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**An Existentialist Reading of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man  
and the Sea* and Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl***

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*To my family who grant me the chance to create an authentic self*

## Abstract

Human existence has been a subject of controversy in philosophy, psychology and literature. Synthesizing ideas of existentialist thinkers into a pragmatic realistic order, Existential psychotherapy aims to rehabilitate a stance which enables us to go beyond the surface of human casual anxieties to dig up the source of anxiety in relation to three ultimate concerns; death, isolation and freedom rooted deep in our unconscious. With an interdisciplinary approach, this thesis attempt to examine how Sadeq Hedayat in *The Blind Owl* and Ernest Hemingway in *The Old Man and The Sea* encounter death, existential isolation and freedom applying theories of Existential Psychotherapists, particularly theories of Ervin D. Yalom and Rollo May. The present thesis intends to answer following questions: How do Hedayat and Hemingway expose the heroes of *The Blind Owl* and *The Old Man and The Sea* to death, existential isolation and freedom as a 'boundary situations' and what defense mechanisms do they erect against the resultant anxiety? In their exposition to these ultimate concerns are the characters capable of creating an authentic self? The findings underscore that first Hedayat and Hemingway erect specific defense mechanisms- ultimate rescuer, heroism, fusion- to shield their characters from anxiety that death, isolation and freedom bring about. As these defense mechanisms blur ego boundaries and burry the anxiety, a sense of cozy familiarity and forgetfulness pall upon the individuals. Confronting the characters with each one of these ultimate concerns, the writers shatter the safety and numbness which these defense mechanisms create to make human being anxious about his/her Dasein or being-in-the world. Consequently, anxiety is a guide toward authoring an authentic self in relation to others as a Dasein.

Key words: Sadeq Hedayat, Ernest Hemingway, Existential Psychotherapy, The Blind Owl, The Old Man and the Sea, Death, Existential Isolation, Freedom

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# Introduction

Existentialism, as one of few recent philosophical movements that aroused much of both interest and controversy, has a long lasting impact beyond academy in literature, politics, and art, and in fields as diverse as psychotherapy, theology, and Asian thought (Michelman xi). It came to prominence in Europe, particularly in France, immediately after World War II, focusing on 'the uniqueness of each human individual as distinguished from abstract human qualities' (Audi, ٢٠٠). Against the scientific systems that regard human beings as members of genus or instances of universal laws, existentialism claims that our own existence as unique individuals in concrete situations cannot be grasped adequately in such theories. Moreover, systems of this sort conceal from us the highly personal task of trying to achieve self-fulfillment in our lives. Existentialists therefore start out with a detailed description of the self as an 'existing individual', understood as an agent involved in specific social and historical world. One of their chief aims is to understand how the individual can achieve the richest and most fulfilling life in the modern world (Lacey, ٢٦٠).

Thus, the starting point of existentialism as a movement is the existing individual and his engagements in a particular world. Emphasizing the affective rather than rational side of human being, existential thinkers focus on uncovering what is unique to that individual, rather than treating him as a manifestation of a general type. Denying that there are essential features or properties that determine the being of a thing, thus existentialists appear to be anti-essentialists. Furthermore, they insist that the world is not just lacking in essence, but absurd, and thus incapable of being made of sense (Dreyfus and Wrathall, ٣). Asserting that traditional definitions of the human being as a 'rational animal,' 'thinking thing,' or 'created being,' existential thinkers believe that those

definitions reduce the individual to an instance of a universal essence, misunderstand the subjective and necessarily relational character of existence, they insist that human existence should not be equated with a thing or a substance-and thus not to be assumed according to objective definition (Michelman, 1992).

There are many definitions of 'existentialism' as a theory, and central to each definition is the assertion that 'existentialism is a theory or statement about the nature of man's existence' (Barnes, 9). The most influential contributor to this theory, the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre defines existentialism as the view that, for humans, 'existence precedes essence'. It means that we exist, find ourselves born to a world not of our choosing, and it is up to each of us to define our own identity or essential characteristics in the course of what we do in living out our life (Lacey, 2006). Moreover, it holds that because we are self-creating or self-fashioning beings in this sense, we have full responsibility for our lives. According to this theory, to become authentic individuals or more committed and integrated individuals one must take over his/her existence with clarity and intensity and such a transformation is made possible by profound emotional experiences as anxiety and existential guilt. Apart from the French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, who coined the term, Existentialism is usually associated with Sartre although its history goes back to two of the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers namely Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, who helped to construct existentialism. Existentialism is more often used as a general label for a number of thinkers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century who made the individual central to their thought (ibid). The most eminent philosophers, apart from them are Martin Heidegger, and Karl Jaspers.



The French Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was the first philosopher who used the term 'existentialism' for the philosophy that dealt with human existence and his relationship with the world. Individualism, as the central claim of Sartre's theory emphasizes that individuals do not have a 'given nature' and instead can freely choose their own goals (Olson, 2013). This is why for Sartre there was no difference between being (man's existence) and his being free: to exist, therefore, was to be free. He proposed that 'existence precedes essence', which means that man would possess essence (would become what he is) only after coming to existence, and this is the point where man's freedom is definable, for man is free as he incessantly creates and invents himself. However, the awareness of this freedom and the experience of being responsible for one's own fate beget anguish. In return, the individual experiences anguish and therefore embarks on action (Existentialism Is Humanism, 1956)

Revolting against the systematic philosophies of Kant and Hegel, The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was the first person to call himself an existentialist thinker (Dreyfus and Wrathall, 2011). His seminal formulation of core existentialist concepts including anxiety, authenticity and inauthenticity, choice, commitment, freedom, and responsibility indicate how his statements served as templates for future existentialist accounts. The influence of his works, such as *The Concepts of Anxiety* and *Fear and Trembling* was particularly clear and important (Michelman, xiv). He is often called the father of existentialism, since his belief in the subjectivity of truth, as opposed to the traditional objectivity that dominated philosophy and religion, paved the way for the appreciation of man's comprehension of the world on the basis of an inward understanding of what might be a valid and meaningful life for him. Therefore, the

individual must always be prepared to reject the accepted practices of society and find a personally accepted and valid way for his life. The result of this separation from others for the sake of a responsible self is loneliness and solitude. However, this Kierkegaardian loneliness of the self,

is not the isolation of an ego locked into a consciousness with no content bit of its own ideas. It is rather the inwardness of a self, whose relation to itself is in any case mediated by its relationships with others that is called upon to accept as its own responsibility for choosing how all those relationships will be structured (Critchley and Schroeder, 131).

The German philosopher Nietzsche (1844-1900) is the second major 19th-century precursor of existentialism. Nietzsche's significant influence on existentialism is difficult to define. His concepts of the 'death of God,' nihilism, the 'Overman,' the 'will to power,' and the 'transvaluation of all values' cast a spell over most European intellectuals of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including many existentialists (Michelman, xiv). His influence on the development of existentialism came mainly through his conception of 'the will to power' as the fundamental motive of all life which rejects any passive adjustment of 'the pressures and necessities of the environment' but the life-affirming individual will for strength and power (Badey, 2000). He appreciated the love of freedom and life and encouraged the love of fate when one has lived life to the full and endeavored to reach the highest levels of human potentialities. He agreed that human beings were free to do as they chose, which meant that life was not predetermined. He attacked 'the weak and

mediocre against the strong and self-reliant' and stressed freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's act (Yeganeh, 2018).

The German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), is one of the most influential thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century whose early works contributed to phenomenology and existentialism and his later works paved the way to hermeneutics of Gadamer and poststructuralism of Derrida and Foucault (Audi, 2017). The preeminent 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher did not consider himself an existentialist (Michelman, 1970). His self-conception as an ontologist and his reputation as an existentialist is a source of controversy, since he clearly rejected this classification and repudiated every attempt to apply any label to his philosophy, though his privileging human existence for philosophical inquiry in the first phase of his philosophy has been associated with existentialist thought (ibid, 1970). According to Michelman, Heidegger is considered by many to be the founding figure of atheistic existentialist philosophy. In his philosophy, 'the human being is thrown back on its own 'nothingness' without appeal to a transcendent power'. Heidegger says that the only thing that reveals this to man is to confront him to his death. In so doing, the being is capable of annihilation so that he can understand that what is to be a man (Killinger, 2017). Despite his rejection of the 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialism, Heidegger's work carried on the existential tradition of thought as it had been developed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century progenitors of existentialism, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and also was tremendously influential on the later development of existentialism. Heidegger's standing in the existential tradition is secured by his exploration of the existential structure of Dasein or human being, his historicized

account of essences, his critique of the banality of conformist everyday life, and his reflections on guilt, anxiety, death, and authenticity (Dreyfuss and Wrathall, 168).

A defining feature in his existential stance is the belief that the nature of things cannot be understood apart from human involvement with them. The distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence is another important feature. Inauthentic being is an everyday mood of being in which social norms and practices determine the meaning of the world for the individual uncritically, consequently the individual loses the sight of one's freedom as a finite individual. On the contrary, authentic being is taking hold of one's existence and making choice rather than accepting the facts passively. It is associated with one's attitude toward death and toward one's historical situation that results in an anxious awareness of one's true nature as 'being of possibility' (ibid, 173). He argues that morality is our defining moment that we are thrown into limited worlds of sense shaped by our being-towards-death, and that finite meaning is all the reality we get. He claims that most of us have forgotten the radical finitude of ourselves the world we live in which results in falling into nihilism (Lacy, 340). In his masterwork, *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time* 1927), Heidegger transformed Edmund Husserl's phenomenology into existential phenomenology and stimulated existential approaches to theology and existential psychotherapy (Michelman, 170). His book focused on the traditional question of metaphysics: what is the being of entities in general? Rejecting abstract theoretical approaches to this question, Heidegger drew on Kierkegaard's religious individualism and influential movement called life philosophy, 'Lebensphilosophie', and then identified with Nietzsche, Bergson and Dilthey, to develop a highly original account of humans as embedded in concrete situations of actions (Audi, 317).

Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), German psychiatrist and philosopher rejected the existentialist label, although he is one of the main representatives of the existentialist movement (ibid, 388). Dissatisfied with the inability of science to provide an insight to human condition, Karl Jaspers emphasized the need for a 'world view' and on the power of communication. He proposed the notion of 'limit situations' such as death, guilt, condemnation, doubt and failure that remind us of our existence (qtd in Van Duerzen, 14). This idea was particularly important since his account of death as 'limit situation' or 'border situation' became the model for Heidegger's account of 'being-toward-death' in *Being and Time*. He also discussed the importance of awareness of the comprehensive elements of our existence to transcend our everyday preoccupations (ibid, 19). As individual lives through the intensity of a limit situation, he may experience an expansion of awareness and self-awareness, a heightened sense of freedom and responsibility, which Jaspers refers to as Existenz. Existenz is one's 'authentic being'. It emerges through acts of inner 'struggle,' 'anxiety,' and 'decision-making' (Michelman, 4). Pointing to important questions and reflecting upon human beings and the meaning of scientific research, Jaspers gave a systematic account in his three-volume book *Philosophie* (Audi, 388). Predating that of Heidegger, his book was not a strict work of philosophy rather a hybrid expression of psychology and a philosophy of world views inspired by Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber, as well as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (Michelman, 4). Jaspers' existentialism is distinguished by its focus on interpersonal, ethical, and transcendent dimensions of existence, in contrast to Heidegger's humanist and ontological approach (ibid, 193). Jaspers synthesizes different perspectives like Kant's idealism, Historicism of Dilthey and Subjectivism of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, to shape the notion of 'philosophizing' as an open ended search for transcendent truth pursued by existing

individuals within particular historical horizons (ibid, 194). His first two books, the monumental *General Psychopathology* (1913; revised in 1941) and *The Psychology of Worldviews* (1919), criticize the naive use of natural scientific method and attempt to rehabilitate psychology with the help of phenomenology and existential philosophy. Moreover in his *Philosophical Autobiography*, he points to his rejection of academic philosophy and the deep effects of Kierkegaard as more common aspects he shares with Heidegger. As a psychiatrist, Jaspers is regarded as the father of existential psychotherapy (Fouladvand, 134).

Surprisingly, philosophy and psychotherapy do not have a more distinguished history of cooperation. Van Duerzen maintains that human well-being and human living are the common concerns for both disciplines, one in a theoretical way, and the other in a pragmatic way. The mission of philosophy is to understand, clarify and sustain concrete realities of people though detached itself from its primary objectives to move increasingly toward abstraction. Ethical philosophy made some contributions in this way; however, with the emergence of philosophies of existence, particularly those of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, philosophers became directly interested in the concrete questions of human existence. They draw attention to subjective life of individual and provided an excellent basis for the philosophy that can inform the practice of psychotherapy. She contends that affected by the advent of phenomenology of Husserl, philosophers like Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau Ponty, a more concrete methodology of investigation of human issues was proposed (Van Duerzen, 1). Moreover, accordingly, existentialism gave people a handle on the moral choices and existential crisis and constant challenges of daily reality. It provided a forum for debate to clarify the far-reaching changes that humanity had to

negotiate in the modern and postmodern era. So existentialism predictably generated a new form of psychotherapy to set off individual's particular problems against the background of a general existential perspective (ibid, ۲).

Existential psychotherapy is an umbrella term for a range of related approaches in ۲۰<sup>th</sup> century psychiatry and psychotherapy that incorporate ideas and methods from existentialist philosophy and phenomenology. Alternate labels include 'existential psychiatry,' 'existential analysis,' 'existential psychology,' and 'humanistic psychology' (Michelman, ۱۳۶). Thus existential psychotherapy is considered to be firmly based in existential philosophy rather than in psychology (Van Duerzen, ۲). It includes a range of European and American psychiatrists and psychotherapists writing between about ۱۹۳۰ and ۱۹۷۰ who in their turn to philosophy rather than psychiatry tried to come to a better understanding of human difficulties, conflicts and paradoxes. The common core of these approaches is a rejection of psychological theories modeled after the natural sciences, especially biology. In particular Freudian psychoanalysis is criticized for advancing a theory of human nature based on the presuppositions of biology, as evidenced by Freud's theory of drives. Important contributors have included Jaspers, Yalom, Binswanger, Boss, Tillich, May, Frankl, Bugental, Schneider, Diamond and Van Duerzen - Smith.

Among these, probably the most widely read, and one of the most highly regarded writers and contributors to the field of psychotherapy overall, is existential psychotherapist Irvin D. Yalom, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at Stanford University (Berry Smith, vii). Yalom was the first to complete a manual, *Existential Psychotherapy*, which delivered both theoretical structure and practical techniques for an approach that he says, is not a modality in itself, but a philosophical stance for all psychotherapists, psychologists, and

counselors, regardless of their theoretical bias. Unlike cognitive behaviorism or psychoanalysis which are accepted as schooled approaches, existential psychotherapy represents a way of thinking which may be integrated into all therapies (ibid). Yalom in Existential psychotherapy says;

I have found that the four givens are particularly relevant to psychotherapy: the inevitability of death for each of us and for those we love; the freedom to make of our lives as we will; our ultimate aloneness; and finally the absence of any meaning or sense to our life. However grim these givens may seem they contain the seeds of wisdom and redemption.

Yalom is acknowledged and respected globally for his contributions to contemporary psychotherapy; both for his theoretical understanding and his stance for practice. His theory and approach to practice are grounded in the understanding that all human beings face four ultimate existential concerns – death, freedom, isolation and meaningless. Furthermore, he is of the profound belief that all psychopathologies are derivatives of the anxieties generated from awareness of the four concerns, and that a vital task of human development is to confront, and come to terms with the realities that each concern presents (Berry Smith, vii).

Rollo Reese May is an American existential psychologist who is associated with humanistic psychology and existential philosophy and considered to be a major proponent of existential psychotherapy. He authored *Love and Will*, *The Meaning of Anxiety* and *Freedom and Destiny* (Feist and Feist, ۳۰۰). Unlike Freud, Adler, Rogers,



and other clinically oriented personality theorists, May did not establish a school of psychotherapy with avid followers and identifiable techniques. Nevertheless, he wrote extensively on the subject, rejecting the idea that psychotherapy should reduce anxiety and ease feelings of guilt. Instead, he suggested that psychotherapy should make people more human: that is, help them expand their consciousness so that they will be in a better position to make choices (ibid, ۳۶۸). These choices, then, lead to the simultaneous growth of freedom and responsibility. May believed that the purpose of psychotherapy is to set people free.

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Considering basic tenets of existential philosophy, this study compares Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* in the light of existential psychotherapy. Sadeq Hedayat was an Iranian immanent modern writer whose novel, *The Blind Owl* praised by many has been called one of the most important literary works in Persian literature. Hemingway was an influential and famous American author whose novel, *The Old Man and The Sea*, inspiring for many readers and writers, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in ۱۹۵۳. His individual writing style has strongly influenced the ۲۰<sup>th</sup> century fiction. Both authors influenced the world of literature and a large body of criticism written on their works which also include prejudices and biases that block their deep understanding.

This study is significant, since the researcher's great emphasis is placed on her responsibility to be aware of and question these biases and her own pre-conceptions with the goal of understanding of meanings and value systems underlying these two novels. Furthermore, the present study discusses some ultimate concerns of human being

expounded by existential philosophy which later became the central principle to a school of therapy, namely Existential Psychotherapy. I believe that the revelation of the core concepts like death, existential isolation and freedom in these authors' works equips us with new measures to delve into the world of their literary creations. This study may also appeal to readers who are interested in deeply personal philosophical investigations.

Existential psychotherapy deals with concerns of existence which means certain ultimate concerns, certain intrinsic properties that are inescapable part of the human being's existence in the world as death, freedom and isolation. The present study aims to investigate Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea* to find out the revelations of these three concerns. This study unveils the two authors' confrontation with each of these facts which constitutes the content of the existential dynamic conflict. Reflecting upon the nature of these gives the present study is after excavating the role and significance of them. Moreover, it will help the readers to arrive upon the ground that underlies all other grounds, to say deep structures of our existence. Additionally, one can understand author's worldview and realize how each author responds to the existential concerns in the aforementioned novels.

Regarding the principles of Existential Psychotherapy the main purposes of this research are: introducing and analyzing three main existential concerns as death anxiety, existential isolation, freedom and responsibility sketched in three main questions. The second is exploring these two novels to excavate how these concerns have been expressed. The third is surveying the writers' biographies and ideas to see how they treat or respond to these existential concerns in their life to support the embedded meaning-providing schemas in their novels. The fourth is comparing and contrasting the findings

for each author and his novel to find out if they share common existential concerns and expound their differentiations. The last is signifying and elaborating on the possible relation between the two novels and discovering their shared existential themes and notions.

Above all this study is based on deep reflection to help one discover the nature of these givens. I intended to let myself and the reader look through the lens of existential psychotherapy and reflect upon these literary works and their creators' life and opinions so that the process may bracket our everyday world and motivate us to think deeply about our situation in the world and our existence, boundaries and possibilities and eventually make us confront these deep structures of existence.

I have chosen two novels, *The Blind Owl* and *The Old Man and the Sea*, because they are their most famous creations. These novels are going to be studied from the perspective of existential philosophy since it is a strand of psychology that concerned itself with human issues and particularly because existential philosophers are directly interested in concrete questions of human existence and in understanding, clarification and sustaining the concrete realities of people. Therefore, this discipline is more practical and closer to these basic objectives of philosophy in general, rather than many other schools of thought. Taking its principals from existential philosophy, existential psychotherapy is concerned with human well-being and human living in a pragmatic way. It provides the researcher with a forum to negotiate and shed light on far reaching human challenges and concerns. Therefore, three main existential themes have been chosen to explore since they are recurrent in most of their works, especially in these novels. Their heroes, Santiago and The Narrator, are alienated human beings going

through a journey confronting the deepest conflicts of being; death, existential isolation and freedom. As a result they experience existential anxieties and fears spawned by them consciously and unconsciously. Moreover, both novelists as outstanding intellectual characteristics despite their origination from various cultures share a sense of absurdity which flourished strongly in these novels.

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Among many critics who analyzed *The Blind Owl*, Homa katouzian in his precious book *Sadeq Hedayat; His Work and Wondrous World* (٢٠٠٧) rightly asserts that beneath and beyond Hedayat's apparent cynicism, iconoclasm one may observe, his anger and despair, his acute sensitivity, his immeasurable suffering, his continuously darkening view of his own country and its people, and his condemnation of life as it is, rather than it ought to be. According to Katouzian, through Hedayat's writing one may notice his predicament: the personal tragedy, the social isolation and the universal alienation (١٠). In addition, Katouzian says that 'what has given Hedayat his unique place, nevertheless, is his psycho-fiction, of which *The Blind Owl* is the best and purest example' (١١). Furthermore, Katouzian believes that 'this work is modernist in style, using techniques of French symbolism and surrealism in literature, of surrealism in modern European art, and of expressionism in the contemporary European films, including the deliberate confusion of time and space' (ibid).

Following Nietzsche and Nietzschean thinkers like Klossoski and Deleuze in his article 'Eternal Recurrence in *The Blind Owl*', Michael Cisco discusses that their ideas interact with *The Blind Owl* to reveal unnoticed dimensions of the work (٤٧١). He asserts that Hedayat struggles with nihilism through philosophical notions of existentialism. To