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Existentialism

Literary Lens

Questions and analysis of text (*Heart of Darkness)*

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Questions.

1. **Who are the most influential proponents of this type of critical theory?**

Through the years a multitude of philosophers have defined what is deemed existentialism. It is believed that Immanuel Kant, who is regarded as the father of modern philosophy, began this school of thought. His writings were then been passed on to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, and Georg W. F. Hegel. From Hegel’s works, Soren Kierkegaard rose to prominence and contributed heavily to Christian Kierkegaard existentialism( A.K.A. Theistic existentialism).

Soren had abandoned Hegel’s philosophy of absolute idealism. He was a strong believer in Christ but he recognized that he was a follower through faith in contrast to logic. Kierkegaard believed that life itself was experienced in 3 different stages: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. According to Kierkegaard, the paths of pleasure (aesthetic), the pursuit of society (ethical), and the course to spirituality (religious) resulted in despair. Through his understandings of these stages, he concluded that every decision made redefines the individual and that existence precedes the awareness of self. To Kierkegaard, living is the art of the existentialist, the truth is subjective, God is real but non-existent, and there is nothing that the existentialist could be certain of.

“Modern” existentialism, as we know it today, was formalized by Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre drew upon existentialism through the works of Martin Heidigger. Heidigger addressed the motifs that have later defined existentialist thinking: concern of the relationship between the individual and society, the use of science of being unable to fully understand the human being through logic, the finite nature of life, the projection of one’s self through their freedom and choices, and the existence of anxiety and nihilism (as drawn upon by Friedrich Nietzsche). Sartre exercised a great amount of influence on Western philosophy and vocalized the philosophy of existentialism. He emphasized on the present and accentuated the fact that an individual’s actions define them because they have the freedom to make choices. He has claimed that every action committed involves a human setting and a human subjectivity; this is what made universal solutions impossible. Sartre believed that we were always in the making and that existence preceded essence. He also emphasized the fact that man has to decide what he is as well as what others are in society. Through his advocacy, he made himself famous at the end of World War II and had become the center point of existentialism, making it *the* philosophy to study.

**2. What are some of the major concepts, ideas, characteristics, etc., of this type of theory? How does one employ/use these concepts?**

“You are what you make yourself to be.”

Existentialism is a philosophical theory or approach that emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining his or her own development through acts of the will. Existentialism is known as a philosophy characterized by individualistic aspects. Though some contributing philosophers of existentialism were atheist, others (e.g. Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel) explored the concept of authentic existence for religious consciousness.

Of those whom were atheist, Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the “fathers” of existentialism, put forward the idea of the “death of God”, and that “if God does not exist then everything is permitted”. This eliminates the possible notions that our actions or life events are predetermined since God or any “higher power” does not exist, or has perished. This relates to the philosophies of humanism, which is person-centered and focuses on an individual’s pursuit of identity and development despite divine or supernatural predeterminations, and the pressures of conformism. Soren Kierkegaard’s idea of the Single Individual explains the concepts of freedom and responsibility. Due to the absence of any sort of predetermination in an individual’s life, the individual has the complete freedom to act the way they choose, and is therefore responsible for their actions as well as development. One employs this aspect of existentialism by viewing one’s life as a whole and reflecting on one’s actions. Just as with physics, Newton’s third law states that every occurring force brings upon an opposite and equal force. One’s responsibility is proportionate to freedom. One is “only as responsible as one is free”.

Another major concept of existentialism is Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Existence Precedes Essence”, where one’s identity is constituted neither by nature nor by culture, since to simply exist is precisely what makes up such an identity. Essence is a necessity; an entity/substance without it loses its identity. However, one’s essence is also not predetermined, but in fact determined, and occurs as a result of one’s choices or existence. One’s essence is a product of one’s decisions (existence), which arises out of one’s freedom, and therefore, an individual is responsible for what is produced. As a result, existence is an independent variable, often referred to in the study of mathematics, and essence is dependent. Therefore, existence precedes essence and it cannot be reversed.

Existentialism arises with the “collapse” of the idea that philosophies can provide substantive norms for existing. An existentialist is concerned with evaluating the authenticity of his or her life and of the societal situation. Acting in a certain manner because it is socially accepted as the norm, or “what one does” is inauthentic. Acting in the same manner can also be authentic if acting this way is something the individual freely chooses on his or her own, and is committed. Authenticity is not governed by the individual’s actions per se, but whether or not such actions are “one’s own” or “what one does”. As a result, authenticity relates to an individual’s freedom from the norms for existing. The individual is free and responsible for his or her own actions regardless of societal norms.

**3. What kinds of questions would an existential reading of a text produce/pose/employ, or kinds of explorations does an existential reading encourage.**

An existential reading of a text would pose questions that are concerned with the individual and how they define themselves. It would encourage exploration both through the text as well as through the reader. How might the characters portray existential traits? As well, how might the reader relate the reading in their own lives? They might explore how society has herded them into a certain mentality, and try to break away from them. The existential lens sheds light on the individual’s purpose in life, and how to change their attitudes or decisions despite what is “factual” or can’t be changed (i.e. ethnic background, age, gender etc.). The lens of existentialism implores people to contemplate the idea that they have absolute freedom in making choices, and must accept total responsibility for their actions. The very core of the reader’s concept of human nature and life will be challenged by looking at a text through an existential lens. In the text, questions would focus on character’s decision making, whether they are free to make them or not. It would be important to look at how characters may define themselves, whether it is due to facticity or from the acknowledgement that their decisions define them. Questions such as these will posed to the reader about their lives and the text.

What set circumstances (factual) are evident in my life?

What attitudes or decisions can I display to transcend from my facticity?

What does it mean to be human?

What is my purpose in life? Is there a purpose?

How does one find a purpose in life?

Where have I followed the herd, how can I stray and make my own path?

How do I define myself?

How do characters in text exemplify existential thought?

Do the characters accept freedom and responsibility for their choices?

In what ways does the author of the text portray existential ideas?

What aspects of the text are brought to the forefront through the existential lens? Which are moved to the background?

**4. What are the strengths of this type of reading practice?**

Reading through an existential lens is useful in many aspects. Since existential ideology stresses the importance of freedom of choice, this does not limit an individual from any cognitive boundaries, nor are their actions set within strict parameters of human behavior (evil or good). Thus, this forces the reader to critically analyze characters without a prejudiced opinion or a preconceived idea of what the character is, and this leaves more room for empathizing and understanding the character more deeply. Reading through an existential point of view also makes novels more engrossing since many characters in literature ask many existential questions such as “Why am I here?” and “What is the point?” etc. As opposed to the unemotional, scientific analysis in which one systematically and almost rationally determines the reasons for a character’s actions, existentialism allows the reader to become more emotionally involved and approach literature as if it were a piece of art; free to interpretation.

* More empathy with the characters regardless of their actions
* Better understanding of their choices
* More freedom of interpretation
* More open mindedness as even the most irrational could be seen as rational
* More immersion into the novel as most literature deals with existentialistic themes
* A more challenging perspective as there are no ‘good” and “bad” just choices; lots of gray areas
* Identification not Characterization

**5. Does the group see or feel that there are some weaknesses in this type of reading?**

Existential literary criticism is generally characterized by an emphasis on existence that precedes essence. This school of literary criticism leans heavily on the philosophical theory of existentialism. However, when applied as a literary lens there are a few weaknesses in the practice.

One of the major weaknesses found in this reading practice is a result ofthe complete rejection of traditional critical questions and concerns. In existentialism, one must accept that there are no pre-existing conditions or transcendental set of values by which a person’s behavior or morals are governed. This sense of arbitrary choice is one of the major tenets of existentialism but causes some problems in literary criticism. Rejecting all systems of values and rebelling against moral laws, makes it impossible to justify or explain an act. In existential criticism, there are no standards to compare or evaluate actions of characters. Attempting to introduce such standards would be a abandonment of one’s freedom and authenticity of the self. This creates a paradox, in this type of literary criticism.

Another weakness of existential criticism is the lack of a social philosophy. Existentialism is primarily concerned with the individual and human motivation. For the most part, it rarely addresses the interaction between people and the place of an individual within a social community. Since all meaning is self-determined, ordinary communication with others would be seen as unauthentic. From this idea we can infer that the more authentic a person becomes the more isolated they are. This raises an issue in literary analysis and criticism since we often deal with characters in relation to others within a body of work. This human interaction cannot be adequately addressed with existentialist philosophy as it rejects the totalitarian theories of Hegel and Marx but does not offer a satisfactory alternative.

In conclusion, the complete rejection of all ethics and values leaves it difficult to analyze or interpret the actions without compromising this principle of existentialism. The existentialist theory focuses almost exclusively on the individual and pays little attention to more social questions pertaining to politics of life and the social responsibility of a society.

Analysis of *Heart of Darkness*

Existentialist Analysis

When one thinks of existentialism, many thoughts come to mind, such as the reflection of being meaningless, absurdity, the death of god, the search for authenticity, existence preceding essence, the danger of dreams, and more. These thoughts and ideologies are extremely useful to keep in mind while reading a text with existentialism as a literary lens. It would be too hard to read a novel with just the vague lens of “existentialism”, but if instead, you read a novel with these common themes in mind, it is profoundly more efficient to let the existentialist components of the work rise from the text. The following analyses are from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a novella from 1899. Our group chose to analyze this novella because of its saturation of existentialist themes.

The first existentialist theme that was found in the text was that of dreams. “Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams…” (Page 32)

This section explains Marlow’s views on dreams and how they inadequately capture reality. According to existentialist philosophy, dreams are a negative force since they depict what has yet to be achieved. To the existentialist, one must carry out actions and make things happen rather than dream about them. Marlow struggles to grasp reality and shows some existential anxiety in this segment. Dreams can only go so far, but they stem from wasted thoughts. They are viewed as deceptive expectations that have only gone unfulfilled. According to existentialists, this internal struggle between dreams and reality is because we have the power to change things with the choices we make since we are condemned to be free. An action that has been carried out can only exist in a human setting in combination with human subjectivity, while dreams are limitless and convey what has yet to be achieved.

The quote below too incorporates dreams in its subject matter, but as far as the existentialist lens of the passage, refers to meaningless. Existentialists believe that life does not have an objective or universally known value, instead the individual must create their own value of life. This notion is exemplified upon Marlow’s return to home. “I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch money from each other...to dream their insignificant silly dreams” – pg. 133 as well as “I had some difficulty restraining myself from laughing in their faces, so full of stupid importance” – pg. 134. Marlow has issues, furthermore, a resentment, towards the inhabitants of the city are acting because he views their life as futile. This anger originates from the fact that his value of life differs greatly from those he is judging; hence this clash is what makes him have a sense of superiority.

Another large component of existentialism is the absurd. This notion was developed by Paul Sartre. The absurdist explores the human search for meaning in life and the inability to find any. A perfect example of absurdity is when Marlow witnesses a ship firing into the jungle, “…in the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent...there was a touch of insanity in the proceedings” pg. 22. Here Marlow finds this event absurd as it has no meaning and no relevance to him. He believes that the act of firing into nature is not only futile but beyond comprehension.

 “… these little things can make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness.” Pg. 60

 “These little things” refers to the internal mechanism of humans who have been conditioned to act according to the norm. When Marlow states, “when they are gone [these little things]”, he is discussing how when an individual has freedom from societal norms, his or her actions and choices are authentic and not according to social norms. This is the existentialist concept of authenticity. In this next passage, Marlow touches on the concept of “The Single Individual”, proposed by Soren Kierkegaard, “… you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness.” Here, existentialist thought emphasizes that the individual is a free and responsible agent determining his or her own development through certain acts (Jean-Paul Sartre) or decisions(Soren Kierkegaard)*.*

Sartre-like elements are plentiful in *Heart of Darkness,* especially the following quote which if viewed through an existentialist lens, is related to Sartre’s views on one’s essence. “I lived in an infernal mess of ruts, filings, nuts, bolts, spanners, hammers, ratchet-drills – things I abominate, because I don’t get on with them. “Pg. 129-130

This exemplifies Jean Paul Sartre’s argument that “existence precedes essence”. Tools can be a metaphor for essence preceding existence, for example, the purpose of a hammer is already defined, it is merely to hammer. This “infernal mess” of tools Marlow lives in can correlate to society. He considers his societal beliefs are already defined by current norms, values, and human nature etc. Marlow however, “abominates” these things, and doesn’t get along with these ideas because he asserts that existence precedes essence. Unlike tools, man is undefined and creates his own meaning.

The death of Kurtz is one of the most important parts of *Heart of Darkness*. Although Kurtz’s death could have many interpretations, with an existentialist lens, one prevails; a thought from Nietzsche; the death of God. One of the main themes that reoccur in existentialist ontology is the diminution of an omnipotent “God” that controls our lives, creating a world void of hope, and meaning. In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* the exchanges of thought exhibited by Marlow in regards to Kurtz illustrates a strong resemblance to the dilemma defined as Nietzsche’s “Death of God”.

In the beginning of the novel, Kurtz is described by his acquaintances as one who is beyond greatness, one whose power and riches enable him to be transcendent, like a supernatural being. An example can be found in pg. 31 & 32 in which the chief accountant first explains to Marlow that “He (Kurtz) is a remarkable person” and that “He (Kurtz) will be somebody in the Administration before long. They above—the Council in Europe, you know---mean him to be*.”*

Marlow’s admiration of Kurtz grows as he understands this to be a reaffirmation of the success that he could achieve and he strives throughout the entire novel to come to terms with this transcendent power. Kurtz’s colleagues almost worship him, and even Marlowe himself acknowledges the danger in unreserved faith that encompasses such characters as the Russian trader, and Kurtz’s wife. As a result, his opinion of Kurtz wavers and he is unsure of his convictions towards the ambiguous figure of Kurtz.

In the end, however, when Marlow finally confronts the God-like, Kurtz, he is disappointed by what he sees: a demoralized and ruined man. Ultimately Kurtz’s death is the final culmination of Nietzsche’s theory in which Marlowe now understands that no such “greatness” exists (which even Kurtz perceives in the end when he utters his last words, “The horror, the horror”) and the reality is as volatile as the “darkness” he journeys through.

The novella also incorporates the utmost tangential, yet interesting parts of existentialism. In fact, Conrad himself indirectly alludes to Marlow’s realization as the Buddha’s enlightenment. At the beginning of the story the primary narrator describes Marlow as “a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus flower.” (8) and in the last page of the narrative he describes Marlow as being “indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha.” Buddha, himself, threw away all hopes of luxury to attain “the truth” just as Marlow ventured through the unknown and ambiguous darkness to find meaning. The death of Kurtz or the eradication of Mara (the devil) when Buddha meditated under the Bodhi tree, enables them to finally reach enlightenment, to see reality as it truly is. This derivative explains the existentialist totality of being: the true nature of the world, suffering and chaos.

 In conclusion, *Heart of Darkness* is rich with certain existentialist elements, and if one reads this story through an existentialist literary lens, many insightful elements will appear. These elements at times can be depressing-the death of God, or at other times inspiring- the importance of authenticity. Regardless of what mood this text evokes, Joseph Conrad’s novel never fails to lend itself to existentialist thoughts.

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