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Individualism is the Downfall of Communities

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Does individualism help or hurt a community? Can a person pursue their own individualistic ambitions without affecting others? Nathaniel Hawthorne and F. Scott Fitzgerald address these questions similarly in their books, respectively, *The Blithedale Romance* and *The Great Gatsby*. Though the characters in these books have vastly different senses of community, individualism becomes the downfall of their communities.

Miles Coverdale & Nick Carraway

Miles Coverdale and Nick Carraway have similar individualistic downfalls. They both are never fully immersed in their respective communities, which causes them to not be a part of the community at all. They both as narrators spend the whole book observing the actions of others and analyzing other characters instead of truly being a part of the story. In the article, "Individualistic and Social Moral Concerns in Hawthorne's Novels," Miles Coverdale is explained as such, "Coverdale, the narrator, becomes hard as an uninvolved and indifferent observer;" (Mahmoud Rowshanzamir 303). He cannot be a part of the Blithedale community

because he is too much of an observer. He is too concerned with what everyone else is doing, such as when he goes to the city and is watching Zenobia through the window. If he was not so concerned with observing and questioning others' actions, he would have been able to immerse himself into the community.

Nick Carraway is just as much an observer as Miles Coverdale. He spends his time observing mostly Gatsby and his parties. He is always forming opinions of others. Although Nick forms a relationship with Jordan Baker, he still spends most of his time with Gatsby. Towards the end of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick states", 'They're a rotten crowd,' I shouted across the lawn. 'You're worth the whole damn bunch put together.' I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end" (Fitzgerald 164). This is an example of his fixation with the other characters in the book. He thinks that they are all terrible people, which prevents him from truly being a part of the community. Miles Coverdale and Nick Carraway's individualistic issue is their fixation with other people.

Hollingsworth & Jay Gatsby

Like Miles Coverdale and Nick Carraway are similar, Hollingsworth and Jay Gatsby are similar in their downfall. They both have different goals but, they both let their goals get in the way of their community and do not

realize how their actions effect those in their community. Hollingsworth wants the land that the Blithedale community is on and the money that Zenobia (and then Priscilla) have so that he can create his prison reform work. He will do anything to get what he wants even if it hurts others.

Towards the end of *The Blithedale Romance*, Zenobia says this to Hollingsworth “, Self, self, self! You have embodied yourself in a project. You are a better masquerader than the witches and gipsies yonder; for your disguise is a self-deception” (Hawthorne 218). He dumps Zenobia for Priscilla when he finds out that Zenobia is poor because all he cares about is making his dream come true.

Jay Gatsby’s selfishness is a bit more complicated because he is typically seen as the tragic hero of *The Great Gatsby*. He has the “American Dream”. He rose from being the son of a poor farmer to having a mansion, a Rolls-Royce, and tons of money. The real problem is his motivation that got him there. Gatsby spent his whole life trying to get Daisy back, who chose Tom Buchanan because of his money. Every decision he makes is to impress Daisy and win her back. In a conversation with Nick Carraway he makes that clear:

“‘I wouldn't ask too much of her,’ I ventured. ‘You can't repeat the past.’

'Can't repeat the past?' he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!'

He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand.

'I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before,' he said, nodding determinedly. 'She'll see'"
(Fitzgerald 118).

Gatsby is so obsessed with getting Daisy back that it eventually leads to his death. He takes the blame for her killing Myrtle. This is his individualistic downfall. He cannot be a part of the world—his community—because he will do anything for Daisy to be a part of his life. Jay Gatsby and Hollingsworth are too concerned with their own goals and dreams to be a part of their communities.

Tom & Daisy Buchanan

Tom and Daisy Buchanan have the same downfall. They ruin their community—their marriage—because they are focused on other people. Tom has an affair with Myrtle and Daisy has an affair with Gatsby. They are focused on their own wants too much to care about their marriage. This also ends up effecting the community around them. They together ruin George and Myrtle Wilson's marriage. Daisy ruins it when she runs away with Gatsby

and runs over Myrtle. Tom ruins it by having the affair with Myrtle in the first place. Nick sees that Tom and Daisy do not care about others when he states “, They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made” (Fitzgerald 191). After the deaths of Gatsby, George, and Myrtle, they pack up and leave town like they had nothing to do with it. Their individualistic selfishness ruins their own community and the community around them.

Myrtle Wilson

Myrtle Wilson wanted nothing more than to be rich and escape her current life. She wanted it so badly that she put up with Tom Buchanan physically abusing her. Her community was her marriage and this is how she felt about it:

"The only crazy I was was when I married him. I knew right away I made a mistake. He borrowed somebody's best suit to get married in and never even told me about it, and the man came after it one day when he was out. She looked around to see who was listening: " 'Oh, is that your suit?' I said. 'This is the first I ever heard about it.' But I gave it to him

and then I lay down and cried to beat the band all afternoon" (Fitzgerald 39).

She thought George had money but, when she found out that he did not, she wanted desperately to get away from him. She cheated on him with Tom hoping that he would leave Daisy and that she could live a life of luxury. Tom was horrible to her but, she did not care because he bought her shiny things. This all eventually leads to her death when she runs out into the street thinking Tom was the one driving Gatsby's car.

Zenobia & Priscilla

Zenobia and Priscilla both wanted to be with Hollingsworth and this is their downfall. They let him take advantage of both of them. Zenobia wanted Hollingsworth so badly that it led to her death when he eventually rejects her for her sister, Priscilla. She tells Coverdale this " , Tell him he has murdered me! Tell him that I'll haunt him!"—she spoke these words with the wildest energy— "And give him—no, give Priscilla this" (Hawthorne 226). She let his rejection led her to drowning herself. She was so focused on him, instead of the Blithedale community, that she cannot continue to live when Hollingsworth no longer wants to be with her.

Priscilla is a complicated character because she is very timid. The article, "Individualistic and Social Moral Concerns in Hawthorne's Novels," describes her this way " , Priscilla, the mysterious maiden, who does not

have a substantial character and is, therefore, easily destroyed between the strong forces of Hollingsworth and Zenobia, both symbols for Selfishness and pride;" (Mahmoud Rowshanzamir 303). However, she is just as selfish as all of the other characters. She wants to be with Hollingsworth and when he rejects her sister and she is clearly hurt, she does nothing to help her except to say that they are sisters. Priscilla is too weak willed to say no to Hollingsworth because she wants to be with him and cannot give him up for her sister. She is not meaning to be selfish but, she cannot give up her own individualistic desires for the good of her community or her family. She is just as much to blame for Zenobia's death as Hollingsworth.

Conclusion

Each of the characters in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Blithedale Romance* let their individualism be the downfall of their communities. None of them are willing to let go of their own individualistic needs for the better of their community. Miles Coverdale and Nick Carraway are too much of observers to be a part of their communities. Hollingsworth and Jay Gatsby are too concerned with their own dreams to see how they might hurt those around them. Tom and Daisy Buchanan are selfish and careless which hurts their community and the community around them. Myrtle lets her need for the finer things in life ruin her community which leads to the death of three characters including herself. Zenobia and Priscilla are too obsessed with Hollingsworth to think of the good of their community or their family.

Through *The Great Gatsby* and *The Blithedale Romance*, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Nathaniel Hawthorne show that individualism can be the downfall of communities if the community members let their individual needs get in the way of their community needs.

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