

The Concept of Suicide in Cormac McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited*: Sartrean reading

Mustafa Talib Jawad

(English Department, Faculty of Arts, Imam Ja'afar Al-Sadiq University, Iraq)

ABSTRACT: The paper attempts to pick up specific points of Cormac McCarthy's *The Sunset limited* play by clarifying the existentialist philosophical problems that may lead an individual to commit suicide. This paper mainly regards Jean Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy as prominent perspective that mimics the character of White. In accordance with Sartre's existentialist writings, an individual is born a free, which means a man can decide or choose whatever is appropriate in life. All the challenges and struggles that a man may face in life are invaluable as long as death is the absolute bitter end of human beings. Sufferance is the dominant characteristic of life. Therefore, nothing meaningful deserves all the different images of suffering. However, on one hand, the paper shows these existentialist problems regarding Sartre's writing. On the other hand, it shows how such a philosophy mimics White's intention for committing suicide.

Keywords -Cormac McCarthy, existentialism, *The Sunset Limited*, White, suicide and freedom

I. Introduction

Seemingly, Existentialism deals with existence of human being, the prominent existentialists clarify the problems that face a man philosophically. In accordance with what was read, existentialism consists of two main branches; on one hand, the religious existentialism. On the other hand, the atheist one. Each existentialist branch has its essential philosopher. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) devoted his existentialist writings to the significance of religion, his philosophy is based on religion as an essential of existentialist philosophy. While, Jean Paul Sartre relies on the atheist aspect as a main basic of his philosophy.

McCarthy (1933-1965) was an American novelist, playwright and screenwriter; He became well-known in USA. He wrote many novels like *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *Child of God* (1973). The play he wrote is a novel in dramatic form. It discusses the main existentialist problems like the meaninglessness of life, religion and (non-religious belief), suicide, despair and responsibility. *The Sunset Limited* is derived from the name of a train station between New Orleans to Los Angeles. The events take place in Black's New York City apartment. The argument on meaninglessness of life waged between the characters, White and Black. Just a few moments before the opening scene, Black prevents White from committing suicide, by saving him from jumping in front of a train. The events of the play are Black's attempts to talk to White in order to convince him to avoid committing suicide. They entered Black's apartment, the two characters of the play begin arguing on the meaning of life, existence and purpose of life. White looks at life as meaningless, and claims that a man lives to tolerate the suffering. White intends to commit suicide for the reasons he told Black about, but the latter is attempting to dissuade him from the intention of committing suicide. At the end of the play, White begs Black to open the apartment's door because Black's attempts and arguments were unsuccessful. Finally, Black opens the door, and the atheist character White leaves to accomplish what he started the play with. Accordingly, the play mimics an existentialist matter. Studying it regarding Sartre's views toward human beings is a significant attempt to clarify what leads into committing suicide. Jean Paul Sartre is a prominent existential philosopher who depends on atheist perspectives. Regarding Sartre's writings and McCarthy's text, the paper focuses on the philosophical reasons and benefits that may lead an atheist to suicide.

II. Literature Review

The Sunset Limited is derived from the name of a train station. The events take place in Black's New York City apartment. The argument on meaninglessness of life absorbed between the characters, White and Black. Just a few moments before the opening scene, Black prevents White from committing suicide, by saving him from jumping in front of a train. The entire play consists of Black's attempts to talk to White away from the idea of committing suicide. They entered Black's apartment, the two characters of the play begin arguing on the meaning of life, existence and purpose of life.

Several searches have been accomplished or written about the same play, *The Sunset Limited* (2006). These searches mimic the concept of existentialism concerning various perspectives. For instance, Ellis (2006) explains what McCarthy's main aspects that he concentrated on; he also referred to the main points in the play that McCarthy depended widely on, Ellis reveals that the playwright based on setting rather than on plot, or even character. On the other hand, Greenwood declares that the play produces different views of the sympathetic portrayal of life for those two men, an image of religious man who believes that life is a gift; while the atheist one considers life as an aimless (Greenwood, 2009, p.p. 87-89). This paper is an attempt of clarifying the philosophical reasons and motivations of the atheists that participate to the concept of committing suicide. Questions that are raised in this paper; what is the philosophy Existentialism? How is suicide linked to the Sartrean Existentialism? What are the philosophical reasons and motivations of White character that are contributing to the idea of committing suicide? Concerning the questions above, this paper answers them regarding McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited* and Sartrean philosophy of Existentialism.

III. Discussion

3.1. Existentialism as a philosophy

Defining Existentialism appropriately is still a problematic mission. Several scholars define it with ambiguity. Suicide is argued crucially in philosophy of Existentialism. The concept of suicide is merely tied to the existentialist philosophy. Soren Kierkegaard is a considered as a prominent religious existentialist who believes that life is a gift and committing suicide is forbidden by God. Regarding Jean Paul Sartre, the existentialist who "stressed the anguish of freedom," man has not a "given nature" as traditional religious belief: In accordance with Sartre's existentialist previous speech, a man is totally free and his/her decision or choice is made freely. Therefore, Existentialism is an argumentative philosophy. The character White in McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited* intends to commit suicide for one general reason. Regarding McCarthy's text, existentialist problems urge White to end his life.

Sartre believes that God does not exist, in paradoxical image with the positivists who confess that they will not consider the existence of God (Sartre, 1955, p. 187). The point that Sartre intends to refer to is human beings have not been given a specific nature, a man is not a tool or machine, he/she is not born in the universe with specific orders that he/she must perform. A man is not performing instructed rules or commands. He/she doesn't obey the cultural concepts, environmental boundaries or religious instructions. But, he/she has his/her own values and unlimited powers or capacities to behave freely in life. Therefore, he rejects the existence of God in order to refuse all these religious instructions. Perhaps, Sartre's rejection of God existence guided him to write his well-known article which was entitled "*Existence Precedes Essence*" in 2007: In which he argued the philosophical issues of existence and essence.

3.2. Sartre's *Existence Precedes Essence*

Perhaps, philosopher and thinkers still argue whether existence precedes essence or existence followed by essence. It is regarded as an eternal philosophical argument. It resembles the eternal argument; the egg came first or chicken first. But, Jean Paul Sartre declares that existence precedes essence and supports that with evidences and proofs. What is meant by the declaration of Sartre, "existence precedes essence" is that when a man has wood and intends to build a theatre; building the theatre has been intended to be accomplished because of the existence of wood or the need of it? Certainly, the need of building the theatre urged the human to define the function of the existence of the wood. Accordingly, human beings come first then they are defined. First, they come to the universe. Then, they form their identities and establish their essences.

Existence Precedes Essence (2007) is the most significant essay that Sartre wrote. He clarifies the main philosophical problems of existence; in which he indicates the problematic matter that individuals may face in their lives. All these existential problems are tied to the existence and essence. The point that can be inferred is that human beings are free, that make their decisions and choice according to their intentions and freedom.

Seemingly, concerning “*Existence Precedes Essence*” (Sartre, 2007). Sartre’s concept of suicide largely mimics the philosophy of existence. A being whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.” (Sartre, 2007, p. 22). That means a man him/herself defines what he/she is. No power or outside orders clarify what a man is. “life is nothing until it is lived.” (Sartre, 1980, p. 54). This statement relates to McCarthy’s White character. In accordance with White’s speeches, he lived his own life but filled with suffering, melancholy, aimlessness and emptiness.

Obviously, Sartre’s main principle in existentialist philosophy is freedom: A man is born without restrictions or any type of social, political, or even religious restrictions. Seemingly, the crucial point that Sartre intends to refer to is a man’s freedom is devoted to his behavior. he is compelled to exercise his freedom and form his own identity which is always in the making, transcending the given situation with his self-chosen action (Sartre, 2007, pp. 22-33). An individual’s freedom looks like having a car, when an individual has a car, he/she has the absolute freedom to deal with it. He/she has the capacity to keep it and destroy it at the same time or even burn it. He/she has the total freedom to do whatever is suitable for him/her whether he/she decides to keep it or burn it; accurately, like having a life. Therefore, an individual is totally free to keep that life or end it.

3.3. White’s philosophical problems of existence

The play consists of two characters only, White and Black. White is an atheist white professor, while Black is a religious black man. They spend one night in Black’s apartment arguing the existential problem that White suffered from. These problems led the latter to commit suicide, but White has been saved by Black suddenly. After saving him, Black brought him to his apartment as if he arrested him. But, he attempts to convince him to avoid committing suicide. White justifies and reveals the essential reasons that led him to commit suicide. White began arguing that whatever a man does in life, it will never last forever:

WHITE. ..., you like music, right?

BLACK Yes, I do.

WHITE. Who is the greatest composer you know of?

BLACK. John Coltrane. Hands down.

WHITE. Do you think his music will last forever?

BLACK. Well, forever's a long time, Professor. So, I got to say no. it won't. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 55)

Nothing remains forever, nothing is immortal. Whatever an individual accomplishes is not mentioned for a long time. These accomplishments will be forgotten one day. When White asks Black about the greatest composer that he knew, he intends to declare to inform him that whatever a man accomplishes will never remain forever. White addresses Black and declares that a man intentionally or unintentionally gives up the world, and all the courage is farcical and comical. Gradually, a man becomes an accomplice with his annihilation. Meanwhile, living any kind of life is not going to make a man to be. The most important thing we know about White, though, is that he has convinced himself, intellectually, that there is no point in life: Committing suicide, to die is better because it minimizes pain. But his faith in culture has been undercut by human brutality. Events like the Holocaust have made him see art and literature as devoid of sustaining values and truths. True to form, McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited* does not offer peaches and roses. He offers the sad reality of what life means to the two characters. Despite the dark tone, the play reads extremely well, the dialogue is direct.

I don't believe they could offer the first reason why they shouldn't elect die as soon as possible." (McCarthy, 2006, p. 57).

Then, White tells Black his convince that if an individual saw the world with no illusions, he lies and dreams, he will have no real reason to live such a life. When people recognize that they will not find a reason behind living in such a world, they will claim the same as him; because there is a chance to be with all nothingness and meaninglessness.

"But I'm at a loss as to how to bring myself to believe in some most excellent world when I already know it doesn't exist" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 56). He denies the significance to bring himself into a world because it is an attempt of losing time and effort, nothing deserves to do so. Life for him is ended, and he argues that with Black.

3.4. White and freedom

White is free, and can perform whatever he wants. He does not feel that he is unable to do something. But nothing will last forever, he describes that saying even the musical deeds will not remain forever because forever is a long time (McCarthy, 2006, p. 55). All he is going to perform is empty, meaningless and life for him is limited, he utters." the truth is that the forms I see have been slowly emptied out. They no longer have any content. They are shapes only. A train, a wall, a world. Or a man". (McCarthy, 2006, p. 58). The point that he wanted to show is that he is in despair; because of the life's meaning. He intended to commit suicide not because he is ill of despair, but because of the meaninglessness of life. The main point that Sartre’s existentialism depends on, is human freedom.

Sartre (1992), describes the idea of freedom as: "I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. "I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself" (Sartre, 1992, p. 439). According to White's notions, that excellent world does not exist. Therefore, why should a man insert himself in such a situation? He finds out that committing suicide is better than suffering, it will not be good to wait for death.

"I don't believe in God. Can you understand that? Look around you man. Can you see? The clamor and din of those in torment has to the sound most pleasing to his ear. And I loathe these discussions." (McCarthy, 2006, p. 58)

White's resentment reached its finality. His comment accurately refers to the level of the recognition that he reached. He summarizes and identifies the meaning of life. He affirms that religion prepares one for more life. But he is a non-religious believer, he will not apply the religious rituals. He believes that he is free, and he can choose whatever he sees as a suitable. When a man contemplates in the meaning of life and purpose of living with no illusions, lies and dreams. As a human being, we are born, some of us have died, and we may live for more few days, months or years, then we will join them, no more no less. Accordingly, the atheist one doesn't believe in the everlasting life, he believes that a man has one life only, then he will be annihilated. Therefore, White declares that such life, described above, will be ended one day, that no need to insert himself in. Therefore, he believes that getting rid of this life is much better than keeping it. According to what has been mentioned by Sartre above, would expand responsibility to all men, not to a single man, since his exercise of option necessarily affects others, which is part of one's facticity. A single choice is a choice for all. Nothing is better for man unless it is better for all. To choose between this or that is, at the same time, to affirm the value of that which is chosen.

A man's essential idea is freedom. It is said, authentically a man looks for his existence when a man is totally free to choose who and what he will become in his own life. Unfortunately, a man is limited and places as stone away from the notion of finding his being, and therefore subject to all the constrains. Thus, to look for freedom is a risk and not easily can be achieved, it made him live in tension between fearing of losing freedom and freedom itself. Even though, human always suffers from anxiety because of his efforts to reach his freedom. He finds nothing, he does not find his being without his freedom. Therefore, freedom is a fundamental among the existentialists.

For Sartre (1957), freedom is the chief characteristic of man. For him 'Man is freedom'. Freedom simply means "the autonomy of choice" (p. 483). Freedom for the atheist is understood as human autonomy. The existence of God is a threat to human's freedom, or God makes human as his puppets, his actors that have to play their given roles. In order to achieve freedom, man should have his own right to choose and decide outside the existence of God who determines man's life and fate. All the human beings are existing, even objects around us like cup, bed, table. Etc. Nevertheless, that freedom always drags the heavy responsibility and consequences along the way, since it must be the best choose, not only for himself but also for others and every mankind.

White, the atheist professor, explains for Black "I don't believe in God. Can you understand that?" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 57). He discovered that his existence is a nihilist one and nothing deserves to live in such a life, and committing suicide is the only way to achieve a better condition. Regarding the autonomy of choice which was declared by the atheist existentialist Sartre, he intended to kill himself because he believed that human beings are born free with no limits. White views to the needless condition of believing in certain thing around him or the world. He reveals "I can speak for others. My own reasons centre on gradual loss of make-believe. That's all. A gradual enlistment as to the nature of reality. Of the world" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 51). His speech refers to the level of being a non-believer in the world and its contents and even he addresses Black ironically showing that it is a dull and silly matter to show others how a man may lose his faith or belief in the world. He tells Black "..., I don't regard my state of mind as some pessimistic of the world. I regard it as the world itself" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 57). He does explain the meaning of life and reasons pushed him to commit suicide, not because of the pessimistic view toward the world, but the world itself like the way he described. So, he made his decisions and chose relying a big deal on his own freedom because life is a non-worth living. The fundamental theme of the play is freedom. The image of freedom was embodied in the character of White. He discusses the matters with Black with no limitations or red lines. White reached the highest point of freedom because practicing his freedom depended on doing, not saying committing suicide is regarded as practicing freedom, a man may practice freedom. But it is difficult to reach the level that White did because he looks at it philosophically.

BLACK. What do you think is wrong with you that finally narrowed all your choices down to The Sunset Limited?

WHITE. I don't think there's anything wrong with me. I think I've just been driven to finally face the truth. If I'm different it doesn't mean I'm crazy.

BLACK. Different?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Different from who?

WHITE. From anybody. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 36)

White answers Black that he should avoid thinking that something has happened to him. White has been led to the truth of the meaning of life. And, no need to think that he is mad, because he thinks in a different way. To be different from anybody, it doesn't mean he has done something wrong or something wrong has happened. Considering White's philosophical views, he breaks the traditions and the way we think.

BLACK. What if what he said made sense?

WHITE. It wouldn't make any difference. Crazy is craziness.

BLACK. Don't make no difference if it makes sense.

WHITE. No. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 46-47)

White confesses that he is not noble enough because he believes in the principle that a man is totally free. He thinks that he always tells the truth, even when he describes himself. Black insists to know White's relation to God. But he repetitively announces that he does not believe in God. Then Black asks White if what has been said to him by Jesus. White answers that he would not make sense because craziness is craziness. According to White's description, "craziness" is a definition for whether Jesus will make sense or not, for what he said to him. In short, employing the word "craziness" is an evident indication for the way that a religious one thinks or believes. It is somehow a mythical view.

Existentialism is a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity. It is public knowledge that the fundamental reproach brought against us is that we stress the dark side of human life. The atheist existentialist Sartre defines Existentialism with simple description. He considers Existentialism as a doctrine by which human life becomes possible, no difficulties or fears. He links the human action with two significant matters; the environment and the human subjectivity are important bases for the human truth or action. When someone feels angry, and screams to exist or to be, Sartre (2007) reveals it is not a way or means to express his/her existence (p.p. 24-29). Accordingly, some people call those in a moment of anger as naturalists. Sartre (2007), in his Existentialism is a Humanism, defends his philosophy against the claims. The world problem that occupies peoples' minds and affects the heart of their present existence, is social problem. The social problem then starts to reflect in the man that lives it intellectually a revolutionary bitterness.

The very beginning of Sartre's existential philosophy is freedom. "I am my freedom" (Sartre 1980, p. 117). Accordingly, his philosophy concentrates on atheist notions. The believer of mystical Christianity experiences a complete breakdown of ontic distinctions and Accordingly, Sartre's intention is deeply to describe the religious one and the way he tends to God as well. Along the play, White attempts to clarify the idea of religion. In many points, it seems that White draws Black to show how Black is totally impressed by rituals of religion. In the beginning of the play, when White was brought to Black's apartment after saving him from committing suicide, and went on to discuss the meaning of life; Black defends the Bible against White's answers while they are discussing which book is good to read. White declares that there are books better than the Bible or religious books (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 5-11). White comments: "I suppose maybe a history book. Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire might be one. At least, the events would be the actual events. They would be things that had happened" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 11). The religious Black believes that the Bible is a holy book and must be read, he desperately defends it against White, because the latter did not read the whole Bible and preferred to read many other books in different fields.

According to the dialogue, between White and Black. There are several shifts in their conversation from one topic into another. But there is another point which refers to the point that how a religious one experiences a complete breakdown of ontic distinctions and becomes aware of the single divine nature to which everything belongs. When they went on discussing the meaning of life and other matters, they shifted to the sudden save of White. Black's nature and his association with religion made him guess that he played a role as something sent to save White from his "destruction", something like an angel. But, when White hears him, reveals such things, as he does not believe in angels (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 12-13).

Nowadays, philosophy discusses the daily and social problems wider, and focuses on the meaning of life and purpose of life. The appearance of Cormac McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited* discusses the idea of whether life is worth living or not. Before starting with Black to distinguish whether he is in the cage of the religious thoughts or out of it, let us begin with the atheist White who believes in freedom with no limitations or red lines.

Relying on *The Sunset Limited*, White defines life and religion along the play. The atheistic version of existentialism "emphasized the total isolation of the human being and the total responsibility of each person for his own existence" (Khawaja, 2016, p. 2). Regarding Khawaja, Sartre's notion of "nothingness" grew directly out of his atheism. White

passed the traditional understanding of atheism; he does not make attacks on God. He only declared that he does not believe in God (McCarthy, 2006, p. 57). He describes nothingness that world is saturated with, he describes it philosophically. Regarding the absurdist thoughts and the nothingness, he mentions:

WHITE. You don't think this is a terrible place?

BLACK. Terrible?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Damn, professor. This aint a horrible life. What you talkin bout?

WHITE. This place. It's a terrible place. Full of horrible people.

BLACK. Oh my. (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 19-20)

According to the text, White is a professor of philosophy. The way he describes the world and life shows how he went far away from the notion of atheism; he was not limited; he was free to think however he likes to. The absence of limitations made him announce his thoughts utterly. Accordingly, he reached a level which realizes that life is meaningless. Therefore, he intended to kill himself to get rid of this world and the non-worth-living life. It can be interpreted that he imagines the world as prison and needs to release himself from this horrible life and the terrible world. Black interprets the events around him relying on the nature and revision. For example, he insists that he was somehow sent by God as a savior for White, he even claims that White's leap which was supposed to be on the front of the train, took place in a way as if he was appointed to save the atheist professor. Black addresses White "You know who appointed me. I didn't ask for you to leap into my arms down in the subway this morning" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 8). A religion plants idea which cut the concept of being off.

White does not see the absentees. He does not believe in the absent material like Sartre. That can be observed clearly when they were discussing Jesus existence in the room which they were in. Black claims that Jesus is in the room as if the coat that White wears (McCarthy, 2006, p.8). White made a character hypothetically, named Cecil. He invented it to show Black the difference between the unseen things and the seen ones. White tells him if Cecil came now and told us that White does not wear a coat, but he does wear it. He tells Black that there is a big difference to think about the existence of his coat on his body is like thinking that Cecil's claim that his coat does not exist (McCarthy, 2006, pp.8-9). Accordingly, the indication is very obvious, White does not believe in unseen things he denies, the existence of Jesus in the room.

The core of the atheistic or existentialist notion is freedom. Therefore, Sartre (1992) asserts; that the notion of freedom is precisely nothingness which is made to be at the heart of man and which forces human reality to make itself instead of to be; this means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself (pp. 439-441). Thus, a man should be free, like White, who even didn't hesitate to commit suicide because of his miserable life. "Man is nothing, but what he makes of himself and that this is the first principle of existentialism" (Sartre, 1992, p. 15). While, Black didn't look for his absolute freedom. His freedom depends on what religion commands him. White regards religion as a machine which prepares a man for more "lies, dreams and illusions" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 58).

IV. Conclusion

In brief, Sartre's existentialist writings reveals that an individual is totally free in choosing his/her choice in life. Therefore, applying McCarthy's text on Existentialism leads to infer that White is free in choosing suicide. White, the atheist professor believes that life is aimless. Seemingly, he believes that whatever an individual accomplishes in his/her life will never remain or last forever. Specifically, an individual's absolute destiny is death. He thinks that he is not in need of such a life, filled with weariness, torment and suffering. These existential philosophical problems led him to commit suicide.

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