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Existence Precedes Essence: A Comparative Analysis of Existential Crisis in The Remains of the Day and Fight Club

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Abstract:

This research paper explores the intersections of existentialism and absurdity through a comparative analysis of two structurally divergent yet thematically linked novels: Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day and Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club. By applying the core existential tenets of anguish, alienation, authenticity, and facticity, the study examines how individuals navigate an existential crisis within a world stripped of inherent meaning. The analysis highlights the "Bad Faith" and "philosophical suicide" inherent in Stevens' rigid adherence to professional dignity, contrasting it with the volatile, anarchic rebellion against consumerist numbness found in the narrator of Fight Club. Drawing on the frameworks established by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the paper argues that both protagonists grapple with the "Sisyphus-like" struggle of modern existence—one through the stifling repression of the self and the other through its violent deconstruction. Ultimately, the study illustrates how these works move beyond mere literary despair to reflect the "Absurd Hero's" journey, suggesting that while the universe remains silent, the human capacity to forge individual meaning remains the definitive act of rebellion.

Keywords: Existentialism, Absurdity, Existential crisis, Sartre's bad faith.

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Introduction

Existentialism is the belief that there is no pre-determined meaning to life. Humans are not born with a "soul" or a "destiny" carved into the stars. Instead, they simply “emerge into” (exist), and spend the rest of their lives deciding who they should be. The central tenet of this movement is: "Existence precedes essence." (Sartre 22) While the existentialist ideas were simmering for centuries, two primary intellectual movements catalysed the development of these ideas: The Forefathers of the nineteenth century first brought the concept of existentialism to mainstream discussion. Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, focused on the individual’s subjective relationship with God and the "leap of faith." (Kierkegaard 65) Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher, declared God to be dead, meaning that society could no longer rely on traditional religion for its moral compass. Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher was the one who officially coined the term "Existentialism" in the 1940s (Sartre 17). He popularised the key concepts of existentialism through cafe culture pf the 1940s. The French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, was a "Christian Existentialist" who initially accepted the term before later rejecting it, but he helped shape its early framework. This study aims to uncover how the quiet restraint of *The Remains of the Day* and the volatile energy of *Fight Club* both grapple with the same core truths: the weight of existentialism and the shadow of the absurd.

The literary application of existentialism is characterized by five primary thematic elements. Anguish (Anxiety) is one of the key traits which suggests an overwhelming feeling of the realisation that one is totally free about their destiny. The fact that there is no God or Fate responsible for one’s actions or choices makes every action, one’s own fault. This causes a terrifying experience as there is none other than oneself to blame in every fall. In literature, this is not just "stress"; it manifests as a profound psychological burden that results in existential stagnation or mental dissolution, when characters realize the safety net of "Fate" has been

pulled away. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* written before the formal philosophy of Existentialism, it is the best example for existential anguish. Existentialism posits that individuals are responsible for creating their own meaning in a world that provides none. In *The Remains of the Day,* Stevens' tragedy is that he outsourced his agency to someone else. Stevens believes that by serving a "great gentleman" like Darlington, he is indirectly serving humanity. This is his attempt to find essence in his life. However, when Darlington is later revealed to be a Nazi sympathizer and a "lightweight" in world affairs, the foundation of Stevens' life collapses. On the pier at Weymouth, Stevens finally feels the weight of his wasted life. The "absurdity" of his devotion is laid bare: he sacrificed the only authentic connection he had (his father, and later Miss Kenton) for a master who was ultimately unworthy of that sacrifice. Meanwhile the narrator of *Fight Club*, by immersing himself in groups like "Remaining Men Together," confronts the ultimate absurdity—death—to bypass his own emotional numbness, proving that in a world of "single-serving friends," pain is the only remaining currency of authenticity. This sense of desperation marks the shift from absurdism to existentialism. This creation, however, takes the form of the destructive, anarchic figure of Tyler Durden. The support groups are his first, unsuccessful attempt to find meaning through others. This parasitic form of catharsis highlights the tragedy of a man so disconnected from his own life that he can only express his emotions when he is mistaken for someone who is dying.

Alienation can be defined as the second identifiable trait. This refers to the feeling of being a stranger to others, to society, or even to oneself. It is the jarring sensation that the world is a stage on which one is a foreigner, or that one's internal reality cannot be bridged to the external world. In literature, this often manifests as a character feeling physically present but existentially invisible. In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* it provides the definitive exploration of social alienation. In *The Remains of the Day*, the instance of Miss Kenton catching Stevens

reading a sentimental book and trying to get him to open emotionally speaks of the trait of alienation. He freezes her out. This shows his fear of the self; he is afraid that if he acts like a human, his "butler essence" will shatter. Stevens' frantic attempt to hide the book is not merely a defence of his privacy, but a desperate preservation of his "butler essence," which he believes would be irrevocably shattered by the admission of human vulnerability or a desire for escapism. In this moment, the room's literal darkness mirrors Stevens' internal state of "Bad Faith" (Sartre's mauvaise foi), where he treats his professional persona as that of a butler. In *Fight Club* the narrator's obsession with his apartment is a physical manifestation of his isolation. The nameless narrator in fight club, views his furniture as a replacement for a personality or a family. When his condo is destroyed, his curated "nest" is gone. He tells the detective, "That wasn't just a bunch of stuff that got destroyed, it was me." Without his material walls to hide behind, his isolation becomes unbearable, forcing the "birth" of Tyler Durden—a psychological projection created specifically because the narrator is too lonely and repressed to function immutable, objective reality—a suit of Armor that forbids the existence of a private self.

Authenticity (The goal of life) can be defined as the third trait. It means living according to one's own internal values rather than mindlessly following the "herd" (society, religion, or family). Authenticity is the "cure" for the existential crisis. Once the world is absurd, and freedom is terrifying, and society alienates one, the only honest response is to define oneself to overcome the mental crisis. In literature, this often looks like a "rebellion of the soul"—a character choosing a difficult truth over a comfortable lie. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is a classic study of the struggle for authenticity against the "herd" of Victorian social expectations. Before his road trip, Stevens spends an obsessive amount of time reflecting on the polishing of the silver at Darlington Hall during the 1923 conference. This is not just a chore; it is an existential anchor for him. It is Stevens' attempt to exert total control over a chaotic and

unpredictable world. In an existential sense, the silver is the "prop" he uses to convince himself that his life has a higher purpose. This fixation is a classic manifestation of Sartre's "Bad Faith," where Stevens treats himself as an object—a tool for polishing—to escape the terrifying freedom of making his own moral judgments about Lord Darlington's Nazi-aligned sympathies. The silver becomes a literal and metaphorical "prop" in his performance of dignity; its reflective surface offers him a distorted validation, mirroring back a "perfect butler" while masking the void of his personal identity. While in *Fight Club*, the narrator asks Tyler to hit him as hard as he can. In an existential sense, this is the first time he makes a choice for himself that is not about comfort or money. He chooses pain because it is "real." This most important incident serves as the narrator's definitive leap from absurdist paralysis into existential action, as his request to be hit "as hard as you can" represents a radical reclamation of his own agency. In a world defined by the "softness" of consumerist comforts and the absurdity of a life lived through catalogues, physical pain becomes the only undeniable truth—a "biological reality" that cannot be bought or simulated. By actively choosing suffering over safety, the narrator rejects the passive, "single-serving" existence that has kept him numb and instead embraces the existentialist belief that meaning is forged through conscious, often difficult, choices. This moment marks the transition from Camus's realization of the absurd to Sartre's "condemnation to be free"; the narrator is no longer a collection of furniture, but a visceral being experiencing the immediate, stinging proof of his own life.

Facticity, is the following trait, which refers to the matters one cannot change, such as one's race, country, parents, language etc. Existentialism analyses how one lives despite their facticity. The struggle of the human condition is the tension between one's facticity (what one is) and transcendence (the conscious ability to choose who one will become despite those facts). In Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* the main protagonist Tess is trapped by her father's discovery of their noble ancestry (a fact of the past) and sets the tragedy in motion.

For Stevens, the butler, facticity is not just his background; it is a restrictive framework he seeks to aestheticize. He attempts to transcend his human "facticity" (emotions, mistakes, and desires) by achieving a state of perfect "dignity." Stevens views his position as a butler not as a job he does, but as the fundamental truth of who he is. He believes a "great" butler must never inhabit his own skin, but only his professional role. Stevens' obsession with the "Hayes Society" and their definition of a "gentleman's gentleman.," justifies the fact. He treats his social status as an unchangeable law of nature. By adhering strictly to the facticity of his class, he avoids the terrifying freedom of making his own moral or emotional choices. Stevens prioritizes his professional facticity over his subjective humanity, effectively subsuming his individual identity. In *Fight Club*, the narrator initially tries to escape his facticity through consumerism, but Tyler Durden forces him to confront it through pain and destruction. Tyler Durden's primary goal is to strip away the narrator's artificial identity and force him to face the raw facticity of being a biological, mortal human. In the chemical burn scene, Tyler pours lye on the narrator's hand and refuses to let him use water or "meditate" the pain away. He says, "This is the greatest moment of your life, man, and you're off somewhere else. "Here, pain is a "brute fact." By forcing the narrator to experience the burn, Tyler is forcing him to acknowledge the facticity of his body. One cannot "consumer-culture" their way out of a chemical burn; it is a physical reality that demands one to exist in the present moment.

Absurdity is the most significant among the traits of existentialism. It generally refers to the search for meaning in a world that offers none. This phenomenon illustrates the inherent friction of the absurd: the persistent human impulse to extract specific meaning from an environment that remains fundamentally indifferent and structurally entropic. In literature, this friction is often depicted through characters who is trapped in repetitive, illogical, or fruitless cycles. Samuel Beckett's, *Waiting for Godot* is perhaps the definitive work of the Absurd. In the novel *Remains of the Day*, Stevens prioritizes serving wine over saying goodbye to his

dying father. This illustrates his absurd commitment to a professional role that offers no emotional reciprocity or inherent value. In Camus' definition of The Absurd, a person seeks meaning in a universe that offers none. Stevens' "universe" is Darlington Hall, and his "god" is the concept of dignity. Stevens creates his own version of the Absurd, Stevens offers a religious-like devotion to an institution (the English Aristocracy) and a man (Lord Darlington) that views him merely as a high-functioning tool. Stevens treats the wine service as a matter of cosmic importance while treating his father's death as a logistical inconvenience. Meanwhile in *Fight Club*, the narrator goes to support groups for people with terminal illnesses just so he can cry and feel something. This is his existential crisis—he is so "dead" inside that he must borrow other people's misery to feel alive. This action serves as a visceral manifestation of the existential vacuum created by late-stage consumerism, where he attempts to solve his "death of the soul" by voyeuristically consuming the genuine mortality of others. This reflects the core of Albert Camus's absurdism. The narrator realizes that his curated, IKEA-furnished life is fundamentally meaningless, yet rather than initially embracing the freedom of that realization, he falls into a state of "philosophical suicide," seeking a simulated purpose through borrowed grief.

In philosophy, "The Absurd" is not just something that is "silly" or "ridiculous." It refers to a very specific friction: The conflict between the human search for meaning and the "silent," meaningless universe. Humans have a "biological" need for answers, but the universe has a "physical" inability to provide them. That gap between our question and the universe's silence is what one calls the absurd. While the feeling of absurdity has been around since the beginning of time, it was crystallized in the mid-20th century. Albert Camus is widely regarded as the preeminent figure of Absurdism, whose philosophical contributions crystallized the mid-twentieth-century understanding of the human condition. In his 1942 essay "The Myth of Sisyphus", he laid out the framework. He did not necessarily "invent" the word, but he gave it

a philosophical definition. He compared the human condition to Sisyphus, the Greek figure condemned to roll a boulder up a hill for eternity, only for it to roll back down every time. Søren Kierkegaard, before Camus, this 19th-century theologian used the term "The Absurd" to describe the paradox of Christian faith—specifically, how a finite human can believe in an infinite God.

Works in literature written on the theme of absurdism demonstrates the following characteristics:

Pointlessness of Effort: Characters often perform repetitive tasks that lead nowhere. They are "perpetuating cycles of futility". In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Lewis Carroll turns this feeling into a literal moment with the Red Queen. This perfectly captures the exhaustion of maintaining a status quo that yields no actual progress. Throughout the book *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens tries to learn how to tell jokes because his new American boss expects it. It is Absurd—he is trying to "calculate" how to be a person with a personality, treating human connection like a formulaic challenge. One can analyse his "bantering problem" as a mechanical tragedy—the moment where a human being who has lived as an appliance tries to suddenly function as a person. Throughout the novel, Stevens has spent decades perfecting the art of being "invisible" and "functional," much like a high-end piece of furniture or a clock. When his new American employer, Mr. Farraday, demands "banter," he is not asking for a service; he is asking for a personality. The absurdity lies in Stevens' attempt to "solve" humour as if it were a stain on a rug or a scheduling conflict. Drawing from Albert Camus's philosophy, the novel *Fight Club*, suggests that modern life is a "Sisyphus-like" struggle where individuals exert immense energy toward goals that are ultimately meaningless. The narrator's job is the ultimate manifestation of pointless effort. He travels across the country to investigate horrific car accidents, only to apply a cold mathematical formula to determine if a human life is worth the "effort" of a recall. He spends his life in airports, hotels, and wreckage sites, documenting

tragedy. The effort he puts into his "career" results in no moral progress or human benefit. He is a cog in a machine that views death as a budget line item. This mirrors the absurd, where a person seeks meaning in a system that is inherently indifferent to human value.

Breakdown of Language: As the world has no objective meaning, linguistic signifiers become increasingly divorced from their objective meanings. Conversations in absurdist literature often feel like two people talking at each other rather than to each other. Here, language stops being a tool for communication and becomes a tool for distraction. Characters use words to fill the terrifying silence of the universe, resulting in "dialogue" that is just two overlapping monologues. In Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party,* Pinter developed a style so specific it is called "Pinteresque," characterized by the 'Pinter Pause.' This result in the "breakdown" occurring in the silence between words. The characters talk at each other to assert dominance, but no real understanding ever occurs. Language is shown to be a mask that hides our fundamental isolation. One of the most chilling breakdowns occurs in Remains *of the day*, when Lord Darlington instructs Stevens to fire two Jewish maids to please his pro-Nazi guests. As a result, Miss Kenton confronts Stevens, expressing her outrage and threatening to quit. Stevens responds by repeating corporate platitudes about "the master's wishes" and "the standards of the house." Here Miss Kenton is speaking from a place of moral reality; Stevens is speaking from a place of procedural facticity. He uses language to dehumanize the situation, stripping the words of their ethical weight. He is not talking to her grief; he is talking at her with a manual of protocols. Meanwhile in *Fight Club*, the narrator frequents support groups for diseases he does not have. Here, language is divorced from truth. People speak in clichés of healing and "remaining whole," but the narrator finds meaning only in the physicality of crying, not the words spoken. Communication becomes a series of scripted responses. By lying about his condition, the narrator highlights the absurdity: the connection is real, but the language used to achieve it is a total fabrication.

Camus argued that when one realizes life is absurd, one has three options:

Suicide (Camus rejected this as "cowardly.") is the first option pointed out by Camus. He rejected this because it does not solve the absurd; it simply yields to it. It is an admission that the "clash" between human longing and universal silence is unbearable. In *Remains of the day*, Stevens does not literally take his own life, Ishiguro uses Stevens' Father and the concept of "Professional Fatalism" to represent a metaphorical death of the self. Stevens has essentially "killed" his human side—the son, the lover, the individual—to maintain the mask of the butler. His father's literal death, occurring while he is performing a ritualistic task, mirrors Stevens' own state: he exists as a cipher, entirely subsumed by his professional identity.", having committed a slow, social suicide for the sake of "dignity." In *Fight Club,* suicide is used as a recurring threat and a final "solution" to the split personality. The narrator frequents these groups because being around people who are dying makes him feel alive. At the end of the novel, the narrator realizes the only way to "kill" Tyler Durden (his projection of meaning) is to pull the trigger on himself. The narrator shoots himself in the mouth to end the conflict. While he survives, the act itself is a literal confrontation with Camus' first question: "Should I kill myself, or have a cup of coffee?" The narrator chooses the bullet to resolve the absurdity of his dual existence.

Philosophical Suicide (Camus rejected this as "denial."): This is the act of "killing" one's own reason to escape the discomfort of the Absurd. It involves adopting a belief system (religion, political utopias, or "everything happens for a reason") to provide a fake script. In *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh, the character Julia Flyte eventually commits philosophical suicide. A parallel manifestation of this concept is evident in Stevens' characterization. He commits his own version of "Philosophical Suicide" by handing his entire sense of self over to Lord Darlington. He refuses to judge the world on his own terms; instead, he bets everything on the idea that if he is just a "perfect" butler to a "great" man, then his life automatically has meaning.

By telling himself, *"It is not my place to harbour opinions,"* Stevens essentially shuts down his own brain to avoid the pain of living in a chaotic, confusing world. He takes a "leap of faith" into the British class system, using his job as a shield to hide from the responsibility of his own freedom. When Lord Darlington begins hosting Nazi sympathizers and enacts anti-Semitic policies (firing the Jewish maids), Stevens suppresses his own moral discomfort. This dialogue uttered by him showcases how Stevens kills his own intellect to avoid the pain of an absurd, chaotic world. He takes a "leap of faith" into the hierarchy of the British class system to find a fake sense of purpose. Camus describes this as escaping the absurd by attaching oneself to a dogma or a prefabricated meaning. It is "suicide" because one kills their own critical thinking to feel safe. In the *Fight Club*, this is represented by the narrator's initial life and later by the members of Project Mayhem." He believes that if he finds the perfect coffee table, his life will be "complete." Later, the members in Project Mayhem commit philosophical suicide by surrendering their identities to Tyler Durden. They chant, "His name is Robert Paulson," and follow "The Rules" without question. Whether it is consumerism or a cult, both are escapes from the void. The characters trade the "Absurdity of Nothing" for the "Certainty of a System." Rebellion ("Absurd Hero"): The Absurd Hero is someone who knows their effort is pointless, knows they will die, and knows there is no God—but they live with maximum intensity anyway. Their "rebellion" is their refusal to be crushed by the truth. It involves acknowledging that life has no inherent meaning, yet choosing to live vibrantly and defiantly anyway. For most of *Remains of the Day*, Stevens fails at this, but the ending at Weymouth Pier offers a flicker of it. After meeting Miss Kenton (Mrs. Benn) and realizing he has lost his chance at love and that Lord Darlington was a flawed, misguided man, Stevens sits on a bench and weeps. However, he then watches the pier lights come on and decides to return to Darlington Hall to practice his "bantering." This is Stevens' closest brush with rebellion. He realizes his "Greatness" was a sham and his "Dignity" was a cage. By deciding to find small joy in

"bantering" despite knowing his life's work was built on a lie, he reflects Sisyphus pushing the boulder. He accepts the "remains" of his day without the delusion of grandeur. In *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden is the personification of this rebellion, though he eventually corrupts it into a new dogma. The act of "Fight Club" itself. The men are not fighting for money, points, or hate; they are fighting to feel the "now." "It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything. "Tyler's philosophy of "Self-Destruction" over "Self-Improvement" is a form of Camunian Rebellion. By destroying his apartment and his possessions, the narrator rejects the fake meanings of society. He accepts that he is "the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world" and decides to live defiantly in that knowledge.

When explaining its relevance in Literature, Absurdism radically disrupted traditional narrative structures. It gave birth to the Theatre of the Absurd (a term coined by critic Martin Esslin).

Instead of a "Beginning, Middle, and End," Absurdist literature often has a circular structure. If the universe does not have a grand design, why should a play? It moved literature away from realism and toward symbolism and surrealism.

In Literature, Existentialism became the dominant philosophical framework in the post-war era. After seeing the horrors of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, writers found the structured optimism of the Victorian novel insufficient to express the era's disillusionment. They needed a language for the chaos. It led to the Theatre of the Absurd, where plots do not make sense because life does not make sense. It shifted the focus from "What happens next?" to "Why am I here?" Literature across the globe celebrated existential themes especially in their post-war literature. Important works with this recurring theme are The Stranger by Albert Camus, No Exit by Jean-Paul Sartre, Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett, The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka.

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