

## Gift and Curse of Freedom: A Study of *the Snows of Kilimanjaro* From Sartre's Philosophy of Existentialism

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### Abstract

This article has a study of *the Snow of Kilimanjaro*, one of Ernest Hemingway's most successful short stories. It explores this short story from Sartre's philosophy of Existentialism, mainly from Jean-Paul Sartre's view about freedom and responsibility. The hero Harry's most important turning points and the final struggle and reflection at the end of his life serve a best example to illustrate Sartre's idea of gift and curse of freedom. Because freedom is a double-edged sword, everyone should take responsibility for himself or herself, therefore, freedom is indispensably linked with responsibility. To ponder about why freedom can be both gift and curse, this article gives an explanation from how the tremendous changes of social structure in World War I and after it had a profound influence on people's psych, which led them have different views of freedom. The post-traumatic feeling of nothingness and nonsense from the changes of social structure pervades the story, and it is the source of people's anguish, the curse of freedom.

**Key words:** Existentialism; Sartre; Freedom; Gift; Curse

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### INTRODUCTION

*The Snows of Kilimanjaro* is one of Hemingway's most successful short stories. His style succeeds because it is so inextricably wedded to the tragic vision of human existence it was created to express. His best stories remain enduringly original and disturbingly profound, and a reflection of the existentialist philosophy (Dana & Gwynn, 2006, p.372). Existentialism is one of the most influential philosophical trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which has covered a wide range of intellectual fields, so it can be considered as a way of life quite closely related to our life. This article selects only one theme from the five thematic ideas in Existentialism, discussing especially Sartre's views on freedom. For Sartre, freedom is an individual-based choice, which provides blessing to everyone, but also has its own limitations. Freedom is not totally free. This article will have a study of the existence of the hero Harry in Hemingway's short story *the Snows of Kilimanjaro* in the theoretical framework of Sartre, and we can see how Harry's whole life echoes to Sartre's view of freedom.

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Eddins (2001) discusses the idea of Existentialism between Camus's myth of Sisyphus and Hemingway's *the Old Man and the Sea*. Among the various existentialist philosophers adduced to illuminate Hemingway's ethic and metaphysics, Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* is uniquely apropos. Camus analyzes the heroic but doomed struggle against cosmic absurdity with a physical and emotional immediacy and a starkly lucid perspective on the value problems that this struggle entails.

Similar to this, Stoltzfus (2003) discusses Hemingway's relationship with Camus and Sartre: Ernest Hemingway's writing had a profound influence on the new generation of French writers in the 1930s,

particularly Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, and, in a 1946 essay in *the Atlantic Monthly*, Sartre said that L'Etranger would not be what it is if Camus had not read *The Sun Also Rises*. Although there is rebellion of sorts in both works, neither novel displays much solidarity. *Sun* narrates the erratic behavior of "the lost generation," the term Gertrude Stein used to describe American expatriates in Paris in the 1920s. Killinger (1960) wrote a book about Hemingway's existentialist philosophy. The book entitled *Hemingway and the dead gods; a study in existentialism* discusses the fictional world of Ernest Hemingway as it is related to the world view of Existentialism.

To make the term Existentialism more specific, fears and anxieties are frequent issues in the discussion. Japanese scholar *Shiromaru, Toyomi* explores (1996) Hemingway's fears and anxieties as presented in his works *In Our Time*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell To Arms*, *Man Without Women* and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*. Emphasis is on the works themselves. Patterns of anxiety seem to be associated with three broad areas in his writings: the father-son relationship, the mother-son relationship, and the experience of war. Professor *Iacone* explores (2008) the idea of "alienation" in Existentialism. Although the term "alienation" is an ambiguous one, prone to a variety of meanings in fields as diverse as psychiatry, theology, sociology and literature, it generally expresses a state of dissociation or separateness. Alienation is a persistent theme in American literature; it can then be specifically applied to the fiction of Ernest Hemingway.

The international literature reviews suggest that a lot of studies have discussed Hemingway's philosophy concerning Existentialism and his works. And their study have touched the core concepts in Existentialism, namely, loneliness, alienation, anxiety, and how people seek in the work for their own existence. But properly speaking, Hemingway is not an existentialist, for there has been no known close relationship between him and the existentialists, either personally or intellectually, in a matter of fact, Hemingway's writing had a profound influence on the new generation of French writers in the 1930s, particularly Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

If we want to find any relationship between Hemingway's works and Existentialism, we could say that his works and those of Sartre and Camus share some similarities, because they have similar world view, and they seek for the explanation of human being's existence in the world. The similarities are due not to collaboration but to live in the same milieu. The remainder of this article will discuss Hemingway's short story *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* from the perspective of Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the leading figures in Existentialist movement. Sartre's outlook on freedom will find expression in this short story with profound meaning.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Introduction to Existentialism

Existentialism represents a long tradition in the history of philosophy in the west, extending back at least to Socrates (469-399 B.C.). It is a practice of philosophy as "care of the self" (Flynn, 2006, p.1), thus it is a belief that ethics and meanings must come from an individual experience of the world. It is a philosophy movement which can be viewed as reviving personal notion of "truth", and subjectivity can be truth, and that is a truth which is lived as distinct from and often in opposition to the more detached and scientific use of the term. Existentialists advocates personal freedom or responsibility, thus Existentialism is a philosophy of freedom. Its basis is the fact that we can stand back from our lives and reflect on what we have been doing. In this sense, we are always "more" than ourselves. But we are as responsible as we are free.

### 2.2 Introduction to Sartre's View on Freedom and Responsibility

Jean-Paul Sartre, an eminent French philosopher, novelist, a leader of the resistance against the occupying German forces during World War II, famously tight friends with Simone de Beauvoir and the leading exponent of Existentialism. During his lifetime, he became known worldwide for his distinct brand of Existentialism, which focused on the human experience of freedom and responsibility in a godless universe. (Leitch, 2006, p.1332)

For Sartre, "existence is prior to essence", because the world and human nature possess no fixed meaning, human beings are responsible for their own choices and actions, and a person is always in a state of becoming, and defines who he is by the choices he makes. Sartre's deep sense of freedom and responsibility originates from his own experiences: He was a prisoner of war in Germany, and after being released he joined the French Resistance; until 1944 he worked as a journalist for the liberation of France. Philosophically, his experience of the war led him to a deeper appreciation of human freedom and responsibility. To better illustrate why only mankind has freedom, Sartre declares in his magisterial book *Being and Nothingness* (1943) the distinction between things that exist in themselves (*en-soi*) and human beings who exist for themselves (*pour-soi*), terms meant to distinguish between worldly objects and human consciousness. Because mankind has consciousness, mankind has freedom.

However, there is *anguish or Angst* entailed by freedom. Anguish is awareness of one's freedom as radical possibility. It differs from "fear", which has a specific object. Thus one might fear falling off a cliff but feel anguish before the possibility of throwing oneself over (Flynn, 2006, p.133). Sartre also explains the causes of anguish from phenomenological point of view: As human beings can apprehend the appearances of phenomena, they

cannot grasp any kind of metaphysical reality, including God. All they can know is existence, which is contingent and unfixed. Conscious of the limits of knowledge and of mortality, human beings live with existential dread or anguish, facing the nothingness to come. And they live with the burden of the freedom to choose, to make of themselves what they will, but always in relation to the particular situations at hand. To the extent they allow bureaucracies and entertainment to define and distract them, they live inauthentic lives.

### 3. DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Gift of Freedom

As Sartre says: "Man is the means by which things are manifested" (Leitch, 2001, p.1334). In this quotation, Sartre indicates that the individual discloses or reveals being; by introducing relationships and order, by imposing unity on the diversity of the world, he or she directs being.

The hero Harry was an enthusiastic young man, who had joined in the army to participate in the World War I. After the war, he settled in Paris, where he enjoyed the luxurious life and drifted among many rich women. The principle he held for this period of life is hedonistic one, because he abandoned himself to sensual joys and flitting fun. He was indeed squandering his youthful time. So the redemption came suddenly to him, for he discovered that he was no longer in Muse's favor, and his intellectual field was in lack and wants. There could be no good article penned by him.

But he was capable of using freedom to make a choice, a choice to go on a safari to Africa. The vastness of African plain was deemed as a source of great power, and people could become dauntless in confrontation with the grandeur and solitude of the landscapes with primitive features. Harry wanted himself to be inspired there. This freedom of choice meant a lot for him, though during the journey, he was injured and incurable, finally mortality came. Even his company, his girlfriend Helen complained that: "I wish we'd never come", "You never would have gotten anything like this in Paris". But if Harry did not have freedom to make this choice and settled in a relaxed life with women, forever in Paris, till the last moment of his life, would he be so regretful that his life was totally in vain, because he did not live like himself?

The freedom of choice Harry made to go to Africa can be further explored in an existentialist point of view. As Sartre mentions "existence is prior to essence" (Leitch, 2001, p.1333). The world and human nature possess no fixed meaning; human beings are responsible for their own choices and actions. In this sense, Harry was in a state of becoming, in a state of freedom to make better choices, and he defined himself by the choices he made. Though approaching the end of the story, we can see Harry lingered in the world, with his feeble breath, he was

in extreme tiredness and desperation, but Hemingway did not depict Harry's final picture as gloomy, but extended sympathy to him. Harry, in his own imagination, went through the darkening sky in thick rain and fierce storm, came upon the light from the sun, and "all he could see, as wide as all the world, great, high and unbelievably white in the sun, was the square top of Kilimanjaro". The dried and frozen carcass of the leopard, in a posture of seeking, beside the west summit of Kilimanjaro, is symbolic of Harry's elevated spirit, trying to attain perfection in his life.

#### 3.2 Curse of Freedom

Sartre affirms that people are always essentially free. No matter how objectified they may be, the gifts of freedom and consciousness mean that they always have the possibility of making something out of their circumstance of objectification. In Sartre's view, individual freedom of consciousness is humanity's gift—as well as its curse, since with it comes the responsibility to shape our own lives (Oaklander, 1992, p.331).

However, there is "anguish" or "Angst" entailed by freedom. "Anguish" is awareness of one's freedom as radical possibility. Sartre also explains that mankind lives with the burden of the freedom to choose, to make of themselves what they will, but always in relation to the particular situations at hand. To the extent they allow bureaucracies and entertainment to define and distract them, they live inauthentic lives.

The hero Harry joined the World War I, and was impressed so strongly by the scenes of cruelty, as well as the times he spent with his fellows. He thought there was so much to write, because "he had seen the world change; not just the events", and he could remember how the people were at different times, especially "He had been in it and he had watched it". As writer, he felt the responsibility of writing of it, but "now he never would". The reason why he chose not to write about it was that he indulged himself in luxurious life in Paris, and he mingled with so many dazzling fun and was in a circle of rich women. The freedom he enjoyed actually killed his inspiration, the intuition of a writer. Freedom for him became a curse, a killer of his spirit, and finally turned a sore in his mind.

At the verge of dying, Harry recalled his life, and felt so regretful. He described that

he had destroyed his talent by not using it, by betrayals of himself and what he believed in, by drinking so much that he blunted the edge of his perceptions, by laziness, by sloth, and by snobbery, by pride and by prejudice, by hook and by crook.

His degeneration resulted from the curse of freedom, because he chose not to use his talent, but traded on it.

The curse made him feel the "Angst". He felt the deadly smell symbolized by the hyena and the huge, filthy birds outside his tent. The feeling of "angst" cumulated when he sensed that death could be everything: "a puff,

as of a wind that makes a candle flicker and the flame go tall; it had no shape, simply occupying the space”.

The “Angst” accompanied him throughout his life, and it only disappeared at the last moment of his life. “Angst” is best expressed by the painful feeling, but when he was dying, he was no longer obsessed by the feeling pestering him during his dying hours. With the pain the horror had gone and all he felt now was a great tiredness. Death meant nothing in itself.

### 3.3 Responsibility of a Man

Existentialism is a philosophy of freedom. Its basis is the fact that we can stand back from our lives and reflect on what we have been doing. In this sense, we are always “more than ourselves”. But we are as responsible as we are free (Flynn, 2006, p.8).

As freedom can be both gift and curse that the only way of getting benefit from freedom is to take responsibility for oneself. This is the theme of the story about Harry. Being a soldier, he experienced a lot during World War I. He was a witness to the cruelty of war. He wanted to write something about people and things in the war. After the war, he settled in Paris, smelt the smell of dirty sweat and saw poverty and drunkenness in Paris at first, and he could write something to earn his livelihood, and at that time, there were only two rooms in the apartments where they lived and he had a room on the top floor of that hotel that cost him sixty francs a month where he did his writing, and he was then a creative writer and an honest man.

But later, he changed and forgot the responsibility of being a writer. He indulged himself in the affection from women, and women turned out to be both kindly caretaker and destroyer of his talent. The softness of luxurious life made him “live with something else instead of a pen or a pencil”.

The sense of responsibility was re-awakened in Harry when he had the idea of going to Africa, a place for getting inspired. However, he was injured, and the final stage of gangrene made him gradually lose his life. He called up to his mind a stream of pictures in the past, depicting those good or bad things in his life. Finally, he repented for his dullness and reluctance for not taking responsibility.

“We must all be cut out for what we do”, as Harry said. This means taking responsibility.

### 3.4 The Social Structure in Which Man Has to Take His Every Step

In the early phase of his career, Sartre focused mainly on his belief in the sanctity of every individual consciousness, a consciousness that results from each person’s subjective and individual experience of the world. He was particularly attuned to the ways that people are objectified by the gaze of others (Oaklander, 1992, p.339). As Sartre became more intimately involved in the concrete political questions of his day, he came to focus more on the various

larger social structures that systematically objectify people and fail to recognize or affirm their individual consciousness and innate freedom. These structures include capitalist exploitation, colonialism, racism, and sexism.

*The Snows of Kilimanjaro* explores human being’s psych in the post-traumatic world after World War I. The brutality by slaughtering people remain a horror picture in the human mind. Cruelty of war can be felt in Harry’s remembrance: when Williamson, a brave officer, was caught in the wire, with a flare lighting him up and his bowels spilled out into the wire, he begged Harry to shoot him.

The war also brought disaster to economic stability, especially inflation. The proprietor of the Hotel in Triberg hanged himself, just because the inflation and the money were not enough to buy supplies to open the hotel. Another disaster is the chaos caused by economic instability, and it fueled capitalists’ over-exploitation of the workers, as we can see from this example: Marie, Harry’s femme de ménage, protested against the eight-hour working day.

Not only did the war bring disasters to economic structures, but also it peeled off people’s most softest place in the deep heart: sympathy and love for each other. People went to extremes after the war, and they lost their beliefs about right or wrong. The social structures were torn up, and made people feel alienated and abandoned, especially those poor people. All the dramatic changes of social structures caused doubt for people to make their use of freedom to choose. As Sartre mentions that social structures systematically objectify people and fail to recognize or affirm their individual consciousness and innate freedom. These structures include capitalist exploitation, colonialism, racism, and sexism.

Harry is in the case. At first, he felt so lucky that he was “equipped with good insides so that you did not go to pieces that way, the way most of them had”, and he survived that war. He hated the war resulting from capitalist exploration and greedy expansion, and he sent sympathy for those poor people. As a writer, he felt the innate freedom and responsibility of writing about these people, but he would never do it, because “each day of not writing, of comfort, of being that which he despised, dulled his ability and softened his will to work, so that, finally, he did no work at all”.

The social structure in Chaos resulting from the war has disastrous impact on people. People feel so objectified, helpless and desperate. They feel being dropped into an abyss, by the sudden overturn of fate. The desperation can be expressed by the fellows’ argument over a dying soldier: “Lord never sending you anything you could not bear and someone theory had been that meant that at a certain time the pain passed

you out automatically". The feeling of nothingness and illusion pervades in the story.

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## CONCLUSION

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*The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, one of Ernest Hemingway's most successful short stories, is a good example to illustrate Sartre's philosophy of Existentialism. As an avant-guard of Existentialism, Sartre argues about the human experience of freedom and responsibility in a godless universe.

Sartre's philosophy is built around the idea that human beings are capable of interpreting the world for themselves, thereby creating new values. Freedom is the ability to invent new values and to create oneself and one's own world. Since all other values spring from one's free interpretation of the world, freedom is the foundational value in Sartre's system.

However, in Sartre's view, individual freedom of consciousness is humanity's gift—as well as its curse, since it come the responsibility to shape our own lives.

The hero Harry's most important turning points and the final struggle and reflection at the end of his life illustrate Sartre's idea of gift and curse of freedom. Because freedom is a double-edge sword, everyone should take responsibility for himself or herself, therefore, freedom is linked with responsibility.

To find the reason why freedom can be both gift and curse, Sartre comes to focus more on the various larger social structures that systematically objectify people and fail to recognize or affirm their individual consciousness and innate freedom. These structures include capitalist exploitation, colonialism, racism, and sexism. The setting in which the story happens serves as a mirror for us to see the social structures at that moment.

Not only did the World War I bring disasters to economic structures, especially inflation, but also it torn up people's most softest part in the deep heart: sympathy and love for each other. The post-traumatic symptoms

were horrifying: People went to extremes after the war, and they lost their beliefs about right or wrong. The social structures were dismantled and destroyed, and people felt alienated and abandoned, especially those poor people. All the dramatic changes of social structures caused doubt for people to make their use of freedom to choose.

He post-traumatic feeling of nothingness and nonsense from the changes of social structure pervades the story, and it is the source of people's anguish, the curse of freedom.

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