlanders, though, actually believed in a future with lighter workloads for both men and women. Petrulionis observes that the minimization of labor is "not what happened, however, and Alcott's short sketch thirty years later records her childhood experience at Fruitlands from the vantage of her mother's view of exploited and slighted gender roles" (69). The story emphasizes Sister Hope's tireless labor, from her night-time tasks to her saving of the harvest.

Claudia Durst Johnson notes that basic to Fruitlands' "existence was a reorganization of labor" ("Cost of an Idea" 49). Unfortunately, in real life and as portrayed in Alcott's story, the commune did not reform labor practices, and most of those practices were injurious to women. In "Transcendental Wild Oats," Alcott does not shrink from bitterness about the way "philosophers were absolved from the demands of the work ethic" (Johnson, "Cost of an Idea" 49). Pfaelzer writes, "What was most insidious to Louisa was their hypocrisy regarding shared labor" (95). Some men do work, as we have seen in the Thought vs. Action chapter. Still, Sister Hope must do extra work so men can avoid work at the farm and follow their individual inner natures.

In the discussion of Men vs. Women in *The Blithedale Romance*, we have seen how a common element of histories and fiction about communal living is the tension over gendered labor. "Transcendental Wild Oats" does not so much dispute the limits on women's options for work as much as it shows how "women's labor made men's

rumination possible,” as Carol Farley Kessler summarizes the situation (9). A similar situation occurs in Kate Atkinson’s *A God in Ruins*. The narrator says of Viola’s husband, “Hardly a day passed without him having one great idea or another, most of which seemed to involve drudgery on Viola’s part” (39). Another communitarian admires how the husband ““thinks of six impossible things before breakfast!”” but to Viola, “the world . . . would be better off without so many ideas” (9). Like Alcott’s story, Atkinson’s novel shows us that the thought vs. action dichotomy at a commune can be unfair to women.

A twist on gendered work at Fruitlands is that women are never freed from the domestic sphere, but they move into the men’s sphere. As if heeding Fuller’s call to let women be sea-captains, Hope captains the harvest. Contrast this with Blithedale, where Zenobia considers women’s fieldwork as only a distant possibility. Although Petrulionis calls the women’s harvesting “radical” (72), Fruitlands is not more progressive than Blithedale. Hope takes to the fields as a matter of survival, not the kind of Fourierist choice that Fuller supports. Fruitlands may overturn some limitations women face, but only to benefit men, and not to expand women’s horizons.

Compounding the situation, men make women’s labor more difficult in several ways. First, the men who set the rules at Fruitlands privilege animals’ rights over human women’s rights. To require women to toil away while liberating animals from the same requirement is to add insult to injury. Hope’s comment that the commune’s sole “beast of burden” is “only one woman” does more than merely decry her exploitation (TW 44). She is acknowledging the status of women at Fruitlands: they rank lower than livestock.

That Jane Gage is driven off the commune reinforces this point; she is worth less than the fish she eats. Furthermore, in the harvest scene, the women and children become farm animals. With a storm imminent, “Sister Hope gathered her forces. Three little girls, one boy (Timon's son), and herself, harnessed to clothes-baskets and Russia-linen sheets, were the only teams she could command” (TW 46). Women and children are “harnessed” and become “teams.” They add farm work to household servitude. Their yokes, which are the accoutrements of domesticity (laundry baskets and linens), symbolize the overlapping sets of responsibilities. Rescuing the harvest, Sister Hope saves “food for her young, with the instinct and energy of a mother-bird with a brood of hungry nestlings to feed” (TW 46). Her harvest-work is an extension of her duties as a mother and a cook. In this, too, she is likened to an animal.

Men at Fruitlands also make women's work more difficult by infringing upon the domestic sphere. Women at Fruitlands, in Pfaelzer's view, “lose authority over domestic life” (86). Relegated to housework, women should at least retain control over it, but as discussed in “The Individual vs. Society,” the Fruitlands founders dictate all facets of communal life. By taking his family to Fruitlands, Abel Lamb compromises Sister Hope's ability to properly fulfill the nineteenth century American woman's job: caring for her family. Hope's domain, the kitchen, is substandard. Describing this discovery, the narrator employs a convention of sentimental writing by appealing directly to the reader's feelings: “Any housewife can imagine the emotions of Sister Hope, when she took possession of a large, dilapidated kitchen, containing an old stove and the peculiar stores out of which food was to be evolved for her little family of eleven” (TW 41). Not only

must Hope work with limited equipment and supplies, she must feed an entire community. Hope's family is not eleven people; rather, this number includes all the communards. Although the story does not number her children, it mentions only a few daughters. "Little family" is ironic because Hope must mother all the communards.

The emphasis on dietary reform contributes to women's loss of control over the household. One purpose of this reform at the real Fruitlands, writes Petrulionis, was to reduce labor. Petrulionis claims the Fruitlands' "ideology specifically purported to free women from their household drudgery" by freeing them from "servitudes of the dairy and flesh pots" (72). This idea apparently rested on the premise that "woman's work consists primarily in roasting meat and churning butter" (Petrulionis 72). Despite these expectations, a vegan diet only makes feeding family and farmworkers more difficult. "Transcendental Wild Oats" illustrates this challenge, for Sister Hope toils to bake bread, one of the few acceptable foods. The catalogues of limited food supplies accentuate the difficulty of the cook's job. A related challenge is caring for the tableware Lamb buys to make all meals sacramental occasions, for he ignores Hope's concerns about it.

The commune's ideological principles also complicate another aspect of women's work: producing and tending to a family's clothing. As we have seen, Mrs. Lamb repairs the clothes, often in insufficient light, yet a man not involved in the upkeep of garments issues decrees about them. Lion proclaims that communards should go barefoot until they can manufacture a new form of vegan footwear, but this is impractical plan for those who actually work in the kitchen or fields. Pfaelzer writes, "When radical men presume to define domestic needs, the results are at best absurd and, in the end, dangerous" (91). The

men set the rules, leaving women to obey and apply them. In doing so, men add to women's workload, usurp their autonomy, and compromise their comfort. When Alcott writes that "only a brave woman's taste, time, and temper were sacrificed on that domestic altar," the word "only" serves two functions here (TW 41). It communicates that the principles do not affect men, the people who really matter. Further, it is ironic understatement, for "taste, time, and temper" are not mere trifles.

In her dedication to housework and in her efforts to follow men's rules, Hope conforms to the Cult of True Womanhood's expectations for domesticity. As shown in the discussion of spirituality in Chapter Three: Thought vs. Action, purity and piety were valued at Fruitlands, but "Transcendental Wild Oats" does not give the subject of women's purity and piety the same amount of discussion as *The Blithedale Romance* does. The extent to which Sister Hope remains submissive is a complex topic, and it is the focus of much of the rest of this chapter.

Addressing this topic involves revisiting the issue of leadership in the fictionalized Transcendentalist commune. In *The Blithedale Romance*, as we have seen, the commune has no clearly designated leader, but a female character holds some sway due her formidable personality. Fruitlands is different from Blithedale, for it is Lion and Lamb who publish a manifesto, and Lion enforces its principles as "director" and "dictator" (TW 40, 42). Zenobia's power declines until she fades away and dies, but in her time at the commune, Hope grows more powerful and becomes "commander" (TW 49). When the commune's failure is imminent and Abel Lamb lays down to die, a major power shift occurs in the story. Taking charge of the family, Hope exercises the kind of authority she

used when taking charge of the harvest. This is the point at which the story's style switches from satire to sentimentality, as if Alcott must soften Hope's strength with a sweeter but more serious tone.

Petrulionis sees Mrs. Lamb's rise to power as resulting from men spending more time thinking instead of doing. She observes that Hope's

assumption of female power uncovers a social gap that developed in

Transcendentalism: when the men are busy philosophizing and the women handle all the work (not just the domestic duties), the reins of power can be radically transposed. At Fruitlands, Sister Hope recognizes her ability to do all the labor required for her family's survival. She becomes their leader and guides them back into society, prepared to address the challenges of living. (70)

Instead of standing on the sidelines while the commune falls apart, Hope takes action.

Petrulionis argues that a problem inherent in the Transcendentalist communalism—male thinkers who “evade their obligation to provide”—brings about this near-ruin and

subsequent female intervention (75). Petrulionis continues, ““Transcendental Wild Oats’

shows that when men leave the performance of the mundane duties of everyday life to

women, they may wind up intellectually superior but socially and politically powerless”

(75). The men do not entirely leave mundane duties to women; rather, as Pfaelzer argues,

men interfere with such duties in ways that are ridiculous as well as dangerous. On the

other hand, the men talk about this work rather than dirtying their hands with it.

Petrulionis writes further, “By transforming a story about patriarchal utopias and

transcendental ideals into a tale of woman's triumph, Alcott implies that the power to

enact social change lies with women who act, not with men who dream” (79). Alcott portrays the Transcendentalist commune as oppressing women, but paradoxically, as thus allowing for “radically transposing” power to women. As Nina Baym writes in her study of American women’s fiction, in the work of many nineteenth century female authors, “happily . . . the world’s hardships provide just the right situation for development of individual character” (*Woman’s Fiction* 277-78). Rising to the challenges imposed by hardship, Sister Hope sheds her submissiveness, becoming Fruitlands’ leader in its remaining days, as well as her family’s leader. Says Petrulionis, “A study of the various Alcott family biographies affirms that this is exactly what happened: after Fruitlands, Bronson never again presumed to lead the family, and Abba's matriarchal rule was uncontested” (78). Here, Alcott chooses in her fiction to relate an actual event. Although Hawthorne also includes some close-to-fact life events in his novel, Alcott is a realist rather than a romancer, and one way she builds the verisimilitude is by sticking more closely to facts than Hawthorne does.

Sister Hope’s willingness to speak her mind raises questions about submissiveness. Important to Margaret Fuller, as demonstrated in the Conversations she hosted, was women’s freedom to express themselves. Fuller saw this as necessary for women to improve their status. In “Transcendental Wild Oats,” Hope gradually finds her voice. One way the story illustrates Hope’s rise to leadership is through the way she communicates. As is the case with Blithedale, Fruitlands does not especially encourage women’s expression or activism. Before her ultimate victory, Hope’s voice conforms to the True Womanhood paradigm, for she rarely vocalizes any dissent. As the story progresses,

Hope's quiet obeisance vanishes. This is a sharp contrast to Zenobia, who loses her voice.

Hope's silence at the story's start accompanies her self-sacrifice and is also a form of it. She forfeits her voice to maintain harmony. As the family heads to Fruitland in the first scene, "The cheery woman tried to cover every one but herself with the big umbrella" (TW 36). Hope cares for everyone except herself. Shielding the children from the harsh outside world but leaving herself exposed to the elements, she is upbeat. Her demeanor here is much like the "bright way" she says she follows her husband to serve as ballast (TW 44). Radiating sunniness and optimism, Hope communicates to her family that all is well, masking any negativity or anxiety a woman in her situation would likely feel, putting a positive spin on the move to a remote, primitive farm. As Barbara Welter writes about the domestic role of the True Woman, "Home was supposed to be a cheerful place, so that brothers, husbands and sons would not go elsewhere in search of a good time. Woman was supposed to dispense comfort and cheer" (55). Hope employs her voice in the service of domesticity, to maintaining a happy, secure home.

Hope also teaches her daughters to do the same through her example. In this, she resembles Marmee in Alcott's *Little Women*, counseling Jo about how to refrain from showing her temper. Says Marmee, "I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo; but I have learned not to show it" (89), and she encourages Jo to do likewise. We see a similar molding of daughters in the opening scene of "Transcendental Wild Oats." The narrator tells us that in the wagon, the "the little girls sang lullabies to their dolls in soft, maternal murmurs" (TW 36). They are emulating their mother, the True Woman who uses her voice to soothe her family. The narrator gives a physical description of Hope as "an



energetic-looking woman, with a benevolent brow, satirical mouth, and eyes brimful of hope and courage (TW 36). All is potential: her energy, bravery, and candor are dormant, lying in wait—not permanently repressed like Marmee’s feelings.

As discussed in “The Individual vs. Society,” at Fruitlands unlike at Blithedale, verbal conflicts are few. Jane Gage and Brother Moses break rules but do not argue with the leaders. When Gage receives her reprimand from Timon Lion, in a pitiful attempt at self-defense, she whimpers that she only ate a bit of the fish (TW 44). Instead of standing her ground, Gage weeps, and then she flees. In keeping with this low-conflict environment, Sister Hope curbs her voice in the first part of the story. For example, when Timon Lion spouts his principles during the rainy journey to Fruitlands, Hope replies to some of his comments, but then she “held her peace” (TW 38). When Lion says that communards can go barefoot until the creation of cruelty-free shoes, Sister Hope says, ““I never will, nor let my girls” (TW 39). Although Alcott uses the word “rebellious” to describe Hope here, the dissent is “murmured . . . under her breath” (TW 39). This is the story’s second use of “murmur.” The first is when the little girls murmur lullabies in the wagon, establishing it as the speech of powerless females. Rather than aggressive confrontations, or breaking rules like Jane or Moses, Sister Hope quietly makes snide remarks.

When Hope does rebel against the commune’s dictates and dictators, it is through her “satirical mouth” (TW 36). The narrator uses this last phrase to describe Hope’s facial features, but the description also fits her manner of speaking. Petrulionis contends that “Alcott clearly portrays Hope’s rebellion against the male hierarchy that presumes control over her sphere” (76), but until the end, Hope’s revolutions are velvet. They take

the form of speech rather than action. Further, Hope's opposition is barely audible to her listeners, e.g. muttered under her breath or inaudible to readers. Alcott does not always tell us what Hope says in response to the various indignities that Fruitlands founders impose. For example, we learn that Sister Hope "rebelled" in the question of procuring evening light, but the narrator does not provide dialogue or otherwise tell us how Hope communicates dissatisfaction or refuses to comply (TW 41). Further, the light helps Hope to subdue herself, for with the light, her "anxious heart forgot its burden in a book" (TW 41). Petrulionis notes that Hope "fails to suppress 'a humorous glimmer'" when asking Lion about his plans for work (TW 76); however, smirking and eye-twinkling are not full-fledged self-expression or rebellion.

Angela Mills writes about Hope's brand of wit. Claims Mills, "Hope's resort to humor—as her sense of the ludicrous supporter her through many trying scenes—has frequently been read as a marker of her resistance to the masculinist preoccupations and structure of the Consociate Family" (15). Mills notes that Johnson, Petrulionis, and Pfaezler all characterize Hope's humor as "biting rebuttal," but "the tale as a whole depicts her as tempering her tone with a countervailing capacity for sympathy" (16). Hope may "deride" or "chastise," but she remains steadfastly loyal and forgiving (16). Her generous spirit takes the edge off her jokes. Likewise, Zenobia couches many of her comments to Coverdale in a joking tone, using humor to educate him when he speaks ignorantly about what women's situation.

Hope does not or cannot fully voice her thoughts, but self-culture at the commune provides space for men's free self-expression. As seen in Chapter Three: Thought vs.

Action, Abel Lamb and Timon Lion are big talkers. As seen in Chapter Four: The Individual vs. Society, one communard believes he can freely spout profanity as long as his spirit is right. One irrepressibly shares all the “emotions of the soul,” and one expresses himself incessantly through music (TW 43). The commune, however, does not grant women this same right to disruptive self-expression.

Sister Hope’s voice grows more assertive, but not until the end of the story.

Petrulionis writes,

Only a few paragraphs following Sister Hope's successful and courageous management of the “men’s work” in the fields, Alcott seems to reduce her to a meek, supportive wife. Standing in as the sentimentalized, hand-wringing female, Sister Hope initially asks, “What is to become of us?” and awaits their fate “with a mysterious awe and submission.” (77-78).

After her husband takes to his bed, Hope still appears meek when she “crept fearfully to see what change had come to the patient face on the pillow” (TW 48). This scene marks the story’s major flip: Hope takes charge of the family and finally speaks forthrightly. As “the new commander, with recovered courage,” she says to the despairing Abel, “Leave all to God—and me. He has done his part, now I will do mine” (TW 49). She feels empowered enough to put her agency in the same league as God’s. Then she contradicts her husband. When he says, “But we have no money, dear,” she replies, “Yes, we have. I sold all we could spare, and have enough to take us away from this snowbank” (TW 49). To Lamb’s questions (e.g. “Where can we go?”), she has ready answers (e.g. “I have engaged four rooms . . . . There we can live cheaply till spring”) (TW 49). She

finishes the conversation by telling the distraught Lamb to “cheer up, dear heart,” sounding more like a husband bolstering a despondent wife than the opposite (TW 49). Unlike her husband and Timon Lion, Hope does not just talk a good game about what the future might hold. She accompanies her newly awakened voice with action, and she delivers real results.

The story closes with Hope literally getting the last word. As the family leaves the commune, Abel calls Fruitlands “a failure” (TW 49). To this, Hope says, “Don't you think Apple Slump would be a better name for it, dear?” (TW 49). The Thought vs. Action chapter notes that “half-tender, half-satirical” could describe the tone of the story, part parody and part sentimentality. The description also perfectly sums up Sister Hope: part submissive wife and part wry observer. Hope's take-charge persona at the end raises the question of whether the earlier hand-wringing was an act. Was Hope merely playing the part of helpless woman and docile wife? When her husband took to his bed, Hope already must have been at work addressing the situation. Reaching out beyond the farm, she made business arrangements with a landlord, with employers, and with a buyer for the family's remaining possessions. Preparing for the community's closure, Hope becomes the boss, stepping into a male role. Perhaps her initial murmurings indicate that she was biding her time. Instead of wasting strength on glancing blows, she waited until she could triumph in a complete *coups d'état*.

As Hope finds her voice, Lamb loses his. “Silently he lay down upon his bed” where “soul and body were dumbly struggling” with “no word of complaint” (TW 48). Greeting Hope upon his recovery, he expresses himself nonverbally, with “a wasted hand

outstretched to her” (TW 48). His verbal expression is reduced to just “a feeble voice,” and he speaks his last words in the story with a “sigh” (TW 48, 49). Abel Lamb becomes a “wan shadow of a man” (TW 49). “Lamb” suggests weakness, and he grows weaker as the story continues—and as his wife grows stronger.

Their gender roles reverse. In the second half of the story, Lamb displays what Pfaelzer calls “intense emotionality” (98). This emotional weakness, on top of physical weakness, “further challenges the sexual division of subjectivity, which enscribes men in terms of political and economic attributes and women in terms of their feelings” (Pfaelzer 98). When Hope becomes head-of-household, Abel displays the hand-wringing helplessness his wife once seemed to have. Their first names then come to seem ironic: Hope shows her ability to manage the family’s future, as opposed to being merely hopeful about it, and Abel is not able.

As noted in the “Thought vs. Action” chapter, Ralph Waldo Emerson worried about scholars being stereotyped as sickly or as feminine. Abel Lamb embodies Emerson’s fears. Like Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance*, Lamb falls ill into bed. Both Lamb and Coverdale rise with new consciousness of and commitment to their masculine roles. Coverdale is the more successful of the two; he grows muscular and becomes proficient at farming. This happens near the start of his time at Blithedale, when time remains for him to fulfill his commitment. When Lamb gets out of bed, he speaks of the “duty” to his wife and children that he must do “manfully” (TW 48). This resolution comes too late, however, and characteristically, it is more talk than action. With his abandonment of the harvest and then his waiting with “pathetic patience for death to cut the knot which he

could not untie,” Lamb has already ceded power to his wife (TW 48). He cannot reestablish his masculinity or dominance. Even before his breakdown, we learn that Lamb is “too high and tender to bear the rough usage of this world” (TW 44). Hope, in contrast, does more than merely survive tough times: never once does she even go down for the count.

Given Hope’s rise to power, the story’s handling of the Cult of True Womanhood is complex. Sister Hope seems the ideal nineteenth century American wife given her initial reluctance to express herself; her bright, cheery attitude; her willingness to follow her husband, and her dedication to domesticity. As we have seen, however, the story challenges the Cult of True Womanhood when Hope readily assumes the masculine roles of harvesting the crops and then rescuing her family. Perhaps one short, easily-overlooked phrase from the story’s start captures Hope’s position as wife. As the communards arrive at Fruitlands, the narrator describes Hope as “unconverted but faithful to the end” (TW 37). The import of this phrase is not entirely clear until we reach the story’s conclusion. Hope balances lack of confidence in her husband’s plans with loyalty and unconditional support. She does not let lack of confidence undermine her allegiance to her husband. Hope is True Woman on the surface but not underneath. A veneer disguises her real nature, just as her plaintive ““What is to become of us?”” disguises the fact that she is already solving the problem.

Sister Hope’s evolving, complicated nature supports Mary Kelley’s observations about Barbara Welter’s True Womanhood paradigm. Reading nineteenth century American sentimental fiction, Kelley found that although “Welter’s womanhood was a

seamless ideology,” the fiction is actually “shot through with ambivalence, tension and contradiction” (“Commentary” 70). Welter found “docile compliance with the ideology’s prescriptions,” but Kelley “detected acts of subversion” (70). Sister Hope embodies the sentimental heroine who is not thoroughly deferential but is quietly and then blatantly subversive.

Exercising her voice and demonstrating her competence in both women’s and men’s work, Hope assumes the dominant position in the marriage. Initially, the marriage of Hope and Abel resembles one of the less desirable kinds of marriage in Margaret Fuller’s typology. The Lambs appear to have a “household partnership” in which husbands seek a “‘capable, sweet-tempered’ wife” (42). In keeping with the sentimental form, Alcott’s story plays up what Mary Kelley find in many sentimental novels: “woman’s selflessness and her service to the needs of others” (“Sentimentalists” 437). Kelley does not address “Transcendental Wild Oats” in “The Sentimentalists: Promise and Betrayal in the Home,” but much of what she writes applies to Alcott’s story. When Hope is her most subservient and self-sacrificing, the family is most imperiled. The family suffers when the wife is complicit in her husband’s neglect. After Hope takes control, the Lambs’ marriage does not squarely fit any of Fuller’s categories. When Abel arises with a newfound sense of responsibility, the couple seems close to reaching the common ground of Fuller’s categories of intellectual companionship or religious relationship. Both of these marriage types, however, are unions of equals, but Hope has gained the upper hand (just as Priscilla has done). An argument can be made that the story closes with the Lambs only reaching mutual idolatry. Consistent with this state, Lamb experiences at the end “a new

dedication of heart and life to the duties that were left to him when the dreams fled” (TW 48), and Hope is what Kelley would describe as a “supportive and guiding redeemer for husband” (“Sentimentalists” 437). Also consistent with mutual idolatry is that “both parties weaken and diminish each other” (Fuller 42). At the end, Abel is controlled by Hope, and Hope is saddled with a useless partner. With mutual idolatry, writes Fuller, “to men, the woman seems an unlovely syren; to women, the man an effeminate boy” (42). Hope’s assertive action and voice could seem that of a siren, and as we have seen, Abel is effeminized. Further, the pair is focused on merely surviving rather than on reaching higher intellectual or religious ground.

Petrulionis argues that by “effectively silencing the would-be hero,” Alcott’s story “inverts the sentimental form” (70). Petrulionis takes issue with Pfaelzer’s position that the story is “an exposition of the feminist impulse within domestic sentimentality” (Pfaelzer 97). Pfaelzer sees a feminist message in the harm done to women who lose jurisdiction over the domestic sphere. In contrast, Petrulionis reads Alcott as overturning the conventions of domestic sentimentality rather than using it to communicate a feminist message. To Petrulionis, “Alcott clearly portrays Hope’s rebellion against the male hierarchy that presumes control over her sphere” (76). “Transcendental Wild Oats,” however, may conform to the sentimental style more than Petrulionis allows. Petrulionis sees Hope’s rebelliousness as “unmistakably subverting the sentimental plot,” for “rather than a man saving a ‘damsel in distress,’ a woman delivers her husband and family from the all-too-real threats of homelessness and starvation, and he willingly acquiesces to her his (gendered) power” (78). Petrulionis also says, “Alcott indulges her audience’s taste



for sentiment in ‘Transcendental Wild Oats,’” but “instead of a female victim, she creates a female victor whose authority derives from male submission—quite a radical revision of the sentimental form” (77). She claims Alcott’s story only “initially appears” to “align . . . with the typical sentimental plot that restores domestic harmony in the wake of crisis” (77). Then, in Petrulionis’ view, the story breaks the sentimental mold.

As support for her position, Petrulionis quotes Kelley’s “The Sentimentalists: Promise and Betrayal at Home.” Petrulionis picks up on a particular hallmark of nineteenth century American women’s sentimental writing that Kelley discusses: the expectation that wives defer to husbands. Lending credence to Petrulionis’s reading of “Transcendental Wild Oats” is that Hope’s deference to her husband does not last the entire story; Hope stops acceding. According to Kelley, however, the sentimental heroine is not always completely deferential. Therefore, “to perceive the sentimentalists as simply sweet singers of domestic blissfulness . . . is to ignore the strains in their fiction” (Kelley, “Sentimentalists” 436). These strains are the tensions between “domestic dreams” and “deep discontent” (436). Kelley notes that in their effort to “share grievances” with their female readers, sentimental writers “promoted as a female archetype a strong, commanding, central figure in the home” (436). Kelley’s description of the archetypal sentimental heroine seems to match Sister Hope. Hope exhibits the desire to fulfill her domestic responsibilities while also exhibiting strength. Thus, portraying Hope as commander is not necessarily inconsistent with sentimental literature. Her shedding timidity and showing mettle does not overturn the sentimental form but instead illustrates its complexities.

Alcott's portrait of Hope's husband, as well as of Hope herself, matches Kelley's description of sentimental characters. Lamb is like the men who are "indifferent to the family's welfare," which he shows when he "forgets or refuses to be a provider, neglects his children, and fails to abide by his wife's moral example" (Kelley, "Sentimentalists" 443). More concerned with himself and his ideals than his family, and then disappearing at harvest-time, Lamb does not provide for his family. Kelley claims sentimental fiction often features a "self-concerned, aggressive male" (443). Abel Lamb is self-absorbed, but he is not aggressive. Instead, aggression comes from Lamb's alter-ego Lion, issuing proclamations hampering Hope's work and comfort, and bullying Jane Gage. Lion does more in the story than impart historical accuracy by standing in for Charles Lane; he enables Alcott to place male aggression in the household without attributing it to Lamb. Further, the male in sentimental literature is not necessarily an ill-intentioned villain; at times "he is well-meaning but weak and irresponsible, incapable of performing his assigned role" (443). This description almost perfectly captures Abel Lamb's essence.

Kelley explains the purpose of the undesirable male figure in sentimental literature. She writes,

Despite their assent and belief in woman's posture as one of deference to a male head-of-household, the glorification of woman as superior being was tantamount to a protest that she had to defer to an erring, inferior husband; the promotion of woman as strong and independent underlined her predicament as a dependent forced to rely upon an unreliable male; and the wonderment at woman's work implied a rejection of the characterization of woman's status as inferior.

(“Sentimentalists” 437)

The narrator’s sardonic tone through “Transcendental Wild Oats” conveys wonder that such a woman as Hope could be thought, or treated as, inferior to either Lamb or Lion. Further, depicting the feckless Abel and aggressive Lion imposing their will on Hope reinforces her characterization as superior to both, and it underscores the injustice of her oppression. Even though Lamb tries to infuse aspects of the commune with spirituality, Hope emerges as the truly moral parent, working steadfastly and selflessly throughout the story to feed her family and ensure its future.

“Transcendental Wild Oats” expresses fear about how dependence on men imperils women. Kelley claims that sentimental writers believed “in the domestic as woman’s properly restricted sphere,” but at the same time, “they were apprehensive that woman’s position was dependent upon the stability of the family (“Sentimentalists” 437). Although the story shows that women can succeed outside of the domestic sphere, as Hope does with the harvest and the post-Fruitlands business arrangements, the story also shows her and her children at the mercy of Abel’s whims. Kelley sees the sentimental novel as protesting this type of scenario. In this “protest lay the promise and the betrayal of the nineteenth-century woman” (437). “Transcendental Wild Oats” spends much time depicting betrayal, and it ends by showing Hope’s promise. Hope’s ultimate independence is another way the story is consistent with sentimental literature rather than an inversion of it.

Whether or not she overturns the sentimental genre the way Petrulionis claims, Alcott does make an important innovation to the genre: setting it at a Transcendentalist

commune instead of a traditional American home. She takes a typical sentimental situation, a husband endangering his family through neglect, and she plays it out in a supposedly utopian environment. In a unique setting and in a unique hybrid form of realism and sentimentalism overlain with parody, she grapples with serious issues that preoccupied sentimental writers and issues preoccupying realists, e.g. how people cope with or even flourish in difficult times. The satiric overlay adds comic relief to what would otherwise be a very depressing story.

A Transcendentalist way of life, the story tells us, does not improve women's lot. Women face the same challenges as in ordinary American homes, and the communal setting even worsens those challenges. For example, women are still responsible for maintaining the home, but men at the commune interfere with the domestic sphere, e.g. through mandating dietary rules and usurping of women's traditional role as spiritual leaders. The Transcendentalist commune also creates entirely new challenges for women, such as the need to take on men's work when men are busy thinking rather than doing. Given the conditions under which Sister Hope labors at Fruitlands, it is "little remarkable that only one woman ever joined this community" (TW 44). According to Kelley, sentimental fiction shows "an American society judged to be in dire need of regeneration" ("Sentimentalists" 437). Alcott goes a step further: she shows that even in a regenerated form of a society, such as a Transcendentalist commune, women still get the short end of the stick. Patriarchy is inescapable. A realist like Rebecca Harding Davis, Alcott shows us not only the grittiness of nineteenth century American life but its particular impact on women.

Another characteristic Kelley observes in sentimental fiction is anxiety about individualism. She claims that sentimental fiction often presents “the rampant, destructive individualism” that writers “were convinced was preempting a higher commitment to community” (Kelley, “Sentimentalists” 443). As we have seen in “The Individual vs. Society,” a Transcendentalist utopia should unite people in a tightly-knit community while at the same time encouraging self-culture. It should promote a constructive rather than destructive individualism. Unfortunately, reconciling the opposing tendencies of this mission proves impossible to achieve at both Blithedale and Fruitlands. Zenobia’s cry of “‘It is all self!’” shows the fault-line running through Transcendentalist communalism, and it is akin to the individualism about which sentimental writers worried (BR 201). Fruitlands is especially hostile to women because they are not accorded the same chance as men for self-discovery and self-expression. According to Kelley, due to “the burden of household duties and the demands of serving the needs of others, woman’s autonomy was diminished and her individuality denied” (“Sentimentalists” 437). This is exactly what Hope experiences in the first part of the story, even though she lives in a place that purportedly values the individual. The Fruitlands manifesto promises to cultivate inner natures, but in practice, this applies only to men. Alcott’s shows that a Transcendentalist utopian community does not cultivate the individual so as to advance women.

Sentimentalists also worried about materialism, a concern Alcott shares. Kelley claims these “writers were not antagonistic to males per se, but to the individualist and materialistic values of their time which men were thought to embody more than women” (“Sentimentalists” 435). Kelley continues, “They deplored society’s materialism and

called for reimmersion in the spiritual” (437). We might assume that a Transcendentalist commune would eschew materialism, but this is not entirely the case. On one hand, the hardscrabble farm and the scarcity of food indicate disinterest in material goods or comfort, and Lion and Lamb reject money as they travel. On the other hand, the men’s renunciation of the material world can only happen because they allow others to befoul themselves with cash in a way they will not do, as when fellow passengers pay their way. Lion and Lamb do not stay home because ferries cost money. Lamb’s longing for Britannia tableware is another example of materialism, even though he sees it as having a higher purpose.

The last issue to consider in regard to gender in “Transcendental Wild Oats” is that of sexuality. In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne includes references to heterosexual desire, perhaps to satisfy readers imagining all communes to be hotbeds of sexual activity. Hawthorne’s novel also alludes to homoerotic desire as part of the passions at play. In contrast, Alcott keeps her story free of sexual innuendo. This might be a result of her ignorance about the implications of the consociate family as a child; the narrator might or might not be a child as Alcott was at Fruitlands, but Alcott might be writing the story from the perspective she had at ten years old. Even as an adult writing the story, she might not have known exactly how Bronson Alcott envisioned the consociate family. The lack of sexual innuendo might also be a conscious choice to suit her readership, or because she did not want to write a tell-all about her family. Whatever the reason, keeping the story innocent fits the story’s mission of painting Sister Hope as above reproach, a virtuous wife who happens to exercise autonomy and assume authority.

Unlike Zenobia, Hope's power-seeking does not include making herself an object of desire. Zenobia wears a hothouse flower to accentuate her attractiveness and signal her availability, but Hope exhibits no similar behavior.

In the story, Timon Lion does not directly or indirectly mention an interest in celibacy for himself or for the other communards. When Lion leaves Fruitlands to join the Shakers, the narrator mentions this only to make the point that a non-Transcendentalist commune will require him to work. Alcott need not state that Lion goes to a celibate community; her readers surely knew the Shakers' practices. The specter of celibacy, however, might lurk in the story. Johnson claims, "Though the word 'abstain' is used, suggesting abstinence from sex and alcohol, the full implication is not made clear in Louisa's fictionalized account" ("Discord" 118). In this view, withholding some sensual pleasures could indicate a propensity to withhold all of them. In the same vein, Pfaelzer comments that "in Louisa's revisionist history of Fruitlands, she holds Lane and her father accountable for the sexual and emotional repression that lay behind the rigid asceticism" (94). Sarah Elbert also links the tendency toward asceticism with celibacy, contending that at the fictional Fruitlands, "food and diet and also domestic labor become concrete vehicles for the expression of sexual conflict" (75). Restricting women's control over the domestic sphere is a manifestation of hostility. Anxieties about food impurity could represent anxieties about other types of impurity, such as sex or women's bodies.

Although "Transcendental Wild Oats" contains no overt sexuality, it suggests one quasi-sexual conflict. We see Sister Hope win her husband back from his infatuation with Fruitlands while Timon Lion slinks off to the Shakers. Driving out the interloper, Hope

prevails in the competition for her husband. Sister Hope will not tolerate the family breaking up for any reason: not poverty or the folly that causes it, not depression or the dashed dream that causes it, and not sexual longings or the pursuit of celibacy. In their final conversations that almost amount to a renewal of marriage vows, Hope and Abel affirm the rightness of a traditional heterosexual couple.

The topic of presenting sexual issues through veiled references is a fitting note on which to close this chapter—and the literary analysis section of this dissertation—for this project has explored the overlaps and disconnections between writers' commune experiences and their fictionalization of those experiences. In "Transcendental Wild Oats," Alcott does not dwell on sexual tensions at the real Fruitlands, but she focuses on tensions between men and women at the commune in regard to workload, self-expression, and power. By placing her story of women's exploitation at a commune, Alcott shows that this exploitation is not only a problem in traditional or mainstream American households, or is not just a result of organizational structure. Rather, the problem of patriarchy runs much deeper. Just as Hawthorne finds that a Transcendentalist utopia cannot alleviate the alienation inherent in the human condition, Alcott finds that such a utopia cannot alleviate sexism. The utopian community not only fails to solve women's problems, but it adds to them. As the preceding paragraphs show, the men intensify women's work without relaxing basic expectations that women tend to home and hearth. A woman must work especially hard because men are occupied with thinking, because of conditions at the commune (such as additional mouths to feed and substandard resources), because of communal philosophies (such as animal rights), and because of



men's interference in the domestic sphere. A woman must be especially selfless while men indulge in self-culture and thus outright selfishness. Whether or not we accept Petrulionis's reading of "Transcendental Wild Oats" as violating the conventions of sentimental fiction, we can see Alcott layering sentimentality onto her satire when she expresses concerns about women's ability to fulfill their duties and concerns about dependence on negligent men. Whether or not Alcott's depiction of Hope as heroine is in keeping with sentimental convention, the commune pushes Sister Hope to a point where she must stop deferring and start using her voice. Thus, by worsening women's situation, the commune paradoxically creates conditions resulting in women's heroism. Perhaps the only benefit of communalism for women is that it generates a crisis from which freedom arises. "Transcendental Wild Oats" ends with family and marriage bonds restored. It repudiates the experimental living style that weakened those bonds, and it upholds American values like prioritizing action over thought and facing life head-on. "Transcendental Wild Oats" could meet contemporary publishers' and readers' needs while starring an emboldened, triumphant, admirable female protagonist.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

### Summary

Undertaking a study of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* is daunting because 163 years of prior scholarship about it seem to have left no stones unturned. Bringing *Blithedale* into conversation with Louisa May Alcott's "Transcendental Wild Oats," however, provides new perspectives on the novel as well as on the short story. Both texts have much to say about Transcendentalist communes, despite Hawthorne's claim that his fictional commune is only backdrop. Neither text gives us the precision or the factual accuracy of memoir or documentary, though Alcott's story has more elements of literary realism and thus provides more precise detail than does Hawthorne's romance. Still, both texts give us entry into a unique moment in American intellectual history, when groups of New England philosophers sought to realize their ideals by establishing intentional communities. Analyzing Hawthorne's and Alcott's fictionalizations of Brook Farm and Fruitlands reveals how both writers use the utopian setting to process particular preoccupations, such as Hawthorne's concern about alienation and Alcott's concern about exploitation of women.

These preoccupations, as well as the attitudes toward Transcendentalist communitarianism, come to light through application of this dissertation's methodology. The three literary analysis chapters here have examined how Hawthorne's and Alcott's works handle several tensions common to utopian texts, whether real or fiction: thought vs. action, the individual vs. society, and men vs. women (a look at gender roles and relationships). Ideally, this dissertation serves as a model for examining other utopian

discourse through the lens of binaries. This concluding chapter briefly reviews major findings of each literary analysis chapter and then suggests directions for future research.

Many Transcendentalists, notably Ralph Waldo Emerson, advocated particular ways of living, such as seeking inspiration in nature or through self-culture. Brook Farm and Fruitlands were attempts to make Transcendentalism tangible, to live according to philosophical principles of the movement. *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” dramatize the difficulty of actualizing theory, of implementing ideas that may be overly abstract or ambitious. In Chapter Two: Thought vs. Action, we see the novel and short story reminding readers that ideas or intentions alone are not enough to make a commune function. Further, the Thought vs. Action chapter shows how the two works dramatize the impossibility of balancing thought and action. In his life before and during Brook Farm, Hawthorne struggled to find a balance between physical labor and intellectual, or artistic, labor. *The Blithedale Romance* seems like a fictionalized explanation, or apologia, for his leaving the commune to pursue writing full-time. At Blithedale, the communards find that labor is detrimental to the thinker. At Fruitlands, the opposite occurs; the philosophers cannot leave the world of thought to focus on farming, which leads to the commune closing. Both texts show the dangers of over-intellectualizing. This is a fatal flaw of Fruitlands, and at Blithedale, mesmerism represents the dark side of a life of the mind.

*The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” reinforce the binary of thought vs. action, but in both works, the way communards think about their project breaks down another binary: the religious vs. the secular. As seen in Chapter Two’s

overview of utopian history and historical scholarship, historians typically place communal projects in one category or the other. Oneida founder John Humphrey Noyes is one of the few observers of communalism who stresses similarities between religious and secular projects. Hawthorne and Alcott portray their fictionalized communes such that they straddle this supposed divide. Blithedale and the fictional Fruitlands have an almost divine mission: building a new Eden in America. Spiritual experiences at the communes are not often sparked by nature, which we might expect of Transcendentalists, but other aspects of communal life take on a spiritual dimension, such as Coverdale's attraction to Zenobia or the Fruitlanders' meals. The reform impulse at Blithedale can resemble a religion in itself, and Fruitlands resembles a Perfectionist community with its strictly enforced abstemiousness intended to purify its members. Readers of *The Blithedale Romance* and of "Transcendental Wild Oats" might be hard-pressed at times to classify the communes as clearly secular or clearly not.

Chapter Four: The Individual vs. Society discusses tensions arising at the fictionalized utopias between individuals and society on and off the commune. In *Blithedale*, Hawthorne shows us individuals straining against the closeness of the community, which creates conflict, and he shows us individuals straining to balance individual and community interests. Hawthorne gives us the character of Hollingsworth to illustrate how selfishness can undermine a communal enterprise. Chapter Four also shows us Hawthorne using the communal setting to confront his lifelong fascination with alienation, for *Blithedale*'s narrator finds himself isolated from those around him, or he isolates himself as a detached observer. Even a commune, the novel tells us, cannot

eradicate the hopeless human condition of alienation.

In “Transcendental Wild Oats,” we see how Transcendentalist self-culture contributes to the commune’s downfall, for individual interests take precedence over community interests. Hawthorne comments on the difficulty of binding together disparate people united only by their disaffection with mainstream society, and Alcott gives us numerous examples of especially idiosyncratic individuals. Ubiquitous in utopian discourse is the assumption that people cannot get along well enough to sustain a tight community with shared resources, and Alcott’s story suggests that this problem is heightened at Transcendentalist commune, which prizes nonconformity. Henry David Thoreau embarked on his Walden experiment as a response to the commune-fervor he saw among other Transcendentalists, and his relative success indicates that solitary living may be more effective than collectivism in making Transcendentalism tangible. *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” also provide universal commentary about utopianism beyond their comments about the Transcendentalist version. For instance, both works warn us about the dangers of excessive zeal for reformist ideology.

Chapter Five: Men vs. Women shows Hawthorne and Alcott pointing out that application of Transcendentalist philosophy to everyday life does not improve women’s status. We see in Hawthorne’s novel that the Newness of Transcendentalism does not grant women more opportunity or freedom than in the world outside the commune—the kind of opportunity Margaret Fuller sought. Female Blithedalers are still bound by traditional gender roles and by the True Womanhood paradigm. In “Transcendental Wild Oats,” Alcott emphasizes the commune’s exploitation of women by showing the ill-usage

of the female protagonist. Alcott suggests that patriarchy is intractable on communes as well as off. By setting up the commune as a parallel to the traditional household of a typical sentimental story, she shows that conditions can be hostile to women in various settings. A commune is not a domination-free zone, but its one benefit in this regard is that conditions grow so bad for one woman that she is compelled to take charge. Just as communes cannot remedy the pervasive alienation Hawthorne experienced, communes cannot the remedy for the pervasive mistreatment of women that troubled Alcott.

Both *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” touch on the challenges of negotiating romantic relationships in the communal environment. In the novel as well as the short story, marriages are not the types Margaret Fuller finds most advantageous for men or women. Alluding to the licentious sexuality practiced at many communes, Hawthorne’s narrator admits to his own lustful feelings toward men and toward women. Although Alcott avoids sexual references in her story, the many references to self-denial and chastity indicate the communards’ unease about sensuality and the body. These references could suggest a longing for the kind of celibacy practiced at some communes. Such references, considered along with the Lamb couple’s reconciliation, could be a repudiation of the licentiousness practiced at other communes. The treatment of sexuality in *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” highlights the complexity of exploring real-world utopian fiction, for Hawthorne seems to play up sexual tensions that might not have existed at the actual Brook Farm, and Alcott buries the tensions that probably existed at the actual Fruitlands.

After this long and close look at *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild

Oats,” we may wonder about the writers’ final judgment on the experiments in which they participated. In their eyes, was Transcendentalist utopianism a success or failure? Much discourse about utopian projects, factual or fictional, ends by concluding that these projects failed: the communards grow disillusioned, the work and the interpersonal relationships are mismanaged, or the leadership is heavy-handed or inept. As a result of one or more of these factors, communities close. The attention paid to commune closures could fit some larger cultural narrative that seeks to affirm the status quo and reproach those who try creating alternatives to mainstream society. This emphasis would have us believe that communal living is always doomed to fail, that utopia is always nowhere. The typical message is that contemporary society (whenever or whatever that might be for the reader) is as good as it can get, so we should stop complaining, stop imagining the grass could be greener, and stop trying to build something better.

In their fiction, neither Hawthorne nor Alcott take a completely negative view of utopianism. In the final tallying, the overall impression left by both *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” is that the negatives are plentiful and sizeable, but they do not entirely outweigh the positives. Despite the many shortcomings they describe, neither Hawthorne nor Alcott are willing to write off the utopian experiments as a total loss. Miles Coverdale says this directly at the end of his story: the time he spent at Blithedale was not wasted. Alcott’s closing word labels the project a “slump,” but a few paragraphs prior, the narrator wishes society would respect Abel Lamb’s noble and daring experiment. (These turnarounds might remind us people who poke fun at their own families but become defensive if others try to do the same.) Both works lay some

blame for the communes closing on the period of time; some fundamental ideas were good, but people of the day were just not ready. Both works seem wistful. In retrospect, the hard times and disappointments at the commune had value. Any suffering that transpired was worthwhile. Miles Coverdale might not have written poetry or found a mate, but he becomes a brawny farmer and dispels his concerns about being too brainy or insufficiently manly for the job. In “Transcendental Wild Oats,” the suffering leads to Hope’s empowerment and the reconsolidation of the family; it brings the family together.

One quality of the stories that tips the scales to the negative side is that both writers mock their fictional communes, often painting them as ridiculous. Alcott’s story is satirical until its sentimental ending, and though Hawthorne’s novel is not full-on satire, the narrator sometimes caricatures the commune by stating its goals in overblown language. Further, in many ways other than quick closure, their fictionalized communes are unsuccessful. Problems range from the Fruitlanders’ inept farming to the devastating selfishness Zenobia finds at Blithedale and which is also endemic at Fruitlands. The implementation of Transcendentalist ideals is unsuccessful at both communities. A fusion of thought and action never occurs and so cannot spur productivity, and privileging individualism is problematic in a communal environment. Women get a raw deal at both communes.

Tellingly, the two tales end with the main characters abandoning the commune and returning to mainstream society. Hawthorne and Alcott do not give us happily-ever-after-at-the-commune endings, choices they could have made in their fiction. Also noteworthy in *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” is that both communal



sojourns feature tragedy. In “Transcendental Wild Oats,” a family is nearly destroyed. Both stories feature suicidal behavior: Zenobia’s drowning, and Abel’s attempt to die in bed. Hawthorne signifies the death of a beautiful dream by killing off Blithedale’s most magnetic and attractive figure. Zenobia and Abel are not marginal like Priscilla or Jane Gage, and they are not chronic malcontents like Hollingsworth or Lion. Their suicidal impulses symbolize the sputtering fire of true belief and of passion, and they mark the crisis points of *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats.” Perhaps, they are also the authors’ final judgments on communitarianism: more destructive than constructive.

Withholding absolute verdicts on the merit of Transcendentalist communalism, and showing advantages as well as disadvantages, *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats” show how real-world utopian fiction can shatter two distinctions that are common in utopian discourse. The first is the success-failure binary. Communes are supposed to be one or the other, and most are depicted as landing on the failure side. The novels of Marie Howland and Jane Hume Clapperton are two exceptions to the usual rule that fictional communes will collapse. The few that survive for decades, like Black Farm Commune in California, the Farm in Tennessee, or Idyll Dandy Arts (IDA) in Tennessee, are touted as exceptions to the rule. They become the subjects of documentaries or *New York Times* articles. The failures usually meet with a ‘told-you-so’ smugness. Real-world utopian fiction can show that a commune does not need to last forever to have lasting effects. Communards may leave the commune disappointed or even damaged, but they take away a new awareness about people and about themselves.

The real-world fictional texts themselves, if based on first-hand experience like Hawthorne's and Alcott's, serve as testaments that time at a commune was well-spent, for it led to introspection, and ultimately, to art.

Depicting both the positives and negatives of communal living, real-world utopian fiction can also smash the eutopia-dystopia binary. Standard definitions of utopian literature classify texts as one or the other. A text either imagines a glorious society that repairs the faults of the contemporary world, like Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, or it invents a nightmarish society, like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949). Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* are examples of speculative fiction combining elements of eutopia and dystopia, but both books separate the good place from the bad one. Instead of worlds colliding, they are polar opposites, with the dystopia highlighting the desirable qualities of the eutopia. Real-world utopian fiction shows that utopian communities, like all communities, are messy; they are not wholly good or wholly bad but are a mix. Sometimes, a particular aspect of communal living can seem to be positive one day but negative the next, as when Coverdale reacts happily but then cynically to the knot of dreamers to whom he has bound himself. Eutopia and dystopia coexist in *The Blithedale Romance* and "Transcendental Wild Oats." This is true of other works of real-world utopian fiction, such as T. Coraghessan Boyle's *Drop City* and Lauren Groff's *Arcadia*.

Examining *The Blithedale Romance* and "Transcendental Wild Oats" brings to the fore many commonalities between the two. Examining how each addresses sets of

binaries also highlights commonalities with other real-world utopian texts. In real-world utopian texts from the nineteenth century, from the twentieth century, and from as recent as this year, we find recurring themes related to the binaries of thought vs. action, individual vs. society, and men vs. women. Numerous texts confront the world's readiness for utopianism, communards' readiness for it, and strained relations with the outside world. We find set pieces like communards gathering and dreaming on their first night together. Many texts associate fictional communes with Arcadia or Eden, and with unconventional forms of ritual. Stock characters populate real-world utopian fiction, such as domineering leaders, men who are big talkers, practical-minded women who bear the brunt of the workload, and judgmental neighbors. Real-world fiction shows us communards debating their approach to gendered work, but we find few making progress. The fiction shows us communards striving for but not always finding harmonious relationships, including romantic relationships and comfortable cross-class interaction. We see communards struggle to balance individual interests with community priorities. Although the settings are in the real world, the journeys to the fictional commune are often as arduous as the fantastic journeys to places like Herland. Many elements of real world utopian stories, including the voyages, connect fictional communes to the foundational American story of the Pilgrims starting their city on a hill. Studying two classic American tales, *The Blithedale Romance* and "Transcendental Wild Oats," opens the door to exploring other stories about utopias, American and otherwise.

### Directions for Future Research

Little if any scholarship examines the distinctive characteristics of fiction about communes that really existed or could have existed. Thus, the subgenre of real-world utopian fiction merits more attention. Defining the utopian literary genre, Lyman Tower Sargent writes, “All utopias ask questions. They ask whether or not the way we live could be improved and answer that it could. Most utopias compare life in the present and life in the utopia and point out what is wrong with the way we live now, thus suggesting what needs to be done to improve things” (*Short Introduction* 5). *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats,” works of real-world utopian fiction, ask these questions about mainstream society. But what if “the way we live now” is also in a utopian community? Both Hawthorne and Alcott consider life in a utopia, and they ask whether it, or specifically, a Transcendentalist form of utopia, can fix the problems they see in the larger society. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Shaker stories and his novel *The Blithedale Romance* appear to have been the first works in the subgenre of real-world literary fiction, and this dissertation is among the few studies comparing choices that writers make in fictionalizing the communes they have encountered. As noted in Chapter Two, only a few other studies have put into conversation two or more works from this subgenre. These include Robert Emmet Long’s “Transformations: *The Blithedale Romance* to Howells and James” (1976) and Jean Pfaelzer’s “The Sentimental Promise and the Utopian Myth: Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘The Harmonists’ and Louisa May Alcott’s ‘Transcendental Wild Oats’” (1989), though both are more narrowly focused than this dissertation. Future scholars could look at the unique characteristics of the real-

world utopian fiction subgenre and at how the subgenre intersects with the broader utopian genre in terms of similar concerns and approaches.

Various sets of works could be examined. For example, studied alongside *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats,” Mary Gove Nichols’ 1855 novel *Mary Lyndon, or Revelations of a Life* could add a new perspective to fiction about Transcendentalist communes. “Transcendental Wild Oats” and *Mary Lyndon*, together with Rebecca Harding Davis’s “The Harmonists” (1866), Marie Howland’s *Papa’s Own Girl: A Novel* (1885), and Jane Hume Clapperton’s *Margaret Dunmore: or, A socialist home* (1888), could teach us more about women’s role in nineteenth century communitarian fiction. Looking at *Drop City* and *Arcadia* (2012) could reveal much about twenty-first century attitudes toward 1960s communes. Novels by Israeli writer and kibbutznik Amos Oz that are set in kibbutzim, such as *A Perfect Peace* (1985), could be studied alongside each other, or alongside other works named here. *A God in Ruins*, *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*, and *Martha Marcy May Marlene* can give us insight into post-1960s communes, and the last two could do the same for religious cults. A study could also investigate the portrayals of communes in movies over the years, including *Easy Rider* (1969), *Together* (2000), and *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (2011).

Future research could apply the methodology used in this dissertation to real-world utopian fiction or to any discourse about any type of utopian community. The three literary analysis chapters examine the binaries of thought vs. action, the individual vs. society, and men vs. women because these topics were of particular interest to Transcendentalists. Nonetheless, *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild

Oats” also have much to say about tensions between the urban vs. the pastoral and the authentic vs. the artificial, as do numerous other works. Perhaps more binaries could be added to this list, and perhaps scholars could look at the ways distinctly American concerns, e.g. the individual vs. society, are treated in our literature and in comparative literature. As much as this dissertation has aimed to interrogate the treatment of Transcendentalist utopianism in *The Blithedale Romance* and “Transcendental Wild Oats,” it has also been an effort to ascertain what we talk about when we talk about utopia.

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