

THEMATIC STUDY OF A LANTERN IN HER HAND BY BESS STREETER ALDRICH

Dr. Rupal S. Patel
(H.O.D. English)

Shree Meghmani Parivar and Shree Bhailalbhai A. Patel (Detrojwala) Umiya Arts & Commerce College for Girls,
Sola, Ahmedabad-60.
(M) 9879874882
Email : rupalashok@gmail.com

Patel Naisargee Ashokkumar
Pre – Med. (Junior)

University of Nebraska
Lincoln,
USA
Email : naisargeepatel26@gmail.com

A Lantern in Her Hand, a classic pioneer tale is written by Bess Streeter Aldrich, who is one of Nebraska's most widely read and enjoyed authors. It is the magnificent story of a young girl who went West as a bride and helped to build a nation. It is an excellent tale about the sacrifices of a mother that she made during the pioneer days. It is set in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The core of the novel is "if you want a garden – you have got to dream a garden" which is unique.

The protagonist of the story is Abbie Deal who was the daughter of European immigrants. The book starts off with the introduction of the protagonist and her dreams and desires and ends with a long journey of Abbie Deal from childhood to her old age. At the end, the writer described:

This is the story of the old lady who died while the meat burned the children played, Run, Sheep, Run, across her yard (Aldrich: 1994, 9).

The journey of Abbie Mackenzie started from her childhood. She was the daughter of a Scottish aristocrat and the Irish peasant. From her childhood, she had great responsibilities. At the age of eleven, she helped her family in doing many household works like gathering eggs, going to school and herding animals particularly cows. They had lost their fortune and she, with her parents, moved to America. She was eight years old when her family shifted from Chicago to Blackhawk county, Iowa. Unfortunately her father died young and her mother migrated her large family out west to Iowa. In her childhood, she had many dreams. She dreamt of returning to the life that her grandmother Mackenzie had as a wealthy woman. She dreamed of becoming a fine lady like her aristocrat grandmother. She wanted to devote herself to music and art.

Will Deal a sensitive young neighbor boy came in her life. She found in him a friend on whom she could depend on. She grew as a beautiful young woman with sweet singing voice and grand ambitions. With her physical growth, the growth of her dreams was also found in her. With her growth her dreams of stardom and becoming a famous singer with painting hanging in museums and books written by her lined on library shelves grew rapidly. Abbie often practiced her singing before the trees. At that time she thought the trees as her audience of New York. Another young man, Ed Matthews, the son of the local doctor and studying in medical school at New York heard Abbie's songs. He was able to give her a chance to become a well-known lady in comparison to her miserable childhood days. He promised to educate her. Instead he wanted to marry Abbie and also wanted to take her New York for training. She might learn music lessons, acting lessons and get a chance to sing. At eighteen she got a chance to live a comfortable life as a doctor's wife and she gracefully agreed but soon she realized that Will Deal was the only man whom she could ever love and decided to spend whole life with Will Deal.

Abbie chose love instead as she could not forget Will Deal who was fighting in the Civil War in Ed's place. On returning of him from war, Abbie married him. After marriage, they had a son almost immediately. With the baby's birth, she realized that the growing family now needed their own home instead in laws home. They decided to move Nebraska where they could get cheap land and home. Abbie began art and voice lessons. She did not want to give them up. Will was also positive and promised her to continue her lessons as soon as the teacher would be available. Her trip was miserable as Abbie was pregnant again. When they arrived at Nebraska, two other families joined them and they bought land. Will built a house made of sod and dreamed that they would build a frame house as soon as the farm began.

Both, husband and wife, strongly accepted the challenge of homesteading in Nebraska territory where the prairies spread long as far as eyes could see and only strongest persons could survive for long, particularly in winter. She started her life in Nebraska prairie. She moved to Nebraska as a bride but there she faced problems like drought and plague. Both of them made a farm and hoped that they would be wealthy soon but their dreams never came true

The initial life at Nebraska was difficult and with full of hardships for Abbie and Will. Though the soil was good, little rain and a plague of grasshoppers were responsible for the failure of crops. Meanwhile Abbie gave birth to three more children. Out of three, the little boy was born stillborn. Eventually, the whole area developed, population grew, school had opened, general stores were also opened and doctors also came to visit the place. They also got profit from the farms and finally they were able to get their own home they always desired.

Time passed out. Their oldest child Mack became adult and decided to live in the city. Though Will refused, he moved to Omaha and got a job in the bank there. Meanwhile a school opened in a nearby town and Abbie again sacrificed her trip to Iowa as she wanted to send Margaret to the school. In the following year, John also joined Margaret. At the age of forty, Abbie again became pregnant which was a shocking incident for her. Abbie gave birth to a healthy baby girl during snowstorm.

She faced many hardships and difficulties in life. She continuously struggled and sacrificed her dreams and desires to fulfill her children's dreams and desires. She had sacrificed everything for her children. Only a mother can do such selfless sacrifices on the earth. Abbie felt proud how she was able to help her children to succeed in life.

In short, it is a classic story of Abbie and Will Deal who left everything behind for new life of America's frontier. Abbie's dedication to her husband is also praiseworthy. She helped her husband in digging the well. She hit herself on the head with the well handle while bringing Will out of the well. She knocked herself out. Thus, she faced many hardships in her life.

At her young age, she lost the companionship of Will Deal as Will passed away and she was widowed at the age of forty four. He died of heart attack when he was of 50. After the death of Will, Abbie's decision to stay alone in the house was noteworthy but the children didn't understand why she stayed herself alone at the farm. Abbie was left alone to take care of children and the farm. Abbie and Will sacrificed so many things so that their children might have a chance to educate themselves and they could fulfill their dreams. It is really pathetic that though Abbie spent her whole life for the betterment of her children, her children could not even tried to understand her sacrifice. All her children and grandchildren grew talented and successful. They were busy in their lives. Her only source of help was John, but he also wanted to become a lawyer and he left her without a man to work on the farm. Her daughter Isabelle went to Chicago after marriage and became a music teacher and then a singer. Grace became a college professor. At that time, Abbie was in her eighties. Though she was surrounded by children and grandchildren, they were not able to understand her desires to live in the same old home alone. Her seven grandchildren also did not care to understand her feelings. They found her grotesque, cranky and old fashioned. At the time of her first granddaughter's marriage, Abbie presented the pearl necklace to her which was presented to her by her grandmother to her mother and then to her which was a symbol of all the dreams of Abbie. She realized that her dreams had fulfilled.

At last, one day she suffered severe loneliness. She heard children playing in the yard and Will coming for supper. She was confused and laid down to rest. The wind no longer brushed by Abbie's face but the clock was ticking on. The neighbours found her as her supper burnt on the stove. Abbie died in the same home which she and Will had built together. She was satisfied there. The children were also conflicted that they were not with their mother at her end who spent whole life for the betterment of her children and grandchildren.

The struggle for identity and recognition is also found in both the novels. The hardships of nature, migration, sacrifice, struggle for survival etc. also play vital role in the development of the novel. Through *A Lantern in Her Hand*, the writer has described the psyche and life style of the people on the plains. It exposes the hardships and obstacles of the original settlers of the plains who suffered a lot for the existence with the land.

A Lantern in her Hand revolves round the struggle of a woman named Abbie who faced many hardships as a daughter, wife, mother and a grandmother. Throughout her life, she poured her dreams into her children. She herself struggled a lot, earned for children and paid for their good upbringing, good school and educational opportunities. Once, she got a chance to a nearby town to fulfill her dreams by taking lessons but she refused. Instead, her oldest daughter wanted to develop the talent of drawing and so Abbie sent her to take lessons. As she described:

That's just it I've only baked bread and pieced quilts and taken care of children. But some women have to , don't they?... But I've dreamed dreams... And I think I dreamed them into the childrenAnd the children are carrying them out... (Aldrich: 1994, 229).

Abbie is the representative of those women who have had to give up their dreams and desires, opportunities and chances just so their family could fulfill basic necessities and survive. She refused herself to be broken by hard experiences, Abbie set a joyful example for her family – husband and children. All her children are busy in their work. Only Mack's daughter Laura spent time to listen to Abbie's stories.

In *A Lantern in Her Hand*, the villains are weather and poverty. The Nebraska weather do not allow the husband and wife to be rich and brought up their children without hardships. They worked hard in the farm but could not grow more because of adverse weather and they had to compromise with their own dreams and desires. They spent their whole life to fulfill the dreams of their children.

Biographical element is also found in this novel. In *A Lantern in her Hand*, the protagonist Abbie was modeled on her own mother who in 1854 had travelled to the Midwest. The author's near and dear husband who was her friend, philosopher and guide Charles died unexpectedly from a cerebral hemorrhage in May, 1925 and

Aldrich had the responsibility to bring up four children alone. She faced the challenge bravely without her husband whom she called Cap who was her strong supporter. In the same way, Abbie was 44 when her husband died and like Aldrich, Abbie became a single mother with four children at home. Like her, she also felt emotional vacuum in her life. Like Bess Streeter Aldrich, Abbie Deal had to find the way to endure the loss of her beloved one.

The element of migration is also found in this novel. In *A Lantern in her Hand*, several migrations are described. In the beginning, the migration of Abbie's mother and family is found. After marriage Abbie and Will migrated to Nebraska for better future. But their lives were surrounded by many hardships and both of them spent their whole life to fulfill the desires of children. Their children and grandchildren also migrated from Nebraska to various parts of U.S. for better future and lead better life. Migration means a change and change is essential for the enhancement of mankind. People migrate for better life and bright future. In this novel, characters migrate for better life and future.

Along with the migration, the struggles for recognition of the protagonist is found. In *A Lantern in her Hand*, Abbie and Will struggled a lot and fought against weather and socio economic condition of their life. Will lost his life. At the end of the novel Abbie also died. So the loss of life is found in both the novels. In *A Lantern in Her Hand*, Abbie died leading lonely life at her own home. Nobody from her family was with her at her last days of life. As described here:

Isn't it dreadful? Poor Mother! So many of us ... and not one of us here just when she needed us ... and after all she's done for us (Aldrich : 1994, 6)

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