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THE MEANING OF EXISTENCE AND THE MATTER OF FATE IN THE NOVEL “OF HUMAN BONDAGE”

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Abstract

This article analyzes the artistic expression of human destiny and existential problems in the novel “Of Human Bondage” by the English writer Somerset Maugham. The work raises questions about human existence, freedom, and the meaning of life through the life quests, choices, and sufferings of the main character Philip Carey. The main concepts of existential philosophy — self-awareness, the search for meaning, loneliness, absurdity, and responsibility for choice — become central themes in the poetics of the novel. The article sheds light on the place of Maugham’s work in the existential context and the writer’s concept of destiny from an artistic and philosophical perspective.

Keywords: existentialism, destiny, choice, freedom, responsibility, meaning of life, Somerset Maugham, Philip Carey, absurd.

Introduction

In the philosophical thought of the twentieth century, existentialism emerged as a significant school of thought concerned with fundamental questions of human existence. Developed by thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, this philosophical movement is grounded in the ideas that human beings are responsible for their own lives, possess freedom, and have the capacity to give meaning to their existence. From an existentialist



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perspective, a person is not merely the product of a predetermined destiny; rather, the individual is a being who creates his or her own destiny through personal choices.

The reflection of this philosophy in literature can be observed in the works of writers such as Franz Kafka, Sartre, Camus, and Dostoevsky. In English literature, however, one of the writers who expressed existential motifs in a distinctive manner is Somerset Maugham. In his 1915 novel **Of Human Bondage**, existential themes are presented in a unique way—not through abstract philosophical discourse, but through lived human experience. Through the life journey of the protagonist, Philip Carey, and his personal suffering, choices, aspirations, and disappointments, Maugham explores profound questions concerning the meaning of human life, suffering, freedom, and the relationship between individual agency and destiny.

The novel draws upon the classical tradition of the Bildungsroman, yet it is imbued with an existential spirit, in which personal development occurs not merely through external circumstances but, more importantly, through profound internal transformations.

Main part

Philip Carey: A Central Symbol of Existence and Suffering

Philip Carey is the central protagonist of Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, and through his personal life journey, the reader is given an opportunity to engage with complex questions concerning human existence, freedom of choice, the meaning of life, and destiny. Philip's life revolves around several fundamental concepts of existentialism—freedom, responsibility, suffering, and meaninglessness. From childhood to adulthood, he continuously strives to understand himself and find his place in the world.



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At the beginning of the novel, Philip is portrayed as an orphaned, physically disabled child who feels alienated and unaccepted by society. The deformity of his left foot constantly distinguishes him from others:

“He had a clubfoot and that made him shy with strangers.” (Of Human Bondage, Ch. 1)

Through this seemingly simple sentence, the writer reveals the protagonist’s marginal position within society. His disability becomes not merely a physical condition but also a social and psychological limitation. Although Philip is still a child, he perceives himself as “different” and experiences a persistent sense of isolation, which gradually leads him toward inner suffering and a process of self-awareness.

Within existentialist theory, the human being is often understood as a being who is “thrown” into the world. Martin Heidegger refers to this condition as *Geworfenheit*, or “thrownness”—the state of being brought into existence under circumstances that one has not chosen. Philip finds himself in a similar situation: he is born and compelled to live under particular conditions not of his own choosing. His disability may therefore be interpreted metaphorically as a manifestation of the burden of existence. He struggles to live, to find his place in society, and even to regard himself as worthy of love.

Philip’s suffering is connected not only with his physical disability but also with his profound desire for love, recognition, and freedom. He is repeatedly rejected by others, his feelings remain unreciprocated, and these experiences gradually lead him toward an inner sense of emptiness. Through his life experience, the novel gives artistic expression to what Kierkegaard describes as “inner anguish”—the condition in which an individual is confronted with his own self and is ultimately left alone with his existence.



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Throughout the novel, Philip repeatedly rebels inwardly against his circumstances. He attempts to reject the social stigma imposed upon him, yet these attempts are frequently followed by failure, loneliness, and despair. This experience resonates with Camus's concept of the "absurd": the human being searches for meaning, while the universe remains silent, leaving the individual without a definitive answer.

Philip's fundamental struggle in life is therefore a struggle for self-acceptance. Rather than merely attempting to conform to society, he seeks to understand himself and construct his own identity. In this respect, he becomes a distinctly existential protagonist: society does not provide him with a ready-made form of existence or a predetermined path; instead, he is compelled to discover his own way of living.

"He had to find out for himself what was worth living for." (Of Human Bondage, Ch. 40)

This statement expresses the essence of Philip's entire philosophy of life. He can no longer simply expect meaning to come from other people, society, or even religion; he must discover and construct the meaning of his own existence. Sartre explains a similar condition through the proposition that the individual creates his essence through his subsequent actions. Thus, Philip searches within himself for the meaning that he fails to find in society, which constitutes a fundamental aspect of the existential approach.

Every choice Philip makes—whether unsuccessful or painful—contributes to his personal growth and self-formation. He gradually learns to recognize and accept the painful experiences of his life rather than deny them. This process demonstrates the development of his sense of personal responsibility and his growing awareness of himself as an individual capable of shaping his own existence.



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Thus, Philip Carey emerges as one of the most compelling figures through whom existential concerns can be explored in modern literature. His suffering and struggles represent not merely the consequences of physical disability but also universal human experiences such as psychological emptiness, loneliness, rejection, and the search for self-understanding. Maugham does not idealize Philip, instead, he portrays him with considerable psychological realism, revealing both his weaknesses and his strengths. It is precisely this authenticity and human complexity that make Philip Carey a particularly significant character within an existentialist reading of *Of Human Bondage*.

Freedom and Choice: Can a Person Choose Their Own Path?

In Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, the issues of choice, free will, freedom, and the responsibility associated with them are raised with particular urgency. Throughout his life, the protagonist, Philip Carey, repeatedly finds himself confronted with significant choices, and these choices shape the course of his destiny. From an existentialist perspective, the human being is a free individual. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, a person is "condemned to be free": one is constantly compelled to make choices and to assume responsibility for those choices.

The major choices in Philip's life include choosing a profession, abandoning art in favor of medicine, making decisions concerning love, and confronting the dilemma of whether to continue living or to give up. In each of these situations, Philip attempts to act according to his own inner impulses rather than simply following the expectations of others. At the same time, however, he comes to understand that freedom of choice inevitably brings with it inner anguish.

"He did not know whether he had made a choice or merely drifted." (*Of Human Bondage*, Ch. 30)



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This quotation reflects Philip's initially undeveloped awareness of choice and personal agency. He senses that the flow of circumstances is carrying him toward directions he has not consciously selected. From an existentialist perspective, this can be interpreted as a state of **self**-estrangement or an attempt to evade one's own freedom. Sartre describes a similar condition through the concept of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*): a situation in which an individual refuses to acknowledge his freedom and instead perceives himself as a victim of circumstances or fate.

Gradually, however, Philip comes to understand that his actions are grounded in his own choices. For instance, when he abandons his studies at the art school in Paris and returns to medicine, he makes this decision consciously and deliberately:

"He realized that he could go back to medicine. It depended entirely on himself."
(Of Human Bondage, Ch. 70)

This turning point represents a moment at which Philip recognizes his own freedom. He no longer considers society or fate solely responsible for his successes and failures; instead, he begins to regard himself as responsible for the direction of his own life. This constitutes an important stage in the maturation of the existential protagonist.

Philip's most painful choice concerns love. In his relationship with Mildred, he consciously condemns himself to humiliation and emotional suffering. Mildred takes advantage of him and is unfaithful to him, yet despite knowing all of this, Philip is unable to free himself from his feelings for her:

"He knew he was not loved, and yet he could not tear himself away." (Of Human Bondage, Ch. 55)

This represents an existential paradox: a person may freely choose a course of action while simultaneously choosing his own suffering. Philip's anguish over Mildred is a combination of inner contradictions, his desire for self-



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understanding, and the fundamental vulnerability of human nature. He recognizes his own condition, yet remains unable to escape it. Consequently, he must also experience the pain resulting from his own choice. Here, one of the central principles of existentialism becomes particularly evident: although choice provides an individual with moral and existential freedom, freedom is never completely free from anguish.

An important characteristic of Philip's choices is that they are not based on sacred or lofty ideals but rather on ordinary human needs, personal searching, and the desire to understand himself and the world. He is not a purely philosophical protagonist; he is an ordinary human being. Yet it is precisely through this ordinariness and authenticity that he experiences the universal difficulties of human existence.

Toward the end of the novel, Philip comes to realize that meaning can be found in the ordinary dimensions of life—in everyday pleasures, human relationships, work, and love. He finally chooses life. This choice brings him a sense of inner peace and contentment:

“He had found happiness in the common things of life.” (Of Human Bondage, Ch. 115)

This final stage can be understood as a natural outcome of Philip's existential development. Despite all the meaninglessness, rejection, and suffering he has experienced, Philip ultimately accepts life and discovers his freedom within it. This recalls Camus's idea that the individual does not necessarily overcome the absurd world by eliminating it, but rather by recognizing and accepting its conditions and creating meaning within them.



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Confronting the Absurd: Is There Meaning in Life?

One of the most important and enduring questions in existentialism is: “Does life actually have meaning?” or, more specifically, “Does meaning exist independently of human beings, or do we create it ourselves?” In Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage*, this question is not merely raised; rather, it becomes the central problem underlying the protagonist’s entire life journey.

Throughout his life, Philip Carey searches for meaning: first through religion, then through art and love, and finally through ordinary everyday life. His searches never lead to a complete or definitive answer. Each time he becomes disillusioned with one path, he turns toward another. This painful and repetitive movement corresponds closely to the absurd condition described by Albert Camus.

In his famous work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus defines the absurd as the conflict between the human desire for meaning and the silence of the universe. Human beings naturally seek order, purpose, and significance, yet existence itself provides no definitive answer. It is precisely from this contradiction that the absurd emerges. Philip Carey finds himself in a similar situation: he expects life to provide meaning, yet receives no final answer.

“He felt as though he had been seeking something all his life and found nothing.”
(*Of Human Bondage*, Ch. 95)

Philip’s condition should not be understood merely as philosophical despair; rather, it represents a stage of existential awareness. He gradually comes to recognize that the supposedly sacred sources of meaning—religion, love, and art—have either failed him or cannot provide the kind of answer he had expected. This realization constitutes his confrontation with the absurd.

In the second half of the novel, an important transformation takes place in Philip’s psychological development. He gradually abandons his attempt to understand life through perfect philosophical explanations or absolute systems of



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meaning. Instead, he begins to accept life as it is. Most importantly, he comes to understand that the meaning attributed to life does not necessarily come from outside the individual; rather, it emerges from the individual's own relationship with existence:

“Life was like a pattern, repeated endlessly, and that was all. There was no meaning, except the meaning you gave it.” (Of Human Bondage, Ch. 110)

This idea represents one of the central principles of existentialist thought. There is no necessarily predetermined or universally imposed meaning of life. Each individual must create meaning through his or her own existence. Maugham presents this idea not in a purely didactic or theoretical manner, but artistically through Philip's experiences, emotional struggles, failures, and gradual maturation. Philip ultimately accepts that life is accidental and sometimes unjust, yet nevertheless worth living.

This development also bears a certain resemblance to Heidegger's concept of Dasein, particularly his emphasis on human existence as something that must be authentically confronted and understood. When an individual moves beyond merely asking why one exists and begins to confront the question of how one exists, a more authentic relationship with existence becomes possible. Philip reaches a similar stage: he gradually learns to value not only the achievement of predetermined goals but also the experience of living itself.

He no longer evaluates life primarily through intellectual or aesthetic standards. Instead, he learns to appreciate ordinary existence—simple work, human relationships, tranquility, and everyday human experience. He no longer desperately pursues social status, exceptional achievements, or grand ideals. This development corresponds directly with Camus's idea that, even in an absurd world, one can nevertheless choose to live:

“You must imagine Sisyphus happy.” (The Myth of Sisyphus, A. Camus)



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In a similar way, by the end of *Of Human Bondage*, the reader can imagine Philip as a contented and fulfilled person. His happiness does not arise from discovering an absolute philosophical meaning of existence. Rather, it emerges from his ability to give his life a form and significance of his own. He finds meaning in stability, love, human relationships, and the simplicity of everyday existence.

Coming to Terms with Life: Existential Relief

One of the important dimensions of existentialism is the process of coming to terms with life despite its meaninglessness, limitations, and suffering. Human beings must live not simply according to a predetermined destiny, but through their own choices. At the same time, they must assume responsibility for creating meaning in their own lives. Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* portrays precisely such a process through the psychological transformation of Philip Carey.

In the early pages of the novel, Philip is engaged in a constant struggle with his own existence. He finds it difficult to adapt to society, lives in a state of psychological anguish, and persistently searches for a "higher meaning" in life. He struggles with both his inner vulnerabilities and the social pressures imposed by his environment, yet these struggles frequently lead him toward disappointment and despair.

By the end of the novel, however, Philip finally achieves a sense of inner equilibrium. This transformation does not occur immediately; rather, it emerges as the result of numerous trials, psychological crises, and experiences of suffering. His relationship with Mildred comes to an end, his professional path becomes clearer, and he gradually learns to listen to his own inner voice. Philip slowly abandons his idealistic expectations and learns to accept real life as it is.



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“He had ceased to trouble himself with theories of the meaning of life. He accepted it as it came.”

(Of Human Bondage, Ch. 112)

Through this statement, Maugham reveals a fundamental transformation in Philip’s worldview. He ceases to search for a divine or metaphysical meaning behind existence. Instead, he begins to accept life on the basis of experience rather than abstract theory. This represents a state of existential relief: the individual accepts the uncertainty and imperfection of existence and nevertheless chooses to continue living.

According to Camus’s conception of accepting the absurd, human beings may never discover perfection or an ultimate explanation for existence, yet they can learn to live with its limitations and contradictions. Philip follows precisely this path. He does not discover perfection in any particular sphere of life, but he eventually finds meaning in ordinary existence—in personal work, sincere human relationships, and inner peace.

“He had found happiness in the common things of life.” (Of Human Bondage, Ch. 115)

This statement represents the culmination of Philip’s psychological development. The concept of “ordinary life” becomes, within the context of existential literature, a profound human value. Philip no longer views life through the lens of idealism but through the perspective of realism. He learns to appreciate the reality that actually exists rather than continually pursuing an imagined perfection.

Philip eventually accepts life in its existing form. He does not deny his orphanhood, physical disability, failures in love, or his sense of inadequacy as an artist. On the contrary, he begins to regard these difficulties as part of his personal experience and as stages in his journey toward self-understanding. In this respect,



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Philip arrives at his philosophical conclusion: life is not merely something given to him; it is something shaped through his own engagement with it.

He gradually comes to recognize several fundamental principles:

- Life should not be approached through the pursuit of perfection alone; stability and contentment are equally important.
- Inner equilibrium is more significant than external achievements.
- The meaning attributed to life begins with the individual himself.

In the final sections of the novel, Philip marries Sally, a simple and sincere young woman, continues to earn his living through work, and realizes his desire to become a father. These choices represent the decisions of a character who has moved beyond his earlier searches through religion, art, philosophy, and romantic idealism, while ultimately discovering a more authentic understanding of himself and his life.

Conclusion

Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* occupies a distinctive place as a literary expression of existentialist philosophy. Through the character of Philip Carey, the novel profoundly explores the human experience of inner anguish, the desire for self-understanding, the struggle with the apparent meaninglessness of life, and the attempt to shape one's destiny through personal choice. Every turning point, every experience of suffering, and every instance of rejection in the novel reveals an existential map of human life characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and freedom.

Philip's life reflects not so much a struggle against external threats as a confrontation with inner questions, doubts, and anguish. He attempts to discover the meaning of life through society, religion, art, and love, yet repeatedly encounters human vulnerability and existential emptiness. In this process, he



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comes to recognize the absurdity of existence: life does not necessarily possess a predetermined meaning; rather, meaning is something that the individual creates through his own existence. This idea occupies a central position in the novel as one of the fundamental principles associated with existentialist thought.

Through his choices, Philip experiences pain and suffering, but ultimately he learns to accept life in its simplicity and natural course. This represents a form of existential reconciliation - not the attainment of perfection, but the acceptance of existence as it is. Through Maugham's literary treatment of these ideas, the novel encourages readers to reconsider fundamental questions about life, human existence, and the nature of personal meaning.

Thus, *Of Human Bondage* can be regarded not only as a Bildungsroman, or a novel of personal development, but also as a literary-philosophical work imbued with the spirit of existentialism. It gives literary expression to humanity's enduring questions: "Who am I?", "Why do I live?", and "Does my life have meaning?" Through this work, Maugham demonstrates the significant place that existential concerns can occupy within the context of the English literary tradition.

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