



Examining the Influence of Existential and Alienation Philosophy on the Literary Works of Theodore Dreiser's Contemporaries

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Abstract: Existentialism is a philosophical discourse around an individual's freedom and the autonomy of thought processes in decision-making. It acknowledges the ceaseless freedom of humans while also identifying the absurdity of their existence and the inevitability of mortality. The philosophy suggests that individuals face an existential predicament when they try to find their creative potential within social restrictions that often obstruct their freedom. It emerged as a reaction against the perceived distortion of values in capitalist societies, supporting the concept of alienation. However, contrasting direct alienation, existentialism involves a keen awareness of it. These philosophical ideas have influenced modern American fiction, shaping narratives that delve into the intricate relationship between individual autonomy, societal constraints, and the existential challenges of human existence.

Index Terms- Existentialism, Alienation, Constraints, Predicament, Distortion.

INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is a philosophical vision that revolves around man's existence, his place and importance in the world and his relationship with God. The fundamental theme of existentialism is the eternal freedom of man, his ability to think independently and his power to make decisions. When a man finds himself amidst undesirable forms of existence, the only way out is to detach himself from the situation and emerge dissatisfied with the present situation. It suggests that man's existence is absurd as his end is inevitable. He experiences an existential dilemma when he realises it is impossible to develop and find his potential in a social world that is hostile to his freedom. Man creates his world based on his understanding of nature's and society's laws. However, while trying to create a world that is safe and secure, he faces opposition from social forces and his biological urges. This leads to a dilemma where he must decide whether to adjust to his needs or the world around him. Existential philosophers suggest that if a man wants to achieve something in life, he must detach himself from the common people. 'Man is advised to renounce the world to break all ties with it, to free 'himself', to isolate himself from the social milieu - so that he may sink himself from his inner being...' (Ovcharenko, A., 1978, p.14.)

Soren Kierkegaard is considered one of the most influential existential thinkers of the nineteenth century. In his book "Either/Or", He criticized the hypocrisies of his time. His philosophy's central theme is the despair inherent in all human life. He believed that humans are constantly afraid of the annihilation of their personalities through death. To overcome this despair, Kierkegaard suggested that one should seek to unite oneself with the universal human, which is the love of God, and to humble oneself before God. According to Finkelstein, an American critic: 'every man must carry his 'personal despair' or 'existential predicament' wherever he goes'. (Finkelstein, 1965, p. 33.)

To him, this world is inimical and treacherous instead of a place where he can stretch his wings and grow. ‘The whole existence frightens me the most inexplicable thing of all is my existence.’ (Reinhardt, 1952, p. 27.)

In his book “Fear and Trembling”, Kierkegaard affirms the need to accept life as ‘absurd’. Kierkegaard asserts the necessity of embracing life’s inherent absurdity. He argues that it is important to acknowledge and accept the irrational and unpredictable aspects of life.

Fyodor Dostoevsky’s character, Ivan Dostoevsky asserts that faith is the key to lightening human suffering caused by exploitation. He criticizes science, reason, and enlightenment as selfish and morally corrupt, aligning himself with atheistic existentialism. Dostoevsky, inadvertently, creates a character symbolizing atheistic existentialism rather than a social activist. Friedrich Nietzsche, in “The Will to Power,” explores the role of greed in shaping rationality, democracy and morality, introducing the concept of the ‘Superman.’ Albert Camus, in “The Stranger,” examines existentialist perspectives on hypocrisy, capital punishment and freedom. He urges contempt for illogical connections and the belief in life’s purpose. Jean-Paul Sartre, an atheistic existentialist, emphasizes personal responsibility and rejects the myth of God’s existence. In “Nausea,” he illustrates existential challenges through Roquentin. Karl Marx addresses the human dilemma arising from class distinctions, caste disparities and capitalist exploitation, emphasizing the misuse of scientific knowledge. Existentialism emerged in response to biased values in capitalist societies, focusing on the growth of alienation. Individuals confront existential dilemmas in the struggle against social hostility, realizing their vulnerability and isolation. It, therefore, is not exactly alienation but an alertness of alienation: ‘It is an awareness of alienation accepting it as the eternal condition of people in society and it tries to combat it by going in society, out of society.’ (Finkelstein, 1965, p. 162.)

Existential writers portray the external world as harsh, antagonistic and bleak, reflecting the individual’s internal fears, conflicts and distress. This portrayal originates from the belief that the world functions as an irrational jungle, prompting individuals to emancipate themselves through acts of initial aggression and irrational conduct. Alienation, an inescapable theme, also arises from life’s perceived meaninglessness and desolation. Realism is presented as strange, cruel and constrained by the future spectre of death, increasing the sense of life’s insignificance. The rise of alienation is suggested as a socio-psychological phenomenon, attributed to the impact of ascending middle-class values and escalating materialism. The ruthless pursuit of wealth and material gain makes insensitive individuals, distracting them from fundamental life objectives.

Existentialism and alienation have become important themes in modern American fiction, particularly catalyzed by the disappointment following the two World Wars. An inescapable scepticism towards human progress emerged, portraying a miserable future and picturing human existence as futile. Modern American writers have clearly illustrated this sense of victimhood, portraying individuals who, while weak and impotent, struggle with alienation amid social pressures. The protagonists in the literary works of the writers are not heroic figures but rather ordinary individuals trapped in the complexities of superficial paths to success. This thematic exploration serves as a thoughtful observation of the challenges faced by individuals in searching for a world marred by social forces.

In the works of Dos Passos, protagonists wrestle with the harsh realities of society, experiencing suffering upon adjustment into its complex systems. He paints a world where social and political systems impose fixed ideologies on individuals, leading those who diverge into a dilemma resulting in alienation. The dominance of external powers over individuals, fighting man against man, is represented in the context of war, where exploitation is painfully evident. Characters like Dan Fuselli, George Baldwin, J. Ward Moorehouse, Dick Savage, Charley Anderson, Jed Morris, Chuck Crawford, Frank Worthington and the Teamsters surrender to the system, sacrificing their peace of mind. His characters can be categorized as social rebels who reject the system at the cost of material loss but gain moral integrity. Examples include John Andrews, Ben Compton, Glen Spotswood, Willard Carol, Paul Graves, and Terry Bryant. Another group comprises characters who reconcile with their situation, adopting an existential approach and rarely attempting to break free from alienation. Blackie Bowman is portrayed as a thoroughly alienated character. His characters negotiate with an inflexible world, reluctantly participating in life’s activities, their dissatisfaction expressing a sense of alienation.

Ernest Hemingway, in contrast, explores the dilemma of individuals in a war-scarred world, highlighting their alienation and loneliness. His characters engage in the war despite its natural brutality, seeking love, closeness and fulfilment in a foreign and lonely environment. In “A Farewell to Arms,” Fredric Henry is physically and psychologically wounded by war, experiencing alienation and confusion following the death of his beloved, Catherine. “For Whom the Bell Tolls” portrays the suffering of man amidst large-scale killings, with Robert Jordan struggling with the urge to avoid capture through self-harm. “The Sun Also Rises” features characters like Jake Barnes, physically impaired by war, and a group of expatriates finding life devoid of meaning. In “The Old Man and

The Sea,” Santiago struggles for survival, symbolizing the dilemma of a man unwillingly drawn into the hardships of war.

Saul Bellow probes into the crisis psychology of Americans in works such as “The Victim,” “Seize the Day,” and “Herzog,” further exploring the intricacies of existential dilemmas and alienation in the modern world. Alfred Kazin rightly remarks: ‘Each of these narratives was a kind of survival kit for a period in which survival became all too real a question for many Americans.’ (Kazin, 1980, p. 130.) The protagonists in Saul Bellow’s stories represent singular consciousness and boldness, yet they carefully assess the existential costs of their existence. Bellow, characterizing this world as inherently disgraceful, imbues his novels with existential undertones, depicting heroes wrestling with a reality governed by unfamiliar and indifferent forces. This existential milieu is particularly evident in Bellow’s works, notably “The Victim” and “Seize the Day,” where characters confront irrationality and struggle with the ramifications of social inequality. In “The Victim,” the protagonist Asa Leventhal, subjected to persecution, oppression and discriminatory terror by a Gentile, innocently raises an important question that summarizes the essence of existential predicaments. Bellow’s narrative intricately explores the characters’ weakness in the world’s irrationality and their enduring experiences of inequality. The academic analysis of Bellow’s works reveals a profound engagement with existential themes, exposing the complexities and challenges inherent in the human condition within a social context marked by disparity and capriciousness. ‘Wait a minute, what is your idea of who runs the things?’ (Kazin, 1980, p. 136.)

In Saul Bellow’s “Herzog,” a distinctive Heideggerian perspective is expressed through the character Herzog, who descends into madness following the emotional separation from his beloved daughter. Herzog paradoxically asserts his happiness within his seclusion and insane state, embodying a Heideggerian view that suggests an alternative understanding of well-being and existence.

An existentialist writer, Arthur Miller employs his works to portray individuals as unfortunate victims of social norms and ethical standards. Rather than solely attributing social problems to external forces, Miller clarifies the image of the indecisive individual who makes errors and ultimately succumbs to the consequences of their actions. Examples include Joe Keller in “All My Sons” and Willy Loman in “Death of a Salesman,” both victims of the attraction of quick and effortless success. Their pursuit of wealth leads them to dishonesty, betrayal, and even murder. Distressed by their choices, they experience alienation and in a tragic turn, seek liberation through suicide.

In “All My Sons,” Joe Keller’s sons face disappointment when the manager is arrested, with one son driven to suicide due to moral concerns for his father’s guilt and the other abandoning his father. Joe Keller, facing alienation and anguish from his sons, ultimately takes his own life. In “Death of a Salesman,” Miller seemingly criticizes capitalism, but a deeper analysis reveals a deeper exploration of the human condition. The play explains the tragic consequences of a relentless pursuit of the American Dream, highlighting the alienation and despair that arise when the promises of success and prosperity disillusion individuals. This approach supports existential themes, emphasizing the individual’s internal struggles and the consequences of their actions within the framework of societal expectations. Emphasizing this Richard Watts writes: ‘Loman’s real tragedy was not his failure in business or his discovery of the arrival of old age, but his surrender to the false idea of success’. (Finkelstein, 1965, p. 254)

Dreiser, along with his peer American writers, described various literary and philosophical constructions to explore existential themes and the inescapable sense of alienation experienced by characters navigating the tumultuous landscape of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America. Theodore Dreiser was greatly influenced by Karl Marx’s ideas and believed that social barriers, especially those based on class and racial discrimination, obstruct individual growth. This viewpoint is evident in his novel “An American Tragedy”, where the protagonist, Clyde, struggles with challenges restricted by society’s flawed moral standards. Dreiser recognizes the importance of religion but also criticizes superficial actions like hymn singing, which he sees as failing to provide true life benefits. Characters such as Jennie Gerhardt and Sister Carrie in Dreiser’s novels confront difficulties due to the effects of capitalism. The consciousness of money’s power becomes a central theme, showcasing how economic inequalities impact people’s lives. However, Dreiser shows that the pursuit of material success often leads to feelings of alienation. For instance, Clyde in “An American Tragedy” abandons his roots for a more lavish lifestyle, only to feel immense guilt and loneliness. This same theme resonates in the “Cowperwood Trilogy,” where the character Cowperwood achieves financial success but battles with a sense of isolation.

Dreiser’s depiction clearly illustrates how the relentless pursuit of wealth not only stresses the separating gaps of class division but also cultivates an enhanced consciousness of one’s social standing. This unyielding drive for financial prosperity, as depicted by Dreiser, catalyzes individuals to become increasingly distanced from their interpersonal connections and sense of identity. The real disconnect felt by characters in his narratives reaffirms a

poignant truth that echoes in contemporary society: deep-rooted social disparities profoundly shape individuals' lived experiences and the dynamics of their relationships.

This enduring thematic importance highlights the serious requirement to challenge and redress such systemic inequalities for the collective well-being of society. In Dreiser's narrative world, the pursuit of material wealth serves as a blunt tale for the broader socioeconomic realities that continue to shape our present-day existence. As such, his exploration of the consequences of this relentless pursuit serves as a poignant reminder of the imperative to strive for a more equitable and inclusive social framework.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design uses a diverse range of methodologies. Primary data is gathered from literary works authored by various writers, serving as the foundational material for analysis. Secondary sources utilized in this study include books explaining various philosophical perspectives, composed by a range of authors. Additionally, electronic content sourced from scholarly research papers supplements the investigative process. The researcher tries to comprehensively analyse existential and alienation philosophies as they pertain to the shaping of Dreiser's literary oeuvre. This approach combines both primary and secondary sources to provide a multifaceted examination of the thematic foundations present within Dreiser's works.

CONCLUSION

The themes of existentialism and alienation emerge prominently in twentieth-century American fiction, with writers like Dreiser portraying characters struggling with existential dilemmas caused by declining ethical standards and the erosion of human values. Their works portray individuals as victims of the corrosive influence of materialism and a new morality that confuses fundamental human principles. These writers highlight the struggles of individuals trapped in the pursuit of happiness defined by middle-class ideals, leading to a sense of alienation and disconnection from both society and self. In attempting to follow societal norms, characters find themselves in a quandary. The quest for success and contentment often leads to alienation, disconnecting individuals from society and their sense of self. This description highlights the dual nature of wealth as a two-edged sword, bringing success but also contributing to a profound sense of isolation. This paper seeks to present a clear and comprehensive understanding of the profound influence of existential and alienation philosophy on Theodore Dreiser's literary oeuvre. Through this exploration, the writer aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the intersection of philosophy and literature, shedding light on the enduring relevance of Dreiser's works in the context of existential and alienation thought.

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