

Book Review

A Woman of Independent Means by Hailey, Elizabeth Forsythe

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Abstract

The book seems to ultimately discuss the concept of meaning of life. This novel chiefly concentrates on a life of only one woman, but what a wonderful example for discussions of many significant questions in a woman's life! It is written in personal letters and raises some relevant thought-provoking inquiries related to significance of independence for adults as learners. It can be highly recommended for study in the human development coursework.

Keywords

Adult independence, adulthood developmental period, women, novel, personal diary

1. Novel Appeal

I think the success of the work is in the author's right choice of presenting the life of a main character through publishing her personal letters in a chronological fashion similar to a diary style. The collection of many personal letters written by the main character, Bess Steed Garner, causes the reader to become very familiar with a whole range of her life events, those busy, overwhelming with instantly changing environment, stressful rhythms, circumstances, and reactions to those life challenges and rewards which revealed her character development process from the age nine till the day she died at the age of seventy-eight. The reader at first sees the young girl's idealistic, romantic image for life she desperately wanted to keep through the years of youth and did not lose when she matured.

The novel can be considered a powerful character analysis of Elizabeth Steed Garner, a sensitive, intelligent, successful, independent woman who gracefully faced numerous difficulties and happy moments through her life that she described in her personal letters to the people she knew, happened to get closer to, and became separated from at a certain point in time. Throughout the course of her life, Bess did everything a woman was expected to do: got married, gave birth to three children, helped her husband and aging parents, studied, traveled, suffered personal losses and deaths, remarried, took care of grandchildren, corresponded with family and friends, established her place in the social circles, etc. Her life seems to be very eventful and ordinary, and yet, her persistent quest for independence, her own

ambition, sense of personal identity, self-reflection, and constructive approach to defying the meaning of life for herself and others make this woman an ageless extraordinary heroine, an inspiration to many generations of women. Incisively and with subtlety, this book examines materialistic trends in human culture and idealistic quest for higher purpose in life...

2. Themes and Concepts Developed in the Book

Humans understand themselves through numerous interrelations with life, society, and the environment. The book contains many interesting ideas in connection to career choice, marriage, friendships, relationships between the generations, single parenthood, widowhood, retirement, an empty nest syndrome, death and dying, successful aging, history, culture, politics, money, the role of technology in the lives of present, past, and future generations of Americans collected on the basis of personal observations. The book discusses the question of individual interpretations of the impact of modern world on human experiences and the concept of meaning of life.

3. Relationship of These Themes and/or Concepts to Issues Noted in the Professional Psychological Literature Describing the Developmental Period

Eric Erickson, a prominent American psychologist, defined the time between the age of 30 to 50s as the period of Generativity/Stagnation and 60-plus as the period of Integrity/Despair. I would like to concentrate on the time of late adulthood of the main character of *A woman of independent means*. In the time of middle adulthood, an individual is concerned about having children, making a difference in the lives of others, and making a contribution to society. In the later years, an individual is concerned more with the preparation for death and living a personal legacy. This is the time for tremendous changes in physical and mental abilities that require some serious psychological adjustments. "Parents, siblings, and spouses die, friends die or move away, retirement occurs, income is reduced, and body begins slowly to decline" (Morrison, 1990, p. 399). The main character of the book, Garner, mentioned the physical problems of her husband and her own connected to their aging: his fading memory and sight, and her fragile bones. In the psychological literature, it is also noted that in terms of social relations late adulthood is defined by a shift of attention from children to grandchildren and friends. Bess wrote that she certainly loved grandchildren more than children. Morrison (1990) points out that in late adulthood there is also an increase of introspection of value systems: "How dare polite society segregate people on the basis of age? This injustice makes me angrier than discrimination on the basis of race or sex" (Hailey, p. 235). "Old age should be regarded as a reward for a lifetime of hard work, but it can only be punishment if one insists on doing the same things one has always done, measuring present achievements by past ones and inevitably falling short" (p. 248). Bess also expressed the genuine concern about human mind and freedom, especially what it means to be a woman: "No wonder women outlive men. We have had to be responsible for the shape of our lives from the beginning. Even women with jobs face a full workload every day at home. Every woman knows that making a living is

just the first step. But for too many men it is the entire trip” (p. 255). Many elderly people recognize their zest for independence in late adulthood, so did Bess: “Nature as a process provides for no growth past physical maturity. Only the individual, through an effort of will and imagination, can add, enhance, enrich. Life unresisted merely abstracts. I no longer believe an individual can change the fate of other people, no matter how much she loves them, but I will not relinquish the responsibility for my own life until the day I die” (p. 234). Morrison (1990) notes that many older adults “worry about burdening their survivors with the expenses of dying and burial” (p. 400). Bess arranged all the necessary procedures in advance and paid for her husband’s and her own funeral not to burden the family in grief and not to delegate these responsibilities to children. This woman strongly believed that old people should consider the future for the coming generations. She got a will and updated it regularly to make sure everyone got something to inherit. At the end of her life, Bess concluded that independence for people should be a goal of life as the key to happy, gratifying social and personal relationships: “For a marriage to succeed, each partner should be excited by the abilities of the other and not feel threatened by an interest that is not shared. You must not begin your marriage by denying all that you are or you will never develop into all that you can be” (Hailey, p. 258).

4. What Learning Opportunities did the Individual Take? Relevant Concepts for Issues Related to Adults as Learners

Mrs. Garner was always interested in intellectual pursuits. In late adulthood she found that “television seldom engages the mind as fully as it does the eye so I keep my radio and record player within easy reach” (p. 254). When her children went to school, she read the same books, so they would not feel she was behind and also enjoyed establishing literature fans’ clubs for the community. Bess made special efforts to learn French, German, even though these languages were not considered “practical” compared to French, and even “dangerous” during the times of wars with Germany. She did it because she felt the need to broaden her horizons and feel the old world. Bess embraced the atmosphere of a technologically advanced planet. She learned to drive an automobile at the beginning of the twentieth century when women were not very open to that idea, and mastered a type-writer on her own when they first came to the consumer market. The author raises highly disputable issues in regard to the direction we are taking our fate vs. it is taking us. It is also interesting to see how the main character speculates whether technology gives us more free time or it makes our daily schedules busier and more complex.

Bess thought about what it meant to be human. She reflected upon her lifelong learning experiences. And she wrote: “One life is simply not enough for all the lessons there are to learn” (p. 259). Her memories also went to old-fashioned pleasures like gardening, extreme sports, and adventure travel. Her own progress of understanding the material side of life and setting the financial goals for the future of her family went alongside developing and preserving the spiritual foundation of human existence. Her artistic expression demonstrated that she learned it is essential for people to reflect on self-actions

and their responses to the surroundings.

Reading this book is an excellent start to exploring the complications of the world and our culture. *A woman of independent means* is a fascinating discussion on significant questions of a woman's life. It is filled with concrete examples relevant to the study of coming of age and its role in human development.

References

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Morris, C. G. (1990). *Psychology: An introduction*. Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.

TITLE: A woman of independent means
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TIME: Years 1899-1968, pre-and post-millennium events in the letters of Bess Steed Garner.