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A Romance with a View: Awaking to Picturesque in *The Blithedale Romance*

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Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) is replete with vivid descriptions set in a utopian community inspired by the Brook Farm. The final scene, which depicts Zenobia's grave on the hill, offers a strikingly picturesque view. This essay delves into the reasons behind Hawthorne's choice to bury Zenobia in such a scenic location, as well as the significance of the tomb. It explores this visually compelling moment within the nineteenth-century context to illustrate Hawthorne's keen attention to the sense of the picturesque.

Throughout his body of work, Hawthorne frequently employs the term "picturesque." According to F. O. Matthiessen, Hawthorne utilized the vocabulary of paintings to convey a similar "process of vision," often employing the term "picturesque" in his works (229). Additionally, Thomas Woodson's research reveals that from 1853 to 1860, Hawthorne referenced the term "picturesque" more than 200 times in his works and journals (173). These instances underscore Hawthorne's inherently picturesque inclinations.

Traditional trends in scholarly criticism have not sufficiently examined Hawthorne's concise understanding of the picturesque, especially in his romances. However, a thorough investigation of Hawthorne's description of the picturesque scenes reveals how he employed the literary technique to create a romantic convention, setting imaginary situations in the realistic everyday life scenery. From this perspective, this paper examines *The Blithedale Romance* by focusing on Hawthorne's consciousness of the picturesque. To contextualize Hawthorne's notion of the picturesque and his aim to create a specifically American romance—the idea of the picturesque tour, the taste for a cottage design, and the rural cemetery

movement, which were widespread in America when he was writing the romance must be considered.

Before further pursuing Hawthorne's picturesque sense, the word "picturesque," which was frequently used in eighteenth-century Europe must be defined more explicitly. "Picturesque" is derived from the Italian "*pittresco*" meaning "painter," and refers to visually attractive subjects such as paintings. William Gilpin (1724-1804) and Edmund Burke (1729-97) provided more concrete contributions to the aesthetic value of the picturesque. The concept crossed the Atlantic from Europe and reached the United States through landscape painting and the picturesque tour. The American people's adoption of the value of picturesque can be viewed as a phenomenon symbolic of cultivating a sense of American aesthetic. In the nineteenth century America, "picturesque" tended to be simplified, and Hawthorne equated the word to "beautiful." ¹

1. Coverdale as a Picturesque Tourist

In the 1820s, Americans started embarking on cross-county trips to discover the American landscape, acquiring picturesque tastes that were original and different from those of Europeans. In the early nineteenth century, the evolution of the traffic system allowed Americans to travel great distances. This increase in travel around America led to a "picturesque tour" boom, similar to the "grand tour" in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. The American picturesque tour took a short period with only inland destinations (Masunaga 4-6). Nevertheless, it stimulated the American people's interest in their own landscape and cultivated an American aesthetic sense of their homeland.

According to Marion L. Kesselring, Hawthorne borrowed many books about travel, including tourist guidebooks.² After graduating from Bowdoin College, Hawthorne underwent training to be a professional writer from 1825 to 1839, during which he visited relatives and traveled across North America. Those travels must have elevated his sense of the picturesqueness of the American landscape. Hawthorne visited the White Mountains, the Hudson Valley, and Niagara Falls, which were all recommended destinations for picturesque tours in those days. Through these travels, he acquired his sense of landscape and learned the technique of viewing. Hawthorne himself attributed his life and creativity to his experience

of travels (Weber 1-2). In 1832, Hawthorne took a long trip alone and tried to publish a collection of his travel writings titled *The Story Teller*, but the editor Samuel Goodrich refused (Milder 54). Now, however, we can read his travel sketches and tales in “Our Evening Party among the Mountains” (1835), “The Ambitious Guest” (1835), “My Visit to Niagara” (1835), and “The Canal Boat” (1835).

Critics have noted the influence of Hawthorne’s picturesque tours on his writing. For example, Beth L. Lueck argues that Hawthorne’s experiences of picturesque tours were infused into his travel writings, creating satirical tones. Leo B. Levy asserts that Hawthorne’s sketches were realistic responses to the “actual physical landscape” (212). According to John Evelev, Hawthorne’s 1830s travel sketches constituted picturesque tourism and American exceptionalism. Alfred Weber states that young Hawthorne widely explored America to see its nature, life, and people. Hawthorne’s picturesque tours’ experiences were an essential source of his creativity, but scholars have yet to thoroughly investigate how he used these experiences to write a romance.

Hawthorne’s experiences of picturesque tours enrich the visuality of *The Blithedale Romance* through the travelogue like narration of Coverdale whose second move from the city to Blithedale can be considered a picturesque tour.³ Staying in the city for a while, Coverdale returns to the agricultural community. As walking toward Blithedale, he closely observes the surrounding nature: September grass, mostly green trees, the barberry bushes with their scarlet fruit, the mossy pool with tiny fish, and the hermit frog. Like “a naturalist,” he examines picturesque objects as he approaches the agricultural community: the line of the ancient stone wall, white villages, ruddy apples in orchards, ripening corn in the fields, and woodland. He also responds to “all such sweet rural scenery as looks the fairest, a little beyond the suburb of a town” (205). These descriptions signal that Coverdale’s movements as a returnee to the community and a picturesque tourist in New England. He discovers the beauty of the rural district and uses his artistic expressiveness to depict it as a landscape picture.

As a picturesque tourist, Coverdale easily visualizes the roadside scene as remarkable. His consciousness of the picturesque scenery increases the visual value of this romance, and the landscape becomes more apparent through the narrator’s informative eyes. As he works hard on the farm, Coverdale notices “a richer picturesqueness in the visible scene of earth

and sky” (66). His visual sense catches the unusual beauty of the nature surrounding him, embodied as picturesque.

Hawthorne’s experiences of picturesque tours must be examined. In Hawthorne’s trip with Horatio Bridge to Augusta, Maine, in July 1837, they saw the Mill Dam, strolled alongside a large brook, and rode a route “parallel with the Kennebec” river (*American Notebooks* 53). Hawthorne observed the pebbles, some bare places, partially moss-grown stones, and some small trout swimming along the current (37). Similarly, Coverdale finds little rivulets with “mossy pools where tiny fish were darting . . .” (*Blithedale* 205). By continuously highlighting Coverdale’s perspective as a picturesque tourist throughout his second journey back to Blithedale, Hawthorne describes the narrator’s experiences with an increasingly complicated world through the phrases “the spectral” or “something real” (206).

Moreover, both Hawthorne and Coverdale are attracted to colorful local plants. Hawthorne saw “[g]reat toad-stools under the trees, and some smaller ones, as yellow and about the size of a half-boiled yolk of an egg. Strawberries scattered along the brookside” (*American Notebooks* 39). A similar spectacle catches Coverdale’s eyes: “I see the tufted barberry bushes, with their small clusters of scarlet fruit; the toadstools, likewise, some spotlessly white, others yellow or red” (205). Coverdale’s depiction of this roadside resembles Hawthorne’s journal entry of July 8, 1837. Hawthorne’s characterization of Coverdale as a picturesque traveler reflects his actual experiences of the picturesque tour in Main. In light of the tour’s cultural context, Coverdale presents an acute sense of picturesque and a keen eye for scenery familiar to a person living in nineteenth-century America.

Coverdale’s “mental eye” discerns and remembers “the tufted barberry bushes, with their small cluster of scarlet fruit; the toadstools” on the roadside (205). The appearance of toadstools, “mysterious growths, springing suddenly from no root or seed, and growing nobody can tell how or wherefore,” impresses Coverdale, who admits, “In this respect, they resembled many of the emotions in my breast” (205). These toadstools remind Coverdale of loneliness and helplessness as he has lost his sense of the meaning of life. Because of his unsettling situation, he feels alienation from Blithedale’s idealized symbiosis and self pity. He assumes a betwixt-and-between status and identifies with the toadstools in his sight to seek emotional satisfaction.

Coverdale’s emotional response to others or whatever he sees could be “empathy,”

which refers to the human ability to imagine oneself in another's place and share feelings. Coverdale's power of empathy with what he sees is remarkable.⁴ As a spectator of picturesque scenery and objects, Coverdale becomes involved in his observations, and his reaction to the picturesqueness of the landscape makes him an exemplary picturesque traveler. Renowned American landscape painter Thomas Cole (1801-48) noted the impact of Niagara's incredible scenic beauty on human conceptions. "And Niagara! . . . In gazing on it we feel as though a great void had been filled in our minds—our conceptions expand—we become a part of what we behold!" (8) ⁵ Viewing a picturesque landscape such as Niagara thus appeals not only to our visual sense but also to our emotional responses. Picturesque travelers are emotional beings. In this sense, what we see affects our minds and strongly connects us to the landscape. As previously mentioned, the empathetic Coverdale gets absorbed in his view. Theodor Lipps recognized that "empathy entails fusion between the observer and his or her object" (qtd. in Montag 1261). Coverdale has deep emotional ties to what he sees in the picturesque landscape.

The ultimate test of Coverdale's empathy takes place after Zenobia's drowning. On the very night of Coverdale's return to Blithedale, he is confronted with Zenobia's death. Along with fellow Blithedale residents Hollingsworth and Silas, he searches for the missing Zenobia and finally finds her drowned body and "describe[s] the perfect horror of the spectacle" (235). Coverdale's depiction of Zenobia justifies his responses as a valid outcome of the workings of his mind. Concerning readers' blame, he fully recreates the "spectacle" of Zenobia's death despite feeling a sense of "sin" and "shame" (235). Zenobia's dead body is considered grotesque; however, Coverdale's transmissive descriptions of Zenobia's death with meticulous attention to detail.

The description of Zenobia's death conveys Hawthorne's intent to express everything as realistically as possible and in visual terms, even if it is a grotesque sight that may stimulate obnoxious feelings. Coverdale falls into self-absorption and deception and cannot keep his distance as a "calm observer" when he looks at Zenobia (97). Despite the unpleasant visual image generated by Zenobia's dead body, Coverdale describes her in this incident with great detail. He is meticulous in his expression and demonstrates his ability as a painter with words. As a witness to Zenobia's tragedy, he feels a sense of duty to recount the painful event, thus bringing Zenobia's corpse vividly before the reader's eyes. This detailed portrayal

of the distressing sight of the drowned Zenobia, even after 12 years, can be seen as an excessive “spectacle.”

Coverdale is a powerfully effective narrator who visually improves the picturesque-ness of this romance. His ability to see depends on his consciousness of picturesque elements as a picturesque traveler. His precise observations increase his empathetic feeling for objects.

2. Coverdale's and Hollingsworth's Sense of Place

Coverdale and Hollingsworth confront Zenobia's death and begin mulling over her grave. Because most of those who gather at Blithedale are young and healthy enough to work all day on the farm, they do not think about death in a serious light. Earlier, Coverdale ponders who is fated to die early and suggests preparing for the first funeral in the distant future. He wonders, “Would it not be well, even before we have absolute need of it, to fix upon a spot for a cemetery?” (130). At this point, Coverdale is not thinking of an actual funeral as an immediate possibility; his idea for a graveyard is only an imaginary one, and a cemetery plot is not set aside yet.

Coverdale wishes for Zenobia to be buried at the base of Eliot's Pulpit and for her ordinary name, “Zenobia,” to be engraved on the rock (238). This proposal shows Coverdale's compassion for her and his hope that she may rest in peace in that calm place. The rock is named after John Eliot (1604-90), well known as a Puritan missionary to the American Indians who started to address a congregation in Algonquian (Vaughan 247-49).⁶ The pulpit is a familiar place where Coverdale, Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscila spend peaceful Sunday afternoons (117). The old rock with “shrubs, bushes, and even trees” is overshadowed by a birch tree (119). The last time the four met at Eliot's pulpit, Zenobia accused Hollingsworth of selfishness in front of Coverdale and Priscila (218). Hollingsworth decides to make Blithedale a setting for criminal correction, using Zenobia's money in his judgment. Moreover, he leaves penniless Zenobia for young, rich Priscilla, who takes over Zenobia's wealth. Sobbing, Zenobia downs her body like being buried in the earth with grief (221). Her forehead is placed against the rock of Eliot's Pulpit to endure her “tearless agony” (222). Coverdale hopes to console Zenobia's soul and memorialize her name on the rock.

Hawthorne uses the picturesque landscape of Eliot's Pulpit to represent both Puritan

toughness and Blithedale's failure (Stay 284). According to Lauren Berlant, Eliot and Hollingsworth share a role as social reformers with visionary social plans to cultivate and enlighten others (45). Unlike Eliot's successful missionary work for Native Americans, Hollingsworth fails in his plan for a correctional institution. For Hollingsworth, Eliot's pulpit is the site of an old wound — the doom of Zenobia and the beginning of the failure of his scheme — which is why he cannot accept Coverdale's plan for Zenobia's burial place at the pulpit. As a result, Hollingsworth has different ideas as to where Zenobia's grave should be dug: "But Hollingsworth (to whose ideas, on this point, great deference was due) made it his request that her grave might be dug on the gently sloping hill-side, in the wide pasture, where, as we once supposed, Zenobia and he had planned to build their cottage" (238). He chooses a bright, open spot, a "gently sloping hillside" with a view of the peaceful scenery of rural Blithedale, for Zenobia's burial spot. He changes his building plan from a newlywed couple's cottage to the unmarried woman's cemetery.

Long before the incident, when Hollingsworth outlines a plan to find a place for Zenobia and his house. Coverdale suggests that their cottage be built "a little withdrawn into the wood" for their cottage to avoid catching the public eye (80). However, Hollingsworth expects to "offer my edifice as a spectacle to the world" — the exact opposite of Coverdale's proposal—adding "that it may take example and build many another like it. Therefore I mean to set it on the open hill-side" (80). Hollingsworth's rhetoric holds great significance. Currently a respected leader in the Blithedale community, his words closely echo John Winthrop's "City upon a Hill," which captured public attention for establishing a model residence driven by religious zeal.⁷ According to Sacvan Bercovitch, Winthrop was revered as the exemplary American hero with biblical significance in Cotton Mather's "Life of Winthrop" (35, 47). In this sense, Hollingsworth has the potential to be the savior of the utopian community and could ascend to the status of a legendary figure at Blithedale.

Hollingsworth's strong connection to his surroundings is notable. Coverdale questions whether Hollingsworth's intentions to enhance "public taste in the realm of cottage architecture" are truly altruistic (80). Hollingsworth's sentiments are reminiscent of those expressed by landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-52), whose influence on American architecture and landscape design within the nineteenth-century middle class was extensive. Downing emphasized the aesthetic impact and educational value of country houses, advocat-

ing for them to embody “the beautiful and the picturesque” in order to elevate “the taste of every class in our community” (80). Hollingsworth’s appreciation for the picturesque is not just a personal preference, but a reflection of the nineteenth-century American aesthetic, as championed by the era’s prominent architect and landscape designer. His strong sense of place reflects his proactive nature and the American affinity for the picturesque. His character is shaped by a fusion of the Puritan ideals of his ancestor, John Winthrop, and the aesthetic preferences of nineteenth-century American landscape artist Andrew Jackson Downing.

Examining this romance through the protagonists’ connection to their surroundings unveils new insights. Coverdale’s selection of Zenobia’s burial place at Eliot’s Pulpit highlights the romance’s link to Puritan heritage. Similarly, Hollingsworth’s fondness for a specific location not only reflects his Puritan-like character but also his taste akin to that of a nineteenth-century American landscape artist. At Hollingsworth’s request, Zenobia’s bleak circumstances undergo a dramatic change when she is laid to rest in a spot overlooking the tranquil Blithedale pasture. Her final resting place bestows a picturesque quality upon the romance.

3. Zenobia’s Picturesque Grave

The presentation of Zenobia’s grave offers new insights into her death, shedding light on the Antebellum perspective on death and mourning. Zenobia’s final moments are depicted as lonely and desolate, with nobody witnessing her entry into the river. Her drowned body is left exposed on the riverbank. However, her tragic death is now integrated into the picturesque rural scenery of the burial ground. During the mid-nineteenth century in America, Zenobia’s grave was not an uncommon sight.

Coverdale’s proposal for the first grave in Blithedale meets the criteria for a rural cemetery. He suggests that “the rudest, roughest, most uncultivable spot” be chosen for the grave, stating, “Death shall teach us to beautify it, grave by grave” (130). The concept of death as a desolate and terrible occurrence is becoming antiquated. People’s inclination to beautify human demise led them to seek an ideal environment for the deceased, rather than traditional, musty burial grounds.

Until the 1830s, corpses were interred in local churchyards, but due to space

constraints and concerns about hygiene in urban areas, a rural cemetery movement emerged. In 1831, the first rural cemetery, Mount Auburn, was established on the outskirts of Boston in a picturesque location that attracted numerous visitors (Kurosaka 77-88). It functioned not only as a graveyard, but also as a public park designed to provide pleasant paths for strolling, tranquil resting areas, and enchanting views. As Stanley French points out, the creation of Mount Auburn enhanced people's perception of death and the grave as a "cultural institution"(38).

Mount Auburn has become a popular tourist destination, as noted by Aron Sachs (211). Visitors were known to bring guidebooks such as "The Picturesque Pocket Companion and Visitor's Guide" (1839) when exploring Mount Auburn. It featured a short story by Hawthorne titled "Lily's Quest" (Douglas 211), providing historical information, monument guides, and various illustrations that Hawthorne and other writers contributed. Another short tale, "The New Adam and Eve" (1843), depicts the protagonists strolling on Mount Auburn at the conclusion (266). To Hawthorne, Mount Auburn was not only a renowned burial ground but also an essential setting for engaging with creativity.

Zenobia is to lie in this incomplete utopia forever and her tragic death is forgotten because of the picturesque grave among pastoral scenery. Indeed, the beautification of death has advanced because of the development of rural cemeteries. Ann Douglas argues that such a rural cemetery concealed the disfiguration of death, and that its function increased people's sentimentality (210). Dana Luciano observes that the picturesque rural cemetery provides a new space for grieving, offering solace and a sense of impermanence to mourners (33). By employing the rural cemetery, Hawthorne effectively reduces the impact of Zenobia's tragic death and romanticizes her suicide. Zenobia now finds eternal peace in a setting that embodies ideal romantic reflection.

In addition, the picturesque grave connects Zenobia and Margaret Fuller (1810-50), who some critics believe to be the model of Zenobia. Both women were characterized as leaders of the women's rights movement.⁸ A new and worthwhile conjecture here is that Fuller died in a maritime accident and was buried at Mount Auburn in 1850. Therefore, the two have quite similar causes of death and picturesque burial sites. Zenobia's grave is the essential element for her characterization, analogizing Fuller.

While many critics have discussed Zenobia's death, there seems to be little discussion

of her grave.⁹ Hawthorne's verbal depiction of her death not only includes the realistic description of drowned Zenobia's body but also a romantic rural grave. The transition from Zenobia's grotesque death to her picturesque grave demonstrates Hawthorne's adroit literary technique, indicating to create "a neutral territory," a place between the real and the magical worlds, to allow for the meeting of actuality and imaginary objects in his romance (*The Scarlet Letter* 36). Writing about picturesque things in the romance conveys an influential "atmospherical medium" to generate a neutral territory (*The House of the Seven Gables* 3). Zenobia's grave as a concrete structure in a neutral territory in a picturesque context is necessary element to comprehend *The Blithedale Romance*.

Conclusion

Hawthorne's use of the picturesque in *The Blithedale Romance* is not just a literary technique but a key to understanding his ambition to create an original form of American literature. His work is a departure from the European novel themes, seeking out new subjects and settings that represent the unique blend of the nineteenth-century American social context and a product of imagination. This significant contribution to American literature resembles Thomas Cole's landscape paintings, which express his high ideals and merge the American wilderness with a view of the actual landscape. Cole's paintings emphasize the American landscape's superiority, allowing him to modify the details of what he saw. Like Cole, Hawthorne creates a new landscape in his romance —one more picturesque than the real America.

Notes

- 1 In a critical review for *The Westminster Review*, George Eliot, writing anonymously, commented on Hawthorne's portrayal in *The Blithedale Romance*. She observed that Hawthorne focused primarily on the picturesque aspects of the setting, portraying it as a "thing of beauty" while either lacking strong convictions about its deeper meaning or hesitating to express them (Crowley 263).
- 2 For instance, among the books he borrowed from the Salem Athenaeum are Jonathan

- Cariver's *Travels through the Interior Parts of North-America in the Years* and William Bartram's *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, and East and West Florida*.
- 3 The tradition of American travel writing emerged during the pre-revolutionary period, initially serving as a colonial travel journal to educate the Old World about the New World. These travel accounts served as insightful guides to unfamiliar societies, offering unique perspectives distinct from the familiar domestic world. Following the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), travel journals and memoirs began incorporating autobiographical elements (Gould 13-25). Coverdale's introspective portrayal can be likened to the frontier journal, much like Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, while his keen observations of nature parallel John Bartram's scientific investigations.
- 4 Theodor Lipps theorized the first scientific theory of *Einfühlung* ("feeling into," "empathy"). His definition of empathy was how to understand the mental states of others. (Montag et al. 1261) See also Jardine and Azanoto; Maddaloni (21-22).
- 5 Hawthorne never mentioned Thomas Cole in his journals. *The Oxbow* was shown at the National Academy of Design in 1836, and *Course of Empire* (1833-36) was exhibited in May 1847 at the Boston Gallery of Fine Arts, which Melville saw (Nurmi 47). There may be a possibility that Hawthorne visited these exhibitions or saw printed pictures.
- 6 Hawthorne's admiration for John Eliot is evident in his writings. In "Grandfather's Chair" and *The Scarlet Letter*, he reveres Eliot as the "Apostle" and regards Indian proselytizing and making Bible for Native Americans. This connection between Hawthorne and Eliot adds a layer of depth to Hawthorne's portrayal of characters and settings.
- 7 Winthrop delivered in "A Model of Christian Charity": "[F]or wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are vpon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee haue vndertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from vs, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world . . ." (295)
- 8 Oscar Cargill notes that Zenobia's death recalls Margaret Fuller's end to readers (859). Linking to Fuller and Zenobia, see also Mitchell.
- 9 About Zenobia's death, see Bronfen (241-9); Crews (166-67); Diamond; Dill.

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