

ZENOBIA: AN IDOL  
IN THE FALSE COMMUNITY OF BLITHEDALE

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(1) In his essay "A Place Called Community," Parker Palmer describes a false community as being "idolatrous." He claims that a false community "takes some finite attribute like race, creed, political ideology, or even manners, and elevates it to ultimacy" and, additionally, "worships that which should be viewed critically" (17). An example of this type of "false community" is portrayed in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, The Blithedale Romance. At a superficial glance the Blithedale community appears to be a place where people live and work together in harmony, striving to better society and to achieve unselfish goals. When one probes deeper into the core of Blithedale, however, one realizes that the cooperative community which was first observed is actually one of selfishness, falseness, and particularly idolatry. This "idolatrous" theme is portrayed in The Blithedale Romance in the way the characters behave towards Zenobia, a beautiful, wealthy, high-spirited woman who, at first, appears to bring the community together with her amiability and warmth. However, the "idol worship" of Zenobia by the other community members, and even by Zenobia herself, causes false relationships to form and contributes to the community's eventual misfortune.

(2) Coverdale, both the narrator of The Blithedale Romance and the inside observer, is one community member who "worships" Zenobia. From their first meeting Coverdale continuously describes Zenobia as an "admirable figure of a woman" who not only is "healthy" and "vigorous," but "remarkably beautiful" as well (43). Coverdale is particularly mesmerized by the brilliant, rare, exotic flower Zenobia wears in her hair each day. He is also perplexed at whether or not Zenobia has ever been married and he yearns to discover the "mystery of her life" (71). His longing to disclose this "mystery" obsesses Coverdale throughout the novel, deeply involving him in the lives of Zenobia and two other characters--Hollingsworth and Priscilla. Coverdale is possessed with trying to understand Zenobia's innermost thoughts, her actions, and her relationships with the other community members. But his obsession with Zenobia's "secret life" causes her to put on a facade so that no one, including Coverdale, will uncover the "real" Zenobia.

(3) Priscilla, like Coverdale, looks up to Zenobia and idolizes her. Although Priscilla is an older teenage girl, she is still quite young and naive in her way of thinking. From her first night at Blithedale Priscilla trustingly "betook herself into the shadow of Zenobia's protection" (58) and follows Zenobia continuously, often gazing lovingly into Zenobia's beautiful face. At first Zenobia is reluctant to show any emotion towards Priscilla, but with time Zenobia seems to return Priscilla's love in a "sisterly" fashion. Although Priscilla's love is of purest form,

Zenobia's feelings represent another element of falseness in her character. In reality Zenobia is jealous of Priscilla and subtly competes with her for Hollingsworth's love. Zenobia even betrays Priscilla by eventually leading her back into the bondage of the Veiled Lady. Even though Priscilla idolizes Zenobia in a most innocent manner, Zenobia's falseness in this relationship adds deception to the community.

(4) A third character who idolizes Zenobia, although for reasons different from those of Coverdale and Priscilla, is Hollingsworth. Hollingsworth is a philanthropist interested in building a facility for the reform of criminals. He does not have the money, however, to build this structure, and for this reason looks toward famous, successful, wealthy Zenobia, who could make Hollingsworth's dream a reality. Hollingsworth uses Zenobia by idolizing what she stands for in his mind--her money. Although Zenobia "worships" Hollingsworth as well, her feelings are genuine. She loves him passionately and shows it openly: Zenobia "took the hand of Hollingsworth in both her own, pressed it to her bosom, and let it fall again" (141). The falseness in the relationship between Hollingsworth and Zenobia lies in the fact that Hollingsworth "leads Zenobia on" with his "disguises of self-deception" (224) by not telling her until too late that it is Priscilla, not Zenobia, for whom he truly cares.

(5) The greatest amount of idolatry, however, lies in Zenobia's view of herself. Zenobia tries to relive her famous and successful years by seeing herself as the reigning "queen" and the "hostess" (43) of the community. Zenobia's personality is false in this sense because even she sees herself as something she no longer is. Zenobia's act of suicide at the end of the novel emphasizes this truly false character. She kills herself, not because of the hurt she feels when Hollingsworth proclaims his love for Priscilla, but as an act of revenge. Zenobia refuses to "blush under the eyes that knew her secret" (230), but, instead, chooses even a false victory through her revengeful act, making Hollingsworth believe he has actually "murdered" her (231).

(6) In each of the key relationships involving Zenobia in The Blithedale Romance an "idolatrous" element forms a facade. The community eventually becomes full of mistrust and suspicion because its members have "worshipped that which should be viewed critically" (Palmer, 17). Inevitably, Zenobia as an individual and the community as a whole are destroyed.