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The Failure of a Utopia in Hawthorne’s The Blithedale Romance and Thoreau’s Walden

The concept of a Utopia has long been a topic of discussion as a reform for society. Throughout history many different groups have attempted to create such a society, such as the Puritans of the seventeenth century. Unsurprisingly then, the longing for a perfect society has been a topic for literature that has influenced the writings of a range of authors, from Thomas Moore’s Utopia to Karl Marx’s Communist Manifesto. With the idea of a Utopia being so prevalent throughout history and the history of literature, the question of why these societies have not lasted comes to mind. This failure seems to be addressed in the attempts for a perfect society in the nineteenth century. With the creation of communities of intentional equality, as seen in Hawthorne’s The Blithedale Romance, the ignorance of the individual was the major downfall, whereas in the creation of Thoreau’s singular society that embraced “self-reliance,” there is an indication that the individual can live a somewhat solitary existence, but cannot thrive without community. Neither type of project was able to last because each lacked what the other had. Despite the intellectual wisdom of creating a perfect society on either end of the given spectrum, human nature’s apparent need to have both the individual and community destroys the project. Examples from nineteenth century literature indicate that the creation of either a communal or singular Utopia actually elides societal concerns; instead of creating a perfect society, these Utopias merely increase the division between self and community, and, therefore, cannot last because they enhance the problem.

The creation of a community of equality, like that in The Blithedale Romance, ignores the self-interest of human nature. In the novel, Coverdale himself recognizes the impossibility of the project to last: “On the whole, it was a society such as has seldom met together; nor, perhaps,
could it reasonably be expected to hold together long” (58). The community cannot “hold together” because throughout the work the main characters are physically living in a community, but are mentally preoccupied with their own concerns. After reading Coverdale’s confession that “I—I myself—was in love—with—Priscilla!” (228), his actions throughout the novel can be seen as self-interested because he concerns himself with the actions of Priscilla, and those most closely attached to her, Hollingsworth and Zenobia. Priscilla and Zenobia are also self-interested members of the project, as each is more concerned with winning the affections of Hollingsworth than the community. Priscilla merely reflects those she wishes to please, namely Hollingsworth, and Zenobia leaves Blithedale in order to win Hollingsworth’s affection. None of these characters’ actual concerns are the success of Blithedale, but rather their own desires. Although characters like Foster seem to put aside their own wants for the good of the community, the fact that each of the main characters in the novel does not have this same level of commitment highlights that such a society cannot function when the individual desires of the members are far from the goals of the community. The community must realize that individual wants could distract members from the goals of the community, but instead of ignoring this problem as in the novel, address it so that both the individual and community can be satisfied.

The ignorance of the individual in this community can, therefore, be seen as hindering such an experiment. This concept is perhaps most clearly seen in Hollingsworth’s scheme to destroy Blithedale. Hollingsworth attempted “to obtain possession of the very ground on which we had planted our Community” (122) in order to create his own scheme of a philanthropic organization. When questioned by Coverdale, Hollingsworth points out the defection of Blithedale: “‘I see through the system. It is full of defects—irremediable and damning ones!...There is not human nature in it!’” (123). The project has ignored the fundamental and
natural concerns of each individual, and as Hollingsworth pointed out, is, therefore, unable to last. Hollingsworth is not the only one in the novel who recognizes that an ignorance of self-interest is the pitfall of the community. Zenobia also decries: “‘It is all self!...Nothing else; nothing but self, self, self!...for your disguise is a self-deception’ (201). Each character from Zenobia to Hollingsworth is guilty of Zenobia’s declaration. The community is made up of self-interested individuals who are, as Zenobia highlights, disguising their self concerns under the guise of wanting to help the community of Blithedale. Although this self-interest is a hindrance to the goals of the community, it is the community’s ignorance of self-interest that is the greater problem. The fundamental downfall of the community is its lack of self.

Other signs that a Utopian community cannot last when built on a foundation which ignores self-interest are actual experiments done in the nineteenth century, such as the Pantistocracy scheme and Brook Farm. Each of these systems attempted to create a perfect society, like what was attempted in *The Blithedale Romance*. In the article found in “The Ladies’ repository, and gatherings of the West” in 1847, this recognition that Pantistocracy and Brook Farm were doomed to failure is made evident:

> Not satisfied by the uniform failure of all similar attempts, the poet Shelley and his young companions undertook to produce an equality of fortune amongst men, by leveling the rich and the great to the condition of the poor; but a few years of experience ripened their understandings and satisfied their judgment, that…the evil would only be aggravated by the remedies applied…and Brook Farm is destined to be the scene of another failure to join fiction and philosophy in a common cause (316).

Brook Farm was “destined to be…another failure” because selfishness destroyed the attempt, just as it had in past experiments. The attempt at equality in such a society probably cannot be
accomplished, and in fact adds to the problem because the “evil” of self-concern found in human nature will “only be aggravated by the remedies” because the self is not being addressed.

An 1850 “Christian Review” article makes a similar point to individual members being the reason of Brook Farm’s failure: “These attempts were, we believe, uniformly unsuccessful…We know enough surely of the Brook Farm Association…to ascribe its financial failure quite as much to the inefficiency of their avowed supporters” (525). Brook Farm is described as being inefficient because the supporters of the community were unable to fully support the scheme, indicating that they were unwilling to revoke self-interest completely for the cause of the community. The ignorance of the community to realize its dependence upon self-interested individuals seemingly destroyed the project faster than if there had been such a recognition.

Perhaps the inherent problem of these communities to not consider individual desires as an important aspect of any community is best stated in the “The United States magazine and Democratic Review” by Conrad Swackhamer in 1843:

The secret of this universal failure is chiefly in the fact that, in all our attempts to organize the communal element, we have organized it in the view of itself, and not in view of the fact…that the Community is to be actualized only in the Individuality…The proceeding has always been grounded on the assumption that Individuality is the destruction of Community, and that Community, therefore, necessarily excludes Individuality. Here has been the error…Look into any of the projects for a Community…and we shall see that the ruling thought is Community for the sake of Community, not Community for the sake of Individuality (135).

Community cannot be built simply “for the sake of Community” because in doing such, Utopian communities have forgotten elements of human nature. According to many nineteenth century
philosophers, the individual can only understand itself, and therefore there must be an element of
the individual in the organization of community. A group of individuals creates a community,
and to ignore the individual is, therefore, to ignore the community. Without this recognition, a
utopia is already doomed for failure.

Emerson also points out the importance of having an understanding of both the self and
the individual. In the “Divinity School Address,” he states “By trusting your own heart, you
shall gain more confidence in other men” (79). This statement emphasizes the importance of
understanding the individual first and then building a community off of the individual. In this
moment, Emerson indicates an understanding that society must function on both an individual
and social level.

Yet despite this and other instances when Emerson indicates a need for both individual
and community, in many of his earlier writings Emerson tends to lean on the singular importance
of the individual. In his “The American Scholar” Emerson argues that the individual is the only
necessity: “The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature” (68);
therefore, the man is the only necessity and needs to only rely on himself. Perhaps the argument
that the individual can live without community can be seen even more clearly in Emerson’s
“Self-Reliance.” He writes, “It is only as a man puts off all foreign support and stands alone,
that I see him to be strong and to prevail. He is weaker by every recruit to his banner.” Emerson
suggests that a man can only be strong on his own and not with the help of others or community
in general. Emerson continues with the statement, “Is not a man better than a town?...Nothing
can bring you peace but yourself” (136-37). The individual is portrayed as an entity that needs
nothing but itself, and that community lessens the importance of the individual, suggesting that
the individual is greater than the community.
Yet Emerson’s later writing indicates that he realizes problems with the belief that society can only be built upon the individual. After his son Waldo’s death, Emerson is unable to believe only in the individual and realizes the flaws of such a philosophy. He writes in his journal that, “I do not satisfy myself” (508), which is a complete reversal from his earlier affirmations that he could only understand himself. Emerson suggests that there must be something other than the individual because the self will not always be able to satisfy every need.

The clearest indication that Emerson has reexamined his philosophy in the self is in his essay “Experience.” He seems to come to the realization that the individual cannot, in actuality, lean only on itself. At the beginning of the essay he indicates that at times the individual can deceive himself: “Our life is not so much threatened as our perception…we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth. But it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit” (198-99) and “There is an optical illusion about every person” (201). This passage suggests that the individual can be subject to illusion and not truth, and relying only on the self can actually increase delusion. Perhaps the best example in “Experience” where Emerson highlights the flaws of relying only on the individual is when he states, “The individual is always mistaken. He designed many things, and…blundered much…but the individual is always mistaken. It turns out somewhat new, and very unlike what he promised himself” (207). With the reiteration of the statement that “the individual is always mistaken,” he points out that the understanding of the individual is broken. Emerson realizes that the individual is not always correct and cannot simply trust in the self, and that relying solely on the self can actually result in increased mistakes. This difference in his later writings doesn’t necessarily mean that Emerson has fully revoked the individual or ignored its divine potential, but that he has come to an understanding
that the individual is flawed and cannot merely rely on himself; there must be an element of community within the self.

Much like Emerson’s later writings, Thoreau’s experience at Walden also indicates that a Utopia cannot be built merely on the individual. Although Thoreau makes his experience out to be one of success, it was an experiment that could not last because it forgets community in an attempt to understand only the individual. In order for Thoreau to even attempt the experiment, he relies on others. In the section “The Village” from Walden, Thoreau recognizes his reliance on society, saying, “I went to the village to get a shoe from the cobbler’s” (118). His need for the services of others indicates the impossibility of creating a singular Utopia because he needs the community throughout his experience at Walden.

Throughout his work Walden, Thoreau makes arguments that a life in solitude and individual reflection were the means for him to have a more full existence; yet, a closer examination of Walden reveals that Thoreau recognized his need for others, indicating that although the individual is important, there must be interaction with community in order to survive. In the section “Visitors,” Thoreau suggests his need for community: “I think that I love society as much as most…I am naturally no hermit” (97). The human is naturally a social creature, and was not meant to live a completely solitary life. As seen in “The Village,” Thoreau found he needed society. For example, he writes, “Every day or two I strolled to the village to hear some of the gossip…and which…was really refreshing in its way as the rustle of leaves and the peeping of frogs” (115). The passage suggests that he was able to find the same individual growth in community as he would have in solitary reflection in nature. There is, therefore, a building of the individual in community that cannot be completely ignored, and although Thoreau found much of his individual growth in nature, community also played a part in that
growth. He compounded his need of society because he focused too much on the individual, indicating that the individual must have community in order to survive because there is a level of community in the individual.

As seen in the communities represented by *The Blithedale Romance*, a community dooms itself to failure when it does not recognize the individual; whereas in the case of both Emerson and Thoreau, there is an emphasis on the individual, but a recognition that the individual cannot survive by itself. In each case, the societies were unsuccessful because they ignored a fundamental part of any civilization, and, as a result, actually enhance the difficulty of reforming society instead of fixing it. Therefore, it seems logical to conclude that although the given examples were failures, a Utopian society could be created so long as it did not ignore the problems of both the individual and the community. If a community could successfully address the human need for individual and community, and not ignore either concern, there is an indication that it would be able to flourish—finding a middle ground between the tension of the individual and community.
Works Cited


