

“Aspects of cultural context affect the extent to which a character can be happy or successful within the world of a text” Discuss. (2018)

In both ‘The Great Gatsby’ by F. Scott Fitzgerald and ‘A Doll’s House’ by Henrik Ibsen, the cultural context has a very negative impact on the central characters ability to achieve happiness.

Both ‘The Great Gatsby and ‘A Doll’s House’ are divisive cultures in terms of wealth. However, even wealth or opulence does not guarantee happiness. In Nora’s first encounter with Mrs. Linde we see her proclaim how happy and satisfied she currently is and extensively mention optimism in her domestic role, “Isn’t it wonderful, I can play all day with the children!”. Gatsby too appears to have it all; money, glamour, parties, all often associated with providing happiness. The references to “Rolls Royce”, “champagne flutes” and “five crates of oranges and lemons” reveal a sense of excess and Gatsby’s extreme wealth. On the surface both Nora and Gatsby appear to have contentment in their lives. Nora has a nice house, a family, and a husband with a new high-earning job, while Gatsby owns a mansion in which he throws elite parties. However, all this really brings them is financial stability and security. The more Nora proclaims this “wonderful thing to be alive and happy”, the more we begin to doubt her sincerity. She has to constantly exclaim these things to convince herself that it is the truth. We see a sense of desperation in Gatsby when he meets with Daisy “he had been full of the idea so long, dreamt it right through to the end”. Gatsby only threw his parties and flaunted his wealth in an attempt to attract Daisy into his life. Both Nora and Gatsby are deluded. Nora deludes herself into believing that Torvald is a good man and that she is happy being his “little songbird”, while the “green-light” is symbolic of Gatsby’s yearning for Daisy whom he deludes himself into believing that he could have a future with. Both believe that from the financial wealth they have will stem happiness to distract themselves from their reality. Both texts highlight truth in the expression ‘money can’t buy happiness’ and indicate that affluence is largely irrelevant in terms of achieving happiness.

In both texts we see the total disregard that men in these patriarchal societies have for the women they are in relationships with, undoubtedly evoking unhappiness in the women. Perhaps the most shocking element of this disregard is that it is so casual. Consider the reactions of Tom Buchanan and Torvald Helmer when their world is undermined or challenged by a woman. Myrtle goads Tom

by shouting “Daisy, Daisy, Daisy” during a drunken row in order to try and establish herself as a person of importance in Tom’s life. Nora challenges Torvald to put her first when he discovers the deal she made with Krogstad. She begs for the “miracle” to occur, the miracle of Torvald putting her first. However, in both texts the male characters react with cruelty and disdain. Tom breaks Myrtle’s nose in a “short deft movement’. He offers no apology for it. Torvald effectively ends his marriage and informs Nora that she will no longer be entrusted to raise her own children “but I shall not allow you bring up the children, I do not trust them to you”. He does this without hesitation. The men in these texts behave in this manner as they believe that they have to right to do so. Being male and educated gives them power in their respective cultures. How could either Myrtle or Nora possibly be happy in a relationship where they are completely undermined, disregarded and disempowered? Both texts are set in patriarchal societies where a woman’s voice is to be silenced at all costs, and ultimately their happiness falls inferior to this.

Both ‘The Great Gatsby and ‘A Doll’s House’ have characters that are disenfranchised as a result of the lack of power that they hold, which results in a prolonged negative impact on their happiness. Krogstad tells Nora of his ambitions, "I'm going to get to the top I tell you. I'm going to get back into the bank and its going to be higher up". Similarly we see Myrtle’s desire to be one of the elite in the quotation “She raised her eyes in despair at the shiftlessness of the lower orders”. Both Krogstad and Myrtle are evidently hugely aspirational. They crave the stability, money and respect that has been denied to them. This constant desire to better their economic power chips away at their humanity. Myrtle publicly berates, undermines and humiliates her husband, saying “he's so dumb he doesn't know he's alive”. Krogstad blackmails Nora with the letter until the point where she considers suicide “under the ice down in the cold black water”. Their aspirations do not allow for the luxury of empathy or consideration. Krogstad and Myrtle’s desire to mimic part of society outweighs their reality of disempowerment and demoralisation. Basically decent people that feel under great pressure will do morally questionable things with no regret, remorse or conscience. This leads to an element of cruelty and anger that negates happiness in Krogstad and Myrtle’s lives. Nora has what Krogstad has been denied, security and respect “I want what you and your husband have. I want to get to the top”. Myrtle’s outburst of “Daisy, Daisy, Daisy” reveals her resentment of Daisy for having the wealth, status, glamour and privilege that she aspires to have. Both Krogstad and Myrtle only have loyalties to themselves as a result of their disempowered status in their respective societies. They believe that they are doing the right thing through taking their future into their own hands and attempting to achieve happiness for themselves. Aspiration however evidently creates anger and frustration when it cannot be obtained.

In both texts, the respective societies have class divisions that allow those at the top of society to exert power and control. Both Tom Buchanan and Torvald Helmer crave this dominance to feel content. Tom physically guides and moves Nick around his property, “and he forcibly turned me around by one arm”, in an attempt to establish authority and control. Torvald interviews Mrs. Linde and gives her a job telling her “there’s absolutely no need to thank me”, to feed his self-importance and establish power. Mrs. Linde sees Torvald as a gateway to help her just as Nick does with Tom. These relationships however are symbiotic. Tom and Torvald get the opportunity to demonstrate their success and establish power as members of the dominant class. They are feeding their self-conceit and ego through the establishment of power over subordinates. From the sense of pride and ‘amour propre’ evoked in Tom and Torvald stems satisfaction and content. The control they exert over others is what fuels them.

One key feature of cultural context evident in both texts is the disempowerment of women. This aspect is highlighted through the playing of roles by both Nora Helmer and Daisy Buchanan, restraining them from obtaining happiness in their marriage. Both women abdicated any power and choice they had through their marriage. Nora tells Torvald how she “can’t get anywhere without your help”. She conforms to Torvald’s view of women as weak, shallow and ignorant to the world. Daisy continuously puts on forced cheerfulness seen in the oxymoron of “tense gayety” and play the part of a vacuous socialite, “I’d like to just get one of those pink clouds and put you in it and push you around”. Both women adopt these demeaning roles in order to survive within a world which disempowers women. In both texts men are on a societal high-ground, being male and educated gives them control, power and independence. Women evidently subordinate both their voice and their individuality and with this their happiness. Underneath this exterior, both women display absolute understanding of the role they must play. Daisy after having been forced by her family to marry Tom Buchanan and spending the night before her wedding “crying and crying”, married Tom “the next day without so much as a shiver”. Nora is aware that “a time will come when Torvald is not as devoted to me”. Her looks and youth will fade and as a result she will need to find another way to keep Torvald happy. Both women must sacrifice their own happiness to prolong the security that marriage offers them. They are forced to be pragmatic as the subordinate gender lacking a voice and control. However, these similarities break apart in the final confrontations. Nora tells Torvald she is “taking off her fancy dress”, metaphorically she is shedding her old self and will no longer conform to being his “little squander bird”. In contrast Daisy allows Tom to make the decision for her, following his command to “start on home in Mr. Gatsby’s car”, she is to say her final goodbye to him. Nora is fighting for her happiness while Daisy is once again letting her’s fall inferior through continuing to play a role. Both of these women were

subordinated by the world in which they inhabit yet Nora chose to eventually use her voice, taking on this culture of disempowerment and demoralisation to regain control of joy in her life, while Daisy ultimately retreats back to her security of wealth and privilege.