

Free-Thinking From Existential Perspective In Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (1850)

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Abstract

Through textual analysis, this paper investigates free-thinking and its implications on human existence from an Existential perspective in Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic *The Scarlet Letter*. It focuses on the presence, freedom, and choice of individuals. The study looks into how our activities are linked to our personal freedom. It investigates the factors that influence man's behaviours and beliefs, as well as how he reacts when his freedom is curtailed. The study's major goal is to look at how individuals might discover the reality of life via free thought and how existentialism is represented in the novel. The study discovered that free thinking promotes the use of intellectual inquiry against the enforced authority of historical institutions such as religion and politics, and that it may benefit all aspects of man's existence. It was also discovered that free thought leads to self-sufficiency and independence. Scholars will be able to see this novel in a new light as a result of our research.

Keywords: Free thought, free thinker, existentialism, Nathaniel Hawthorn, *The Scarlet Letter*

Background of the study

A free thinker is someone whose actions and opinions differ from those of others, yet society rejects them. Adultery is a severe crime in any society, (Hany, 2013). and man is afraid that if he does not chase down those who do it, his community will fall apart, and this subjugated society will pay a terrible price as a result of individuals who think for themselves. They are solely concerned with the negative elements of human free thought (Bertrand, 1944), which they associate with witch-like activities such as seducing men and refusing to serve them. Humans, on the other hand, ignore the positive parts of free reflections, such as how one might benefit society

via humanitarian gestures. However, the issue to be answered is what may be the probable purpose for this free thinking, and we quickly realize that it is love that serves as a motivator. This demonstrates that real sentiments can readily triumph over the conventional customs imposed by human rules.

The majority of these concepts are based on Sartre's work Sartre (2009). Paul Sartre is a prominent existential thinker who was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature but turned it down. His fictional works are few, yet they are perceptive. *The Nausea* is a well-known existential book by Sartre in which he promotes a productive philosophy of freedom, arguing that if individuals are granted ultimate autonomy, they will be able to handle their own affairs. Sartre interpreted existentialism in a more positive light, advocating for the oppressed, and typically argues for a more democratic social order based on the value of each individual. (Young, 2007: 32-40)

The Scarlet Letter is the first and most well-known work in the series, and it has previously been examined and is ranked second among Hawthorne's main works, is a sobering tale of hereditary transgression based on the tradition of an illness pronounced on Hawthorne's own family by a lady ordained to death during the witchcraft trials (Nathaniel, 1850). The dismal disintegration of the novel's puncheons family's seven-gabled house, in which the family's enfeebled and bankrupt destitute family members reside, reflects the novel's puncheons family's voraciousness and narcissistic hubris through the decades. (Sartre, 2009)

At the book's end the descendant of a family long ago deceived by the Puncheons leaves his ancestors' blight on the manor and marries a young niece of the family, in *The Marble Faun* a trio of expatriate American art learners in Italy become peripherally caught up to changeable levels in the assassination of an unidentified man; their get in touch with sin changes two of them from innocents into adults now obsessed with a mature and serious consciousness of life's intricacies and potentials. (Conor, 2009)

Statement of the problem

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, this study critically examined free-thinking from an existential standpoint. Free thinking refers to the process of reflecting on something in a nontraditional manner; for example, when we hypothesize in unconventional ways, this is referred to as free thinking. According to the literature assessment, there has been little work done that discloses the study of *The Scarlet Letter* from an existential viewpoint by critically examining free thinking in it, and this is a gap that needs to be filled. The basic principle to be preached in American literature is that free thought leads to self-reliance and independence.

Literature Review

Nathaniel Hawthorne is a prolific writer whose work has been analyzed and interpreted in a variety of ways. Hester is described as a free thinker by Lona Glenn in her work *The Scarlet Letter-Character Analysis of Hester*. Hester becomes a contemplative person who is portrayed to be a

nonconformist who the rest of the population perceives as dangerous as a result of this forced pondering time. Although Hawthorne outwardly opposes Hester's rebellious attitude, readers may easily deduce his inner sympathy for Hester Prynne, as he applauded her attempts to stand alone and suffer all of society's difficulties. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, a picture of a moralist can be plainly seen, as Leftie Chalise (2011) illustrates in her dissertation *A Moral Wilderness* that Hawthorne utilised literature as a way of elimination. *The Scarlet Letter* depicts Hawthorne's understanding of Puritan ideas and society (Stanislava, 2011) as well as his interpretation of those teachings and society through the Romantic lens of the 1850s. Ghasemi (2009) describes it as a study of appearance and reality in her work, a thematic analysis of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. *The Scarlet Letter*, she claims, is a narrative of a confrontation between Puritanical mores and a member of the same community who violates a Puritanical set of norms, and it intertwines the manifestation vs reality subject matter into the very structure of its basics (2). This work was explored by Hadjira (2019) as a symbolic novel. She believes that Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is densely packed with signals. Hawthorne used images in his work to portray the social and religious conditions of the period, as well as to further his themes of transgression and solitude. Because she was separated from a strict Puritan environment, the heroine, Hester Prynne, was an outstanding example of both of these principles (44). In this work, Clayton (2019) discovers transcendental characteristics such as civic disobedience, self-reliance, and nature as a reflection of GOD. All three principles are powerfully displayed in the character of Hester Prynne in the classic *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester first fights her harsh Puritan culture, then she worships nature for her direction through its intuitive tactics, and finally she succeeds in transforming the public's perception of herself. She is a lady who is self-sufficient. *The Scarlet Letter* is a study of the heart for Garcia Matilde (1997). In her work "An Insight into the Inward Sphere in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*", she explains that the hidden sphere of human beings is none other than the heart, and as a result, the writer concentrates on this aspect of man's character. Hawthorne is a well-known author.

Free thinking: A Theoretical Framework

The present research is being carried out in the spirit of existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre (2009). Existential freedom is an essential feature of existential philosophy for Paul Sartre since it allows one to modify one's ideals. In this paradigm, freedom and responsibility are intertwined because when we choose and pursue our own personal choices and beliefs, social values become meaningless, and whatever fruit or outcome we encounter as a result of our decisions, we are totally accountable for our actions. Existentialism is a spirit or aura that attempts to answer the riddle of human existence. Existentialist philosophers are always obsessed with a few dense thoughts that need to be entertained, such as whether life can be easily spent with the aid of philosophical and psychological inquiry, the place of providence in human existence, death, and the meaning of life. Social questions such as politics are usually avoided in favour of individuality, freedom of choice, and then the audacity to face the consequences of your actions along with

responsibility for your decisions. Because life is not objective, the actual elixir can only be retrieved via one's own personal battle, in making judgments that are based on one's own personal fight (Sartre, 2009). This study's sample is Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*, which is examined thematically to address the study's key aims.

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. As a result, it concentrates on the description and interpretation of the novel's text. It aims to investigate the fundamental components of existentialism as well as how successful Nathaniel Hawthorne was in demonstrating the notion of free thought in his masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*. When applied to any work of literature, this strategy entails examining, investigating, inspecting, surveying, scanning, studying, and scrutinizing sections, extracts, phrases, words, and sentences for interpretation. It assists readers in comprehending the novel's primary ideas and topics, as well as the writer's method of conveying them and the message he or she has in mind. This research uses both descriptive and analytical approaches to investigate free thinking. I began by doing numerous careful readings to identify snippets, paragraphs, and phrases relating to the concepts of free thought and repression. All of these phrases were subjected to a textual analysis. Furthermore, the primary goal of the key words/excerpts/sentence analysis is to determine whether specific statements are linked to existential conflict. The core of this paper's approach to existentialism and free thought is based on Jean Paul Sartre's idea of existential free thinking (Robyn, 2015). I summarized the main characters, Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, and important ideas in the novel while reviewing earlier research related to the work's core themes. I gathered information and interpreted it in accordance with the objectives and queries.

Discussion and Analysis

Hester Prynne heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* is a strong, independent and self-reliant lady, who believes in her own instincts, her own code of conduct and inner strengths. At the face of trials and tribulations of life she makes possible her existence through her free thinking and paves way for her redemption. *The Scarlet Letter* consists of 24 chapters, each of which contains the varied themes and angles of existential thought that we would try to search out in the novel.

a. The prison door

The very first chapter of the novel opens with a gloomy and sad atmosphere that captures attention of the readers at once with its title the prison door. A multitude of bearded men, in gloomy-colored outfits and gray steeple crowned hats, together with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was gathered in frontage of a wooden structure, the door of which was deeply wooded with oak, and studded with iron spikes (Nathaniel, 1850:50). The dress code of the puritan's show

their strict and black demeanors, iron spikes door timbered with oak whole architecture of the building portrays repression of this creed (51). It clearly shows that in puritanical society there is no line of demarcation between public and private life in order to put the society on right track all the members of this area keep tabs on one another, and prison house is described here as a black flower symbolically showing its importance along with its ugliness and horror as it has been attributed with a black color (Sartre, 2009). As the readers proceed further, they confront at once with a changed and striking view and that is of a wild rose brush. There was a rose bush, and by an eccentric possibility, has been reserved alive in history; but whether it had purely survived out of the harsh old wilderness, so long after the fall of massive pines and oaks that formerly overshadowed it (Nathaniel, 1850:51)

Wild rose bush stands in sharp contrast to the iron doors of prison house, it has just sprung up before the jail indicative of beginning and approaching into survival of person possessing enthusiasm as red color of rose symbolically stands for it, taking her own verdict and charters her own consciousness to establish her social being. A new age of individuality and self-reliance, autonomy of one's own self to pave its way through the congested and suffocated air of puritan society. (Nathaniel, 1850)

b. The market place

Puritans have strict and severe moral laws for those transgressors who violate any rule which is made for the sinners. Ethical regulations and codes of conduct were so deeply rooted in their souls that anyone who is involved in a vicious crime became enemy of this whole sect and to punish him or her physically and morally they thought it to be their sole right. Joy (1999) explains if it was any other populace, or afterward in the history of New England, the bleak inflexibility that terrified the bearded features of these good people would have predicted some awful business in hand. It could have indicated nothing short of the predictable capital punishment of some noted offender, on whom the sentence of an authorized panel had but established the decree of community reaction (Nathaniel, 1850:52). Religion and law in this new settlement are not separate entities; they are so intertwined to each other that to differentiate between the two is a hard task to be fulfilled. Puritan's law was a collection of stringent and firm rules and codes, for conduct, moral responsibility and discipline. Age, gender, caste and creed have no value when it comes to the execution of a sinner. Women were entirely dependent on men for their living, freedom of expression, knowledge and liberty were banned on them, and if any woman transgressed against the puritanical code of morality she would have to suffer rigorous punishment. Women were subservient; they were oppressed, condemned and damned by their males. Females were thought to be the source of evil as they are easily vulnerable to evil temptations as compared to their male partners; example of Mistress Hibbins is given in the very start of the novel. (Sartre, 2009)

Puritan's women were of the opinion that this punishment would scare her. But they were damn sure that she will never pay any heed to any type of punishment or insult which they have imposed

upon her rather she would mock them by decorating her symbol of ignominy with beautiful embroidery (Nathaniel, 1850:54-55). Conversation of these females depicts how much harsh and cruel feelings they have harbored against Hester Prynne. Her arrival into the public place vividly shows her free thinking, her gestures and walking style where she freed herself from the shackles of the town beadle shows that she is a free thinker because her castoffs man made rules and prefers integrity of her own mind. Hester is not submissive like other women of her community, where the citizens are given the second citizens place in their society. She is autonomous and anti-puritan character, because Hester is a self-sufficient and self-reliant woman, who trusts in her own deep thoughts for making judgments about her life. (Sartre, 2009)

Letter A on the breast of Hester's gown appeared, bordered with sophisticated needlework and incredible embellishments of gold thread. It was so creatively done, and with so much lushness and stunning richness of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and appropriate ornamentation to the attire which she wore, and which was of a magnificence in harmony with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was permissible by the law system of the colony (Nathaniel, 1850:56)

Dress of Hester Prynne portrays existential idea of self-responsibility. Sartre (2009) propounds this idea of existential root that "existence precedes essence" which means for an individual what is more important is that he or she is individual hence must act independently according to their existence i.e. free will instead of following the pre-conceived roles, ideas, concepts and categories which should fit on them, inform of essence justified by others for him or her. Shagufta(2011) explores this trace too saying that true essence or meaning of life is possible only when a person utilizes his or her own consciousness to extract elixir of life.

Her clothes stands in sharp contrast to the rest of the community, puritans use to wear black and grey color but her use of golden and red hues portrays Hester as a defiant and propagator of individuality . It is due to her free thinking that she even uses and moulds art into her own choice, Hester's dress is different showing her meditation as out of the box sort of nature. With the use of gorgeous colors she wants to smack the puritan society at its face with its worn out and austere moral laws, she has been shown as an arrogant fellow who will never yield in front of those hard hearted people where love and affection are consider as arc sins. Like an existential character she has no regret in her heart for whatever she has done and in what manner she has dressed herself.

Hester's dress, which, undeniably, she had created for the occasion in prison, and had designed much after her own imaginations, seemed to communicate the stance of her spirit, the frantic unruliness of her disposition, by its untamed and charming oddity. But what was mesmerizing about it was the point which drew all eyes, and, as it were, transformed the wearer- so that both men and women who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne were now overwhelmed as if they be held her for the first time- was that scarlet letter, so enormously embellished and illuminated upon her breast. It had the effect of an enchantment, taking her out of the commonplace

relations with human race, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself. One of the females appreciates her needle work (Nathaniel, 1850:57)

Hester's moment of public disgrace is actually blessing in disguise for her, in front of multitude she can easily exhibit her inner revolutionary feelings what the public expects on her part, and how she is arrived, how she has decorated her badge of shame is unbelievable (Sartre, 2009). She must repent, it is desire and demand of whole puritan community but Hester spoils their endeavors at once with her snooty demeanor and careless egotistical gaze at the public, she has been transformed in to something else, this grotesque change is witnessed from her clothes, the way she has made prominent letter 'A' suggests that Hester didn't thought herself to be a sinner, moreover punishment which has been forced upon her is without any effect. Her outfit reveals her inner soul, thoughts and feelings of revolutionary fervor and inclinations. Hester is depicted as a deep-seated intellectual busy in ground breaking fight against the conventional regulations. (Nathaniel, 1850)

Hawthorne's heroine portrays herself in this scene as a non-conformist a sort of reminder of the writer's interest in the American transcendental movement which shows striking fervor for civil disobedience along with its stress on natural world and essence. Hester has been fore grounded in this novel just because of her non-conformist stance of life but what is the motive behind her audacious act and then her persistency about her decision not to disclose her lover's name is actually her genuine love for Dimmesdale. In manifestation she is an offended woman, unfaithful to puritan-defined rules while in actuality she gets her strength from Dimondale's love for her, it serves as a back support for her. (Nathaniel, 1850)

c. Recognition

Hester is a deviant because her freedom was restricted by puritan society of new settlements, her most covetous desire to love and to be loved was slaughtered by this old creed followers. Whispering could be heard among the venerable and preacher occupants of the terrace; and the highest in rank addressed the young clergyman that as Hester came under his congregation so it is now his responsibility to advised her to regret and to acknowledgment about her sin ((Nathaniel, 1850:71). She is a woman of mutinous nature it was general opinion about her but actually she professed a new faith and religion, she does not challenge the very foundation of Christian religion but yes with her indifferent attitude. Hester were so much resolved that she will never utter his name even the mob that is present there forced her to disclose his name but she refused. (73)

d. Hester At Her Needle

Hester was a bold woman she knew that what audacious step she had taken after that she would be left all alone by her community people, in order to make her both ends meet she believes in her own potentials, her art of needle work ((Nathaniel, 1850:88). Self-reliance and creativity are two important tenets of existential philosophy which show strong traits in heroine of this novel the scarlet letter. To make possible her existence in puritan community Hester believes in her own

potentials and energies. She is conscious about problems and trial of future life that's why she utilizes with what she has been gifted by the providence and it is none other than art of sewing and embroidery. Hester worked out her new identity in the community with her uncommon needle work. Pearl is nourished with natural dignity and grace. She wonders struck people of her community with her profession of seamstress that she is self-reliant not only in her thoughts but also in economy. Hester deems herself united with Dimmesdale by Just one token and that is letter A at any place where they encounter a splash of relief went through Hester's soul because it gives the impression that they are not separate rather one soul in bearing this pain. (93)

e. Hester, the Girl

When pestilence strokes the town it was Hester that came forward. In all periods of catastrophe, in fact, whether common or of persons, the exile of culture at once found her place. Hester entered to their house not as a stranger but as if she is inhabitant and dim light which reflects in the corners of the home is actually meant for them to have a dialogue about the calamity. Hester is so consoling and soothing that the troubled souls got relaxed at once with her healing words. Philanthropic nature of Hester Prynne is like a source of guidance for these afflicted souls. They can take her counsels whenever they feel their footsteps to dwindle due to hardships and in matters when they were confused about their future affairs. (Nathaniel, 1850:178)

Hester has changed the meaning of this scarlet letter altogether. Now her breast serves like a pillow of comfort for them, she is now known as a "Sister of Mercy" this profession is not selected by her own self neither by the community members rather it was bestowed to her by the heavenly powers. She has the capability to sympathies with others this potential she has in abundance. Inhabitants of Boston call her an angel and able person because meanings of scarlet letter "A" changes from adulteress to the former meanings (Nathaniel, 1850:179). They are generous only in former cases. Inferring Hester Prynne's demeanor as plea of this temperament, society was prone to show its previous sufferer a more benevolent face than she cared to be privileged with, or, by chance, than she ought to have (179). Hester is now their own Hester because she is helpful to the poor and kind to the afflicted persons. Compensation which was due on her takes this form and society accepted this new Hester with warm affections.

Vileness which was formerly associated with this letter "A" now transforms into something sacred, position of an adulterous is now exchanged with that of a nun of a church. Hester's character has now something sanctimonious about itself. This letter provides her protection and safe guard against all the satanic ills of her surroundings. Letter of previous ignominy turned into something precious for her. (Nathaniel, 1850:180)

Scarlet letter has now consecration of its own in the eyes of puritans; they defined it with new ethics and moral principles. Letter "A" common for its infamy now became famous among these hard headed and harsh hearted puritans. This change is possible only due to philanthropic services of its owner. The stigma of disgrace has been washed away as Hester came in for front

with a changed rule. Puritans were so impressed by this new role of Hester that they even compared this letter to a cross on a bosom of a nun. Comparison between the most sacred women of church with one which is notorious for a vile crime of adultery is in itself enigma. (Nathaniel, 1850)

Scarlet letter influenced Hester Prynne's personality deeply, on whatever scales and measurements town's people treat the wearer of this ignominious letter it is apparent from the frigidity and coldness of Hester. This brand with its profound effect changes the very soul of the culprit, puritan's severe laws about punishments were not only applied to punish them physically but they were so stern that even could alter essence of its sufferer.

Frigidity that was spread upon the face of Hester was because of the situation which she had faced. She spent a journey from life of passion and feeling towards that of thought. In this mundane world she was all alone without any support. She has to look after her little daughter pearl, to provide shelter to her and give pearl instructions about her future life. Hester has no hope to retain her previous status in her society. This woman of indomitable courage has broken down all her associations with this world and it's so called norms and values. She has devised all rules of her future life by her own self. (Nathaniel, 1850:181-182)

f. Hester and pearl

For a successful conjugal relationship only physical possession of a woman is not the requirement instead wills of her heart are also necessary to be won by man otherwise their married life would be simply a ruin (Nathaniel, 1850:196). Mismatched marriages evil root of this whole miserable situation, Hester puts light through her rich contemplative nature on it. She is of the opinion that nuptial bond is a sacred oath between two parties required of honesty and steadfastness to keep that relation successful but if one partner is not happy then this bond is utter failure. Hester propounds the idea that a woman should also be given equal right to decide for her future life, if this right is snatched from her then the concept of family life in any society where basic unit is husband and wife would be shattered at all, for happy and thriving conjugal life man should not make himself capable of winning his wife hand with worldly gains and cold intellectual powers but also with his warmth and care the very affections of her heart.

g. A Flood of Shine

This letter of ignominy was her authorization into county where other female souls have not the courage to tread. Humiliation, despondency and seclusion were her teachers, strict and wild ones and they had made her tough, but trained her much wrongly (Nathaniel, 1850:223). Scarlet letter which was her authorization to prison house is now her permit to all those regions to which other women of locality were not allowed to go. It means that sin can be a good master for her doer if he or she takes it in positive aspect after its resultant punishment is completed. If it is seen from psychological point of view then it could be discern that after all of this catastrophe Hester aroused as a triumphant personality. (Yamin, 2010)

h. Concluding part of the novel

‘‘Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!’’(Nathaniel, 1850:290). Reality of one’s own being is necessary to be shown to the world, what is your real face should be disclosed to the world because then a person could save himself from the pain of hypocrisy which at some stage of life irritates the wearer of its double faces. Human nature is complicated it cannot sustain for long time the false show in which he has been put, at some juncture of time he will direly long for it to be thrown away, and if he could not do so then it would have devastating effect on his soul. His last message is that of honesty, truth, courage and bravery. Hester is harbinger of a new age. She has a firm determination that after sometimes when conditions would be feasible then a new relation would sprout between man and woman but this time it would be harmonious and on equal grounds. (294)

Hester identifies the want to challenge puritan’s established faith structure. While she has gone for some years, associations between male and female stay unaffected. She prefers to take up her mothering again, but first and foremost to the population of her own gender, ongoing to reflect that no contentment is feasible until the affiliation connecting both sexes can be altered. Destination is still far away, and until transformation has been made Hester persists to battle for reciprocated esteem and devotion between the genders. However, her struggle now consists of guidance and direction.

Conclusion

Because a free thinker never submits to any external authority or set of rules and regulations, it helps its practitioners to confront any difficult scenario. It also creates tenacity and discipline in a person. Because the autonomy of the free thinker is defined by his own pen of boldness and audacity, he marked out all codes of life to be spent with his own pen of boldness and audacity. Such a person never succumbs to external trials and tribulations since the weapon of free speculation aids him in carving out the proper path for himself, in other words, he has become the author of his own religion. Self-reliance and independence are fruits of free thinking, and they are essential for an individual's survival in this complex and fast-paced society that is based on theory. Self-reliance and independence are fruits of free thinking, and they are essential for an individual's survival in our complex and fast-paced world based on the survival of the fittest hypothesis. The ability to rise beyond the human race's fundamentally absurd predicament requires freedom, decision, and action. Every new system is formulated with the destruction of the old one by exercising free contemplation and developing new ideas, so revolution in any society and system is inextricably linked to the concept of free thinking. A free thinker acts as a zealous person for all those renegades who want to transform any social institution or system that they believe is worn out and defective, because every new system is formulated with the destruction of the old one by exercising free contemplation and developing new ideas. The practice of free thinking is similar to the flux of life in that it is a continual process of examining all things with no end in sight,

necessitating improvement. A free thinker is never enslaved by his feelings and customs. It makes a person self-reliant not just in their thinking but also in their finances.

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