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Echoes of Existence: An Existentialist Construal of For Whom the Bell Tolls

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ABSTRACT

This research offers an existentialist reading of Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and examines how the novel resonates with themes of individual freedom, moral responsibility, and the search for meaning in a world mark by violence and uncertainty. Anchored in the philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the study investigates the psychological and moral dilemmas faced by Robert Jordan as he navigates the chaos of the Spanish Civil War. Through close textual analysis, the research illuminates how Hemingway's minimalist style, symbolic imagery, and introspective characterizations reflect existential concerns such as alienation, absurdity, and the tension between action and despair. This reflects the core existential belief that meaning must be forged through personal choice and authentic living. This research also defines *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) as a profound literary exploration of existence, affirming Hemingway's place among modern writers deeply engaged with existential thought. The study investigates how the novel transcended its historical context to pose timeless questions about identity, responsibility, and the interconnectedness of human lives. Ultimately, this study positions this book as a profound meditation on existential crisis and the human spirit's resilience in the face of annihilation.

1. Introduction

Existentialism, as a philosophical movement, emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries in response to the growing disillusionment with traditional structures of meaning religion, reason, and societal norms. Central to this philosophy is the belief that existence precedes essence: that individuals are not born with a predetermined purpose but must create meaning through their choices, actions, and confrontations with freedom, isolation, and death. Thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus shaped this intellectual tradition, emphasizing the absurdity of the human condition, the inevitability of suffering, and the profound responsibility each individual bears in constructing a meaningful life. Within the realm of literature, existentialism has found powerful expression in narratives that explore the tension between human freedom and the indifference of the universe. One such narrative is Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), a novel set against the brutal backdrop of the Spanish Civil War. At its core, the novel transcends its political context and delves into the philosophical, grappling with questions of identity, mortality, moral ambiguity, and the fragile threads that connect one life to another. The protagonist, Robert Jordan, becomes a vessel through which Hemingway interrogates the existential condition: a man burdened with choice, haunted by impermanence, and yet, striving to act with dignity and purpose in a world that offers no guarantees. This research examined this work through the lens of existentialist thought, uncovering how Hemingway's prose, characters, and thematic structure reflect key existential concerns. By situating the novel within this philosophical context, the study revealed the deeper echoes of existence reverberating through its pages echoes that not only define Robert Jordan's journey but also speak to the universal human struggle to live authentically in the face of inevitable death.

2. Literature Review

- Ernest Hemingway's literary legacy has long been associated with themes of war, masculinity, stoicism, and personal codes of honor. However, in recent decades, literary critics and scholars have increasingly recognized the deeper philosophical layers embedded in his works particularly the existential concerns that permeate much of his fiction. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), one of Hemingway's most ambitious and philosophically rich novels, has been a focal point of such interpretations, offering fertile ground for an existentialist reading. The early scholarship on Hemingway often focused on his biographical experiences and stylistic innovations. Carlos Baker's (1969) influential biography *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* painted the author as a man shaped by war, love, and loss, and suggested that Hemingway's personal struggles profoundly influenced the tone and substance of his writing. While Baker acknowledged the existential weight in Hemingway's narratives, it was later critics who more explicitly connected his fiction to existentialist thought. One of the pioneering voices in this regard was Philip Young (1952) whose concept of the "code hero" framed Hemingway's protagonists as individuals

navigating a chaotic world through personal ethics, courage, and self-discipline. Though not labeled “existentialist” in Young’s terms, the traits of the code hero—facing life with grace under pressure and maintaining dignity in the face of meaninglessness closely parallel existential ideals. Scholars such as Paul P. Somers (1981) and Earl Rovit (1963) have built upon this foundation, analyzing how Hemingway’s protagonists often face moral ambiguity and existential isolation. Somers noted that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) marks a shift from Hemingway’s earlier, more individualistic characters toward a broader philosophical inquiry into collective identity, sacrifice, and the absurd. He argued that Robert Jordan’s internal monologue and reflective nature mirror Camus’ concept of the absurd man aware of life’s futility, yet committed to personal action and moral clarity. Further, critics like Linda Wagner-Martin (2002) has applied Sartrean and Camusian frameworks to Hemingway’s work. Wagner-Martin, in particular, interpreted Robert Jordan’s journey as an existential awakening. She explored how Jordan’s initial detachment and sense of duty evolve into a deeper understanding of personal freedom and interconnectedness, culminating in his acceptance of death not as defeat, but as an affirmation of meaning created through action. In this view, Jordan becomes a Sartrean hero one who exercises choice even in the face of despair. Gerry Brenner’s (1991) work, meanwhile, illuminated how Hemingway’s characters embody the tension between existential authenticity and social expectation. Brenner argued that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) does not romanticize war but uses it as a stage upon which existential dilemmas, alienation, mortality played out with brutal honesty. The novel, according to Brenner, critiques both ideological extremism and nihilistic withdrawal, advocating instead for a middle path grounded in human connection and moral agency. Despite these insightful analyses, many interpretations of that manuscript remain either politically or psychologically centered, often neglecting a more unified philosophical reading rooted in existentialism. Moreover, the existing literature tends to isolate individual existential themes rather than presenting them as part of a cohesive framework. This research, therefore, tried to fill that gap by offering a holistic existentialist reading of the novel, drawing on the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus to illuminate how Hemingway’s narrative engages with core existential concepts such as freedom, absurdity, authenticity, and death. By integrating philosophical discourse with literary analysis, this study demonstrated that this book is not only a political or emotional war narrative but also a profound meditation on human existence. In doing so, it situates Hemingway not merely as a chronicler of war and loss, but as a literary figure deeply attuned to the existential questions that define the modern condition.

3. Theoretical Framework:

This study is grounded in the philosophical underpinnings of existentialism, particularly as articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, whose works provide a critical lens through which Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) is examined. Existentialism, as a philosophical movement, centers on the belief that human beings exist in a purposeless, indifferent universe and must therefore create their own meaning through conscious choice, responsibility, and authentic action. This framework is particularly relevant in analyzing literature that portrays individuals confronted with moral ambiguity, isolation, death, and the

absurd. Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of "existence precedes essence" in his *existentialism theory* serves as a foundational principle in this study. According to Sartre, humans are not defined by any predetermined nature; rather, they become who they are through their actions and decisions. In the book, Robert Jordan embodies this principle as he navigates the chaos of war, making morally complex decisions that define his identity and purpose. Sartre's notions of freedom, bad faith, and authenticity are employed to explore Jordan's existential evolution and his struggle to live truthfully in the face of inevitable death. In addition, Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd—the tension between human beings' search for meaning and the silence of the universe—deeply informs this analysis. Camus's vision of the absurd hero, who recognizes the futility of life yet continues to live with defiant courage, is reflected in Jordan's ultimate decision to face death with dignity and resolve. Drawing from *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), this study interpreted Jordan's final moments as an embrace of Camusian absurdism, where meaning is not found in success or survival, but in the act of choosing and enduring. Furthermore, the study considered the existential motif of death as a constant, a defining aspect of human consciousness. Both Sartre and Camus argue that awareness of death intensifies the urgency of authentic living. Hemingway's use of minimalist prose and internal monologue amplifies this awareness, making the reader experience the existential weight of each moment in the narrative. By integrating these theoretical insights, this framework allows for a nuanced reading of Hemingway's work that transcends political or psychological interpretations. It positions that work within a broader existential tradition, highlighting how Hemingway's fiction not only reflects individual struggle but also engages deeply with the philosophical crises of the modern world.

4. Comparative Analysis

This book served as a profound literary exploration of existentialist themes, paralleling the philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. This analysis examined how Hemingway's narrative aligns with Sartre's concepts of freedom and authenticity, as well as Camus' notion of the absurd, illustrating the protagonist Robert Jordan's existential journey.

4.1 Sartrean Freedom and Authenticity Jean-Paul Sartre posits that individuals are condemned to be free, bearing the weight of absolute responsibility for their choices. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), Robert Jordan embodies this existential freedom. Tasked with blowing up a bridge during the Spanish Civil War, Jordan grapples with the moral implications of his mission, reflecting Sartre's idea that individuals must define their essence through actions. A poignant moment illustrating Jordan's acceptance of responsibility occurs when he reflects: "The world is a fine place and worth the fighting for and I hate very much to leave it" (Hemingway, 1940).

This acknowledgment signifies Jordan's embrace of life's value despite its inherent suffering, aligning with Sartre's emphasis on authentic existence.

4.2 Camusian Absurdism and Revolt

Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd highlights the conflict between humans' search for meaning and the universe's indifference. Camus advocates for a revolt against absurdity through conscious acceptance and personal meaning-making. Jordan's awareness of the futility surrounding him, yet his decision to proceed with the mission, mirrors this revolt.

Camus articulates this stance in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

“The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (*Camus, 1942*).

Jordan’s final stand against the enemy, despite knowing the likely fatal outcome, exemplifies this embrace of the absurd and the creation of personal meaning through action.

4.3 Death as an Existential Constant

Both Sartre and Camus acknowledge death as a central aspect of the human condition. Jordan’s contemplation of mortality is evident:

“You have to make up your mind to be alone. Alone with your own decisions” (*Hemingway, 1940*). This introspection underscores the existential realization of solitude in decision-making and the inevitability of death, reinforcing the themes of personal responsibility and the creation of meaning in an indifferent world. For Robert Jordan, death is not just a possibility but an ever-present reality. He reflects on it often, not with fear but with a sense of inevitability. His final moments, where he prepares to face his end alone, capture Camus’s notion of the absurd hero who meets death consciously and without hope of transcendence. His confrontation with mortality is not tragic but reflective. He accepts it as part of existence, embodying Sartre’s belief that human beings are condemned to die and must therefore make their choices authentically. Existentialism often depicts the individual as alone in a morally indifferent universe.

4.4 Isolation and Moral Solitude

Existentialism often depicts the individual as alone in a morally indifferent universe. Jordan frequently experiences this solitude:

“You have to make up your own mind to be alone. Alone with your own decisions” (*Hemingway, 1940, p. 421*).

This moment highlights Robert’s realization that no ideological cause, collective movement, or personal relationship can ultimately shield him from the burden of personal choice. His decisions are his alone, mirroring Sartre’s existential solitude. Jordan’s internal monologues often depict his sense of existential isolation. Despite being surrounded by comrades, he feels alone in the moral responsibility he bears. His isolation is not only physical but philosophical. He does not find comfort in ideology or religious belief but must rely on his own values and judgment. This solitude reflects Sartre’s idea of existential anguish the burden of absolute freedom and moral responsibility in a world without objective meaning.

4.5 Love and Fleeting Human Connection

While existentialism often emphasizes isolation, it does not negate the importance of human connection. Robert’s love for Maria offers a temporary relief from his alienation:

“But did thee feel the earth move?” (*Hemingway, 1940, p. 215*)

Their intimacy is passionate, yet Hemingway doesn’t romanticize it. The fleeting nature of their love in wartime underscores the transience of human connection a reflection of Camus’s view of momentary joy in an absurd world. The relationship between Him and Maria offers a contrast to the bleakness of war. Their love is genuine, yet both are aware of its impermanence. His love for

her does not deter him from his mission, but it enhances his sense of what he is about to lose and in turn, deepens his understanding of life's value.

4.6 Disillusionment with Ideology

Jordan is not a blind follower of the Republican cause. He frequently criticizes both sides, indicating a deeper search for personal rather than political meaning:

"I am not of one side or the other. I am for having it all over with" (*Hemingway, 1940, p. 168*).

This detachment reveals his move away from ideological certainty and toward individual moral judgment, echoing existentialist suspicion of imposed systems and collective dogmas. His disillusionment is existential: ideologies fail to provide a stable foundation for meaning or action. Instead, he must find his own reason to act. This embodies Camus's rejection of political dogmatism in favor of individual ethical commitment. Jordan's existential evolution culminates in the realization that meaning must be created through personal experience, not inherited from collective belief.

4.7 The Final Affirmation

The novel concludes with Jordan lying wounded, waiting to ambush the approaching fascists so the others can escape:

"He could feel his heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest" (*p. 470*).

This final scene is the ultimate affirmation of existential agency. He cannot escape death, but he transforms it into an act of defiance and purpose. Like Camus's Sisyphus, he meets his fate with conscious acceptance. His romantic relationship with Maria also illustrates the existential concept of fleeting meaning. Their intimacy provides temporary solace, but Jordan never loses sight of the larger existential crisis around him. When he asks,

"But did thee feel the earth move?" (*p. 215*)

It signifies not only passion but a desperate grasp at authentic experience in the face of death. At the end, lying wounded and waiting to ambush the fascists so his comrades can escape, Jordan finds clarity. His heartbeat, described as,

"beating against the pine needle floor of the forest" (*p. 470*).

It becomes a symbol of his existential courage to choose, to act, and to accept death with full awareness. So, these quotes and moments from this work reflect Robert Jordan's existential progression. He begins as a committed agent of ideology but evolves into a figure who accepts absurdity, exercises freedom, and faces death with dignity. Hemingway, through Jordan, creates a character who embodies the existential ethos articulated by Sartre and Camus not through philosophical abstraction, but through action, reflection, and sacrifice.

5. Conclusion: Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) stands as a compelling narrative that resonates deeply with the philosophical tenets of existentialism. Through the character of Robert Jordan, Hemingway explores the essential existential questions of freedom, authenticity, mortality, absurdity, and personal responsibility. Jordan's journey from a man committed to a political cause to an individual grappling with the weight of choice and the inevitability of death echoes the existential philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Sartre's notion of "existence precedes essence" is embodied in Jordan's struggle to define

himself through actions rather than ideology. His repeated confrontation with isolation and the moral burden of decision-making reflects Sartre's view of the self as being alone in a world without inherent meaning. Likewise, Camus's absurdism is revealed in Jordan's awareness of the futility and randomness of life, yet his continued defiance and embrace of personal values in the face of certain death parallel Camus's vision of revolt and meaning-making in an indifferent universe. Through understated prose and a focus on inner consciousness, Hemingway constructs a world where existential dread is constant, yet never paralyzing. Jordan chooses to act not because he believes in a grand truth, but because in acting, he affirms his own humanity. His final moments, lying wounded in the forest and preparing to sacrifice himself for others, are not only a climax of narrative suspense but a profound existential statement: that meaning lies not in outcomes, but in the courage to choose and to endure. In conclusion, this manuscript is more than a war novel. It is a meditation on what it means to exist authentically in a chaotic world. Hemingway, whether consciously or intuitively, crafts a text that reflects the existential concerns of the 20th century, aligning his protagonist with the modern philosophical hero who, in the face of absurdity and despair, forges his own truth.

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