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Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers, Vol. 14 (2)

<https://jett.labosfor.com/>

Date of reception: 11 Jan 2023

Date of revision: 20 Feb 2023

Date of acceptance: 09 Mar 2023

Enas Kamal Mohamed Zayed (2023). Self-Sufficiency And Independence As A Strategy Of Survival And Co-Existence: A Study Of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*, Vol. 14(2). 257-264.

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Self-Sufficiency And Independence As A Strategy Of Survival And Co-Existence: A Study Of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is examined from an existential standpoint. In his portrayal of Hester Prynne, Hawthorne sketches her character in a way that exhibits existential insights as a woman who has to overcome her situation under very complicated circumstances. She is presented as a woman with a firm belief in her abilities and potentials to make free decisions that entail responsibility. The main objective of the study is to provide an in-depth textual analysis of the novel in question to explore the conflict between the society and the individual. To make the exploration a purposeful one, Sartre's Existentialism is employed to provide a detailed analysis of the major characters in the text in question. The paper seeks to pinpoint how Hester Prynne, the protagonist, in this novel, is able to achieve self-reliance and self-sufficiency thanks to her individual ability to chart the paths of her life and achieve fulfillment through making responsible free choices. She chooses not to disclose the identity of her partner despite being judged by him, she gracefully chooses to comply with the verdict by the jury to wear the letter "A" as a badge of shame on her chest the rest of her life, she chooses to remain in the same community despite whatever sufferings she has to endure and, eventually, she chooses to mingle with the community after being shunned in an attempt to change her status and she succeeds in changing it. All these decisions are existentially free; they also demonstrate a great sense of commitment and responsibility to their consequences. As an existential individual, Hester, despite a lot of sufferings, is able to change her badge of ignominy to one of honor and acceptance. In a word, Hester Prynne is presented as an existential figure who is able to turn her predicament to a blessing.

Keywords: Existential, individual, sufficiency, independence, freedom, inward, outward.

INTRODUCTION

A human being endeavors to attain a sense of existence according to the culture of the place where the individual lives. Such a culture is a system that determines how he/she lives. Generally, people become what they are through having relationships with people in the surrounding community in light of its different norms and values. Hence, constructing a sense of self is an essential part of every person's existence or being. Given that each person's self-concept is a set of personal truths and needs, the individual tends to sacrifice his/her identity to achieve personal existence. Disregarding his/her being as a member of a certain community that shares the same collective identity, the individual indulges in a search of personal existence to fulfill his personal needs throughout the different stages of life. As one lives, he/she tries to create his/her essence in light of the different experiences he/she has. While doing so, he/she makes choices based on his subjective perception of what is true and meaningful to his existence. However, ignoring his individual potential and conforming to society actions spoil the person's unique essence and prevents the self from being truly actualized. That is to say existentialists stress that the individual choose his path in life based on his own desires, instincts and ideas.

In the process of constructing a meaningful world, the world reveals itself and takes on meaning. In other words, one's personal existence is constituted through the different experiences that life offers. Therefore, one's individual choices are considered by him/her as those acts which match the self he/she wants other people in the same community to take him to be. Accordingly, man can be seen as nothing but what he/she has constituted. To make such an existence meaningful, man should bear responsibility for his acts and their consequences. "The nothingness man begins with is thus the source of his (man's) freedom, for at each moment it is man's will that can choose how to act. Man is or should be responsible for the consequences of his action." (Benet)

Existentialism is a movement and a school of thought that stresses the importance of freedom at the level of the individual to achieve fulfillment and, in turn, independence. As a literary trend, Existentialism stresses the individual's need for that independence through making free decisions that entail commitment and, consequently, creating personal values. As a movement, Existentialism has primarily emerged as a reaction to

man's feeling of absurdity in the modern world. Though there are a number of philosophers of Existentialism, Jean Paul Sartre is considered as the pioneer of this philosophy. As a philosophical trend, Existentialism has influenced the approaches of many writers at the international level. Though Existentialism does not have a clear-cut definition, it has a lot of implications and it is characterized by different features that can be seen as common principles of this philosophy. Again, according to Existentialism, human beings have come to the world first, then, he/she has created his/her essence. It is a philosophy that is concerned with leading a meaningful life through freedom of choice. As such, generally, the view of life is consistent with the main principle of Existentialism that man's existence precedes his essence.

Again, Existentialism is of the view that the essence of any object can be identified by its abstractness. Yet, the existence of the same object is constituted by its concreteness. Similarly, the physical entity of a human being refers to his/her existence while the characteristics of the same refer to his/her essence. That is to say human beings create their own essence through experience. In other words, a human being is a conscious being who has his/her desire, imagination and memories, and therefore, he/she acts freely to achieve self-sufficiency and independence since individuals are guided by their own selves. They are capable of making their own "essence" through making free decisions. An individual is primarily free and can act independently according to the needs of his/her own consciousness. From a Sartrean point of view, the individual should act independently according to his/her free will rather than passively following the already set roles and concepts. Commenting on "Existence precedes the Essence" as the principle of Existentialism, Stumpf and Fieser remark "The most important conscious consequence of placing existence before essence in human nature is not only that we create ourselves but responsibility for existence rests squarely on each individual". (Stumpf & Fieser)

Again, in Sartre's Existentialism freedom and responsibility are intertwined when individuals decide to live free lives. In so doing, they should be consciously aware whether their choices are consistent with the norms of the society or not. According to Existentialism individuals do not care much whether their acts are consistent with the prevailing norms or not because they are responsible for the consequences of their choices and actions. Unlike other existential philosophers, Sartre's Existentialism advocates for the oppressed individual of in a given society. He calls for a "More liberal social order based on the value of each individual". (Young) He calls for granting individuals absolute freedom in a world full of different odds while bearing full responsibility for this freedom. In his book "The Nausea", Sartre contends that "If absolute freedom is granted to an individual, he/she will be able to handle his/her affairs". (Sartre)

Originally, the British Puritans have landed in New England, America as one of the British colonies during the 17th century. For settlement, they have wanted to create their own religious structure. Therefore, they have made a lot of laws to enforce on the public. In making such laws, the Puritan elite have been keen enough to manipulate them for their own favor more than for the good of the public. This elite have been both the law-makers and the law-enforcers of these made-laws. They have been on top of the hierarchy to represent power and authority. They have regarded any difference from the codes of values they have set as transgression. They have regarded people as public beings and they have considered anything private as a violation of the already-set codes. They have required full submission to the rules as well as outward obedience because the system has punished people for their acts but not for their thoughts. As Nina Baym explains, "The Puritans have no tolerance for secrets; they take people as purely public beings, they fear anything private. Their aim is to turn anything private into something public. For them, people are entirely and only subjects. They consider sinful deeds as equal to a broken law". (Baym)

Generally, the Puritans deal with people not as individuals but as objects. Therefore, people lose their freedom to act, decide or think. They want to shape the consciousness of the people through stripping them off their personal freedom to decide for themselves. As such, in the society of New England, religion and law are intertwined that it is not possible to separate them. Religion is taken as a guise for whatever its men want to enforce on the public in a way to control them. In doing so, a lot of deviations have been added to suit their personal interests. Such an elite have ceased to be true about the reality of their situation as law-makers and law-enforcers. In this regard, Railton points out "In their unwillingness to be "true" to the truth of their common nature lies the source of their inadequateness as 'spectators'. They see the world in the simplistic terms on which the repression of self-knowledge depends" (Railton) In other words, the Puritan elite fabricate laws accordingly to protect themselves. What they set as God's Commands is, in fact, "The reflection of their own social consensus, their law is an expression of the social contract without any divine authorization". (Baym)

In the world of New England, religion is used as a cover to protect its men from losing their high statures. It is in this world that strict rules are enforced only on the public. It is in the same world that differentiation between the outward things and their realities is very crucial and important. As Ghasemi explains, "In the Puritan world, in order to keep people away from truth, respectability and religion are put forward as guises to protect people from losing a higher reality. Accordingly, strict codes are imposed on people the outcome of which is the difficulty in distinguishing between what is right and what is wrong". (Ghasemi)

Hawthorne is one of the authors who have given some space for considering the situation of women in his writings. As a writer, Hawthorne wants to project his contempt toward the Puritan rules. He is one of the male

writer who are interested in female psychology. Though Existentialism has not emerged until his time, some of his writings including *The Scarlet Letter* reflect existential aspects that can be traced in his portrayal of the female protagonists of his novels. Although he is a male writer, he makes some of his female characters his mouthpiece to convey his own vision of the society in which he has lived. *The Scarlet Letter* is a reflection of his mind about the time and place where he has lived. In this novel, Nathaniel Hawthorne wants to show his indignation toward the Puritan system through giving an example of a man who is on top of the hierarchy of the Puritan system. This man represents the elite who control the lives of the people by the laws that they have made. *The Scarlet Letter* is the story of a woman who has to suffer a lot because she is forced to live in a society that outwardly adheres to religion and its values while it is mired in moral corruption in reality. It is a system that manipulates religion and its rules in a way to use them as guises for practicing their power.

While in her home country, Hester has been bound by the bonds of mismatched marriage to a husband that she he has never loved because she has belonged to a needy family that has forced her into this marriage. She has got married to Chillingworth, an old man who has never satisfied her sexual nor emotional needs. Hester has been sent by her husband ahead to New England, America in the hope that he would join her after some time. Hester has to live alone away from her husband for quite some time. While in New England, Hester falls in love with a man, Dimmesdale, who is a minister in the Puritan Church. The love affairs between the newcomer and the priest reach its climax and the result is pregnancy. It is a pregnancy that has resulted from an illicit relationship that is never accepted by the people nor the codes of the society. The relationship between Hester and Dimmesdale is a transgression of the prevailing codes and, therefore, Hester becomes a sinner whereas her partner remains unknown upon his unwillingness to reveal his identity to share her the punishment.

In the Puritan society of New England, leading a private life that is not consistent with the prevailing norms is a taboo. There are no line of distinction between public life and a life of privacy. The transgression of such values receives a severe punishment. In the context of this society, people are considered as equal under law no matter what their gender, age or sect is. Given that the society is patriarchal in nature, women are denied freedom of expression. They are oppressed by men and they are thought to be the source of vicious deeds. Here applying the rules is neither flexible nor compromising. An individual who deviates from the already set norms is denied self-determination and independence. It is really so repressive. Nina Baym highlights this repressive force stating, "The power in this community is vested in a group of elders, ministerial and magisterial, who blend its legal and moral strands into a single instrument, and acting as a group, makes that power appear diffuse and impersonal". (Baym)

The story of *The Scarlet Letter* deals with the everlasting conflict between the individual and the society where the most crucial part is that the individual is mostly engaged in a struggle for survival and, in the process, he/she transforms from one existential state to another. In this novel, Dimmesdale, as one of the law-makers of the Puritan codes, commits adultery and Hester is the object of his sin. Both lovers want to satisfy an instinctive physical need. In satisfying their need, they have forgotten about the codes that makes of such satisfaction a sin. They act freely without deliberation on the repercussions of both the society and the laws. Consequently, Hester is victimized by the law and the public. She is exposed to public shame upon giving birth to a baby whose father's identity remains unknown. Hester becomes a subject of ridicule and contempt by the people especially women.

Hester exhibits some existential traits in her reaction to what she has committed. She is a freethinker who does not think of her relationship with Dimmesdale as evil while considering her mismatched marriage to Chillingworth as the most grave mistake she has ever committed. She is exposed to public ignominy on the scaffold. She is judged by a group a ministers, including Dimmesdale, and she is pressurized to uncover the name of her accomplice, Hester is never willing to disclose his identity. She appears as carrying the baby in her arms while facing the crowd. She is daring enough to face them. She appears as obedient and submissive to the verdict while inwardly she has a lot of contempt toward the rules and the order as a whole. Her behavior is restricted but her thoughts are free. She is exposed as pathetic figure. As Colacurcio remarks "Dimmesdale is so ineffectual an antinomian as not to be able to overcome the conscientious suspicion that his serious sin proves him a hypocrite. Neither his sexuality nor his doctrine can justify the life he has been leading". (Colacurcio) Really, it is a moment of public humiliation as she is urged by the same man who is her partner to reveal the name of her accomplice.

Hester is condemned to wear the letter "A" on her chest the rest of her life as a reminder of her sin. She becomes a public figure of ignominy, yet she remains strong enough to accept what the community wants to impose on her. She shows commitment toward the consequence of what she has done. She never regrets her deed and accepts what she has come to. "Hester is judged as a great harlot even though she is actually a loyal loving woman." (Campbell) She remains more proud than repentant. She is shunned by her community. She accepts isolation in her attempt to come to terms with her new status. She starts to validate her existence on her own terms upon being driven by the society to live as an outcast. She seeks to alienate herself from the community while attempting to liberate herself from its restraints. As the narrator explains "For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions and whatever it represents or what the legislator had

established, criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe” (Hawthorne)

Hester gracefully accepts the verdict and she has to fight a battle to validate her existences. It is an inner fight to maintain self-respect “Within the boundaries of the possible, Hester will strive to make her character felt” (Baym) She loses faith in the people around her but she remains true to her own values thanks to her self-knowledge and awareness of her new status as an outcast. She realizes how deceptive and corrupt the society she lives in is. Though, outwardly, she is complying with the order and its norms, she is, inwardly, a rebel. In her ordeal, Hester’s salvation is achieved through freedom and speculation. Hirsch explains, “Excluded from active participation in culture, the fictional heroine is thrown back on herself. The intense inwardness that results allows her to explore and develop spiritually, emotionally and morally, but often at the expense of other aspects of selfhood”. (Hirsch) Again, she accepts the punishment with a free will. She strives to maintain her character. As the narrator states, “Her sin takes her out of the ordinary relations with humanity and enclosed her in a sphere by herself”. (Hawthorne) Though she accepts the letter “A”, she has the intention to change its meaning. As Robert Martin points out “Hester plays her own part refusing to speak the lines others have written for her. Her proud assertion of her “A” is an acknowledgement of the fact that even the actor or actress on stage is always performing his or her own text”. (Martine) In a word, Hester appears as determined to change her society rather than being changed by it.

After the trial, Hester embarks on a journey for self-assertion characterized by freedom and independence in the context of a society that denies its individuals the right to lead a life of privacy. Glimore remarks, “For Hawthorne, the individual is defined not as a member of some larger unit but primarily in opposition to community; he/she is self-made and owes allegiance to his/her own values and interest”. (Glimore) Hester takes the badge of her sin as a mark of her new identity. Her condemnation gives her strength. She believes that there is a higher level of truth that is not acknowledged in this Puritan society. She refuses to give The Scarlet Letter that represents her sin to the magistrate because she wants to change what it represents on her own way. Hester thinks that she can change it from a sign of shame to one of acceptance and value. She adopts a new approach that enables her to achieve fulfillment and overcome her situation. She has a firm belief in her potentials thanks to her daring nature and assertive character. She is a silent rebel who turns to be defiant with a firm belief in her ideas and principles. She is a freethinker who is strong enough to overcome life-challenges and tribulations in a way that makes her existence authentic and possible. Thus, Hester is strong and brave enough to smack the Puritan society at its face with its morally corrupt made-laws. She is, inwardly, a nonconformist in the broadest sense of the word. As Nijat Nadia remarks, “Hester is a deviant because her freedom was restricted by the Puritan society of her new settlement; her most covetous desire to love and be loved was slaughtered by the old creed followers. She is a woman of mutinous nature. She professed a new faith and religion”. (Nadia)

Hester develops self-reliance while resisting her society attempt to undermine her. “She sees the letter “A” as an assertion of her pride and a masked defiance of authority.” (Baym) She is an existential character in the sense of making conscious choices to remain in the same community that has condemned and ostracized her. She never bothers about her alienation. Gracefully, she goes to live on the outskirts of the town. Though she is outwardly a conformist, she is inwardly a defiant. In social isolation, she sees a privilege. The narrator explains, “She wanders without rule or guidance, in moral wilderness as vast as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest”. (Hawthorne) Upon insisting on remaining in the same community, Hester is possessed by “a feeling of irresistible and inevitable that it had the force of doom.... Her sin and her ignominy were the roots which stuck into the soil. It was as if a new birth, with stronger assimilation than the first, had converted the forest land into Hester’s wild and dreary but life-long home.” (Hawthorne)

Hester goes to fashion a life of her own in isolation. Again, she is able to make her existence valid through making free choices and free decisions. She is strong enough to be self-reliant. She is determined enough to achieve independence from a corrupt community that is led by a hypocrite elite. Hester’s self-determination and autonomy are inwardly developed while, outwardly, they do not clash with the regulations of the society. She adopts a philosophy of her own that enables her to exist and overcome her dilemma through different stages. “Hester is shown as a deep-seated philosopher engaged in a radical struggle in opposition to conventional array. She is meant to be crushed by the Puritans but her self-reliance saves her”. (Khan) While apparently Hester abides by the codes, she strives, inwardly, to achieve autonomy and self-sufficiency. She does not think of herself as a woman stained by shame but as one who can change her status through determination and free will. She first appears as passionate, but in the passage of time, she comes to display “a natural dignity and a force of character”. (Hawthorne) The letter “A”, which is primarily intended to stigmatize her, turns to mark the beginning of a new existence.

After the trial, Hester is free to go back to her birthplace, yet she decides to remain in New England where she has been condemned. Hester is willing not only to change her situation but to change the community around her as well. She creates a set of values that are her own. She is no longer, inwardly, judged by the values of the community. “The world law was no law for her mind. It was an age in which the human intellect had taken a more active and wider range than for many before”. (Hawthorne) Hester has no reverence for man-made laws.

She develops an unrelenting stance toward such laws when their makers attempt to take her baby away from her on the assumption that nourishing the baby by a guilty mother is not good of the former. Hester never succumbs to their endeavor and never lets her baby be taken from her. She has never regretted her deed and, consequently, she never considers this baby as a cause of her disgrace nor her sufferings. She sees her baby as a gift by the creator and she has to strive to maintain her as a precious asset. Nijat Khan asserts, "To Hester, in Pearl's nature, there is neither consideration for human decrees nor judgement". (Khan) She takes her baby away from the community; she goes to freely wanders in the forest. "She thinks of the forest as a new arena". (Hawthorne) It is that arena which represents her free mind. As the narrator explains "Her intellect and heart had their home as it were in desert places where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods". (Hawthorne) From an existential point of view, both Hester and Pearl exist first in the Puritan society and then make their lives meaningful through a variety of activities to define the meaning of their lives on their own ways.

Despite living away from the community, Hester is still regarded as evil by its people. One way to change her status as evil is to claim a new identity as a means to survive unharmed. Though, inwardly, she grows more indigent to the society, she intends to do good deeds outwardly. Though wearing the letter "A" means commitment to the Puritan codes, Hester strives to change what it signifies. She enormously displays the letter "A" on her chest in an attempt to alter the vileness associated with it to a sign of Acceptance. As the narrator states "It had the effect of an enchantment; taking her out of the commonplace relations with human race, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself." (Hawthorne) Hester seeks to achieve autonomy and, consequently, fulfillment. Such fulfillment can only be attaining through acceptance by the people of the same community. She adopts a new personal approach to achieve this fulfillment. First, she tries to get accepted by the public. She learns the art of embroidery as a means to achieve economic independence, on the one hand, and as a means of outletting her imaginative energy on the other. That is to say Hester finds in this art a new life.

Having achieved economic independence, Hester starts to be interested in her relationship with the people in her community. She is strong enough to endure their adverse attitude toward her in the beginning. She is willing to change how she is regarded by them. Amory Dweight Mayo points out, "Hester turns her face toward humanity and begins the life-long task of being up to virtue against the pitiless storm which overthrows so many an offender". (Mayo) Hester starts to do charitable deeds to restore herself to the community. Despite whatever possible scorn that she may receive from them, she persists in offering different kinds of help. Eventually, she succeeds in achieving a position as a philanthropist and is referred to as "Our Hester" by the people. As the narrator explains, "She was self-ordained a sister of Mercy; or, we may rather say, the world's heavy had so ordained her, when neither the world nor she looked forward to this result". (Hawthorne) Gradually, she achieves accomplishment that she is considered as a source of guidance who possesses the ability to console the afflicted and sooth the troubled souls with the magic of her healing words. "They can take her counsels whenever they feel their footsteps dwindle due to hardships and in matters when they were confused about their future affairs". (Hawthorne)

Having perfected the art of embroidery, Hester goes to embroider a new letter "A" to change its meaning and what it stands for. She is primarily meant to be undermined by her society. Yet, she is saved thanks to her resolution and self-reliance. She turns from an adulterous to a nun. The letter "A" turns to provide her with protection and safety rather than rejection and shame. She turns from an object of change to an agent of it thanks to her ability to change the significance of the letter "A" from "Adultery" to "Ability". Parkison remarks "Hester's elaborate artistry is a vehicle for her to preserve and maintain a type of individualism and autonomy". (Parkison) She has become an agent of change given her success in changing from a despised individual to a wanted one by the same people. She succeeds in making the townsfolk regard her as a good charitable person. She has striven to secure a place in society after she has been rejected by it. Hester's success in winning such a place is a clear indication that the society has changed by her. As Harding sums up "Hester is the individual as the source and end of ideas, actions and meaning with whom a new outlook appears and becomes meaningful". (Harding)

On the whole, Hester is able to maintain her individuality and change the society rather than being changed by its laws. Primarily, she appears as passionate lover but in the course of the story, she comes to display a "natural dignity and a force of character". (Hawthorne) She changes the letter "A" from a badge of shame and rejection to one of "Acceptance" and Triumph. She is strong enough to fashion a new life controlled and guided by a personal set of values because she sees a new reality other than the one practiced by Puritanism. She is also daring enough to strike back and inflict her indignation toward an order that judges people by their appearance rather than by their reality. Hester achieves autonomy on her own terms. She makes of her intellect and free thinking the authority that dictates her actions. She has embarked on a tirade against the same order that has condemned and rejected her once and accepted and welcomed her another. She has succeeded in securing a place in the same society and under the same order. Eventually, the letter "A" that has been her cause of isolation and rejection has become her passport to acceptance in the public arena. Hester can be seen as a model and a high example of how a sin can turn to be a pathway for graciousness and triumph if taken positively. Colacurcio sums up Hester's overall status as follows:

Hester begins in outward conformity, playing the game of sanctification. The single rule of which is that the true self is the sum of all its outward works; indeed, by the time she has learned the game so well as to have covered her undestroyed inner pride with an external appearance. But all the while she is moving toward the moment when she announces a doctrine of personal freedom which every person sensed would lead directly to passionate license and judged a more serious threat to public other than adultery itself. (Colacurcio 1985.322)

CONCLUSION

In her struggle to achieve authentic existence, Hester presents a high model to follow in achieving self-sufficiency and independence. Hester can be seen as a harbinger of new age of women who has posed an outlook of a new world where people should have freedom to chart the paths of their lives. Outwardly, she abides by the order and its rules. Yet, in reality she is still obsessed with her own nature. That's to say, in her struggle to achieve authentic existence, Hester displays great potentials to fashion a life of her own. It is a life that is guided by a set of personal values. As an existential figure, Hester Prynne has appeared as resolute and bold enough to achieve independence from a corrupt community. She is able to overcome the dire situation in which she is cast. She is a freethinker who is able to survive in a world riddled with complications and contradictions. Thanks to this free thinking, she is able to achieve self-reliance and independence. Thanks to her free-thinking, Hester is able to change her society rather than being changed by it. She has successfully challenged the order and she is strong enough to change her dilemma to a blessing. She changes the badge of shame to one that signifies the opposite of what it has been primarily stood for. In a word, Hester is an existential figure in the sense of being able to change the society through making existentially free decisions while bearing full responsibility toward her free choices and decisions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author extends her appreciation to Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia for funding this research work through the project number (PSAU 2022/02/21747)

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