

PHILOSOPHY OF EXISTENTIALISM AND ITS IMPACT ON ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Existentialism is one of the important notions of philosophical tendencies in literature. This trend emerged in France and provided number of important philosophical works. In the late 1940s Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were main representatives of the philosophical tendencies, and their novels exactly provided existentialistic views into literature. Nowadays, we not often see existentialistic works in French literature, and philosophical trend seems to be diminishing comparing to English literature. In this article, the author investigates English literature with philosophical inclination that dominates in XX century. The purpose of the article is to explain peculiarities of Existentialism and to reveal the key features of English novels written under existentialistic influence.

Keywords: existentialism, essentialism, absurd, alienation, free choice, authenticity, bad faith

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary English literature highly remarked with three dimensional trends which dominate in belles-lettres, thanks to several factors. These trends are document genre, increasing interest in science fiction, and philosophical approach to literature. One of the leading factors can surely be referred to the World War II and its further impact on humankind. In particular, the emergence of the atomic bomb and its testing in the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki shook all conscious beings. Many authors have focused on the philosophical direction. Questions such as the meaning of life and the purpose of coming to this world, have become more and more difficult. What is the purpose of living this life, if we can disappear just in a few seconds?

Some renowned writers were philosophers themselves and practiced their ideas within the literary works they created. Novels written by Voltaire, Diderot, Nietzsche, Santayana, Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Murdoch contain pure philosophical debates or problems which let them regard as philosophical. Moreover, some philosophers prioritized literary expression, while others, such as Sartre and de Beauvoir, gave a

simultaneous, artistic treatment to their philosophical views in their works of fiction. Works of literature have often made excursions into philosophy in the same way. There are a large number of works in the Western literary tradition in which philosophical perspectives are introduced and presented.

Existentialism is a concept from the philosophical background. It was coined by Jean-Paul Sartre as a self-description. Later existentialism became associated with an intellectual movement that flourished in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s as a result of the widespread distribution of Sartre's and his associates' postwar literary and philosophical output. French writers and thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus were among them. In contemporary English literature this tendency became the leading one and had an impact on several prolific writers, such as Iris Murdoch, William Golding, Collin Wilson, Sid Chaplin and etc.

Main part

In the post-war period philosophical literature grew unevenly, taking various directions. The complicated atmosphere of the 20th century, the two world wars, the moral crisis of society and violence led some writers to show sympathy to philosophical inclination in their writing career. Philosophical tendencies are one of the essential movements of the contemporary English literature. The English writers of the XX century obsessed with philosophical ideas including Existentialistic ones, tried to solve the question that asks what is the meaning of the life?

Plato and Aristotle, two ancient Greek philosophers, argued that everything has an essence. They put a foundation to the theory of essentialism. Essentialism is the knowledge that the essence existed before we were born. People started to show their interest toward essentialism in the late eighteenth century. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, developed Nihilism, the belief in life's absolute meaninglessness. In the mid-twentieth century, French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre revisited the topic of essence, asking the question, "What if we live first?" What if we were born with no reason and it is up to us to explore our true nature? This is a cornerstone for existentialism, and it announces "Existence precedes Essence,". Existentialism, on the other hand, does not dispute the presence of God. Some of the intellectuals who followed this pattern were theologically inclined. For example, Soren Kierkegaard's psychological work centered on people's thoughts and feelings when faced with life choices. So, religious existentialists argue that God exists, but it is not his duty to

avoid all human-caused disasters. Instead, it is a task of humankind, and individuals have the option of making their own choices.

Valentina Ivasheva states that philosophical literature, indeed existential novel came in the late 1940's in France, and French literature provided a number of important existentialistic works. However nowadays French literature left existentialism behind and its philosophical tendency decreased in comparison with other European literature. On the other hand, English and American literature in 1950's and 1970's took philosophical inclination that individual in each country¹.

Existentialistic views reflected in the drama, prose and poetry of contemporary English literature (1950-1960). Of course, although the most English writers were not aware from the philosophy of Existentialism as deeply as the French or the Germans were, we do find the ideas of this movement in their works. Examples include Alan Silliton's novels, mostly in "A Tree on Fire", or almost in all of David Mercer's dramas. A number of existentialistic concepts became prevalent among English writers.

In 1962, Sid Chaplin published "The Watchers and the Watched." The main idea is expressed in the epigraph, "We are all the watched or we are watchers. The only escape from our jailers is death." Although Sid Chaplin claimed that he had not read a single Existentialist literature during his lifetime, the epigraph he chose clearly reflects this philosophy. Moreover, I can say that epigraph quite match the evidences in the novel "The Unicorn", as whole novel written under influence of this fragment. The choice of Hannah (the character who always stays in the center of the evidences) in the novel is crucial, she decides to be free, free from her jail, and commits suicide.

As predecessors of the trend were regarded nineteenth-century thinkers Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Existentialism was not only philosophical concept, but also it was a literary phenomenon. Sartre's own philosophical theories were best known in his works of fiction like "Nausea" and "No Exit" than his more strictly philosophical works like "Being and Nothingness" and "Critique of Dialectical Reason."

Mantra of existentialism declares "existence precedes essence", and it means that we exist first, our existence happens first, then, we ourselves shape our essence, and make who we are. But there is no path settled to follow, there is no universal order, cosmic justice, or destiny which is written before our birth. The Universe is full of choices, and it's up to us to make our own choices to live on. Sartre suggest

¹ В.В. Ивашева. 1978 Прогресс. "НА ПОРОГЕ ХХІ ВЕКА. НТР И ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ МИРА" Стр.44

that no one general or universal can answer what is the human is, why does he exist, except individual himself, and through existence itself. Existentialism notes that through making choices, we create essence.² “Classical existentialism is ... the theory that existence precedes essence,” that is, “there is no such thing as human nature” in an Aristotelian sense. A “person does not have an inbuilt set of values that they are inherently structured to pursue. Rather, the values that shape a person’s behavior result from the choices they have made”.³

Another notion of existential philosophy is Alienation. This term founded by Heidegger, and sometimes translated as “uncanny”. The stem of the word is “*Heim*” which means “home”, indicates feeling as stranger in the world, where we fell like not at home. This fundamental existential experience contrasts strongly with the primitive notion of a *kosmos* in which human beings have a well-ordered place, and it binds existential thinking to the contemporary experience of a nonsensical world. Jean Paul Sartre put in dispute the form of alienation in his book of analysis “The Look”.⁴ So long as the individual participates in an activity without thinking about it, he is nothing more than the first-person viewpoint that defines something as having a distinct significance in the context of what he is doing. A person is immersed in the world and he does not comprehend his behavior in any third-person explanation, as an example of social activity. On the other hand, when a human becomes aware of being observed, and his essence is violated by the essence of someone for whom he is simply a component of the universe. Then suddenly he becomes aware of having a "nature," a "character," of being. An individual can take a third-person viewpoint on himself because we are surrounded by society, but this exposes that he is alienated from a part of his existence. Our purpose of existing, our nature can be revealed only by the Other. Existential social science is affected by this. The act of engaging in the world alienates a human from his authentic nature. If who we are is determined by our presence, this "who" is usually pre-defined by the positions that are accessible in our society. As a result, the “I” is “anonymous,” or “anyone,” and self-making is probably a reflection of not separating ourselves from other people. In contrary, singularity of the individual starts by recovering from alienation in the society, and from these points the concept of "authenticity" emerges.

² Fackenheim, E., 1961. *Metaphysics and Historicity*, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.

³ Webber, J., 2018. *Rethinking Existentialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.p 14,4

⁴ Sartre, J.-P., 1943 [1992]. *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel Barnes (trans.), New York: Washington Square Press, 1992. P.p 58

Existentialism emerges through the breakdown of the belief that theory should have substantive norms for existing, ones that define particular modes of existence. Even so, there is a distinction between what a person does "as" himself and what he does "as" anyone, so existing is something at which an individual can succeed or fail in this sense. Authenticity, or "Eigentlichkeit" in German, refers to the attitude with which we approach our projects as if they were our own. If we do something for the sake of duty because that is what others do, our moral act is inauthentic. But we can act authentically in the same way if it is something we choose as our own, something to which we commit ourselves despite its social sanction.

As a result, the authenticity norm refers to taking responsibility for who we are. An individual can recover himself from alienation, from his uptake in the anonymous "one-self" that personifies him in his everyday interaction with the world, by constructing him according the life's standard. Authenticity thereby denotes a construction process to which we can either fully commit or simply occupy for a period of time, inauthentically shifting between multiple positions. Several authors suggest that the integrity of a narrative is the measure of an authentic life, that to be a self is to compose a story in which a sense of wholeness prevails, that to be a self is to be the author of oneself as a unique individual.⁵ The inauthentic existence, on the other hand, will be one without such integrity, one in which we permit the universe to decide our destiny. As a consequence, being authentic can also be thought of as a form of freedom. An individual grants himself with the principle that goes with the position he's selected. In comparison, the inauthentic individual merely inhabits such a position, and can do so "irresolutely," without dedication. In the first-person perspective, existentialism detects the singularity of existence and defines what is irreducible. The authenticity that an individual gained brings a freedom, which leads to the main key point of the existential doctrine, to the question of value. In this sense, the common existential concepts of anxiety, nothingness, and the absurd must be recognized. Simultaneously, there is a strong desire to promote an authentic attitude against individual values, without which no project will succeed, a desire that is reflected in the principles of "involvement" and "commitment."

Sartre thought that we are painfully, shockingly free. We condemned to be free. No guidelines for our actions – we forced to design our own moral code, to invent a morality to live by. Freedom appears from self-comprehending, when one

⁵ Nehamas, A., 1998. *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Berkeley: University of California Press. Ricoeur, P., 1992. *Oneself as Another*, Kathleen Blamey (trans.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

becomes autonomy, and this evidence leads to anxiety, because of terrified abundance of freedom. Disorienting and dispossessing retreat into ourselves in anxiety gives rise to the existential figure of the outsider, the isolated one who “sees through” the phoniness of those who, unaware of what the breakdown of anxiety portends, go about their lives complacently identifying with their positions as if these roles completely described them.

When an individual experiences anxiety, the theme of absurd appears in first plan. Absurd is a technic term – the search for answers in an answerless world, and it claims that “The world wasn’t created for a reason, and it doesn’t exist for a reason.” An individual might think there is some authority he could look for answers, but all of the authorities are fake. The authorities are just humans like us, and a person should accept his freedom with the light of absurdity. However, in a state of fear, it is only this character, who vanishes from the scene. Since a person is no longer actively engaged, the sense that once occupied the thing as the density of its being now looks back at him as a mere name, as something he “knows” but no longer claims. Anxiety destroys the perceived sense of things, just as when one repeats a phrase until it loses its meaning. They end up being absurd. Objects do not vanish, but all that exists is an empty awareness of their existence, an impression that tells a key scene in Sartre's novel Nausea. Someone who refuses to accept the Absurd is tended to be in Bad Faith. They are the people who search meaning from authorities. Topics such as straying from life, misunderstanding it, and fear of the life around us are reflected in John Osborn’s dramas. In his “Luther” (1960), the universe is seen as a kingdom ruled by chaos and absurdity. The same ideas can be seen in the 1956s drama “Look Back in Anger”. The protagonists of “Luther” are based on Osborne's Existentialist human nature. The whole work sheds light on the existence of man in the face of death, and this idea is taken from the philosophy of Heidegger. In the novel Luther asks Staupitz: “Tell me, Father, have you never felt humiliated to find that you belong to a world that’s dying... Surely, this must be the last age of time we’re living in. There can’t be any more left but the black bottom of the bucket.” The end of the novel is also significant: “No man can die for another, or believe for another or answer for another. The moment they try they become a mob. If we’re lucky we can be persuaded in our own mind, and the most we can hope for is to die each one for himself.” Luther’s words are, in fact, an artistic interpretation of Sartre’s early ideas. According to Sartre, fear offers a clear experience of the independence that

characterizes human life as a whole, despite the fact that it is mostly hidden.⁶ As Sartre describes in great depth, anguish, as a consciousness of liberation, is not something that humans welcome; instead, we want peace, identification, and accept the language of freedom only when it suits us: such actions are deemed by a person to be his free acts, and they exactly fit the self he wishes others to think of him as.

To conclude we can state that, Existentialism is a cultural movement from the past. It has continued to play an important role in modern thought as a philosophical inquiry that developed a new norm, authenticity, for recognizing what it is to be human. Existentialism is a worldview that emphasizes the superiority and alienation of human experience in the world. Despite the fact that human life is meaningless and absurd, people can and do exert influence over their fate through freedom of choice. By Existentialistic point of view, everyone must accept responsibility for their actions. Individuals get anxious as they know they are ultimately responsible for their choices, behaviors, and values. They attempt to stop feeling anxious by refusing or dismissing their freedom. Existentialists criticize this fall into self-deception from a position of autonomy. They stress that, no matter how challenging it can be, people must take complete responsibility for their actions. If one wishes to live a reasonable and fulfilling life in a strange and absurd universe, one must first become completely conscious of the true essence of human existence and bravely embrace it.

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