

**Existential Approach in the Works of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and
Samuel Beckett**

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Abstract

The term 'existentialism' came into use in the late 19th and 20th century by some leading philosophers. In spite of doctrinal differences they unanimously accept that it begins not only with human subject but with feeling, doing (actions) and living (every moment) by individuals. People having existential attitude towards life have a sense of disorientation and profound confusion against the reality of life that is absurd in their opinion. Soren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a Danish religious philosopher is considered as the first existential philosopher, whose concern with individual existence, commitment and choice influence existentialism. Major existentialists like Jean Paul Sartre, a 20th C's greatest existential thinker, Frenchman, Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), Franz Kakfa (1883-1924), Martin Heidegger (1899-1976), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Albert Camus (1913-1960) contributed this school of thought and lighted the path for ensuring generation. The impact of their existential philosophy can be seen in the different genres of the British and American Literatures. Giving the new dimension to existentialism, James Joyce (A portrait of the Artist As A Young Man), Samuel Beckett (Waiting for Godot) and T.S. Eliot (The Waste Land) proved themselves as mile stones in British Literature. The paper explores existential Approach in the works of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett.

Keywords: Existentialism, existentialists, philosophy, theory, religion, barren, wasteland.

Existentialism is derived from the philosophy of Soren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855) explained in his books *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *The Concept of Dread* (1844) and *Sickness Unto Death* (1848) in which he insists that human beings may attain tranquility, peace of mind, freedom from worldly problems and spiritual serenity by the only way of worshipping God. His philosophy was based on Christianity. He was the first existential thinker. He shows his concern with individual's problematic life under which he is compelled to maintain his existence, choice and commitment. Further, he says that individuals have free will or choice and personal responsibility to create and shape their nature and are responsible for giving meaning to their life.

The existentialists believe that individuals make their choice using their free will and without seeking help from laws, traditions and social or ethical rules. Thus, only they are responsible for their choices. Freedom and responsibility walk together hand-in-hand.

Jean Paul Sartre emphasizes that every individual must understand that he has to lead his life alone with his unlimited responsibilities without other's help and with his goal set by him. Human beings inherit property, honour, money and other things but they cannot inherit aim and meaning of their lives from their parents. Further, he says that human life is meaningless or without purpose. That's why it is absurd. Individuals are left alone in this world without any aim, without other's help to survive within their world chosen by them. His philosophy is an amalgam of atheistic and pessimistic approach that human life is meaningless. He focuses on the fact that responsibility is related to human decisions.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky is a Russian writer, who, through his dilemmas in his novels, transcends cultural limitations or demarcations and frankly talks about the common problems of individuals in modern world.

Like other existentialists, Franz Kafka insists that every individual is caught up in a kind of system that is beyond other's imagination with a great ease; whereas, Albert Camus (1913-60) says in his novels that individuals have so caught up in their situations and in their own system that they can't cope with the reality and come out from that situations. Consequently, they find their existence futile. Moreover, he believes that neither individuals nor this world is absurd but the existence of individuals is absurd.

Like Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a German philosopher was concerned with existential phenomenology. He believes that individuals have been thrown into the world that is not made by them and that includes cultural and natural objects. Death is the end of ultimate meaninglessness of life.

Existentialism can be seen in the literary works of Samuel Beckett, James Joyce and T.S. Eliot who are considered great existentialists in the modern world and literature.

Waiting for Godot, written by Samuel Beckett, is about the non-action of vain waiting by Estragon and Vladimir, two tramps. They have existential attitude that is reflected by them saying - “Estragon: (giving up again). Nothing to be done.” (1) In the play, it is not mentioned who Godot is, and what they really expect him to do for them, but they are waiting for Godot who never comes to meet them.

Estragon: He should be here.

Vladimir: He didn't say for sure he'd come?

Estragon: And if he doesn't come?

Vladimir: We'll come back tomorrow.

Estragon: And then the day after tomorrow.

Vladimir: Possibly.

Estragon: And so on.

Vladimir: The point is

Estragon: Until he comes. (6)

In fact there is uncertainty in the minds of two tramps. They are not sure about the place and day they were to meet Godot. Talking about willow tree:

Vladimir: It must be dead.

Estragon: No more weeping. (6)

So, the playwright wants to convey his existential message to his audience that living is suffering that ends with death as far as it is concerned with human beings. Estragon and Vladimir don't belong to any specific religion, time and social circumstances but to eternity and to human desires for a sense of purpose. They are trapped between 'cradle and crane' and have to endure

suffering that is an inseparable part of human life in accordance with the thought of existentialism. As Estragon says:

Estragon: (very insidious). But what Saturday? And is it
Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (Pause.)
Or Monday? (Pause.) Or Friday?" (7)

The play is concerned with neither time, existence, reality, memory nor the past has any meaning or significance.

Samuel Beckett's play reflects total emptiness through its plot, stage structure, action, theme, time and language used by its characters. With the use of unpunctuated idiotic words and phrases of Lucky, Estragon, and Pozzo, Beckett puts forth the futility of communication. Vladimir calls the auditorium "that bog" which is in fact a wet, muddy area and in informal English 'toilet'. Perhaps, Beckett wants to bring about absurdity of universe through the absurd situation in which two tramps are. It seems that Beckett was convinced very much with the view of Calderon who said that man's greatest sin is to have been born.

Through the speech of Lucky, Beckett focuses on a god who is not sensitive to human or individual's suffering, a god whose own existence is suspicious. The whole play revolves round the repetition of cycle of life and death. Both of the tramps wait. They think of passing time, encounter Pozzo and his servant Lucky. They get disappointing message sent by Godot, delivered by his boy, they think of suicide then they decide to go somewhere else but don't go anywhere, even don't move from the place.

Beckett expresses the existential dilemma conversing with Georges Duthuit that the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express. *Waiting for Godot* was taged as 'Theatre of Absurd' by the drama critic Martin Esslin in 1961 in his book.

In 'The Waste Land', T.S. Eliot deals with the theme of existentialism. He talks about futility of modern life after the period of World War I. He criticizes the world to which he belongs. Having seen the bloodshed, slaughter of WW I and enmity among human races, he finds wasteland and barrenness of the mythical wasteland everywhere. He also focuses on spiritual draught in modern life.

He compares the negative condition of the mythical land of King Fisher with his lost reproductive power. The land has lost its fertility and nothing can grow in it. Even the crops and animals and birds have forgotten their reproductive power like its master (King Fisher). Both the wasteland and King Fisher have been cursed in this way and it could be removed by the spirituality. The poet strives to replace physical barrenness and sterility by the spirituality.

The poem is divided into five parts with their respective titles and themes. These parts are interwoven. First of all, he focuses on the wasteland of religion that lacks water.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? (Lines 19-20)

That is directly responsible for the barrenness of the land of King Fisher. Secondly, he lays emphasis on the wasteland of spirit where modern men and women like Belladonna and madam Sosotris are going towards demoralization.

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under the red rock,
Come in under the shadow of this red rock. (Lines 23-26)

In accordance with Bible, Jesus Christ is spiritual Rock that provides solace to the followers of Christ but in modern world people are morally degraded. That's why red rocks don't provide them shelter and relief.

Modern people are materialistic. They run after money, luxuries and comforts of mundane life. Finally, he talks of the wasteland where game of flesh (Albert and Lil & Clerk and typist) and the reproductive instinct has converted into physical gratification rather than a means of maintaining the cycle of birth:

What you get married for if you don't want children? (Line 165)

All the five parts of the poem were published in different time phases but while going through it, these seem to be product of continuous thinking of the poet. The first part of the poem titled "Burial of the Dead" suggests that the world after the World War I seems to be battlefield where dead bodies of men are laid unburied.

The corpse you planted last year in your garden,
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? (Lines 71-72)

As in his contemporary world, the whole world was divided into hostile groups to take revenge upon one another. Hearts of people were converted into stone that is a symbol of futility. They didn't hesitate to kill other people in war for money and possession of land. Theme of the first part is stony rubbish that suggests modern life.

"A Game of Chess", the second part of the poem, is taken from a play written by the English dramatist, Thomas Middleton (1580-1627) in which a war was waged between two hostile armies of England and Spain, and the white pieces and dark pieces represent England and Spainards because of their comparatively dark complexion. The poet suggests rapport between men and women in modern society like moves and counter moves. Men-women relationship lacks morals. They are engaged for momentary pleasure. According to Christianity, God has made man and woman for maintaining the birth rates on earth and for new generation.

It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said,
(She's had five ready, and nearly died of young George.)" (Lines 159-160)

So, Eliot wants to say that modern people are morally degrading. He conveys this message through the relationship of Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt with Mark Antony, Roman Commander. Another incident of seduction of young Philomela by King Tereus of Thrace (in ancient Italy) also echoes the same thing. King Tereus was husband of Philomela's sister, Procne. After that she was metamorphosed into a nightingale by God who felt pity on her condition: "The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king/ So rudely forced;" (Lines 99-100)

In other scene, relationship of a typist with a clerk is how to explain the sensory pleasure and fragility of life in slum: "I think we are in rat's alley/Where the dead men lost their bones." (Lines 115-116) In this episode, the clerk is in pensive mood, thinking over the issue of death and life after death or what follows after death: "Are you alive, or not?/ Is there nothing in your hand?" The pub episode also illustrates hollowness of the relationship between working classman (Albert) and woman (Lil) in London. "He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,/And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said." (Lines 148-149) In this part of the poem, the poet highlights the basic problem of conjugal morality.

"The Fire Sermon", the title of third part of this poem, is taken from Gautam Buddha's (563 BC - 483 BC) sermon who wanted to remove the negative and evil effect of fires of lust, hatred and passion.

Burning, burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest
Burning (Lines 308-311)

This part also shows attitude of morally degraded men and women

Exploring hands encounter no defense;

His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference. (Lines 240-242)

The fourth part of the poem, “Death by Water” refers the theme of death by drowning that is associated with the ancient Egyptian yearly ritual of the God’s head being thrown into the water by river Nile. That is symbol of death and resurrection of the God. The same kind of religious ritual is performed by the Hindu Bengali on the tenth day of Durga Pooja when they immerse decorated image or idol of the goddess Durga in the river Hoogly or the nearest river. But in the poem, Eliot stresses on death, not on resurrection or rebirth into a new life.

“What the Thunder Said”, the last part suggests three themes (i) The journey to Emma’s, a village near Jerusalem, taken from The New Testament, Luke XXIV, 13-31, (ii) It highlights the approach to the Chapel Perilous of the quest for holy Grail: “Here is no water but only rock/Rock and no water and the sandy rock”. (Lines 331-332) Thirdly, the title suggests the decay of Eastern Europe referring the Red (communists) Revolution of Russia under Czars in 1917. Consequently, refugees went to West Europe. On Easter’s third day, they talked about the holy shadow: “Who is the third who walks always beside you?” (Line 360)

Having inspired by the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Bible* and Buddhism, T.S. Eliot tries to give us essence of these sects.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih Shantih Shantih (Lines 433-434)

Coming to James Joyce, in “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man”, he strove that his novel would be his autobiographical novel. He wanted to convert his life into fiction. As an artist, Stephen Daedalus, the protagonist of the novel has distinct way of perceiving the world, faith, country and belief, etc. He finds no one with whom he could share his feelings: “There was no human figure near him nor any sound borne to him over the air.” (p. 132) So, there emerges a distance between him and the people around him. One day while walking with his father, Stephen, he tries to keep himself absorbed in his father’s talking but he feels— “His very brain

was sick and powerless. He could scarcely interpret the letters of the signboards of the shops.” (p.70) Gradually, he feels alienated, whereas other people think that Stephen has transformed into an egoist. Thus, he undergoes through a traumatic situation. His name also suggests negative approach of his life. It carries Christian and Greek myths. In fact, Stephen was the name of first Christian martyr who sacrificed his life for reasons of faith, whereas in Greek mythology Daedalus, a great artificer and his son Icarus were imprisoned in the labyrinth and they made effort to escape. During their escape Icarus flew so high in the sky that his waxed wings were melted because of sun’s heat and plunged to his death into the sea.

Like Daedalus, Stephen also wants to escape from Dublin where he doesn’t find any means of releasing his spiritual, cultural and aesthetic instincts or traits. The conflict perpetually haunted his mind about spirituality and mundane life —

“He moaned to himself like some baffled bowling ball.” (p. 75)

“To be alone with his soul, to examine his conscience, to meet his sins face to face, to recall their times and manners and circumstances, to weep over them. He could not weep. He could not summon them to his memory, He felt only an ache of soul and body.” (p. 105)

In fact, the protagonist is hovering between worldly life and spirituality. It became difficult for him to choose one path. “... he had dared to wear the mask of holiness before the tabernacle while his soul within was a living mass of corruption.” (p. 105)

After encountering with the dark reality of life and reimbursing on the loss of his innocence he considers it as a ‘violent’ sin before an unknown priest in Dublin. Now his conscience pulls him towards two polarized directions. One leads him to enjoy carnal delight endlessly whereas other shows him the path of repulsion over his sins. Consequently, he has to bear spiritual death. On the verge of his maturity from childhood to adolescence he feels alienated and thinks — “He had been lost or had wandered out of existence for he no longer existed.” (p. 70) He doesn’t find things interesting around him that could give him delight. During

the conversation of his father with his friends, Stephen feels - "... he was drifting amid life like the barren shell of the moon." (p. 73) Gradually, he loses interest in spirituality and feels pleasure in worldly life. He felt some dark presence moving irresistibly upon him from the darkness, a presence subtle and murmurous as a flood filling him wholly with itself. It's murmur besieged his ears like the murmur of some multiple in sleep; its subtle streams penetrated his being. (p.76)

Towards the end of the novel, Stephen Daedalus breaks the shackles of cultural restraints and manages to escape from Ireland for his aesthetic freedom. Stephen Daedalus feels trapped in social cultural milieu that doesn't provide him aesthetic liberty and chance to prove him good artist in Ireland. In fact, he wants:

"I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use - silence, exile and cunning ... I do not fear to be alone or to be spurned for another or to leave whatever I have to leave. And I am not afraid to make a mistake, even a great mistake, a lifelong mistake, and perhaps as long as eternity too." (p. 191)

Contrary to it, in other people's opinion, Stephen wants to break restraints of his religion Catholicism and his nationalism that doesn't allow him to pursue his literary career. In the ending of the novel Stephen leaves his country, Ireland— "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." (p. 196)

People also think about Stephen that he is a man of ego who doesn't respect feeling of others. So, all such circumstances are responsible for his alienation.

James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett are three renowned modern existentialists who deal with the internal world of people or their protagonists and their working of minds. They reveal existential attitude in their characterization. It proves disastrous and sometimes in the case of Stephen Daedalus, accelerates his aesthetic career.

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TS Eliot, *The Waste Land*. I have no idea what the IQs of these gentlemen are but I don't think the same criterion applies when you're talking about writers, composers, comedians and artists. Few would dispute that Beethoven was a musical genius, that Picasso was an artistic genius, that Shakespeare was a literary genius and that Peter Sellers was a comedic genius but does that mean that every note Beethoven wrote was a work of genius? or that every line penned by Shakespeare was a work of genius? In fact in *The Faber Guide to Samuel Beckett* there is a lengthy section on "pseudocouples" which notes that "[P]airs of characters pervade Beckett's terrain like animals in search of an ark." Beckett may have come to dislike the work but he pottered around with it for years. Existential philosophy became prevalent in the twentieth century as a symbol of the destruction of culture and tradition following World War II, asserting the hopelessness of humanity and focusing on life in a more honest but pessimistic manner than other socialistic philosophies. In the same approach, Sartre states that we live in a world of freedom and ontological responsibility where there are no certainties. Realization of uncertainty is impossible without self-awareness, and anxiety results from the recognition due to the fact that the individual is surrounded. Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* and Samuel Beckett's Existential works are difficult to describe because the definition of existentialism covers a wide range of ideas and influences almost to the point of ambiguity. Even Beckett himself states that he has no idea who Godot is, and that he would have made it clear in the play if he did (Ben-Zvi 141-142). Beckett makes the misdirection of people who seek to find out who Godot is in his statement that "the great success of *Waiting For Godot* has arisen from a misunderstanding: critics and public alike were busy in allegorical or symbolic terms a play which strove at all costs to avoid definition" (Ben-Zvi 142). The relationship between Pozzo and Lucky in the first act is an example of the notion that humanity must look away from religion as a source of the meaning of life. The dynamic between Pozzo and Lucky in the first act reflects the relationship some people have with their religion. between James Joyce's work and Samuel Beckett's, taking into account the fact that the latter has been, in his youth, a sort of literary apprentice, their friendship being one of the main reasons in the dialectical study of their creations. What interests us most is the critical aligning of some fractures from their writings, in order to find the junction of themes and structure, the way in which Beckett takes Joyce's leitmotifs and transforms them, filtering them into personal marks of his style. Although Beckett detaches himself, in a way, from the influence of his master, by adopting ... James Augustine Aloysius Joyce is one of the foremost figures in literature in the XXth century. Born in Dublin, on the 2.