

The Existential Angst: A Study of J.K Rowling's Harry Potter Series

Dr. S. Kanya Kumari

Dept. of English

University College of Engineering & Technology

Acharya Nagarjuna University

Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India

kanyakumari.anu@gmail.com

Abstract

'The Existential Angst' examines the Harry Potter series through the lens of existentialism. Existentialism in Harry Potter is a discussion of Jean-Paul Sartre's atheistic existential philosophy in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. The chapter evaluates three main characters, Harry Potter, Severus Snape, and Lord Voldemort, and the ways in which their choices and lifestyles exhibit elements from Jean-Paul Sartre's atheistic existentialism.

Keywords: The Existential Angst, Harry Potter series Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, Atheistic existential philosophy, J.K. Rowling, Three main characters: Harry Potter, Severus Snape, and Lord Voldemort, Choices and lifestyles, Elements of Jean-Paul Sartre's atheistic existentialism

Existentialism is a principle that does render human life possible. It affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity. Existentialism says that till man makes a significant choice, he is nothing; just he simply exists with meaningless angst and distress. It tries to give a solution for the problem of knowing meaning within existence. Human being brings a meaning to life with the adoption of some serious social or political reason. As in religion there are no meanings before one's own existence, hence the man should discover meaning for themselves. Existentialist belief has earned a dogmatic status for pessimism and even full-blown nihilism. This status is somewhat apprehensible. The thought of discovering meaning seems nonsense and meaningless. A number of the popular phrases related with existential philosophy, such as angst, boredom, or fear, likewise attack the common man with pessimism. But, the existential philosophical never declares a pessimistic thought of civilization or realism. In fact, this

philosophy talks about the people who are knowledgeable and ethical has the abundant ability to bring a great change in the world. Positive change is then essential; otherwise existence is a complete void. To put it in our own way, it is not just enough to “be.” One has to be “something” or life really lacks meaning or purpose. From this argument, existentialism has the potential to indeed be a very positive means of approaching reality.

Some of the existential literary scholars are Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka. Among them, Sartre is the promulgator of existentialism. He became one of the strong existential thinkers of the twentieth century. Inimitably, Sartre was the only person to turn down the Nobel Prize in Literature award. Being an activist he dedicated his life to the development of society. In fact, Sartre “did the most to give existentialism form and popularity, and art and literature have been impacted by existentialism because of its unusually effective methods of expression”. (Holman 185) The existential Philosopher Sartre gained importance when he proposed that everybody is responsible for their actions which depend on their choices but not on their nature. . During World War II, Sartre and his followers worried about the news of atrocities. They started arguing with other on human existence and human nature, wondering why and how people could allow each other to suffer from "repressive political, social, economic, religious ... policies or systems" (Anderson 56). As a result, Thomas Anderson says Sartre intended for existentialism to encourage people to change the world (11). The theory of existentialism has not satisfied all of the philosophers, so as a result there emerged two divisions: Christian existentialism and atheistic existentialism. This is a discussion of atheistic existentialism in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series based on Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy.

When it comes to existentialism in Harry Potter series, God or religion does not present. So, atheistic existentialism is the spine of the series. J.K. Rowling strongly believes that each and everyone in the world is unique and can make a difference. So believing in that, she rejects Christian existentialism. No character's life is defined before he or she was born, as Christian existentialism dictates. The greatest significant theme in the novels is that all the characters in the novels must produce their identity. One’s own identity is depended on his selection of good and bad. No character in the novels depends upon God to define their purpose. “Those characters and institutions which do not accept responsibility for their actions practice "bad faith," or refuse to accept responsibility for personal choices. They desire to become God, or find some justification

for their existence” (Anderson 16). This is how each character in the series justifying existential qualities.

Atheistic existentialists base their theory claiming that existence precedes essence. People are born and live, but their essence, or identity, must come after. A person is merely present in the world until he or she has acted. Once that person has acted in any way, he or she becomes the product of his or her actions. Each person is an individual and creates his or her own existence (Sartre 15). Atheistic existentialists do not rely on a Bible or other religious text to guide their lives. They are the sum of their actions, and each person determines his or her identity.

The first and most basic principle in atheistic existentialism, Sartre argues, is subjectivity. Subjectivity claims that a man’s action is based upon his past choices. In his theory, a desire to do something is encouraged by past actions. The values and ethics of a human being depends upon the constant decisions he takes in his past which determine his present and future actions.

A subcategory of subjectivity is the concept of affirmation. Affirmation deals with creation of choices. In affirmation, a person “who chooses his or her actions is also creating his or her perception of the perfect human being: the person all humans want to be” (Sartre 16-17). Choosing one path over another places a higher value on the selected path, and then affirms that is the path all men and women should choose because in their eyes, individual choices are the most beneficial.

In existentialism bad faith exists. The individual who observes bad faith denies that his existence is the result of his past choices. He also wants to gain a supreme and eternal power. (Anderson 16). When a person practices bad faith, he or she desires to "give him or herself" some justifiable meaning for his or her existence (Anderson 18).

The themes presented in the novels lay a great emphasis on atheistic existentialism. The novels convey a message that the readers follow existential traits in the characters and urge them to follow Harry and Severus Snape. Readers must take action against apathy and evil, for it is only action that stimulates positive change in the world.

Readers, who remain passive in their own lives, like Lord Voldemort and his followers, not only do not help, but abolish any hope for progress. They even harm others by being passive, revealing very real social and political inferences for today’s society.

The choice of Lily Potter, the mother of Harry Potter changes the world for good. She sacrifices her life for the sake of her son. When Lord Voldemort wants to kill Harry, the so-called boy named in the prophecy that will defeat and kill Voldemort. In order to save her son from Voldemort's killing curse, Lily steps in and takes Harry's place. Voldemort asks her to "step aside" (*Deathly Hallows* 344). But Lily chooses to protect her son. The choices the characters make are usually in an effort to defeat cruel regimes.

Lily's sacrifice gives Harry an ultimate power which no great wizard possess. Since Lily's death was a great sacrifice, Harry is given complete protection from evil Lord, and Harry does not die when Voldemort tries to kill him. Love protects him. Instead, Lord Voldemort himself nearly destroyed. This action of Lily's enables Harry to become the one who can defeat Lord Voldemort and ensure the wizarding world's security from Lord Voldemort's second reign of oppression.

All through the series, Harry Potter faces elements of injustice and battles against power. Harry is just an eleven year old boy when he starts his campaign against corrupt power in the wizarding world. Critic Christopher Routledge says he never wavers in his fight for justice, a main tenet of the novels (205). Harry not only fights with his archenemy, Voldemort but also at Diagon Alley, his aunt's house, at School, and even against the Ministry of Magic. Harry creates his identity in spite of all these odds. Christopher Routledge says "Harry's decision not to join the Slytherin house at school underlines an existential message that identity and social position can be a matter of choice" (209). According to Professor Dumbledore, Harry's choice to join Gryffindor, rather than to allow the Sorting Hat to decide Harry's future, suggests he is a product of his choices. Dumbledore tells Harry about the Sorting Hat's desire to place Harry in Slytherin, "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (*Chamber of Secrets* 333). Dumbledore understands that Harry is very clear about his and making choices about what he wants to be. Harry's choice of the House demonstrates Sartre's existential philosophy. He does not want to join Slytherin because of its reputation for producing the arrogant, the prejudiced, and the most famous Dark wizard in the world. Harry is not a product of his blood, but rather a product of his actions. Edmund Kern argues that Harry is able to get the Stone "not because he intends to use it, but because he intends to protect it from misuse, an intention that has motivated his actions right from the start" (*The Wisdom of Harry Potter* 92-93).

Harry's selection of choices for a lifelong fight against unjust power of people and institutions make him a real hero. In spite of his few choices, he still chooses to fight for the good side. Whether he is fighting against his proud family or the symbol of death, Voldemort, Harry never sways in his fight and is very confident that justice prevails. All of Harry's choices evidence Sartre's existential philosophy because Harry wants only good to triumph. Harry marks his own signature in leading the people for greater good.

The second character that comes across in the series that practices Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy is Severus Snape. Severus Snape is Hogwarts Potions teacher. He is considered as a person of complexity. In the beginning of the series he seems to be hostile and hateful to Harry Potter but at the end of the series readers come to know he is a loyal to Head Master Dumbledore. Snape also saves Harry's life numerous times and risks his life spying for Professor Dumbledore. Because of Snape's conflicting behavior, readers doubt the loyalty of Snape, whether he is a faithful ally of the Order of the Phoenix or serves Lord Voldemort and the Death Eaters.

The last book of the series, Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows cleared the doubts of readers about Snape's controversial. The truth is though Snape is cruel and wild, is indeed a member of the Order of Phoenix, intent on protecting Harry Potter from Voldemort and death eaters. According to Sartre a person's past choices influence a person to make similar choices in the present and future. But in the case of Snape it was not possible because his past actions and motives were unclear.

According to theistic existentialism, an identity is formed before the person born. Snape exhibits atheistic existentialism through his choice to change from evil to good. Severus Snape, at different points in his life, was evil, serving as one of Lord Voldemort's most reliable Death Eaters and murdering innocent people. He proves his identity is not predetermined by making a drastic change later in his life when he becomes one of the Order of the Phoenix's strongest and most valuable wizards. He does not maintain a single identity as one would see in Christian existentialism, but instead Snape has the ability to shape who he is, which the basic idea of atheistic existentialism.

According to Sartre's theory, three principles define whether a person practices bad faith or not. The first one is whether a person advocates freedom or not, second, whether a person understands their actions and the third is whether a person accepts responsibility for those actions.

Snape repudiates bad faith as he renounces his old ideology. Being a member of the Order of the Phoenix, he understands his actions. He plays a very responsible role in protecting Harry Potter. Snape accepts absolute responsibility for his past actions and future choices, even attempting to make amends for those past choices by risking his life for the protection of Lily's son. He also regrets his choice to serve Lord Voldemort, a choice that caused the death of his beloved Lily.

While Harry Potter character stands for true existentialism, Severus Snape embraces both good and bad existentialism. When coming to Lord Voldemort, his whole existence is driven by a belief in fate and a refusal to accept responsibility for his actions. Existentialism claims that all humans are free from fate, destiny, or any other pre-conceived identity, but Voldemort and his Death Eaters, live as though their lives are predetermined and their destiny is to rule over the wizarding world, refusing to accept responsibility for their own actions. In order to rule the wizarding world, however, Voldemort believes he must first conquer Great Britain's wizarding population, beginning with muggles, or non-magical people. Margaret Oakes writes, "Voldemort wants to gain control over much of the wizarding world, but also is obsessed with obliterating, in Holocaust fashion, all of those wizards with wholly or partially muggle backgrounds" (Oakes 123). Lord Voldemort's choices and actions demonstrate bad faith in existentialism. He believes in fate and always blames others for his position in the world. He blames all muggles for the death of his mother and his life in an orphanage. When his parents separated, he started hating muggles discovering that his muggle father abandoned him and his witch mother. He consistently blames others for his life's circumstances, always denying responsibility for his choices. Voldemort exists as an opponent of freedom and a challenger of existentialism.

Voldemort's choice to believe in the prophecy killed an entire innocent people. Because of his choice, Voldemort ultimately provides Harry with his own unique powers. They include the ability to speak with snakes, known as "parseltongue," and through the scar an ability to see Voldemort's inner thoughts and feeling of emotions. Voldemort's choice to single out one child creates "unforeseen consequences," especially because "Voldemort's actions affect the options and motivations of others as they make their own choices" (Deavel 143).

Voldemort confirms his evil identity through his choices and affirms this identity to others through his actions. He wages a second war against muggles and overtakes the Ministry of Magic, employing his new motto: Magic is Might. His new motto illustrates what he values is magic. By placing value on magic, Voldemort affirms to his followers what their values should also be. As

Sartre says, when a person makes a choice and values one thing above another, "he or she is creating a certain image of many of his own choosing" (18).

Harry Potter, Severus Snape, and Lord Voldemort are not only just three characters in J.K. Rowling's series that exhibit the elements of existentialism but also characters such as Albus Dumbledore exhibit the good qualities of existentialism, while characters such as Minister Cornelius Fudge exhibit bad faith. Rowling signifies her message very clearly through the division of good and evil. She illustrates to be a good person; one must accept responsibility for their actions, while evil people do not take the responsibility for their actions and practice bad faith.

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