

Existentialism and the Theme of Sacrifice in August Strindberg's *Facing Death*

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Abstract

August Strindberg's one-act play Facing Death serves as a profound exploration of existentialist philosophy, interrogating themes of sacrifice, alienation, and the absurdity of human existence through the lens of its protagonist, Monsieur Durand. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger, this study examines how Durand's self-sacrifice embodies the tension between autonomy and resignation, central to existentialist thought. Sartre's concept of "bad faith" and Camus's notion of the "absurd" provide theoretical tools for examining Durand's struggle to assert meaning in a world marked by indifference and socioeconomic oppression. Heidegger's ideas on "being-toward-death" further studies Durand's confrontation with mortality and his ultimate act of sacrifice as both a rejection and an acceptance of his existential condition. The play's depiction of financial ruin, patriarchal duty, and societal neglect highlights the interplay between individual agency and external forces, highlighting the paradoxes of existential freedom. By analyzing Durand's journey as both a Christ-like martyr and a victim of modernity, this paper reasons that Strindberg's work transcends traditional tragedy, offering a nuanced critique of the human condition and the ethical complexities of sacrifice. The findings show how Strindberg's portrayal of Durand's existential crisis resonates with contemporary debates on autonomy, responsibility, and the search for meaning in an increasingly fragmented world.

Keywords: *Existentialism, sacrifice, absurdity, alienation, modernity, tragedy, Sartre, Camus, Heidegger*

Introduction

Existentialism, a philosophy centered on individual activity and the confrontation with meaninglessness, floods August Strindberg's dramatic works. *Facing Death*, a precursor to 20th-century existentialist theater, portrays Monsieur Durand, a destitute father who burns himself to secure his daughters' future. Mr. Durand, an aging former railway owner who is financially ruined and lives in poverty with his three daughters—Adèle, Annette, and Thérèse – come to the verge of his existential crises. His wife has passed away, and he has struggled to provide for his daughters, often making personal sacrifices to keep the family afloat. However, his daughters resent him and see him as a failure. Durand, knowing that his life insurance is the only asset left that could support his daughters, begins contemplating suicide.

Throughout the play, he reflects on his past mistakes and expresses bitterness about how he has been treated by society and his family. His daughters, unaware of his true intentions, continue to argue with him and fail to recognize his deep despair. In the

climax, Durand sets his plan into motion, ensuring that his death appears accidental so that his daughters can collect the insurance money. The play ends tragically, leaving the audience with a grim meditation on self-sacrifice, familial neglect, and the harsh realities of life. This act of sacrifice—simultaneously noble and futile—captures the core themes of existentialism: the burden of freedom, the absurdity of existence, and the search for purpose. Strindberg's play reviews societal structures that compound human suffering, positioning Durand as a tragic hero whose death questions whether sacrifice affirms meaning or surrenders to despair. This paper explores how Durand's death symbolizes the existentialist paradox: a declaration of action within complete powerlessness.

Literature Review

The concept of heroic sacrifice has been a recurring theme in existentialist literature and philosophy, often explored through the lens of individual autonomy, despair, and the confrontation with death. Scholars and thinkers from various disciplines have sought to connect existentialist literary theory with the tragic lives and painful choices of characters who embody these themes. Central to this discourse are the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger, whose works provide a framework for understanding the existential crises faced by individuals in their search for meaning.

Jean-Paul Sartre's seminal work, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, articulates the concept of radical freedom, emphasizing that individuals must define themselves through their actions. Sartre writes, "What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterward" (Sartre 22). This perspective underscores the existentialist demand for self-definition, where actions, rather than any predetermined essence, determine the meaning of one's existence. The idea of radical freedom is particularly relevant to characters who face moral dilemmas or societal pressures, as their choices reflect the existential imperative to take ownership of their lives.

Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, explores the notion of the absurd hero, who resists the meaninglessness of existence. Camus presents the idea that many people take their own lives because they perceive life as lacking value, while others paradoxically die for the very ideals or illusions that give their lives meaning. As he writes, "I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying)" (Camus 50). Furthering his discussion on the absurdity of existence, Camus argues that suicide is an ultimate form of acceptance, an extreme reaction to the realization of life's inherent absurdity. He writes: "Suicide, like the leap, is acceptance at its extreme. Everything is over and man returns to his essential history... In its way, suicide settles the absurd. It engulfs the absurd in the same death... It is essential to die unreconciled and not of one's own free will. Suicide is a repudiation" (Camus 54).

These ideas provide a critical lens for examining literary characters of any story whose actions reflect both acceptance and defiance in the face of existential despair.

Martin Heidegger's existential philosophy similarly emphasizes the nature of being and the human awareness of mortality. He argues that individuals are unique in their capacity to recognize their own eventual death, and this awareness instills both

anxiety and the potential for authentic existence. Walter Kaufman reflects on Heidegger's influence, noting, "A discussion of existentialism and death should therefore begin with Heidegger, and by first giving some attention to his approach it may throw critical light on much of existentialism" (Kaufman 75). This centrality of death in Heideggerian existentialism mirrors the narratives of characters who confront mortality as a defining aspect of their existence, often leading to acts of sacrifice or self-assertion.

The exploration of death in existentialist thought is closely tied to reflections on life itself. Tomer and Eliason articulate this sentiment, stating: "Reflection on life is impossible without reflection on the end of life. In existentialism, reflection on life frequently takes the form of reflection on human existence, in particular on human existence as limited and contingent, ungrounded, thrown in the world without justification. Death, in this sense, is always present at the core of human existence, is what makes this existence the clearing in which things appear" (Tomer and Eliason 45).

This notion is deeply embedded in existentialist literature, where the inevitability of mortality frames the existential crises of characters grappling with meaning and purpose. In this regard, Tim Raynor views "To enjoy the rewards of an Existentialist life, we need to face death at each opportunity. When you wake up tomorrow, take a moment to reflect on how great it is that you have lived to see another day. Say: 'thank you'. Life is better when it is lived in the presence of death." (Raynor par. 3) Regarding the literature flooded with existentialism, Richard Tarnas writes "The existentialist addressed the most fundamental, naked concerns of human existence – suffering and death, loneliness and dread, guilt, conflict, spiritual emptiness...the frailty of human reason" (Tarnas 389).

By integrating the philosophical perspectives of Sartre, Camus, and Heidegger, existentialist literature not only deals with the despair of its characters but also challenges audiences to confront the broader existential dilemmas of human existence. Through the lens of existentialism, themes of sacrifice, alienation, and the absurd become profound meditations on autonomy, responsibility, and the human confrontation with death.

Existential Crisis and the Absurd in *Facing Death* by August Strindberg

Monsieur Durand's existential crisis in August Strindberg's *Facing Death* can be analyzed through the frameworks of Sartrean freedom, Camusian absurdity, and Heideggerian *being-toward-death*. His journey embodies the tension between autonomy and resignation, as well as the struggle to impose meaning in a world marked by indifference and socioeconomic oppression.

Sartrean Freedom: The Burden of Choice

Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of radical freedom is central to understanding Durand's final act of self-sacrifice. Sartre's assertion that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 22) underscores Durand's predicament: he is not defined by an inherent purpose but must create meaning through his choices. His decision to end his life to secure an insurance payout for his daughters is not merely an act of despair but a definitive assertion of autonomy. By choosing death, Durand rejects passive suffering and takes ownership of his existence, embodying Sartre's idea that individuals must define themselves through their actions, even under overwhelming constraints.

Camusian Absurdity: Heroism or Futility;

Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd offers another lens for interpreting Durand's actions. Camus argues that life's inherent meaninglessness forces individuals to either accept or rebel against the absurd. Durand's suicide is paradoxical—it is both an acknowledgment of life's futility and a defiant act to impose meaning on his suffering. Camus writes, "Suicide, like the leap, is acceptance at its extreme" (Camus 54), suggesting that Durand's sacrifice, though tragic, is a deliberate response to the absurdity of his circumstances. His daughters' indifference—epitomized in their cold remark, "You've done nothing but complain all your life" (Strindberg)—further amplifies this absurdity, rendering his devotion both heroic and futile.

Heideggerian Being-Toward-Death: Embracing Mortality

Martin Heidegger's concept of *being-toward-death* deepens our understanding of Durand's existential journey. Heidegger posits that awareness of mortality is central to authentic existence, forcing individuals to confront the finite nature of their being. Durand's decision to sacrifice himself is not merely an escape but an active engagement with the ultimate reality of death, akin to what Kierkegaard describes as a "leap of faith." By embracing his mortality, Durand transcends his socioeconomic constraints and asserts his humanity in the face of dehumanizing forces.

Socioeconomic Determinism and Dehumanization

Strindberg's critique of capitalism adds another dimension to Durand's existential crisis. The play highlights the brutal reality that human worth is often reduced to economic utility. Durand's financial ruin and his daughters' transactional response to his death expose the dehumanizing effects of materialism. Their reaction—"Now we can pay the mortgage" (Strindberg)—reduces his sacrifice to a mere financial transaction, stripping it of moral or emotional significance. While his suicide is an act of personal defiance, it is also a product of systemic oppression, illustrating the tension between individual agency and societal structures.

The Paradox of Sacrifice: Martyrdom or Resignation

Durand's Christ-like imagery suggests martyrdom, yet Strindberg subverts religious symbolism by leaving the efficacy of his sacrifice uncertain. His daughters' ingratitude casts doubt on whether his act will lead to genuine transformation or merely reinforce cycles of exploitation. Sartre acknowledges that death can prematurely sever an individual's ability to define their existence: "Death may be—but he falsely thinks it always is— 'the nihilation of all my possibilities'" (Sartre 59). Durand's death embodies this paradox. It is both a rejection of his circumstances and an acceptance of their inevitability, a moment of agency and surrender. The unresolved ending forces the audience to question whether sacrifice holds meaning in an indifferent world or if it is merely absorbed into the machinery of economic survival.

Conclusion

Facing Death exemplifies existentialism's central tensions: the individual's quest for meaning against societal indifference, and the duality of sacrifice as both liberation and defeat. Durand's tragedy lies not in his death but in the ambiguity of its impact—a critique of existentialism's promise of self-determination. Strindberg's play remains a seminal exploration of how human activity struggles with oppressive structures,

offering no solace but demanding relentless engagement with life's absurdity. *Facing Death* is a poignant and tragic examination of human suffering. Through Durand's story, Strindberg delivers a powerful critique of familial ingratitude, economic despair, and the burdens placed upon those who struggle to provide for others. The play's emotional depth and psychological complexity make it a compelling and thought-provoking work in the realm of modern drama.

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