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Author(s)	Kokubo, Junko
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# Dissolved by Others: An Analysis of Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance*

Junko Kokubo

“For Hawthorne,” Jean Normand, one of his critics, expresses, “as for Blake, terror took human form” (214). To explain it more intelligibly, the feelings of terror intermixed with longing exist in the relationship with others for Hawthorne and the protagonists in his texts. *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne’s third romance, provides an appropriate example of this theme. To elucidate the relations between Coverdale, the narrator of this story, and others and how he is influenced and dissolved by them is the purpose of this thesis.

Before turning to main discussion, it is necessary here to look over the stance Coverdale takes in communication with others (Zenobia, Hollingsworth, and Priscilla). He is not, as often claimed, a mere observer but rather an ambivalent narrator. On the one hand, he complains sulkily because he “was at best but a secondary or tertiary personage with either of them,” while “these three characters figured so largely on [his] private theatre” (65). He conceives “a feeling of loneliness” (65) since he is excluded from their affair.

On the other hand, Coverdale repeatedly insists on his role as an observer and sticks to this position, dissociating himself from others’ affair. He regards observing them as his “business to solve” (65) assigned by God: “Destiny, it may be – the most skilful of stage-manager – seldom chooses to arrange its scenes, and carry forward its drama, without securing the presence of at least *one calm observer*” (90-1 emphasis added). He

aspires to preserve his own sphere even while he spends life among others because he is afraid that he might loose "the better part of [his] individuality" (83).<sup>1</sup> Thus, Coverdale's stance toward others is ambivalent. Actually this ambivalence chiefly springs up from his implicit terror of attractive but threatening force of others.

To treat Coverdale's relations to Zenobia, Hollingsworth, and Priscilla respectively will help to analyze his complicated psyche.

## I

The person who should come first when analyzing Coverdale's relation with others is Zenobia since she is the most conspicuous object of his contemplation. She encroaches on and evokes the enormous conflict within his psyche. Her encroachment on Coverdale's sphere is typically demonstrated during his sickness. He remarks, "Zenobia's sphere, I imagine, *impressed itself powerfully on mine*, and transformed me, during this period of my weakness, into something like a mesmerical clairvoyant" (43 emphasis added). The material and substantial nature of Zenobia's sphere is insinuated in the words "impressed" and "powerfully," in which we find Coverdale's hidden terror of it.

Then what is the nature of Zenobia's potency exercised on Coverdale? The conjecture he makes about her marriage experience is important to clarify this point. No matter how ashamed he feels of his conjectures about her virginity as "a masculine grossness" (44), he cannot help repeating it:

Pertinaciously the thought — 'Zenobia is a wife! Zenobia has lived, and loved! There is no folded petal, no latent dew-drop, in this perfectly developed rose!' — irresistibly

that thought drove out all other conclusions, as often as my mind reverted to the subject. (44)

Eroticism is condensed in this passage. Coverdale compares Zenobia to a sensuous flower, a rose. A rose which unfolds the deepest piece of petal is a metaphor for mature woman with sexual experience. This sensuous metaphor reveals his hidden erotic desire incited by the presence of her sensual body.

As many critics points out, Zenobia is one of the dark ladies in Hawthorne's works whose peculiarities are rich, dark hair, well-developed body, mysterious atmosphere, to sum up, sexual attractiveness. Calling them "the incarnation of hidden longings and desires" (338), Philip Rahv argues their substantial and sensual nature.<sup>2</sup> Zenobia's substantial feminine body is repeatedly emphasized throughout the story. Considering that Zenobia is compared to Eve, the first woman in Christianity, or Pandora, the first woman also in Greek mythology, she is the very incarnation of female bodily perfection which is alluring to men. It is sensual female sexuality which allures and, at the same time, terrifies Coverdale.

From the beginning, Coverdale is conscious of Zenobia's feminine body and witnesses with a quick eye, "one glimpse of [her] white shoulder" between her silken kerchief and gown, and is delighted: "It struck me as great piece of good-fortune that there should be just that glimpse" (15). Reacting to her provocative words sensitively, he imagines a picture of her "in Eve's earliest garment" (17). Of course, this expression is just an euphemism. To put it direct way, he fancies her nudity or almost so. Her mature, feminine body impresses him so forcefully that he cannot resist conceiving the obscene fantasy and discloses heedlessly his erotic desire toward her to the readers. How he is overwhelmed by her sexuality is well expressed in

his erotic description of her body:

I know not well how to express, that the native glow of coloring in her cheeks, and even the fresh warmth over her round arms, and what was visible of her full bust – in a word, her *womanliness incarnated* – compelled me sometimes to close my eyes, as if it were not quite the privilege of modesty to gaze at her. (41 emphasis added)

For all his awareness of indecency to gaze at her body, her sensual allure compels him to betray his effort to show himself a man who is indifferent to sexuality and reveal his erotic desire for women, which should be repressed in order to remain a calm observer. Therefore, her sphere, although alluring, becomes a menace which deprives Coverdale of control over his erotic desire.

Zenobia's sphere dominates Coverdale's sphere even when she is absent from him. After she disappears out of his sight after their last interview, he is still influenced by her: "I was affected with a fantasy that Zenobia had not actually gone, but was still hovering about the spot, and haunting it. I seemed to feel her eyes upon me. It was as if the vivid coloring of her character had left a brilliant stain upon the air" (210). Her pertinacious possession of him even in her absence is elucidated by his confession that the tropical flower in her hair, which is part of her existence, "has struck deep root into [his] memory" (15) and "affected [his] imagination" (42). His mind is literally haunted by her.

The tension between Zenobia's sphere and his sphere is symbolically reflected in the scene of Zenobia's drawing-room. Combined with the effect of the brilliant room, her sphere is heavily imposed on him. The mirror in her room, which redoubles whole things in it, reflects "Zenobia's proud figure" (151) and himself, and as a consequence, becomes the

symbolical space of the tension between the two spheres. He seeks to protect his footing against her sphere by means of conceiving malevolent feelings against her. However, "the largeness of her physical nature and the rich type of her beauty" expanded by the enchanting effect of the mirror are "too powerful for all [his] opposing struggle" (152). Her sensual potency magnified by mirror effect negates his resistance. Thus the problem of the relationship between Coverdale's sphere and Zenobia's converges on her sexuality and substanti-ality. His sphere is put in a critical condition by her forceful sphere.

## II

Hollingsworth's sphere also exercises irresistible influence upon Coverdale's sphere. However, the relationship between Hollingsworth's sphere and Coverdale's sphere is more complicated since, unlike the relationship between Zenobia's sphere and his, the potency which causes his terror intermixed with fascination is not reduced to only the problem of sexuality.

In order to see how Hollingsworth's potency is exercised on Coverdale, it is helpful to compare with two scenes which happen between them. The first is the occasion when Coverdale is sick. Hollingsworth's tender and devoted nursing, which gives Coverdale "inexpressible comfort" (39), moves his heart. The light in his eyes seems to surpass fire in the hearth to Coverdale: "There never was any blaze of a fireside that warmed and cheered me, in the down-sinkings and shiverings of my spirit, so effectually as did the light out of those eyes, which lay so deep and dark under his shaggy brows" (39). Recalling that Coverdale repeatedly adores the hearth, we can see how he is intrigued by Hollingsworth's sphere.

Consequently he declares decisively: "Methought there could not be two such men alive, as Hollingsworth" (39). At this stage, Hollingsworth's sphere has still positive value to Coverdale.

The second scene is more crucial than the first one. At this stage, Hollingsworth's sphere becomes quite dangerous to Coverdale's sphere. The chapter in which it happens is aptly named "A Crisis." Here Hollingsworth strenuously compels Coverdale to take part in his "sphere of philanthropic action" (26):

"... Take it up with me! Be my brother in it! It offers you... a purpose in life... Strike hands with me; and, from this moment, you shall never again feel the languor and vague wretchedness of an indolent or half-occupied man!... there shall be strength, courage, immitigable will — everything that manly and generous nature should desire! We shall succeed!..." (123-4)

Immediately after this speech, "his deep eyes filled with tears, and he held out both his hands to" (124) Coverdale and continues, "Coverdale, ... there is not the man in this wide world, whom I can love as I could you. Do not forsake me!" (124) This eloquent, strenuous speech and dramatic gesture disturb Coverdale's mental state. He remembers this man's charismatic potency as follows: "It is a mystery to me, how I withstood it. ... Had I but touched his extended hand, *Hollingsworth's magnetism* would perhaps have penetrated me with his own conception of all these matters" (124 emphasis added). This recollection suggests his terror of being intrigued by Hollingsworth's magnetism.

Obviously the nature of Hollingsworth's magnetism has different meanings to Coverdale between two scenes. In the first scene, Hollingsworth's tenderness like warmth of the hearth is

admired generously as fascinating nature by Coverdale. But in the next scene, Coverdale feels danger of his magnetism, whereas being intrigued by it. It is Hollingsworth's immitigable will to philanthropic scheme which devours others that adds terror to Coverdale's fascination with him. Coverdale repeatedly refers to Hollingsworth's authoritative purposiveness. He pushes his way with immitigable will toward one "over-ruling purpose" (philanthropy) which, he believes, is assigned by God and finally is transformed into "that one principle" (65) itself. The visual impression Coverdale gives to Hollingsworth, "the grim portrait of a Puritan magistrate, holding inquest of life and death in a case of witchcraft" (197), which reminds us of Hawthorne's authoritative forefathers, intensifies the latter's authoritative quality. As Frederick Crews analyzes, ". . . he must eventually appear to Coverdale in the stereotyped role of the Hawthornian father. . ." (203). Occupying himself in the paternal position as if he were "Fate" (123), he exercises charismatic "all-devouring" (66) authority over others.

His "rigid and unconquerable" (122) will toward one purpose is threatening to Coverdale who persists in individuality. Blaming his comfort-seeking way of life, Hollingsworth demands with authoritative attitude Coverdale to give up poetry, a career of his own choice, and seeks to subdue his individual will, saying "I present it (philanthropic scheme) to you," "I shall direct them (Coverdale's faculties)" (124), or "Will you devote yourself and sacrifice all to this great end. . .?" (125). In this manner, he violates the sphere of Coverdale who is struggling to stand upon "his own right, as an individual being" and to look at matters "through his own optics" (125). For fear that his individuality should be subdued, Coverdale seeks to escape from this perilous sphere. It is Coverdale's disgust against philanthropy which enables him to resist

Hollingsworth's authoritative demand somehow. Coverdale fortifies himself by thinking "a loathsomeness" and "a great, black sin" of Hollingsworth's philanthropic scheme and by getting angry with his selfishness. By this measure, he "stood aloof" (124).

Still, to resist Hollingsworth's magnetism accompanies a lot of difficulties: "I never said the word — and certainly can never have it to say, hereafter — that cost me a thousandth part so hard an effort as did that one syllable [No!]. The heart-pang was not merely figurative, but an absolute torture of the breast" (126). Hollingsworth's sway over Coverdale's sphere stays still intact even after twelve years: "As I look back upon this scene, through the coldness and dimness of so many years, there is still a sensation as if Hollingsworth had caught hold of my heart, and were pulling it towards him with an almost irresistible force" (124). A lapse of time makes no contribution to reducing Hollingsworth's authority. No matter how disgusting he is about egotistic nature of Hollingsworth's philanthropy, Coverdale still cannot escape from this man's magnetism. Thus Coverdale's sphere is subjected to the authoritative sphere of Hollingsworth.

### III

In relationship with Zenobia, it is enormous sexuality, and in relationship with Hollingsworth, immitigable authority, that endanger Coverdale's sphere one-sidedly. But in relationship with Priscilla, the case is rather different from the former two cases: she is important to him when she is related to Hollingsworth and Zenobia rather than by herself. She exists for Coverdale as his psychological necessity. By investigating this point, the aspect that his sphere is subject to others'

spheres will come up to the surface more distinctly.

Throughout the story, Coverdale associates Priscilla with insubstantiality. The first expression he chooses to depict her is "a slim and unsubstantial girl" (25). She is often pictured with the adjectives "airy," "fragile," and "transparent." Unlike Zenobia, whose image is associated with such adjectives as bright, fair, rosy, beautiful, the color of Priscilla's face is depicted as "a wan, almost sickly hue" (26). If she is exposed to the sunlight, he imagines, she seems to lose "all the distinctness of her outline" (172) and almost vanish. Thus, Priscilla's sphere seems so insubstantial as to be dissolved easily by the influence of others. But it must be noted here that this image of Priscilla is the "fancy-work" his psychological necessity "decked her out" (94). He embroiders Priscilla with his fancy that she is weak and insubstantial and persuades us and himself into believing her image as such.

Coverdale supposes Priscilla's sphere is weaker than his own and attempts to make use of her in order to relieve his terror that his sphere is violated by two strong spheres of Zenobia and Hollingsworth. As we have observed, no matter how he is allured by Zenobia's sphere, her substantial sexuality is too fearful for him to approach. In contrast with hers, Priscilla's insubstantial sphere seems free from the qualities of sensuous womanhood. Its lack of sexuality seems accessible to Coverdale. Therefore, he, vulnerable himself, conceives a hope to control her sphere at his will. She is the object which he needs so that he can displace his erotic desire incited by Zenobia without being jeopardized. Moreover, he expresses a wish to deprive Priscilla of Hollingsworth. Believing that saving her "from that kind of personal worship" (66) of Hollingsworth is his duty gives him psychological satisfaction because, by this measure, he can relish predominance over

other and, therefore, quasi-substantiality of his own sphere.

Thus, in order to evade the threat of two strong spheres, Coverdale turns to Priscilla's insubstantiality and attempts to violate her sphere. He bears scrutinizing curiosity about her hand-made purse which is, he imagines, a "symbol of Priscilla's own mystery" (33) and tries to break through its aperture which is difficult to find for an uninitiated person. His aggression directed toward her, moreover, appears as a prurient metaphor which he unconsciously uses: "No doubt, it was a kind of sacrilege in me to attempt to come within her maid-  
enly mystery. But... I could not resist the impulse to take just one peep beneath her folded petals" (116). Her purse or the bud, whose portal to lead one to her private sphere (parts) is yet closed, is a metaphor for her virginity, which is contrasted with one describing Zenobia, "to whom wedlock had thrown wide the gates of mystery" (44). He seeks to wrench it open as if deflowering Priscilla's virginity. Since she is frightened by his prying, his attempts to relish predominance of his sphere over hers seem to succeed.

If we recall what motivates Coverdale to care for Priscilla, however, this success is but a superficial one. His confession of love for her is intended to disguise his own tenuous sphere. He displaces his terror that his sphere is being violated by the spheres of Hollingsworth and Zenobia by the supposed love for Priscilla, a harmless girl, to protect it. If we look at it another way, however, her insubstantial sphere paradoxically becomes substantial to Coverdale. It is her insubstantiality that he depends upon. If her sphere is not insubstantial, he loses the object which is requisite for displacing his terror. In this paradoxical sense, his sphere is subject to even such a weak sphere. In addition, as mentioned above, airy, insubstantial image of Priscilla is but "the fancy-work with which [he] idly

decked her out!" We never know whether she is so fragile as he emphasizes. Furthermore, she pays little attention to him from the first. Persons who are dear to her are only Hollingsworth and Zenobia. In fact, Coverdale is dismissed by such a will-less maiden with an imperious attitude that he "had never seen her exercise" (117). His sphere is really weak.

Now let us turn to Coverdale's dream which occurs during his stay in the city to see the relation between Coverdale's sphere and the spheres of other three characters in a block. This dream is crucial because it symbolically depicts that he is "tormented" by the encroachment of the spheres of the three even when he is in unconscious condition. Besides, it concisely illustrates the power-relations of the four central characters:

It was not till I had quitted my three friends that they first began to *encroach upon my dreams*. In those of the last night, Hollingsworth and Zenobia, standing on either side of my bed, had bent across it to exchange a kiss of passion. Priscilla, beholding this — had melted gradually away, and left only the sadness of her expression in my heart. There it still lingered, after I awoke; one of those unreasonable sadnesses that you know not how to deal with, because it involves nothing for common-sense to clutch. (142 emphasis added)

At first glance, weak peculiarities of Priscilla are contrasted with strong ones of Hollingsworth and Zenobia, and Coverdale observes this situation in a detached way. Confronted with the overwhelming spheres of the latter characters, Priscilla is, Coverdale assumes, rendered insubstantial and dissolved, which provokes his sad feeling for her. This explanation, however, is not enough to clarify the significance of the location he occupies in the dream and the nature of "unreasonable sadnesses"

he feels. What we should notice is that it is Coverdale who dreams this dream, so it is the projection of unconsciousness in his mind. Taking into consideration the order of the scenes in the dream will serve to analyze it.

Coverdale's dream is divided into two scenes. The first thing he witnesses is the scene of passionate kiss between Zenobia and Hollingsworth. The three in the first scene form, as it were, a symbolical family. Zenobia, whose peculiarity is mature sexuality, occupies maternal position, and Hollingsworth, who is authoritative figure, occupies paternal position. Therefore, these two persons belong to the world of adulthood, and their action is a synecdoche for sexual intercourse between parents. On the other hand, since Coverdale is afraid of confronting mature sexuality, as we observed in the relationship between Zenobia and him, the world he mentally belongs to is still infantile one. We find that the first scene is the epitome of the situation that infantile Coverdale (Oedipal child) is intrigued by and conceives a desire for sensual Zenobia (mother), only to be rebuffed by the authority of Hollingsworth (father). Therefore, he can do nothing but lie down as an impotent man. Moreover, for Coverdale who fears mature sexuality, the scene of symbolical sexual intercourse is too shocking to witness directly. This mental disturbance makes it impossible to preserve his position as a calm observer (his own sphere). Thus the first scene condenses the predicament into which Coverdale falls.<sup>3</sup>

The second scene in the dream depicts the relationship between Coverdale and Priscilla. The window is a symbol of the refuge he desperately searches for in order to escape from the crisis in the first scene. There he finds Priscilla looking at the incident from outside. Her appearance in the dream is the product of his psyche put in the impending danger. She plays

a role of, as it were, a palliative to him: he displaces his own vulnerable sphere by hers and makes hers dissolve away in substitution for him. By pitying dissolving Priscilla, furthermore, he attains psychological superiority over her and seeks to prevent his own dissolution.

To sum up, Coverdale's dream is the condensation of his implicit terror (of his dissolution by others) and wish (to escape from this terror). His wish, however, is never fulfilled in reality since Priscilla's insubstantial sphere is but a projection of his own dissolved by the influence of others. Her dissolution, in fact, symbolizes his rather than her insubstantiality. His mourning is ironically directed to his own tenuous sphere.

Discussion above has brought the tensions and the power relations between Coverdale's sphere and others' spheres into clear relief: Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla encroach on Coverdale's sphere, as symbolically indicated in his dream. The hermitage in the outskirts of the community is necessary for Coverdale to resist their encroachment. The movement from the center of Blithedale to his hermitage in the woods, "the deepest wood-seclusion," is worth noticing. His escape is accomplished through two processes: first by passing through the encircled woods which leads to "the innermost sanctuary" (83) and then by getting to the hermitage surrounded and guarded by encircling boughs and leaves. From this movement, we find that Coverdale's hermitage is located in the innermost part of concentric circles: it is doubly covered. He recedes deeper into the secure sphere. From the implicit terror that his sphere is violated by others, he secludes himself in the hermitage so closely circumscribed that it seems "as if only a squirrel or a bird had passed" (91).

Coverdale is receding further from the spheres of

Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla into the solitary hotel-room. But his escape from others is made invalid through three phases. First, he becomes homesick from a torment that he "had wrenched [himself] too suddenly out of an accustomed sphere" (142). Then, he recognizes that "They dwelt in a profounder region" (180). Eventually he is drawn back to them, pondering "how unreservedly I had given up my heart and soul to interests that were not mine. . . And why, being now free, should I take this thraldom on me, once again?" (189) For all the recognition that "to be in too close affinity with" the spheres of others is "both sad and dangerous," he is forced to return to them with mixed feelings of "fears" and "wild exhilaration" (189). Thus his escape from the influence of others ends in failure.

The following quotation shows how firmly others grasp Coverdale desperately escaping from them:

After the effort which it cost me to fling them off — after consummating my escape, as I thought, from these goblins of fresh and blood, and pausing to revive myself with a breath or two of an atmosphere in which they should have no share — it was a positive despair, to find the same figures arraying themselves before me. . . . (145)

He went to the city in order to rescue his sphere. No matter how hard he tries to exorcise others from his sphere, however, it is again subjected to their encroachment. His sphere is haunted by them as if by the ghosts. They, who are constituents of his sphere, deprive him of sway over his own sphere: "The more I consider myself, as I then was, the more do I recognize how deeply my connection with those three had affected my all being" (180).

Dryden acutely points out the terror of "menacing otherness at his own center" (21) permeated in Hawthorne's texts. I

would like to develop his opinion a little further. Others not only encroach on the center of Coverdale's sphere, but also, as we have observed, dissolve it from within. His abrupt philosophical speculation, which is sometimes said to disturb fluency of the narrative, reflects this situation:

It was impossible... not to imbibe the idea of that everything in nature and human existence was fluid, or fast becoming so; that the crust of the Earth, in many places, was broken, and its whole surface portentously upheaving; that it was a day of crisis, and that we ourselves were in the critical vortex. Our great globe floated in the atmosphere of infinite space like an unsubstantial bubble. (130)

Here he treats the problem of unsubstantiality as a general phenomenon in the world at present extending it to the earth. But this philosophical speculation, if we recollect our previous discussion, turns out his unintentional expression of his own sphere in crisis. It is, in fact, the boundary of his sphere that is broken, and it is his own sphere that floats like "an unsubstantial bubble," not just the globe. After dissolving his sphere, "Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla! These three had *absorbed* [his] life into themselves" (179 emphasis added). Through these processes, Coverdale's sphere is reduced to nothing.

Beneath the mask of the calm observer, we glimpse at a figure of the man who is tied up with terror of menacing others.

### Notes

- 1 Edger Dryden investigates the meaning of "sphere" in Hawthorne's texts: "For Hawthorne, every person inhabits a 'little sphere of creatures and circumstances in which he [is] the central object'.... Each person, in effect,

is a perceptual center around which there is a circumference made up of the objects and people which fall within the field of perception" (60). The meaning of "sphere" used in my discussion is based on his definition.

- 2 Rahv points out further the common characteristics of Hawthornian dark lady: "Her unity as a character is established by the fact that... she... plays substantially the same role. Hawthorne's description of her is wonderfully expressive in the fullness of its sensual imaginings" (338). Darrel Abel also positions Zenobia, along with Hester and Miriam, in a genealogy of the dark lady.
- 3 Richard Millington's summary of this dream is suggestive: "The parts the characters play in Coverdale's dream correspond precisely to the logic of selfhood that each of them embodies. He and Priscilla are miniature, infantile, while Hollingsworth or Zenobia loom over them, sexual and substantial" (161).

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