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### Helen's existentialism awakening

As we begin reading the story we make a quick observation that Helen isn't your typical country girl and doesn't quite fit in the social norms in her town. She brings a mysterious allure about her origins and her way of life. As the reader we struggle trying to understand some of the choices that she makes throughout the story. We anticipate that she would answer truthfully but Helen herself doesn't even know why she made those choices. And through subtexts we realize that Helen might be going through an Existentialist crisis.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emphasizes the individual's freedom to make choices and the need to create meaning in one's own life. It is a philosophy that encourages individuals to take responsibility for their own actions and to live their lives in a way that is authentic and true to themselves. We see that Helen embodies this philosophy a lot as she doesn't quite care or understand the social norms around her and does whatever she wants despite the backlash she receives. She believes that to live life means to do it in her true form only and not the form of what society wants her to be. As Oates writes, "Helen had wanted to go there all her life, not being afraid of anything, and so she had gone, and was coming back in a form that only looked like herself"(Oates 146). This proves to us that Helen believes in always being her true self and living in her authentic way of life.

As an existentialist to live in an authentic way means to reject societal norms and expectations. Helen, as we can see from her characteristics, is absolutely rejecting societal norms

and traditions. Helen shows us how she simply ignores any words that she doesn't take interest in: “ If she was not interested in a word her mind wouldn't hear it but made it blurred and strange, like words half heard in dreams or through some thick substance. You didn't have to hear a word if you didn't want to” (Oates 146). Helen makes decisions knowing that they are wrong but she doesn't understand why they are wrong so she does them anyway. As Oates writes, “ But to Helen the same man one hundred times or one hundred men, different men, seemed the same. It was wrong, of course, because she had been taught it and believed what she had been taught; but she could not understand the difference” (Oates 146). She proceeds to tell us in the rest of the story of her many scandalous relationships : “ that was one of the reasons she had married John, and before John there had been many others”(Oates147).

Another key concept in existentialism is the idea of absurdity. This is a reference to the notion that life is fundamentally worthless and that there is no real value or significance to human existence. Given that it goes against our innate impulse to discover meaning and purpose in life, this idea can be challenging to grasp. Existentialists, however, believe that this absurdity might serve as a platform for freedom and liberation. Helens shows us how liberated she feels in choosing her own death and her own path towards it : “incredulous pride one might feel when told at last the disease that is going to be fatal. For there were so many diseases and only one way out of the world, only one death, and so many years to get to it. They were like doors, Helen thought dreamily. You walked down a hallway like those in movies, in huge wealthy homes, crystal chandeliers and marble floors and . . . Great sweeping lawns . . . and doors all along those hallways; if you picked the wrong door you had to go through it”(Oates 146).

As we read the story the first time, it seems to us that Helen is indecisive and is just a normal adulterous woman. But reading the story through the scope of an existentialist lens we

see Helen choosing the doors and path to her death. She begins her new life leaving her old one ,as she thought to herself: “—she is only twenty-two (that was not old, not really) and going to begin a new life”(Oates 148). Again taking control of the doors she wants to open and close. She also tells us what her next step towards her path was going to be: “ Make her decision about her husband and the baby and there would be nothing left to think about”(Oates 148).

And as we see her making all these decisions we think that she must be doing this because of a good reason not just because she wants to. She might have been in an abusive situation, or she might have realized what she did was wrong and that she wanted to mend her relationship with her previous husband and her father or she will somehow grow up and take responsibility for the relationships she broke. Whether that's the relationship with her previous husband John, the man she left her husband for and is also leaving too, her baby that she left or her family that she left.

But to our surprise Helen doesn't even know the reason she is doing all this. She simply says that she doesn't understand but she has a gut feeling to search for something and so she goes back home to search for that “something”: “—it was something else, something she did not understand. Not her husband, not her baby, not even the look of the river way off down the hill, through the trees that got so solemn and intricate with their bare branches in winter. Those things she loved, she hadn't stopped loving them because she had had to love this new man more . . . but something else made her get up and run into the next room and look through the bureau drawers and the closet, as if looking for something”(Oates 147). Even when her father was asking her repeatedly why did she leave her husband and why did she come back, she couldn't answer as if she genuinely doesn't understand why there has to be meaning and purpose for every decision she makes:

“Why did you run away with him?”

“I don't know, I told you in the letter, I wrote it to you, Pa”....

“ Then why did you come back?”

" I came back because . . . because. . . ." And she shredded the weed in her cold fingers, but no words came to her. She watched the weed-fragments fall. No words came to her, her mind had turned hollow and cold, she had come too far down to this river bank but it was not any mistake more than the way the river kept moving was a mistake. (Oates 151).

In the story for a slight second she believed that she might have figured out what she was searching for and why she came back, but the thought scared her because that meant that she unknowingly was opening a very dangerous door. She thought that maybe she had come back home leaving everything behind so that she could see her fathers facial expression because then she would know if he is ashamed of her and whether he would take her back: “She had started knowing men by knowing him. She could read things in his face that taught her about the faces of other men, the slowness or quickness of their thoughts, if they were beginning to be impatient, or were pleased and didn't want to show it yet. Was it for this she had come home?—And the thought surprised her so that she sat up, because she did not understand. Was it for this she had come home?”(Oates 149)

When Helen finally realized that her father was holding a knife in his hand, all the worries and the fear she had in her had vanished. Helen wasn't afraid anymore because she had realized that this was the end of her path, the last door. Helen told us previously that there is only one death, and so many years to get to it and that they were like doors, and if you pick the wrong door you still had to go through it. So Helen realizes that she picked the wrong door and can not backtrack her path anymore, she has to go through it even though that means she will come face-

to-face with the inevitable death by her own father. This makes it easier to understand why she began looking at him curiously and not in a fearful way: “ He came to her and touched her shoulder as if waking her, and they looked at each other. Helen so terrified by now that she was no longer afraid but only curious with the mute marblelike curiosity of a child”(Oates 152). It was because she wanted to know how her death would happen since she ultimately chose it through her path. It was her right to know the way she was going to die. And so as her lifeless body laid near her father, the sky began to darken and change, symbolizing the end of her life and the continuation of another. And the absurdity of it all made it even more meaningful as she had the freedom to choose her ending.

Characters who are seeking meaning and purpose in their lives and who are faced with difficult decisions and moral quandaries are frequent examples of existentialism in literature. The works of French authors Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, such as Sartre's novel "Nausea" and Camus's "The Stranger," are some famous examples of existentialist literature.

Helen strikes very similar characteristics of another character in one of the most famous books written about existential philosophy; Meursault in “the stranger” by Albert Camus. The novel's protagonist, Meursault, is an embodiment of the existentialist philosophy. He is a man who lives in the present moment, without concern for the past or future. He is indifferent to the societal norms and expectations placed upon him, and he makes decisions based on his own personal desires and instincts. Just like Helen, Meursault doesn't understand his decisions and ultimately his decisions just like Helen lead to his demise.

Some points in both of the stories that seem to be mirrors of each other would be when Meursault is being questioned by the lawyer: “ ‘Why, why did you shoot at a body that was on the ground?’ Once again I didn't know how to answer. The magistrate ran his hands across his

forehead and repeated his question with a slightly different tone in his voice. ‘Why? You must tell me. Why?’ Still I didn't say anything”( Camus 68). This scene seems to mirror the exact scene where Helen is questioned by her father as to why did she leave John and why did she come back: “Why did you run away with him?”

“I don't know, I told you in the letter, I wrote it to you, Pa”....

“ Then why did you come back?”

" I came back because . . . because. . . ." (Oates 151).

Another similarity would be that both don't seem to put in effort into listening to stuff they don't agree with or aren't interested in. For example Mersault when he was being given advice by his lawyer he didn't take any of his advice and instead thought to himself: “As always, whenever I want to get rid of someone I'm not really listening to, I make it appear as if I agreed. To my surprise, he acted triumphant. ‘You see, you see!’ he said. ‘You do believe, don't you, and you're going to place your trust in Him, aren't you?’ Obviously, I again said no. He fell back in his chair”( Camus 69). Helen is exactly the same as she also believes that if you don't want to hear or listen to something you can simply ignore it: “If she was not interested in a word her mind wouldn't hear it but made it blurred and strange, like words half heard in dreams or through some thick substance. You didn't have to hear a word if you didn't want to” (Oates 146).

In an article written by Dilek Caliskan, he writes about how Joyce Oates uses Existentialism in a lot of her fiction writing: “ Joyce Carol Oates’s fiction reflects the existentialist psychiatrist R.D. Laing’s view (1967) that the individual is educated by the so-called ‘normal’ man to lose herself/himself becomes absurd. Populated by mad characters. Oates’s fiction suggests that, in spite of its emphasis on individualism, the American culture with its conflicts and contradictions denies authentic selfhood and leads to mass”(Caliskan 621).

In Joyce Oates stories such as “By the River” and “The Assassins”, her characters seek refuge in death and its ending from a world they find no meaning in: “Many of Oates’s mad characters seek refuge in death. As death is an important part of the life-cycle, it is useless and unrealistic to deny the finality of death.”(Caliskan 621).

In literature, existentialism is used as a method of understanding the human condition as well as a philosophical viewpoint. We are able to recognize ourselves in the struggles and victories of the people in these books, and we are better able to comprehend our own life in a world that is frequently baffling and unpredictable. Through understanding Existentialism we get to understand Helens character in a better way and how her decisions may be the effect of her ideology on life.

#### Work Cite

Oates, Joyce Carol, “By the River.” Fictions. Eds. Trimmer, Joseph F., and C. Wade Jennings, San Diego: HBJ, 1985, pp. 940-952. Steele, Alexander, ed. Writing Fiction. New York: Bloomsbury, 2003

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Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Random House, Inc. Original Translator: Knopf, Alfred A. Translator for this copy: Ward, Matthew. Copyright© 1988 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. France, Paris 1942. ISBN 0-679-72020-0

