



A Man Who Could Work Miracles by H G Wells and Existentialism

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the features of existentialism in the fictional story 'A Man Who Could Work Miracles' by H G Wells. Existentialism is a philosophy which deals with individual existence, choice and freedom. The existential philosophers assert that the meaning of life is created through our actions. The ability of the individual to determine their life with freedom and responsibility and the conflict between external forces and individual's search for meaning is explored in this study. Fotheringhay's power to change reality and its consequences reflect the existential features. It also shows how power does not create meaning and infinite possibilities could not change the reality. This paper also evaluates the existential philosophy of Sartre, Camus, and Kierkegaard in comparison with Fotheringhay's miraculous power.

Key Words: freedom, responsibility, existentialism, individual.

Introduction

The concept of Existentialism about searching for meaning of life amidst the chaos, and the notion of freedom, responsibility and individuality are mirrored in the short story, 'A Man Who Could Work Miracles' with subtitle 'A Pantoum in Prose' written by H G Wells in 1898. The story presents George McWhirter Fotheringhay an ordinary clerk who is sceptic about the existence of miracles. When he miraculously gains the power which fulfils whatever he wishes for, he tries to change things for better. He struggles with the 'moral implication and chaotic outcomes of his actions.' Finally, he wishes to return to the time before he had this miraculous power. The story brings up the traction between the 'imaginative possibilities and scientific certainties' in the complicated character who is unsure about what to do with newly gained power.

The existentialist stance on how freedom and responsibility go hand in hand and how a mediocre cannot handle the absolute power is presented in this paper. The story presents how power cannot make life meaningful. The story also reflects how 'human reason seeks order' but the universe gives the indifferent chaotic response for disrupting the natural order. The problem of how humans lack power to obtain the meaning and clarity to sustain the irrationality of the life is analysed in this paper. The philosophical perspectives of Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Soren Kierkegaard about freedom, responsibility, absurdity, anxiety and human limitations are explored by close reading of the text.

Existentialism

Existentialism has become a major philosophy during the 20th century with prominent philosophers like Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The French Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel first used the term existentialism in the middle of the 1940s. Jean-Paul Sartre disputed Marcel's initial use of the phrase during a colloquium in 1945. After changing his views, Sartre publicly embraced the existentialist name on October 29, 1945, in a presentation to the Club Maintenant in Paris. This was published in *Existentialism Is Humanism*, a brief book that contributed to the popularization of existentialist philosophy. It is also viewed as an intellectual movement where “existentialism is often viewed as a historically situated event that emerged against the backdrop of the Second World War, the Nazi death camps, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all of which created the circumstances for what has been called the existentialist moment.” It created a sense of anxiety, thought about death, freedom and meaninglessness. The philosophers of this movement asserts that human have absolute freedom for making their choices and creating meaning. The consistent conflict between search for meaning and the irrational world, and the anxiety for handling the freedom of choice and responsibility it brings are certain features of this movement. This philosophy also reasoned on exploring the value and problems of human existence.

Hence, the concept had evolved in 19th century which deals with the concept of searching for the meaning of life and the philosophers associated with this concept are Soren Kirkegaard and Fredrich Nietzsche. It is considered to be an abstract philosophy with various perspectives on freedom, individuality, choice and the struggle for self-discovery.

Absolute Freedom and its responsibilities

Power accompanies responsibilities and Jean Paul Sartre asserts about freedom in his book, ‘Being and Nothingness’ that ‘Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does; that is, freedom is default nature of man.’ In Well’s story, the miraculous power gives Fotheringhay complete freedom over reality. He argues that “the universe is apparently devoid of direction, purpose, or meaning; consequently, the story presents Fotheringhay with no control over his power. This newly possessed power has no inherent purpose and no instructions to follow to unveil the absolute intentions to exercise the power.

In ‘Existentialism Is Humanism’ Sartre states that freedom and responsibility are inseparable. One can have infinite freedom but also responsible for the consequences of their choice. All the miracles that he could do, represents a choice which has unaltered consequences. Sartre states that people try to escape freedom to avoid the responsibilities, and Fotheringhay ends up wishing to go back to the normal state.

According to Sartre, ‘when an individual acts, they are not only choosing for themselves but implicitly affirming a vision of how human beings ought to act. In this way, personal choices carry a universal dimension, intensifying the weight of responsibility.’ In the story, Fotheringhay uses his power to benefit the society upon the advice given by Maydig. He suggests to use this miraculous power to cure illness and enhance the public works. Here, Maydig is fulfilling his desire to correct the society and make it an ideal place to live through the Fotheringhay’s power. Sartre states about ‘bad faith’(Mauvaises foi), according to him, individual deceive themselves by rejecting freedom and responsibility and tend to believe that actions depend on circumstances. These individuals refuse to take freedom as they assume its responsibilities as a burden to bear. Hence, Fotheringhay gives up his power as he could not handle the repercussions.

Anxiety and Isolation

Soren Kierkegaard relates the concept of anxiety to freedom and existential choice. Anxiety is essential in Kierkegaard’s understanding of moral and spiritual growth, because it is through the experience of anxiety, individuals can recognize their freedom and responsibility for their actions.

Kierkegaard states that ‘anxiety is a way for humanity to be saved as well. Anxiety informs us of our choices, our self-awareness and personal responsibility, and brings us from a state of un-self-conscious immediacy to self-conscious reflection.’ He views anxiety as the “dizziness of freedom” and it is associated with isolation from the mass and anguish when taking decisions or making choices. In the story, for Fotheringhay, anxiety

results from infinite possibilities and choices and leads him to take decision. His anxiety over his new found power makes him to seek spiritual support as he goes to attend Sunday church.

For Kierkegaard, isolation is closely connected to anxiety. He states that authentic existence seeks individual to face life independently. Kierkegaard mentions about “the crowd,” which avoids individuals to take personal responsibility. ‘For him, truth is not attained through group consensus but through personal commitment, and each individual must personally grapple with essential issues such as faith, guilt, and meaning.’ This places individual in complete isolation. Fotheringhay feels anxious about his newly gained power and goes to church to seek guidance and he comes across Maydig. He suggests him to pause the night to change the world for good. Accordingly, when he wishes to halt the motion of the earth, it brings devastating results and Fotheringhay stands alone looking at the scale of destructions. He regrets his decision influenced by Maydig and makes a final wish to go back to the time when he didn’t have this power.

Absurdity and Rational Control

Albert Camus believes that absurdity is a constant conflict between human desire for rationality in the universe’s indifference. He describes the philosophy of absurdity in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. According to him, ‘human beings possess an inherent need to understand their existence, to impose logic and coherence upon the world.’ The desire for rational explanation led to the creation of science, religion and philosophy. The story presents a man with logic and rational thinking trying to navigate his newly gained power. The story begins with him being rational and puts up an argument against the miracles and ends up getting the miraculous power.

Camus states that ‘This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity.’ Rationality plays a crucial role in providing clarity and purpose. He also believes that reason becomes limited when it comes to objective reality. The miraculous power which the protagonist gains represent the irrationality. When Fotheringhay is sceptical about his newly gained power, he explores the power by sending a constable to Hades. It shows the internal conflict between rationality and indifference.

Since we cannot provide absolute meaning for our life, Camus suggests that it creates a path for a ‘form of freedom rooted in honesty and engagement with the present moment.’ Fotheringhay accepts his miraculous power and under the guidance of Maydig he uses his power to benefit the society. He is focused on what he can do with this power and did not bother much about what would later. So, his logical plans and rational thinking failed in front of indifference of universe.

Conclusion

The story, ‘A Man Who Could Work Miracles’ presents a protagonist, Fotheringhay who goes through existential crisis for gaining a miraculous power which fulfils his wishes. It showcases how that power could not bring meaning or relieve him from existential anxiety. His incapability to control the miraculous power demonstrates the philosophy of Sarte, Kierkegaard and Camus.

Sarte’s philosophy of freedom and its inevitable responsibilities is explored with Fotheringhay’s newly gained power. The story explores how human beings are not bound by nature or fate but by the control over one’s life because Fotheringhay choses to give up his power at the end. The theme of anxiety and isolation is explored from the lens of Kierkegaard. Fotheringhay’s anxiety roots from his ability to create unlimited possibilities. His failure in seeking meaning and taking rational decisions to resolve his anxiety leads to the theme of absurdity. As presented by Camus, absurdity is the conflict between the human desire for meaning and universe’s indifference. The story reflects it with how Fotheringhay’s intentions to change the world for better and wishes to stop the movement of earth leads to unprecedented catastrophe.

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