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Existentialism In Anton Chekhov's Short Story "The Princess"

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Abstract

Anton Chekhov's *The Princess* explores important existentialist ideas through the life of Princess Vera Gavrilovna. Even though she has wealth, beauty, and a high place in society, she still feels empty and lonely inside. The story shows how people struggle to find meaning in life when the world does not care about their wishes. It also shows the clash between what society wants and what a person truly feels. Chekhov's simple writing style, focus on everyday details, and meaningful conversations reveal the princess's struggles with freedom, responsibility, and death. The story also connects with the thoughts of philosophers like Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, and Nietzsche, showing the human search for self-knowledge, true living, and moral responsibility.

Keywords: Anton Chekhov, *The Princess*, existentialism, meaning of life, freedom, responsibility, alienation, authenticity

Introduction

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860–1904) was a famous Russian writer and playwright. He is considered one of the greatest writers in Russian literature and is admired worldwide for his short stories and plays. Chekhov wrote in a simple and clear style. He did not use exaggeration, dramatic events, or complicated language. Instead, he focused on ordinary people, their everyday lives, and their thoughts and feelings. His stories reflect real life, showing both happiness and sadness, success and failure, hope and disappointment. Chekhov carefully observed human behavior, society, and emotions. He believed that literature should tell the truth about life, not just entertain or impress people. In his writing, small events or simple moments often reveal deep human truths. For example, a quiet conversation, a short visit, or a single reflection can show a character's struggles, fears, and joys. This approach makes his work very realistic and easy for readers to relate to. Even though Chekhov lived more than a hundred years ago, his works are still popular because they make people think about life, society, and human nature. Writers and thinkers around the world have been inspired by his clear writing style, honesty, and deep observations. Chekhov's stories do not just describe life; they also ask important questions about human existence, the choices we make, and the emotions we feel. He shows that even ordinary people face extraordinary feelings, and that even small moments in life can have great meaning. His stories are short but powerful, showing that simplicity can carry profound messages. Chekhov's skill lies in combining the simple and the deep, the ordinary and the meaningful, in a way that touches every reader.

One of Chekhov's important stories is *The Princess*. This story is about Princess Vera Gavrilovna, a young woman who seems to have everything anyone could want. She is wealthy, beautiful, and respected by society. People admire her social position, appearance, and manners. At first, her life seems perfect. Everyone around her believes she is happy, successful, and fulfilled. However, as the story continues, it becomes clear that Vera feels empty, lonely, and disconnected from the world. She struggles to find meaning in her life and often reflects thoughtfully on her situation. Vera visits a monastery, meets ordinary people, and thinks deeply about her feelings. These experiences show the difference between how she appears to society and how she truly feels inside. Chekhov presents Vera not just as a princess or a member of the aristocracy, but as a human being facing important questions about life, purpose, and happiness. The story shows that wealth, beauty, and social status cannot protect someone from inner struggles and existential questions. Chekhov carefully describes small moments and simple events that reveal Vera's inner life. Even ordinary experiences, like talking to someone or walking through a quiet place, can lead her to deep reflection and self-awareness. The story is simple in action but deep in meaning. Through Vera's life, Chekhov explores universal human emotions such as loneliness, emptiness, longing, and the search for meaning. These feelings are not only for Vera or aristocrats; they are experiences that every human being faces at some point in life.

The Princess also connects strongly to existentialism, a philosophy that studies life, freedom, and the search for meaning. Existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, and Friedrich Nietzsche said that life does not have ready made meaning. Each person must find or create their own purpose through actions, choices, and reflection. Existentialism focuses on human freedom, responsibility, and awareness of life's challenges, including death. In *The Princess*, Vera's wealth, beauty, and social position cannot stop her from feeling lonely, empty, and disconnected. She struggles to find meaning in a life that seems perfect outside but feels hollow inside. Her situation reflects Sartre's idea of "bad faith," where people follow society's rules instead of being true to themselves. It also shows Camus's idea of the "absurd," where humans search for meaning in a world that gives no clear answers. Vera's reflections on life, her interactions with ordinary people, and her visits to the monastery show that she is searching for her own purpose and trying to understand herself in an indifferent world. Chekhov shows that Vera, like all humans, must face questions of freedom, responsibility, and mortality to live an honest and authentic life. Her journey is not filled with dramatic events, but it is meaningful because it reflects the universal human struggle to find purpose and live authentically. Through Vera, Chekhov shows that life is more than appearances, social status, or material wealth; it is about understanding oneself, making choices, and facing life's challenges directly.

This paper studies *The Princess* using existentialist ideas. It explores how Chekhov uses a story about a princess to discuss universal human problems. By analyzing Vera's life, thoughts, and experiences and connecting them with Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, and Nietzsche, the paper shows how Chekhov's story goes beyond Russian society and aristocracy. It addresses the timeless questions of human existence, freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning. The paper also examines Chekhov's writing style, including his simple language, attention to small details, and realistic dialogues. These features allow readers to understand Vera's inner life and relate to her struggles. Chekhov's focus on ordinary moments and quiet reflections creates a strong portrayal of loneliness, existential anxiety, and the human need for meaning. The story shows that even a life that looks perfect can have deep questions and struggles. Chekhov's *The Princess* is not just a story about social life or wealth; it is about what it means to be human, to think deeply, and to search for purpose. By studying this story through existentialist ideas, this paper highlights the continuing importance of Chekhov's work and its ability to make readers think about their own lives, choices, and responsibilities.

Existential Psychology: Jean-Paul Sartre

To understand the main ideas of existentialism, we can look at the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. His famous book *Being and Nothingness* (1943) is one of the most important works of existentialist philosophy. Sartre, who was also a novelist and playwright, focused on themes such as freedom, responsibility, and self-deception. While Ernest Becker spoke about the fear of death, Sartre emphasized another troubling truth: the burden of complete freedom.

Sartre's most well-known idea is "existence precedes essence." This means that people are not born with a fixed nature or purpose. Traditional religion and philosophy taught that humans have an essence or a divine plan before they are born. Sartre rejected this. He believed that people first exist in the world and then create themselves through their choices and actions. Human beings have no ready-made design; instead, they must give their own lives meaning.

This freedom is both exciting and frightening. Sartre explained it clearly:

"Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. Man is condemned to be free; condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects, is free, because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does." (*Existentialism is a Humanism*, 1946)

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By saying we are "condemned to freedom," Sartre meant that although we did not choose to be born, we cannot avoid being free once we are alive. Every choice, whether small or big, helps shape who we are. Unlike Becker, who thought anxiety mainly comes from awareness of death, Sartre argued that anxiety comes from realizing that we are totally free. No higher power, rule, or authority can decide for us; we alone are responsible for what we become.

This situation leads to anguish, the feeling of being overwhelmed when faced with endless possibilities and no absolute guide. Sartre also introduced the idea of bad faith, which is a way of lying to ourselves. In bad faith, people deny their freedom and pretend they are limited only by their roles, duties, or circumstances. For example, a waiter who says "I am only a waiter" or a person who blames fate, God, or society for their choices is avoiding responsibility. This denial may feel easier, but it hides the truth of human freedom and increases anxiety in the long run.

Still, Sartre did not believe life is hopeless. For him, the best way to live is to live authentically. This means accepting that we are free and responsible, instead of running away from it. Living authentically is about recognizing that we create ourselves and our values through our choices. There is no guarantee that our values are "correct," but meaning comes from the act of choosing and taking responsibility.

In Sartre's existential psychology, the challenge is not only facing death, as Becker said, but also facing the heavy responsibility of freedom. Both thinkers show that meaning in life is not given to us from outside. It must be created by people themselves, through their decisions and actions.

The Princess (1899) – Existentialist Analysis

The Princess by Anton Chekhov tells the story of Princess Vera Gavrilovna, a young, beautiful, and wealthy woman. On the outside, she seems to have everything: wealth, beauty, status, and admiration. When she visits the monastery, she greets the monks and novices cheerfully: "Did you miss little me, then? It's a whole month since your Princess was here. Well, here she is again, so have a good look at her" (Chekhov 64). The monks admire her, with some even thinking she is "an angel sent from heaven" (Chekhov 65). Everyone sees her as perfect, yet inside, Vera feels lonely, empty, and disconnected. This reflects an important existentialist idea:

wealth, beauty, and social praise do not provide real meaning. Existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Ernest Becker argue that true happiness comes from being honest with oneself, making personal choices, and living authentically.

At the monastery, Vera notices the simple beauty around her the low ceilings, the scent of cypress wood, the modest curtains, and the plain furniture. She imagines a calm, peaceful life far from debts, an unhappy marriage, and social obligations: “How wonderful...to settle down for life in this monastery, where existence was quiet and untroubled as a summer evening” (Chekhov 65). She enjoys the small details of nature the evening mist drifting down the hill, the rooks flying overhead, and the soft singing from the church. Existentialism teaches that humans need authenticity to find real meaning. Vera observes what is real and beautiful, yet she only dreams of it. She realizes she could live a more genuine and meaningful life, but fear, social expectations, and habit hold her back.

Vera meets Dr. Michael Ivanovich, who sharply criticizes her. He tells her, “Your whole way of life’s built on...a loathing for people’s voices and faces...for everything, in fact, that makes a human being” (Chekhov 67). Vera responds defensively, “This isn’t true...I’ve done a great deal for other people, and you know it” (Chekhov 69). This shows that Vera is living in bad faith, a key existentialist concept. Bad faith occurs when a person hides from their true self and follows social rules or appearances rather than being honest. The doctor’s words force Vera to confront reality and reflect on her true intentions. She begins to realize that her actions may not be sincere, even when she believes she is being kind.

The doctor also points out that her charitable acts may be superficial or even harmful: “If you can’t tell people from lap-dogs, don’t go in for charity. Between people and lap-dogs there is, I assure you, a very sizeable difference” (Chekhov 70). Existentialist theory emphasizes that real happiness comes from authenticity, responsibility, and awareness of the impact of one’s actions not from appearances or imagination.

Even after the doctor leaves, Vera tries to convince herself that she brings happiness to others: “There is no higher pleasure, thought she, than to carry warmth, light and joy with one wherever one goes, forgiving wrongs and smiling disarmingly at one’s enemies...How happy I am...Oh, I’m so happy” (Chekhov 74). Yet this happiness exists only in her imagination. Existentialism teaches that humans must act freely and sincerely in real life to create genuine meaning. Imagined happiness alone cannot fill the inner void.

Society contributes to Vera’s loneliness. People admire her beauty, wealth, and status, but they do not understand her inner feelings. Her visits to the monastery and charitable acts are often viewed as performances. Existentialist theory states that life cannot be meaningful if a person lives only for appearances. Anxiety arises from the realization of freedom and responsibility, which Vera experiences as she thinks about her debts, unhappy marriage, and social obligations. Her fear illustrates the existential idea that freedom can be both liberating and frightening.

Chekhov highlights the contrast between Vera’s outer and inner life. Outwardly, she is admired and respected; inwardly, she is lonely and misunderstood. The doctor’s criticism forces her to confront her superficiality. Existentialism teaches that true meaning comes from facing reality honestly and making authentic choices, even when it is difficult or uncomfortable.

The monastery’s simple life and nature offer moments of reflection. Vera notices the birds, the evening mist, and quiet sounds. Existentialist philosophy values such moments because they allow humans to confront themselves, recognize their freedom, and consider authentic choices. These quiet, small moments provide Vera with a glimpse of a meaningful life.

Vera experiences alienation, feeling disconnected from those around her even when admired. Social approval, wealth, and beauty cannot replace genuine connection or inner fulfillment. She struggles with this, clinging to appearances instead of embracing her inner desires. Ernest Becker’s ideas in *The Denial of Death* explain her behavior: humans often focus on social roles, accomplishments, or admiration to avoid confronting death and

life's ultimate meaninglessness. Vera's life illustrates the emptiness that results from avoiding authentic self-reflection.

Her dialogue also reveals her inner conflict: "I am a great sinner"(Chekhov 72). She desires a meaningful life but feels trapped by social expectations. Existentialist theory emphasizes that humans are free to choose, but this freedom brings anxiety. Vera's story reflects this struggle she dreams of authenticity but hesitates to act.

Even brief moments of imagination or reflection reveal Vera's desire for authenticity. Sartre and other existentialists argue that humans must accept responsibility for their freedom to create real meaning. Vera's reflections, although not yet acted upon, show her awareness of authentic possibilities.

In conclusion, *The Princess* is a story about loneliness, self-deception, and the search for authentic meaning. Princess Vera Gavrilovna has wealth, beauty, and social status, yet she feels empty inside. Through her encounters with the doctor and reflections at the monastery, Chekhov shows that appearances can deceive, and true meaning comes from facing life honestly, making real choices, and connecting sincerely with others. Existentialist ideas freedom, responsibility, authenticity, alienation, anxiety, and self-deception are all evident in Vera's story. Even when surrounded by admiration, wealth, and beauty, humans can feel empty if they do not act authentically and confront the reality of their existence.

Conclusion

Anton Chekhov's *The Princess* tells the story of Princess Vera Gavrilovna, a young, rich, and beautiful aristocrat who lives a life full of luxury and admiration. At first, her life seems perfect. People admire her beauty, wealth, and social position. She is respected and noticed wherever she goes. But under this outer appearance, Chekhov shows a deeper story about human life, loneliness, and the search for meaning, which connects closely to existentialist ideas. Existentialism is a philosophy that talks about personal freedom, responsibility, and facing life's hard truths, such as its emptiness, the certainty of death, and the loneliness everyone experiences. Chekhov shows through the Princess that money, beauty, and status cannot protect a person from these deeper truths of life.

In the story, Princess Vera Gavrilovna acts cheerful, confident, and sometimes playful when she meets the monks and novices. She often says proud and lively words like: "Did you miss little me, then? It's a whole month since your Princess was here. Well, here she is again, so have a good look at her" (Chekhov 64). These words show the social role she plays and the image she wants to show to others. But behind this happy and confident face, she feels empty and lonely. Even though people admire her, she knows that life is short and that praise and attention cannot fill the emptiness inside her. Chekhov shows that appearances and material comfort cannot solve the deeper struggles of life. Existentialist psychology says that to live fully, a person must face their own being, freedom, and death.

Existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Ernest Becker explain that people often avoid thinking about death and the responsibility to create meaning in life. In *The Princess*, the Princess tries to escape this by seeking admiration, attention, and new experiences. Even with all her privileges, she feels boredom, emptiness, and the temporary nature of human connections. Her life shows a common existential problem: no matter how rich, admired, or beautiful someone is, everyone must face loneliness, freedom, and the responsibility to make life meaningful.

Chekhov also makes readers think about society and its rules. The Princess is not completely free because she is limited by social expectations and by her own identity. The story shows that freedom is never fully free, because society and personal identity affect our choices. Her playful and proud words act as both a mask and a mirror, showing the difference between what people see on the outside and what she feels inside.

In the end, *The Princess* is more than just a story about wealth, beauty, or high social status. Chekhov shows the human struggle to face life honestly. Through Princess Vera Gavrilovna, we see that beauty, privilege, and money cannot solve life's deeper problems: finding purpose, accepting death, and facing inner emptiness. Chekhov's use of dialogues, character actions, and the story's tone shows existential ideas in a clear and simple way. The story teaches that real understanding of life comes not from other people's admiration but from the courage to face one's own life and to find true meaning within it. It reminds readers that life is short, and the most important journey is the inner one, where we learn to accept ourselves and the reality of the world around us.

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