



Analysis of Schopenhauer's Will to Live in the works of authors in the canon of English Literature who committed suicide

Amoghha Prakash Gupta

Independent Researcher, Former MA English Literature Student, Department of English, Awadhesh Pratap Singh University, Rewa, India
amoghha4@gmail.com

Received: 31 Jan 2025; Received in revised form: 01 Mar 2025; Accepted: 06 Mar 2025; Available online: 11 Mar 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The works of Literature other than giving an expression to the thoughts of the author are implicit with the deeper connotative meanings that at first aren't as apparent as the meanings initially inferred by the reader but after a careful consideration of the respective work, the seemingly shrouded revelations camouflaged within the language that can adequately describe the inner wrestlings of the author's mind are transpired before the audience. The writers of Literature who couldn't harmonize their inner tumults, couldn't help but reveal them in their works either. This investigation intends to scrutinize their principal vexations that forced them into a rejection of the force that underpins all of the existence through the philosophical ideas of Arthur Schopenhauer thus broadening the scope for a more thorough enquiry of the human nature and its association with the contemporary literature.*



Keywords— *Existence, Pessimism, Schopenhauer, Existential, Modernism, Postmodernism, Irrational.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of Literary works throughout its dissemination has either been to delight the audience or to instruct them in certain matters. It was only after the development of a psychoanalytic outlook towards the Literary works that the author thought to be merely a propagator of thoughts until this time was finally brought to the attention of readers. The Literary works are inextricably linked to Philosophy, and its not just with writers but everyone lives by a personal philosophy that guides the actions and disposition of the person concerned. Perhaps there isn't a better way to ascertain the principles of any writer than to peruse the works that need not necessarily be any sort of philosophical treatise as the dramatic or poetic works even, could suffice for a review of the author's psychological state. "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular". (Poetry foundation, 2009, pt. IX lines 11-14).

The arrival at the precipice of ceasing to exist must not be mistaken as an abrupt or impulsive one, particularly with

that of the prominent literary figures whose thoughts were rational and articulated enough to convince people of their obduration with choosing the same outcome again should they hypothetically be given another chance at consideration of their decisive step. Such a conviction clearly couldn't have been the result of an ordinary whim that more often than not troubles most people. Oddly enough, It could be inferred that their inherent inclination towards ruminating about the perplexities of their life was likely the cause of their prolonged distress as is evidently expressed "God is a circle whose center is everywhere, and its circumference nowhere". (Empedocles & Wright, 1981) which betrays a sense of contemplative thought and the unfortunate but imminent descent into the obscurity being its immediate consequence. Additionally such a disposition must have been exclusive to them alone as for the others who don't hazard the leisure of being contemplative about the Existence and Life in general find such bleak notions fitting of scorn and reproach them of their harbouring pessimism. Arthur Schopenhauer's idea of Will to Live is the central force that furnishes an impetus to be for all of the

existence and somewhere down the line of their introspective wisdom, the veritable spirit to exist is transgressed by an agent wholly alien to the prevalent thoughts that the very spirit whose whole function was to expedite the inclination to exist now gets at odds with the idea of existence itself. "Sometimes even to live is an act of courage". (*A Quote by Seneca*, 2024), It's paradoxical to consider that how could the act of merely existing requisite of courage when It's something that's inherently supposed to be anything but efforting. When the Life and its serialised events are commensurate to one's expectations, the will to exist remains firm but It's not always the case, and most importantly must not have been the case with the writers that committed suicide but their constant strife between the desire to exist and an insatiable proclivity to be reduced to oblivion would have prompted them to choose the latter as it guaranteed an escape from the drudgery of existence thus forfeiting the apparent tug of war altogether.

II. CONCEPT OF WILL TO LIVE

Arthur Schopenhauer's renown rests more on him being infamous for encouraging a pessimistic and bleak outlook of life among people than many other important philosophical ideas he had professed. He has defined the will to exist as a "blind incessant impulse without knowledge" (Schopenhauer, 1966) that forms the basis of all Existence. In his outlook the existence whether that be of primitive animals that humans are used to looking down upon or of the creatures inhabiting the apex of the biological hierarchy, is driven by an irrational spirit which makes each of them cling to their lives for reasons that are ineffable. With this premise established, Its striking enough that such an irrational will devoid of any reasoning is exclusive to those who either don't possess the requisite faculty of critically analysing the existence or have willingly withdrawn themselves from any degree of possible introspection. This incessant will to exist is naturally the source of all miseries pertaining to the material world because of it being naturally engineered to keep striving for more, and this elusive nature of the will is never quite realised until the mind is employed to concede of its real nature through a meticulous meditation which most people never have even a slightest repose for. But drawing from these conclusions even if one were to arrive at the understanding about this irrational will, the person would nevertheless be beset with yet another predicament demanding of a denial of this irrational will now because once the mind acknowledges its captivation and witnesses the whiffs of an escape and freedom, It becomes increasingly daunting to continue forth with the former will and the mind now rejects of its deception altogether. This

psychological feud doesn't admit of any repose until either the will to exist is reaffirmed (which becomes almost impossible after having been brought to this conclusion through a rational thought) or the will to exist is derisively denied. In all other cases, the result happens to be nothing more than a prolonged depression that gets only severe with time and results in the inevitable triumph of the denial of will even after not having consciously made that choice. Schopenhauer's philosophy unapologetically approves of the denial of will to exist as the only viable choice after a sensible thought. "That Suicide is wrong; when it is quite obvious that there is nothing in this world to which every man has a more unassailable title than to his own life and person." (Librarian, 2015).

III. BECKONING OF THE EXISTENTIAL DREAD

The most prominent feature of both Modernism and Postmodernism was the apparent Incredulity of its writers for whom the rejection of existing authorities was not something rebelling but an indispensable practice to purge themselves of the rampant ideological burdens of the society they were the part of, While Modernism still had the recourse to a restoration of the former humanistic values and ideals or to put it plainly, their view with regards to the world, though a bleak one yet was not entirely doomed as in the case of Postmodernists who went so far as to even reject the authority of their own minds. The psychological dwellings on the question of existence were thoroughly articulated in the Postmodernist works and as the serious thought and the consequent inundation with the obscured questions was explored, It was only customary for those to have found themselves amidst the existential dread going ahead. "Hell hath no fury like a coolly received postmodernist" (David Foster Wallace, 2011).

In case of David Foster Wallace, though we can only be speculative about the matters that could have led to him adoption a pessimistic notion of life, through his works at least this much can be inferred that his vexations were more concerned with his annoyance of his own ineptitude at seeking meaning in life than anything else that might have pestered him. "The truth will set you free. But not until it is finished with you." (David Foster Wallace & Mondadori, 2016). As for the will to live already stands disintegrated and every additional moment of living is an onerous task considering the newly discovered consciousness that embodies apprehensions doesn't approve of a life of dissimulation anymore. The repeated implorations of the will to exist are overpowered by the tirade of doubts that dare to call the authority of the established order into question. With a mindset as eccentric as this, they go about

distancing themselves from other people whom they think aren't like minded and contrary to what most people would think, this loneliness is seldom the source of their distress rather it's their one of the many ways of asserting a denial of the will to exist as regardless of their orientations, the will remains common to all the sentient beings. "Lonely people tend, rather, to be lonely because they decline to bear the psychic costs of being around other humans. They are allergic to people. People affect them too strongly". (David Foster Wallace, 2009). They consider themselves almost incorrigible in their opinions and despite having been brought to the mental torment resulting of their realisation they still wouldn't be willing to conform to the Will to Live, even if they were to be given another chance at it.

Learning how to think" really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think.

It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience.

Because if you cannot or will not exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed. (David Foster Wallace, 2009)

IV. STRUGGLE WITH A SENSE OF IDENTITY

The conflict ensued from a realisation of the deception of the will to live, along with instilling a sense of existential crisis, also introduces forth a struggle between the conflicting identities within the same person, one that is recent and gradually highjacking the domineering psyche is confronted against the former identity whose remnants still continue ravaging the intellect without any respite. While the originally intended application of a denial of the will to exist was to address the morbid misery that was the result of none other than this irrational clinging to life, but after its denial, the life or whatever was left of it after such a denial had no substance or anything worth latching on to further, Despite being confronted with the existential dread, they still nevertheless asserted their embrace of a freedom of their thoughts and wouldn't trade it even for their life. "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind." (Woolf, 1929).

The fragmented narratives and an angsty approach towards life was the common feature of the literature produced of such thoughts, the mind though having lost its former recourse to the irrational will still found itself to be distressed by the tendency of clinging to life that preceded this resolute conviction and the consequence was yet another irrational and rather unintelligible longing not for anything specific but still being the source of their distress.

I can only note that the past is beautiful because one never realises an emotion at the time. It expands later, and thus we don't have complete emotions about the present, only about the past. (Woolf, 1981)

The existence becomes elusive and obscure to such an extent that the present moment is considered to be wanting in the irrational thing for which the mind longs now. Woolf's disoriented view of life could in part have been the result of society's sneers of her concerned with her, then thought to be unconventional sexuality. "Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women" (Woolf). The disillusionment with society and its values could have been the point of no return for her from the confrontation with the will to exist as when one comes close enough to questioning the societal norms, It doesn't take long before the simple enquiry about life and the abutted society turns towards more serious apprehensions about the nature of reality and existence in general.

What is the meaning of life? That was all- a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years, the great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead, there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. (Woolf, 1927)

Beat down by the dejected existence

If there's a thing that should be indictable of bringing people to the edge of this fatal confrontation with the will to live, It has to be the unprecedented situations in one's life that are controlled by some obscure force, the mere conception of which seems far fetched at this point. "If you expect nothing from somebody you are never disappointed". (Plath, 1963). The state of Sylvia Plath is an interesting one to mull upon with this fact having been established now, The plath's neurotic mental state was a direct consequence of her rather difficult upbringing and the situations in her life that she stumbled upon going ahead and weren't quite like how she had once imagined them to be, Her poetry evokes the expression of being tired of all the dejections so far inflicted on her. "I fancied you'd return the way you said, But I grow old and I forget your name". (Neurotic Poets, 2011, para.5, lines 1-2). Her constant failures as thought or referred to such, by the society, would have been enough to stimulate a sense of Incredulity in her thus putting the struggle between a denial and acceptance of the will to live in motion. After being almost beat down ceaselessly by the fangs of fortune, She had already given up on the will to Live and the only means of redemption for her was to depart from the existence that was now the subject of her intense despire. "I have done it again. One year in every ten I manage it——" (Academy of American Poets, 2019, para.1, lines 1-2). In

her poetry shortly prior to the time of her suicide, she expressed the Subjugation she had experienced all along at the hands of those who had been close to her, But at this point there was no hope anymore as the denial of the will to exist had made her consecutive failed attempts of suicide a pain worse than what she had gone through in other areas of her life and now death had started to seem like a crown that she couldn't wait anymore to have. "Dying Is an art, like everything else. I do it exceptionally well". (Academy of American Poets, para. 15, lines 1-3).

V. CONCLUSION

The ability of being able to think about the existence with a critical lens however interesting and thought provoking it may sound, is the crux of the existential dread that was eventually responsible for snuffing out the lives of those who were labelled by the society as escapists and cowards, The common theme among the writers remains the confessional nature of their writing where they no longer strive to conform to the beliefs and ideals of anyone and their writing provides a medium to purge themselves of the burden of their thoughts but as is evident to no avail. The conflict between the force of Will to Live and its denial has almost always resulted in the victory of the latter because it obviates the need of mending the existential dread altogether by embracing non existence. The denial of the will to live is conducive not to the survival but to the mental peace and as preposterous as it might seem the two are more often than not at odds with each other.

REFERENCES

- [1] Poetry Foundation. (2009). *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69372/from-poetics>.
- [2] Empedocles, & Wright, M. R. (1981). *The extant fragments*. Yale Univ. Press.
- [3] *A quote by Seneca*. (2024). Goodreads.com.
<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/28889-sometimes-even-to-live-is-an-act-of-courage>.
- [4] Schopenhauer, A. (1966). *The World as will and representation Vol. 1*. New York Dover Publications.
- [5] Librarian, A. (2015, May 24). *ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER(1788-1860)from The World as Will and Ideafrom Studies in Pessimism: On Suicide*. The Ethics of Suicide Digital Archive.
<https://ethicsofsuicide.lib.utah.edu/selections/arthur-schopenhauer/>.
- [6] David Foster Wallace. (2011). *Girl with curious hair*. Abacus.
- [7] David Foster Wallace, & Mondadori. (2016). *Infinite jest*. Einaudi.
- [8] David Foster Wallace. (2009). *A supposedly fun thing I'll never do again : essays and arguments*. Abacus.
- [9] David Foster Wallace. (2009). *This is water*. Little, Brown.
- [10] Woolf, V. (1929). *A Room Of One's Own*. Hogarth Press.
- [11] Woolf, V. (1981). *The diary of Virginia Woolf*. Penguin Books.
- [12] Woolf, V. (1927). *To the Lighthouse*. Columbia University Press.
- [13] Plath, S. (1963). *The Bell Jar*. Robin Books.
- [14] Neurotic Poets. (2011). *Neurotic Poets - Neurotic Poets - "Mad Girl's Love Song" by Sylvia Plath*. Neuroticpoets.com.
<https://neuroticpoets.com/plath/poem/madgirl>.
- [15] Academy of American Poets. (2019). *Lady Lazarus by Sylvia Plath - Poems | Academy of American Poets*. Poets.org.
<https://poets.org/poem/lady-lazarus>.