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## **THE INDIVIDUALISM/COLLECTIVISM DICHOTOMY IN N. HAWTHORNE'S NOVEL "THE SCARLET LETTER"**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to examine the novel The Scarlet Letter, published in 1850, by Nathaniel Hawthorne through individualism/collectivism dichotomy, highlighting the major chasm between the harsh 17<sup>th</sup>-century puritan community that demands total conformity from its members and heroine's incessant struggle for individualism. Based on qualitative research, the analysis starts with a short introduction of individualism/collectivism dichotomy. It subsequently highlights the intense clash arising from the puritan morality and the heroine's determination to create her own moral rules. The study found out that Hester's strength of character and support for the community help to abate the dichotomy between the two parties, which leads to a fair degree of mutual acceptance.*

### **Keywords**

Dichotomy, Individualism, Collectivism, Sin, Strength of Character

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## 1. Introduction

The Britannica Dictionary online defines *dichotomy* as “a difference between two opposite things: a division into two opposite groups” (Dichotomy, n.d.). Dichotomy is often employed with the term *false* – i.e. false dichotomy – to refer to a black and white way of thinking which accepts only two options for something, despite the alternatives being more. An example of this either/or fallacy was considering women during the Middle Ages as either angels or devils.

Societies or cultures are regarded as predominantly individualistic or collectivistic. The dimension of individualism-collectivism was invented by G. Hofstede in his groundwork *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (1980), containing four cultural components in which Western and non-Western societies differ: individualism vs. collectivism; power distance; uncertainty avoidance; and. masculinity vs. femininity. According to Hofstede (1980), individualism is “a loosely knit social framework in which people are supposed to take care of themselves and of their immediate families only,” whereas collectivism “is characterized by a tight social framework in which people distinguish between in-groups and outgroups, they expect their in-group to look after them, and in exchange for that they feel they owe absolute loyalty to it” (p. 45). The researcher observed that in highly individualistic cultures, such as in North and Western Europe and North America, the individual was more important than the group, being essential for each person to behave independently, always expressing their personal opinion. On the other hand, in collectivistic cultures, such as Asian and African countries, belonging to a group and showing loyalty to it was far more significant.

Hofstede's cross-cultural theory was also viewed as too generalized in disregarding the individual level. This way, Triandis, Leung, Villareal and Clack (1985) introduced the personality constructs of *idiocentricism* and *allocentricism* as equivalents to the individualism-collectivism dimensions at the cultural level. Similarly, Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggested using the independent view and interdependent view of the self. Individuals possessing an independent view are considered to be “egocentric, separate, autonomous, idiocentric, and self-contained” (p. 226). Interdependent individuals are deemed as “sociocentric, holistic, collective, allocentric, ensembled, constitutive, contextualist, and relational” (p. 227). In the second edition

of his major work, *Culture's Consequences*, in 2001, Hofstede took the personality aspect into account by defining individualism-collectivism as “the relationship between the individual and the collectivity that prevails in a given society” (p.209), arguing that the extent to which the constructs of individualism and collectivism manifest themselves varies with the given context or situation.

In literature, dichotomy, as a literary device, is employed by novelists to create an external conflict between different characters, groups, ideas; or to show an internal conflict between the states of the same individual, in contrasting his/her thoughts and actions. One of most famous examples of this division is perhaps Hamlet's feigned madness to disguise his revenge on his uncle.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the individualism/collectivism dichotomy in *The Scarlet Letter*, hypothesizing that the heroine transcends gender roles and differences, with a view to promoting individuality and mutual understanding in her rigid community.

## **2. Literature Review**

As regards the dichotomy in the novel, previous researchers have drawn attention to such divisions, as: male vs. female; angel vs. monster; and private vs. public self. The present study takes into account such ideas and develops them by emphasizing the heroine's strength of character in a puritan society.

## **3. Methodology**

This paper adopts a qualitative approach to the analysis of individualism/collectivism dichotomy in *The Scarlet Letter*. Materials from various sources, such as: the book in question, journal articles, and internet references were used, with a view to providing valuable insight.

## **4. Results**

Individualism/collectivism dichotomy, as a sociological concept, aids us to better comprehend the nature of conflict stemming between the heroine and the puritan society in the novel. Hester's refusal to cooperate with the authorities plunge her into total isolation. This, in turn, helps the heroine discover her inner strength towards subsistence and independence.

Hester's artistry with needlework and her daughter bring the initially rebellious woman closer to the community, resulting into a necessary interdependence.

## **5. Discussion**

Puritanism is a religious doctrine that arose in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in England, in an attempt to reform, i.e., purify the Anglican Church. Persecuted by the English monarchy, puritans fled their homeland to settle in America, as a Chosen People aspiring to create a New World based on true faith, virtue, and justice. John Winthrop, one of the leading preachers and politicians, envisioned the formation of a 'city upon a hill' where members would help one another, thus serve God. Likewise, they would deprive themselves of personal pleasures in the society's interest.

Hawthorne read extensively about 17<sup>th</sup>-century history, both American and English, which served as a basis for his fictitious writings. McWilliams (1974), in his article, *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, argues that "The Puritan past was the raw material for Hawthorne's romance, partly because it gave him a language and metaphor both congenial to his own ideas and familiar to the public at large" (As cited in Amorim, 2017, p.7). Hawthorne, a "puritan" descendant assumes an ambivalent stance on his forbears. In his collection of short stories, *The Snow-Image and Other Twice-Told Tales* (1852), Hawthorne expresses his admiration for their courage and high morality, while also believing that colonial days were "rude and rougher [...] than our own, with hardly any perceptible advantages, and much that gave life gloomier tinge" (Web, para 4).

The puritan doctrine, as depicted in the book, completely favors the collectivist philosophy over the individualist one. Deeply ingrained in the legal system, this religious reform movement promotes a communal spirit and demands total obedience from its community. If utter compliance or complete punishment is ingrained in the psychology of the masses, the puritan authorities regard Hester's violation of existing state of affairs as highly jeopardizing. This way, the heroine, who has committed the sin of adultery – an infringement of the seventh commandment of God –, constitutes a major challenge and threat to the collective consciousness of the community, not only because extramarital sex was strictly forbidden, but also due to her insistence to not repent. On the other hand, while puritan religion considered human beings evil

by nature – following the Fall of Man – males had clearly an upper hand over females. Stripped of all rights and privileges, women were both subjugated to God and their husbands, upon whom they depended for their overall daily existence. Aware and accepting of their inferiority, the other women in the community do not hesitate to castigate Hester because they feel ashamed of the representative of their own sex. As a consequence, they demand that the full force of law of God and man be applied against the heroine, with one them stating: “At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead” (p.54).

As expected, the reader is presented with a crowd that has been brainwashed, manipulated into accepting without protest the laws and mores determined appropriate by the ruling class, which also exploits the religious component to more easily repress people by propagating that those that obey will go to heaven, whereas those who do not will go to hell. The magistrates are perceived as God-fearing gentlemen and merciful people who harmonize the Word of God with human behavior on Earth by always doing the very best for their citizens. However, their hopes and plans for a perfect civilization based on friendly and peaceful living are doomed at the very outset. The indicator is the prison, mentioned at the opening chapter, serving as a means of punishing transgressors, with a view to preserving the structure of society. Hester Prynne is introduced to the reader while coming out of prison, to be exposed to a throng of people, in the marketplace, where she is defamed and required to disclose the name of the adulterer. Hester has clearly violated the society's conventions by affirming her individual emotions and needs over the social good. Hawthorne is aware of the universal dichotomy between institutions and the individual. While emphasizing the necessity of institutions for a functional society, he believed that puritans ruled by cruelty and intolerance.

Infraction of rules by Hester leads to her banishment from the “paradise-like” community to live a secluded life with Pearl on the outskirts of town. Her refusal to leave New England also shows her feelings of guilt, an indicator that she is not totally impervious to public criticism, and that she has a puritan consciousness after all. Given that the heroine experienced guilt in this community, she is determined to go through her worldly castigation in the same environment, so that the daily humiliation and resulting torture would lead to an absolute cleansing of soul and re-attainment of purity; or more precisely, Hester's self-transformation into a sort of martyr attributes an aura of saintliness to her. In this way, the imposed seclusion on Hester at the

periphery of civilization offers her the opportunity to explore areas which were forbidden to other women. This, in turn, imbues her with considerable inner strength.

Hester asserts her individuality because she is not an ordinary woman, but an attractive young lady imbued with passion, dignity, and artistry. Her skill at sewing and decorating is unmatched, and appreciated by the renowned people in the community. Hester's attire stands out for its beauty – as she is about to be exposed to the crowd – as does her symbol of adultery. Covered [by Hester] in gold thread, the scarlet letter becomes an act of defiance to the severe laws. Above all, her craft of embroidery attracts attention as opposed to other women because her services in the community are necessary. On the other hand, her self-expression through needlework does not separate her from society - as it commonly happens with an artist - but connects her to the rest of the community, denoting stability and permanence.

Hester's personality is best highlighted when compared to Chillingworth and Dimmesdale - the two males she is most closely related to. Each of them counts on her for their own secrets, while both men enjoy their untarnished reputation in public. Thus, following his return to Boston from Europe after a long absence, Chillingworth assumes a false identity, in order to go on with his life as a celebrated doctor, and revenge on Dimmesdale. Filled with consuming hatred, Chillingworth becomes the epitome of evil. As Chelliah (2018) has noted: "The evil effects of revenge, which result in making a devil out of the cruel and vengeful man, foretell Chilling worth. The vengeance of Chilling worth against Dimmesdale is diabolical because it is based on the witness of his secret life. This is conceived as the most cruel punishment since it is a humiliation of the soul" ( p.19226). As a doctor, Chillingworth gives the impression to the others that he is helping to restore the minister's health, not ruining it. However, this strong desire for vengeance erodes his inner and outer being. On the other hand, at a moment of inner peace, Chillingworth also admits to Hester and himself that as an individual who devoted his entire life to books and science, he – as an old man – should not have married a young, beautiful, and passionate woman, as Hester was. Concerning this mismatched marriage, critics Mohammed and Yahya (2017) have rightly observed: "Hester's reactions makes clear that what sets up the adulteress's classic inability to see her adultery as "her crime most to be repented of" is the original sexual incompatibility between the husband and wife. Because of her repulsion for her husband, that title is reserved for her wifely acquiescence. Her adultery, Hester feels, was

a crime only against church and state, but her submission to Chillingworth was an outrage she committed against herself” (p.32).

Maintaining a façade is also crucial to Dimmesdale, whom Hester protects both against public humiliation, and revengeful Chillingworth. The minister is a coward who hides his sin under the guise of his cloak, without having the courage to come clean of his deed. As critic Ning Li (2019) emphasizes in her article *Reflection on Hawthorne's Use of Biblical Allusions and Symbolism in The Scarlet Letter*: “Arthur Dimmesdale is one of the most complex and misunderstood symbols in the book. Dimmesdale's sin is not adultery but not having the courage to admit that he had adulterated. Therefore, he has the sin of concealment. Dimmesdale's guilt is filled with mental anguish, which serves as a constant reminder of his sin. He remains silent so that he can continue to do God's work as a minister” (2019, p.664). He is tortured by having to wear a mask for too long that ironically when he tears it off the act goes unnoticed by the members of the community.

Hester gains power by isolating herself from the community, and because she can abandon Boston at any time, the puritan laws are impermanent for her. Even though she is outwardly abiding and merciful, she is inwardly searching for complete freedom. In this light, critic Godwin (1974) emphasizes that:

Hester shows no respect for this law, for she knows a higher reality and truth than that practiced by the puritans. This higher reality for her is love to which she remains loyal and with which she remains united. In the holy name of love, she, as a cult heroine, stands up to a religion that appears merciful but is ugly and cruel to true love and affection. She stands up against a religion that has deprived her of her right to love and be loved. As a religious and pious woman, Hester knows and believes that religion “must become a vital principle, it must affect the heart and act upon the passions, before it can greatly modify the character of man in society, which means that her sin is rooted in the most perfect of all feelings: love. (As cited in Ghasemi & Abbasi, 2009, p.12)

Pearl serves as a compromising force between Hester's rebellious character and society's influence. Pearl, after all, is identified with the letter. Despite being the cause for Hester's banishment and ensuing hardships, the child imbues her mother with happiness and hope. Pearl

eventually reconciles herself, Hester, and her father Dimmesdale whom she kisses on the scaffold. In this context, critic Clark Davis (2005) states that, for Hawthorne:

There is no easy choice between conformity and rebellion; there is instead a set of choices with political effects that are limited by ethical concerns. Unfettered idealism and self-reliance may be just as dangerous as absolute conformity; revolution leads to violence and often unchecked abuse through idealism. (As cited in Kahhoul, 2011/2012, p.101)

Unlike Dimmesdale and Chillingworth who fade away, Hester overcomes her crisis and regains stability in her life, as well as social interdependence. In her article, *Utopianism in The Scarlet Letter*, Maria Castilho (2006) states that:

At the end of the novel, the Hester that comes to New England is no longer the rebel we first met. She is now a well-adapted, rehabilitated woman in the eyes of the community which rejected and condemned her; above all, she is now a vehicle of order. She believes in institutional order. (p.115)

Upon returning to her old house, Hester recommences to wear the badge of shame, since it represents an essential part of her former life. The letter now stands for beauty and success rather than shame and failure. Hester, eventually, decides to return to the place where she had lived her toughest times of her life determined to re-dimension it. The narrator says:

But there was a more real life for Hester Prynne here, in New England, than in that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence. She had returned, therefore, and resumed, - of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it, - the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale. Never afterwards did it quit her bosom. But [...] the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, and yet with reverence, too. (p.293)

Hester has, thus, achieved her individualism and freedom, not through open rebellion but wise behavior. With her wisdom she has been able to change the society, which has become more accepting of her, judging from the new meaning the letter has assumed, both parties achieving a kind of consensus. Optimistic about the future, Hester has become a driving force in



her community by rising above the rigid social norms and religious doctrine. In particular, she is a role model for all other women who seek to lead a fulfilled life beyond their motherly and wifely duties. In this regard, critic Huimin Liu remarks in her article *The duality of Hester Prynne's Image: Subversion and Submission* that: "Hester's idea of equality demonstrated by her rebellion and charity has influenced the women in the patriarchal community. They come to her with "their sorrows and perplexities," seeking her counsel and sympathy as someone who has been a public victim and as they are private victims. They realize their role as women rather than just "good wives" at the beginning" (2021, p.10).

## **6. Conclusion**

The individualism/collectivism dichotomy in *The Scarlet Letter* arises from the harsh puritan community and the adulterous uncooperative heroine. Feelings undermined by the heroine – who, against expectations, are neither a conventional wife nor an evil witch – the governing authorities do not hesitate to punish Hester for having strayed from the path of righteousness. However, to her God is reached through personal intuition rather than dogma.

The novel is a denunciation of Puritanism and its laws which demand unquestionable conformity at the expense of individual dignity and freedom. Hawthorne's depiction of the other members of this community and, in particular that of its leaders highlights their hypocrisy, anxious to maintain a dignified moral balance, but unable to see the true fault of the members who constitute it. Hence, Hester Prynne is no guiltier than the others.

Guided by her individual conscience and determined to decide her own fate, Hester Prynne develops a remarkable strength of character that enables her to overcome castigation and suffering inflicted upon her by a censorious social system. Her source of power derives from the hard times entailing feelings of disgrace, loss of hope, and living alone –all that teaching her a valuable lesson. Unlike restrained and conforming Dimmesdale, Hester demonstrates her potential for self-reliance and self-fulfillment in a society that demands total subjugation. On other hand, through her independence and unmatched skills, she is of great aid to the poor and women in need of advice and courage. Thus, Hester becomes an influential individual who brings about societal transformation.

This paper has its limitations in being conceived as a concise critical analysis rather than extensive study entailing additional sources, which could be the scope of future research.

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