

THE EXISTENTIAL PRINCIPLE IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to the study of existential motifs that permeate the works of Russian literary tradition. Special attention is given to issues such as the meaning of life, freedom, loneliness, and responsibility to oneself, which are reflected in the works of key Russian writers such as F.M. Dostoevsky, L.N. Tolstoy, A.P. Chekhov, and others. Particular focus is placed on the influence of existentialist philosophical ideas on the formation of the authors' artistic worldview, as well as their interpretation of human existence in the context of social and spiritual crises. The paper emphasizes the uniqueness of Russian literature in addressing existential problems, making it a significant contribution to world culture.

Keywords: existential motifs, being, crisis, death, choice.

Introduction

Russian literature made an immense contribution to the development of existentialism long before its formal philosophical articulation. Writers such as F.M. Dostoevsky, L.N. Tolstoy, A.P. Chekhov, and other Russian authors posed fundamental questions—human loneliness and the absurdity of existence, freedom of choice and responsibility, the search for meaning in an absurd world, rebellion against God and fate, and the clash between the individual and society—that would later preoccupy 20th-century philosophers. In Russian literature, existential themes are enriched with profound moral and religious quests, rendering it uniquely distinctive.

Let us turn to the classic writers, the pioneers of the existential tradition in Russian literature.

Main Part

F.Dostoevsky is rightly considered the "forefather of existentialism." His works and philosophy profoundly influenced the subsequent development of existentialism, particularly through his depictions of the inner world of individuals experiencing alienation, crisis, and loneliness. Dostoevsky raised the crucial question of human freedom, especially in the context of moral responsibility. His works frequently explore the conflict between free will and the

obligations that this freedom imposes on a person. His characters confront the absurdity of the world, its infinite contradictions, and its uncertainty. This is evident in novels such as *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment*, where characters endure deep moral and philosophical torment stemming from the impossibility of comprehending the meaning of life. Dostoevsky was among the first to address the problem of the "split personality," a theme closely intertwined with existentialism as an internal conflict of the self. In *The Double*, he portrays a divided consciousness, which becomes a symbol of the rift between personal morality and the external world (this internal conflict later finds development in Camus's concept of the "absurd man," where a hero, having recognized the absurdity of life's manifestations, continues to love and celebrate life despite it). Dostoevsky also explores questions of faith, doubt, and the relationship with God. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, one of the central issues is the problem of the suffering of the innocent. Ivan Karamazov expresses doubts about the existence of a just God if innocent children and adults must suffer. The question of why God permits suffering is key to understanding the novel's religious philosophy. F. Dostoevsky pays particular attention in his works to the themes of morality and responsibility. Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* embodies the existential dilemma of choice and responsibility that a person confronts. By murdering the old pawnbroker, Raskolnikov attempts to justify his crime with the notion that "great" individuals, like Napoleon, can transgress laws for the sake of humanity's greater good. However, despite his theoretical justification, the act in reality plunges him into profound internal torment. His moral responsibility lies in his inability to escape the consequences of his actions. He gradually realizes that his theoretical defense of the murder holds no weight against real morality and the ethical laws of society. Raskolnikov faces an internal punishment: he is tormented by guilt, becoming mentally and morally exhausted. Though he tries to evade legal punishment, the inner sense of guilt and fear over his actions proves far more burdensome. In the novel, punishment manifests not only externally (through arrest and imprisonment) but also internally, expressed through self-destruction and psychological suffering. Dostoevsky poses a question to the reader about the nature of morality and responsibility, demonstrating how even the most intelligent and calculated justifications for crimes cannot shield an individual from their personal consequences.

Through his works, F.M. Dostoevsky anticipated many themes that later became foundational to the existentialist movement, establishing him as a pivotal figure in the philosophical tradition of existentialism. Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger acknowledged that Dostoevsky's ideas influenced their development toward existentialism.

L. Tolstoy was not an existentialist in the strict sense, yet his later works address questions closely aligned with existentialism—the meaning of life, suffering, death, the search for an authentic and true path, alienation, crises of faith, and the pursuit of moral purification. Furthermore, in Tolstoy's later writings, ideas emerge about the necessity of personal freedom, the rejection of societal conventions, and adherence to an internal moral law, which can also be linked to existentialist perspectives. In his philosophy, a significant role is played by the recognition of human limitation and suffering, reminiscent of the existential approach to life as absurd.



In the novel *Resurrection*, the theme of existence—human life, its meaning, and moral choices—takes center stage. The work deeply explores the inner world of its characters, their struggles with themselves, society, and moral dilemmas, making it a philosophical reflection on human existence.

The protagonist, Dmitry Nekhlyudov, undergoes an existential crisis after realizing his guilt in the fate of Katyusha Maslova, a woman he once seduced and abandoned, leading to her downfall and unjust conviction. This moment becomes a turning point for Nekhlyudov, prompting him to question the meaning of his life, justice, and the impact of his actions on others. His existence takes on new meaning through his pursuit of redemption and his efforts to rectify the harm he has caused. Katyusha Maslova, in turn, also embodies an existential theme. Her life is a struggle for survival amid humiliation, pain, and injustice.

The characters in the novel grapple with existential questions—about the meaning of life, responsibility, and freedom—that arise in their confrontations with societal institutions (the court, prison, and church), which often distort true human values. The novel underscores that authentic existence is possible only through self-awareness, the rejection of egoism, and a striving for goodness. Thus, existence in *Resurrection* is a path to spiritual awakening, where the characters, overcoming suffering and alienation, seek answers to eternal questions about life and its purpose.

In Leo Tolstoy's autobiographical work *Confession*, the theme of existence is explored through the author's profound personal crisis, his reflections on the meaning of life, and his attempt to find answers to fundamental questions of being. In this work, Tolstoy candidly describes his spiritual turmoil, despair, and search for a way out of an existential impasse.

Existence in *Confession* begins with Tolstoy's realization of the meaninglessness of his own life. Despite external success—material wealth, family, and literary fame—he confronts an inner void. Around the age of fifty, the writer asks himself: "Why do I live? What comes next?" This question becomes tormenting, as the conventional values of society—science, art, and pleasure—no longer bring him joy. He describes his state as a sensation of standing at the edge of an abyss: life feels meaningless to him, and death appears inevitable and frightening. Such a spiritual crisis is characteristic of the existentialist hero, grappling with existential anxiety, "dread" (as per Kierkegaard), and the absurd (as per Camus).

The central existential dilemma in *Confession* is the conflict between rational thought and the need for faith. Tolstoy analyzes how science explains "how" things happen but fails to answer the question "why." His reflections lead him to conclude that reason alone cannot uncover the truth or the meaning of life, plunging him into a state akin to despair and even thoughts of suicide.

However, a turning point occurs when Tolstoy turns his attention to ordinary people—peasants whose lives are grounded in faith. He observes that, despite their hardships, their lives are imbued with meaning thanks to their religious sentiment. This realization prompts him to reassess his attitude toward faith—not the official church, which he critiques, but a personal, inner faith in a higher meaning. For Tolstoy, existence takes on a new dimension: life becomes meaningful through the recognition of God as the source of being and moral law.



Thus, in *Confession*, existence emerges as a process of agonizing search, moving from doubt and emptiness to reconciliation with life through faith. Tolstoy demonstrates that authentic existence is possible only when a person takes responsibility for their inner world and finds a connection to something greater than themselves.

It is also worth noting that Tolstoy's works such as *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, *The Living Corpse*, and *Father Sergius* are permeated with existential motifs of death, loneliness, alienation, and the rift between one's external role and inner self. Consequently, his oeuvre can be considered existential in spirit, particularly in how he grapples with freedom, morality, death, and solitude. The existential themes in Leo Tolstoy's works manifest in his philosophy of life, moral quests, doubts about the meaning of existence, and his striving for inner purification.

A. Chekhov does not fit neatly into the framework of existentialism as represented by F.M. Dostoevsky and L.N. Tolstoy, yet his works undeniably contain themes and moods that resonate with existential philosophy. Chekhov offers a subtle portrayal of human existence, infused with a sense of disorientation, aimlessness, and melancholy. For instance, in his plays *Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya*, the characters grapple with feelings of stagnation, the inability to realize their dreams, and profound disillusionment with life. These motifs align closely with the existential notion of the absurd—a life devoid of inherent meaning, where individuals must seek or create it themselves.

In Chekhov's short stories, there is a keen awareness of the limits of human freedom, the fear of life, and the inevitability of its end. In *The Man in a Case*, the protagonist Belikov exemplifies a person constrained by his own rules and fears. Unable to break free from his "case"—his social and personal shell—his life becomes empty and meaningless. This reveals existential themes of loneliness (his isolation repels others), absurdity (a life lived in fear proves pointless), and death as liberation (his demise marks the culmination of his flight from life). Similarly, in *Ward No. 6*, Chekhov reflects on the meaning of life and the inevitability of suffering. The protagonist, Dr. Andrei Yefimych Ragin, concludes that life is a closed circle of pain and senselessness. The ward serves as a metaphor for human existence, where the boundaries between sanity and madness blur, and Ragin's prolonged conversations with Gromov expose an existential crisis.

While Chekhov does not explicitly articulate an existentialist philosophy in these works, his focus on the inner world of individuals, the search for meaning, loneliness, and the absurdity of existence aligns his writing with the existential tradition. Chekhov remains a deeply realistic writer, preoccupied with everyday life, human weaknesses, and subtle irony. His approach, devoid of the philosophical systematicity of existentialism, does not overtly formulate ideas about being. Instead, he observes life as it is—with its longing and emptiness—making him a precursor to existential moods rather than a fully-fledged existentialist.

Results and Discussion

The worthy continuators of the existential tradition (despite the fact that existentialism as a literary and philosophical movement did not have as evident a development in Russia as it did in Europe in the works of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus) in 20th-century Russian literature were Leonid Andreyev, Andrei Platonov, Leonid Leonov, and



Vladimir Nabokov. This is primarily due to the fact that after the 1917 revolution, the themes of existential crisis became particularly relevant, continuing in the works of writers who had survived war and repression.

The work of **Leonid Andreyev** is deeply imbued with themes that form the foundation of existential philosophy: the contemplation of human existence, freedom, loneliness, the fear of death, and the absurdity of life. These motifs are especially evident in his works written at the beginning of the 20th century, when he explored the inner world of a person confronted with the crises of the era: *"The Wall"* (1901), *"Red Laughter"* (1904), *"Judas Iscariot"* (1907), *"The Story of the Seven Hanged"* (1908), *"He"* (1913). In these works, the writer addresses the problem of mortality, loneliness, and alienation. His heroes often find themselves isolated from society, immersed in their inner conflicts. Andreyev frequently portrays the meaninglessness of human striving for happiness or a higher goal in the context of a chaotic and incomprehensible world. For example, in *"The Wall"*, he explores the confrontation between a person and insurmountable obstacles, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for the absurd, akin to the reflections of Albert Camus.

The writer's dark style and focus on the inner torments of man make him very close to the existential tradition. For instance, in *"The Story of the Seven Hanged"*, Andreyev describes the last days of seven men sentenced to death by hanging. The narrative is built around an extreme situation — the expectation of execution, the confrontation between the "instinct of life" and the "instinct of death", making it one of the early examples of existential prose in Russian literature. Through the inner monologues of the characters, the writer reveals their fear, despair, attempts to reconcile with the inevitability of death or to find meaning in it. The existential issues here are connected with the awareness of the finiteness of being, the unmasked protest against capital punishment, and a dramatic manifestation of the will to live. The very fact of the inevitability of death forces the characters to see life and their own "self" in a new light. They are left alone with their existence, in conditions where it is no longer possible to pretend or avoid the truth. The expectation of death is a moment of truth, a "bare existence" stripped of conventions. The characters find themselves in a state of existential isolation, despite being close to one another. Each of the seven condemned experiences the path to understanding their fate differently: Werner – an intellectual and thinker, a symbol of existential despair; his inner conflict between ideology and fear of nothingness. Tanya and Sergey – revolutionaries, trying to maintain dignity, but still subject to the fear of the unknown. Musya – a young girl, hoping until the last moment for a miracle, for mercy. Unlike the others, she is spiritually weak, her fear is animalistic, primal. Janson perceives the image of death as absurd. He does not believe until the last moment that he will really be executed. Vasily painfully reflects on life and death, perceiving them, but unable to rid himself of fear. He finds it hard to accept the physical side of death – the fear of the rope, the body, the pain. The Gypsy, however, does not ponder; he lives by instincts, reacting to death with rage, fear, rebellion. He has a strong physical attachment to life and an absolute rejection of death.

By showing seven individual fates, the writer demonstrates the diversity of human reactions to impending death. Death in the story is not only an end, but also a mirror of the soul, exposing the true essence of a person. In the face of death, some rise, while others break. Death reveals



the essence of personality. Lies, illusions, and social roles disappear – only existence remains in the face of nothingness. Death represents a moment of truth. Thus, through the images of the seven characters, different forms of reaction to the existential challenge are revealed. In conditions of absolute lack of freedom, a person can attain the highest degree of inner freedom, which makes this work an integral part of the overall existential tradition in Russian literature. Leonid Andreyev's story "*He*" is imbued with a philosophical reflection on human existence, the inner division of personality, and the search for the true "Self." The story presents the narrative where the protagonist faces the appearance of another "Self" — "Him." This "He" is the embodiment of the inner observer, the judge, the shadow, which can be interpreted as a manifestation of existential crisis: the person feels inauthentic, living by inertia, confronted with the realization of their own falseness and duality. The hero experiences existential horror when he understands that he is constantly being watched, that he cannot be himself. He is haunted by a fear of being, of losing his grounding, of experiencing absurdity and the destruction of his usual identity. The meaning of what is happening can be interpreted as an inner struggle for authentic existence, i.e., the hero (the nameless student) must rid himself of "Him" and find himself.

Russian existentialism in the Soviet era continues its tradition in the work of **Andrei Platonov**, who masterfully combines absurdity and tragedy, showing the destruction of personality under ideological pressure. In the novel "*The Pit*", the writer explores fundamental questions of human existence, the meaning of life, death, freedom, alienation, and responsibility, which are key categories of existentialist philosophy. In "*The Pit*", the characters work on the construction of an abstract "universal life," but no one knows exactly WHAT they are building. The heroes of the novel are detached from true existence: Voshchev seeks the meaning of life but finds no response, the workers do not feel their individuality – they become cogs in the system, even the children in the novel are not perceived as individuals, but as "future builders." Existentialism asserts that a person is free and responsible for their choices. In "*The Pit*", there is no freedom. The heroes are imposed with a myth of a bright future; they (the proletarians) do not make choices, they follow orders, and any dissent (or even doubt) is punished by destruction. This contrast between freedom and totalitarian unfreedom becomes one of the tragic themes of existential thought, where death becomes an existential limit (the girl Nastya dies – a symbol of the future and hope, and the construction of the pit turns into a symbol of a mass grave, with life itself presented as a path to destruction). Thus, Andrei Platonov's novel "*The Pit*" is an existential allegory, where the alienated person struggles for meaning in a world where meanings are destroyed, and faith in an idea leads to the destruction of personality. The future turns out not to be paradise, but a grave, and traditional values are replaced by empty slogans. Therefore, "*The Pit*" can be seen not only as a socio-political satire but also as an existential tragedy of a person in the totalitarian era, having lost freedom, hope, and meaning. The works of **Leonid Leonov** contain elements of existential reflection, adapted to the Soviet context and Russian mentality. His novel "*The Pyramid*", published in 1994, after the author's death, deserves special attention. It can certainly be considered a work with a pronounced existential theme, although it remains a unique and multifaceted piece, going beyond the confines of any one philosophical school. In "*The Pyramid*", the writer creates a complex,



almost apocalyptic world, where the characters confront the chaos of existence and attempt to find meaning in the context of the collapse of familiar values. The central plot motif – the construction of the "pyramid," symbolizing human striving for greatness or salvation – turns out to be futile and absurd, which resonates with the existential idea of the meaninglessness of many human efforts in a world devoid of absolute truth.

The characters in the novel, such as the priest Dymkov or the mysterious Stalin, are in a state of existential loneliness, where they are forced to make decisions in an atmosphere of uncertainty. The freedom of choice, so important in existentialism, here becomes a heavy burden rather than liberation, which is close to the philosophy of Sartre or Camus.

In *"The Pyramid"*, Leonov deeply explores the crisis of spirituality and the clash between religious ideals and materialistic reality. This conflict reflects existential anxiety – a condition where a person, deprived of external references (God, morality, traditions), must define their own existence. The novel is rich in symbols and allegories, which do not provide clear answers but rather immerse the reader in an atmosphere of uncertainty and mystery. This approach is similar to existential literature, where rational explanations of the world give way to the irrational experience of existence.

Leonov's philosophical and mystical novel *"The Pyramid"* reflects his own reflections on the fate of Russia, the Soviet era, and human civilization as a whole. This work became a kind of summation of his creativity, imbued with a sense of finiteness and questions about what remains after a person – themes that are characteristic of existentialism. However, it is important to note that *"The Pyramid"* is not purely an existential text in the spirit of the Western tradition. Leonov weaves elements of mysticism, Christian philosophy, and Russian cosmism into the novel, making it a unique synthesis, with existential motifs reinterpreted through the lens of Russian culture and Soviet experience.

Vladimir Nabokov is a complex and multifaceted figure, and the question of whether he can be considered an existentialist writer requires careful consideration. At first glance, his works, with their refined style, play with form, and focus on individuality, seem distant from existentialist philosophy. However, in his works, there are elements that resonate with existential themes, refracted through his unique lens. Nabokov's characters are often detached from the world. In *The Defense*, the chess player Luzhin lives in his inner world, where reality becomes absurd and hostile, which resembles existential alienation. His suicide is not a rebellion but a capitulation to the chaos of existence. In *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus C. confronts an absurd world where the surrounding reality is a theatrical set. The world of the novel is a theater of the absurd, where rules and logic are distorted. No one explains to Cincinnatus why he is to be executed, and the people around him act mechanically, like puppets. This is reminiscent of Albert Camus' philosophy, which described the absurd as the rupture between human striving for meaning and the indifference of the world. For Nabokov, the absurd takes on an almost surrealistic hue, emphasizing the artificial nature of what is happening.

Cincinnatus is the embodiment of existential loneliness. He is separated from others by his "opacity," an inner depth that those around him do not understand and fear. His isolation in the cell is not only physical but also metaphysical: he is the only one who recognizes the falseness



of reality, which makes him an outsider in this world. He waits for his sentence to be carried out in prison, surrounded by grotesque characters – jailers, a lawyer, an executioner – who behave like actors in a poorly staged play. Cincinnatus' execution is not a tragic ending, but rather a liberation from the absurd spectacle. In the final moment, Cincinnatus refuses to accept this world as authentic and, at the moment of execution, "stands up and walks away," as if destroying the illusion. The world collapses, exposing its theatrical nature – the set falls, and the characters dissolve. This can be seen as an existential question about the authenticity of being: what is real if everything around is just a construction? However, Nabokov does not provide an answer, leaving it as an aesthetic riddle rather than a philosophical problem.

Thus, Nabokov's characters do not seek a way out of their existential crisis – they either drown in it (Luzhin) or overcome it through art and illusion (Cincinnatus). Nabokov does not offer a philosophy of life but creates worlds where existential questions arise as a side effect of his narrative. Therefore, Nabokov's work is saturated with existential motifs (loneliness, the illusory nature of meaning, and finiteness), creating an existential atmosphere of absurdity and tragic awareness of freedom. These themes he explores not as a philosopher but as an artist, for whom style and play are more important than answers to questions of existence.

Conclusion

Russian literature significantly outpaced Western existentialism in exploring the depths of the human soul. Existential themes such as fear, absurdity, freedom, and choice are key elements in Russian classics, influencing 20th-century philosophy. Russian writers, inspired by existential ideas, delved into profound philosophical questions, altering traditional literary forms and introducing new characters who undergo a personal crisis. The main existential themes in Russian literature include the absurdity of existence (the sense of life's meaninglessness in times of societal crisis), freedom and responsibility (a person choosing their own destiny regardless of circumstances), loneliness and alienation (Russian literary heroes often feel out of place in the world), and rebellion against the system (the conflict between the individual and the state, especially in 20th-century works). The influence of existentialism on contemporary Russian literature is undeniable, as existential motifs continue to appear in the works of authors such as V. Pelevin, V. Sorokin, and others. They continue to develop existential traditions, exploring themes of human existence, freedom, and the meaning of life. In their works, philosophical reflections on being, personal responsibility, and the search for identity are often reflected.

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