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## “I Am My Freedom”: Myth and Existentialism in Sartre’s *The Flies*

*Rather than a close adaptation of the myth of Orestes and Electra, Jean-Paul Sartre’s The Flies (1943) adapts the story from an existentialist standpoint. This paper first considers the significance of classical myths for existentialist writers, as well as the common critical approach to Sartre’s theatre. Instead of using Sartre’s existential bent as a critical starting point of The Flies, this paper then examines the work as an example of Sartre’s theatre of situations, utilising the myth as a simultaneously familiar and distanced subject matter. Focusing on the representation of characters in particular, the paper tracks the steps they take in reacting to the situation of the play, until they reach the point of acknowledging freedom and its consequences. Lastly, this paper interprets the final responses of Electra and Orestes as enactments of bad faith and authenticity respectively, and the inconclusive ending of the play as a formal choice that correlates with the indeterminacy of freedom.*

**Keywords:** Sartre, *The Flies*, myth, Orestes, theatre of situations, freedom, responsibility

### Introduction: Myth and Existentialists

The presence of Greco-Roman myths in existentialist texts, literary or otherwise, is apparent even upon a superficial browsing of the oeuvre of writers affiliated with this philosophical approach. The most obvious examples are *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) by Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s theatrical version of the Orestes myth, *The Flies* (1943). The

same trend would later continue particularly in theatre, where myths were incorporated to depict existential themes and concerns. Notable examples are Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* (1944) and *Médée*, written in 1946 and performed in 1953. While existentialists embrace a detachment from the authority of the past and emphasize instead the importance of the present moment, this utilisation of myths needs consideration.

Critics have proposed several reasons as to why myths provided a fruitful source material for existentialist authors. Hazel Barnes attributes this to the fact that myths provide "a total situation, a complex of experience which is immediately intelligible to any reader," that authors can use and reinterpret for modern times to show their position with regard to "these fundamental truths."<sup>1</sup> George Boas moreover suggests that the existentialist approach was compatible with one typical characteristic of Greek tragedies, the fact that in every case "the heroes have to make a choice," and it is this particular moment that is useful to existentialist writers, especially after they disrobe classical and mythological characters of their fixed traditional depiction, and put on them the appearance of human beings.<sup>2</sup> However, some have found this selective approach to be opportunistic. Distinguishing among three phases of the literary myth, Harry Slochower states that existentialists deliberately choose only the middle phase, the moment of choice and the exercise of freedom, and raise it "to an absolute," ignoring the preceding phase where "ego is *born*" and the following where "the ego finds *reconciliation*."<sup>3</sup> As such, rather than a solution, their final destination is that of anguish and self-isolation. Thus, according to Slochower the existentialists' use of myths is disproportionate, partial and highly selective.

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<sup>1</sup> BARNES (1955: 122).

<sup>2</sup> BOAS (1955: 9).

<sup>3</sup> SLOCHOWER (1948: 42–43).

Sartre's *The Flies* seems to follow the pattern described by Slochower in that it neglects the past of Orestes, starting at the midpoint in his journey, and not providing a clear resolution in the end. As such, the focus and the main conflict of the play seems to be Orestes' acknowledgement of his freedom and the final moment of choice. However, there appears to be a continuous trend in the critical reception of *The Flies* and of Sartre's early plays in general. From earlier interpretations until the more recent, there are two main approaches that deserve attention.

The first has to do with the historical context of the time when the play was written. The mythological foundation of *The Flies* has often been considered as "camouflage,"<sup>4</sup> to allow Sartre to implicitly criticize the Nazi system and the Vichy regime without facing any censorship. In addition, it is interpreted as "an indictment of the [French] people," who had been following a sort of cult of guilt, surrender and inferiority towards this regime.<sup>5</sup> This is in part a direct consequence of Sartre's own statements regarding the play, as he states that:

By writing my play I was trying by my own unaided effort, feeble though it may be, to do what I could to root out this sickness of repentance, this complacency in repentance and shame . . . I was saying to my fellow Frenchmen: You do not have to repent, even those of you who have in a sense become murderers; you must assume your own responsibility for your acts, even if they have caused the deaths of innocent persons.<sup>6</sup>

This historically-oriented approach has resisted times and remains prevalent even in the most recent analyses of *The Flies*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> O'DONOHUE (2005: 54).

<sup>5</sup> SLOCHOWER (1948: 46).

<sup>6</sup> Cf MORGAN (2013: 97).

<sup>7</sup> See A. VAN DEN HOVEN (2025: 13–24).

Secondly, a more frequent starting point of analysis on *The Flies* and Sartre's theatre is his philosophy. His plays are interpreted as by-products of Sartre's non-fictional writing, where the stage becomes a medium to transmit his existentialist theories to an audience. This approach typically results in ambiguities, and sometimes, even contradictions. For example, Slochower argues that, while Sartre places great importance on the notion of thrownness, "Orestes is not 'thrown' into existence," and nothing in the story, with the exception of the murder act perhaps, is really unmotivated.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, he argues that despite the individualistic emphasis of existentialism, there is a strong social motif in the final act of the play, which becomes even more questionable considering that the people whom Orestes wants to save are not even worthy of being saved.<sup>9</sup> Rhiannon Goldthorpe also questions this resolution, stressing a lack of balance between the moral and aesthetic effect of *The Flies*, debating whether Sartre is using the mythical to receive a moral, emotional or aesthetic response, whose end is not even clear.<sup>10</sup>

This analytical approach from Sartre's philosophical theory to his theatre, still continues. Dennis A. Gilbert's review of the scholastic efforts on Sartre's theatre throughout decades, despite his emphasis on "a rebirth of scholarship" in this area after the year 2005, actually reveals that these efforts, "at their best, expand the commonplace philosophical reading of these plays."<sup>11</sup> Although these considerations are viewed through different lenses, whether they be aesthetic, ethical, or otherwise, Sartre's philosophy remains their starting point. However, on a later occasion, analysing Simone de Beauvoir's views on existentialist theatre, Gilbert stresses that she "rejects the notion that Sartre theorizes first and then uses the novels and the plays simply to illustrate certain

<sup>8</sup> SLOCHOWER (1948: 46).

<sup>9</sup> SLOCHOWER (1948: 47).

<sup>10</sup> GOLDTHORPE (1984: 81).

<sup>11</sup> GILBERT (2010: 248).

points of [existentialist] thinking.”<sup>12</sup> It follows then, that it is the situation depicted in the play that can lead to theoretical and philosophical interpretations, not the other way around.

This paper does not consider the historical background of the play, and reverses the order of the aforementioned approach. Thus, the starting point and primary focus will be the play itself, supported by Sartre’s theoretical formulations on theatre, particularly what he calls “theatre of situations,” as well as his views on the use of myths. Following the trajectory of the situation presented in *The Flies*, from the introduction of Orestes until the open ending of the play, this paper will then analyse the steps and the outcome of this trajectory to interpret what this version of the classical myth reveals for modern audiences and readers.

### **Myth in Sartre’s Theatre of Situations**

Sartre highlights two main aspects that make myths a suitable source material for his theatre. On the one hand, they provide a sense of familiarity for the audience. According to him, “if it is to address the masses, the theatre must speak ... in the form of myths which anyone can understand and feel deeply.”<sup>13</sup> In that sense, myths provide a familiar terrain, where the audience does not have to strain to follow the plot, but focus on its thematic content and meaning instead. However, on the other hand, this familiarity should remain moderate, as Sartre also draws attention to the concept of distance. According to him, “a play should not seem too familiar ... even as it speaks to the spectators of themselves it must do it in a tone and with a constant reserve of manner which ... will increase the distance between play and audience.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> GILBERT (2012: 112).

<sup>13</sup> SARTRE–CONTAT–RYBALKA (1976: 38–39).

<sup>14</sup> SARTRE–CONTAT–RYBALKA (1976: 41).

Elsewhere, he states that this distance is indeed “the real origin, the real meaning of theatre.”<sup>15</sup>

Sartre had already explored this interplay between familiarity and distance in his first play, *Bariona, or the Son of Thunder* (1940), in its essence a Nativity play. While the birth of Christ is an easily recognizable narrative for the average audience, its temporal removal from their immediate present is the first step of the distance that the author aims for. The same approach persists in Sartre’s subsequent play, *The Flies*. In both cases, audiences and readers are introduced to a recognizable situation, enabling a smooth involvement in the events of the play. Yet, particularly through the dialogue, they are gradually distanced from the play. The use of myth in *The Flies* makes this transition even easier, considering the fictional nature of the subject matter. According to Jacques Guicharnaud, through such familiar subjects, “Sartre’s plays lead the spectator from the universe of perception, common sense, and psychological or aesthetic habits to an existentialist conclusion, often difficult in its newness.”<sup>16</sup> Adding to the existentialist worldview, this newness is apparent in the theatrical nature of Sartre’s treatment of the myth.

Adapting or reinterpreting myths was obviously something that had been done before. However, Beauvoir considered Sartre’s use of myth as a novelty in the French theatrical tradition, “as a way to replace a theater of fatality ... with a theater of freedom.”<sup>17</sup> This meant that, instead of the typical approach of following the classical plot with loyalty, it was the translation of its meaning for a modern audience that became the focal point. Nevertheless, there is a thematic aspect of mythology that might be thought to cause a problem for existentialism: the pervading theme of fate. In classical sources, whether through the order

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<sup>15</sup> SARTRE–CONTAT–RYBALKA (1976: 12).

<sup>16</sup> GUICHARNAUD (1962: 70).

<sup>17</sup> GILBERT (2012: 112).

of events, or characters like gods, the Moirai and the oracles, fate and destiny are depicted as deterministic forces. The idea that man is bound to his fate seems to oppose the notion of freedom that is so crucial for existentialists. How then does one go from fatality to freedom? Sartre uses theatre in particular to answer this question.

Sartre does not see this sense of destiny and fatality as the centre of classical myth and tragedy. Instead, he argues that human freedom is "the chief source of great tragedy"; that "the fate we think we find in ancient drama is only the other side of freedom."<sup>18</sup> The classical meaning of fate is translated into facticity, that is, the biological, economic, cultural, in short, every external factor that is present in one's situation out of one's control. However, Sartre sees these seemingly deterministic circumstances as prerequisites for one's exercise of freedom. Rather than these fixed factors, it is instead one's reaction to and negation of them that gives meaning to one's existence. With acting and reacting, as well as enacting freedom at the root of this understanding, the use of theatre as a medium becomes even more significant.

To challenge the existing theatrical tradition of the time, Sartre conceived his notion of "theatre of situations." This new type of theatre shifted its focus from the character, which had been at the centre of realistic theatre, to the situation instead. With the restricting nature of facticity being a prerequisite of freedom, Sartre envisioned his heroes as "freedoms caught in a trap."<sup>19</sup> According to him, facticity should not indicate a fatalistic and fixed human nature, but a human condition instead. As such, they highlight the moment of free and deliberate choice, where one acknowledges the capacity of accepting or reacting to said facticity. It is this (re)action to the situation where he is thrown that defines the character. In other words, the maxim "*doing* reveals *being*" is

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<sup>18</sup> SARTRE-CONTAT-RYBALKA (1976: 3).

<sup>19</sup> SARTRE (1988: 235).

apparent.<sup>20</sup> In choosing how to react towards said situation, characters are depicted in a continuous pattern of becoming, where each choice shapes the features of their existence. With the theatre of situations not being concerned with any preconceived “thesis” or underlying ideology,<sup>21</sup> it is this gradual unravelling of the character that is of interest.

### ***The Flies: Characters in a Situation***

*The Flies* is a typical example of Sartre’s theatre of situations. The play starts at the midpoint of the myth of Orestes with the hero’s return to Argos, his birthplace. The character is thrown into an unfamiliar setting and situation, as the domineering presence of a blood-smeared statue of Zeus and a group of old women dressed in black make no sense to Orestes. His detachment from the reality of the situation is immediately apparent in three main levels. Firstly, he does not recognize the place, as he states that “I was born here – and yet I have to ask my way, like any stranger.”<sup>22</sup> Secondly, the established cult of guilt for the death of Agamemnon that the current leader Aegistheus has imposed on the people to force them into submission does not appeal to Orestes. Therefore, in addition to his detachment from the place, he rejects the customs or connections to its citizenry, declaring “These folk are no concern of mine. ... I don’t share their remorse, I don’t even know a single one of them by name.”<sup>23</sup> Lastly, and more importantly, upon being asked by his tutor about the reason of his return to his birthplace, Orestes dismisses the question rhetorically asking “Did I say I had a purpose?”<sup>24</sup> Through these three levels, Orestes shows himself as the ideal “Sartrean hero, the

<sup>20</sup> SARTRE (1988: 193).

<sup>21</sup> SARTRE–CONTAT–RYBALKA (1976: 38).

<sup>22</sup> SARTRE (1989: 50).

<sup>23</sup> SARTRE (1989: 61).

<sup>24</sup> SARTRE (1989: 58).

*homme sans qualites*."<sup>25</sup> He does not have a fixed character or a preconceived ideology and purpose that holds authority on his actions.

His sister Electra is initially depicted in a relatively similar light. She refuses to partake "in this mummery," and rejects the dead that the people are mourning for; they are not *her* dead.<sup>26</sup> However, in contrast to Orestes, who is in a position of reflection, Electra is the only one who acts. Declaring herself "sick with – hatred,"<sup>27</sup> she makes it her *raison d'être* to disrupt the ghostly atmosphere of Argos. Her revolt is immediate upon her entrance, as she addresses the statue of Zeus with blasphemous remarks, even rubbing her body inappropriately against it.<sup>28</sup> Yet, the most significant manifestation of her hatred comes during the ceremony of the dead, where the entire city visits the mouth of a cave, out of which it is said that the dead will visit their living relatives, to torture them by inflicting shameful remorse. Electra presents herself in the midst of the grieving crowd in a white dress, and starts dancing with a "look of ecstasy."<sup>29</sup> This sudden break of the ceremony is not just a more dramatic reiteration of the words "I'm young, I'm alive," that she had said to the statue of Zeus upon her entrance,<sup>30</sup> but also a challenge to the status quo, confronting the cult of death with a celebration, a "dance for happiness and life."<sup>31</sup> This way, against the passive background of the citizens of Argos, Electra emerges as the only active character, conscious of her freedom and capacity of choice.

As an observer of the events that happen in Argos, Orestes eventually makes his own choices, which are not only sudden, but depict a further detachment from others and a closer return to individuality.

<sup>25</sup> GOLDTHORPE (1984: 75).

<sup>26</sup> SARTRE (1989: 71).

<sup>27</sup> SARTRE (1989: 65).

<sup>28</sup> SARTRE (1989: 62).

<sup>29</sup> SARTRE (1989: 81).

<sup>30</sup> SARTRE (1989: 62).

<sup>31</sup> SARTRE (1989: 81).

Although he has been educated by the teachings of his tutor, he finally rejects any external authority dictating his acts and ideas. He proudly declares that “from now on I’ll take no one’s orders, neither man’s nor god’s,” and that he is ready to face the “emptiness” of this detachment.<sup>32</sup> Having severed the ties of any external influence or any value system, be it moral, social, religious or otherwise, he realizes that he is the sole actor of his situation. It is at this point that he makes the decision of killing Aegistheus and Clytemnestra, not because of any prophecy or the pressure imposed by his sister, but only as his own deliberate choice. This extreme act is the direct consequence of the recognition that “there is another path – *my* path.”<sup>33</sup> Goldthorpe interprets this moment as the crucial instant of “pure reflection,” distanced from emotion or past acts and motivations, and founded instead upon “conscious evaluation of our situation.”<sup>34</sup>

Not only does this act distinguish Orestes from the other passive characters, but it also marks a breaking point between the versions of freedom depicted so far by him and Electra. Guicharnaud considers Electra to be a portrayal of “frivolous freedom,” exemplified in chaotic acts fuelled by hatred and the desire for revenge against her mother.<sup>35</sup> However, the fact that she has not acted on this long-lasting hatred before and even after the arrival of Orestes, shows that her motivation and elusive freedom is inconsequential. This becomes even more apparent in the final act of *The Flies*. Orestes, on the other hand, through his process of pure reflection and self-realization, discovers “metaphysical freedom,”<sup>36</sup> an authentic version of freedom, that is simultaneously necessary and unbearable.

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<sup>32</sup> SARTRE (1989: 90).

<sup>33</sup> SARTRE (1989: 90).

<sup>34</sup> GOLTHORPE (1984: 67–68).

<sup>35</sup> GUICHARNAUD (1962: 65).

<sup>36</sup> GUICHARNAUD (1962: 65).

## The Burden of Freedom

The second act of the play ends with Orestes killing Aegistheus and Clytemnestra, leaving the hero and his sister alone to face the consequences. Orestes has discovered real freedom, exclaiming "Freedom has crashed down on me like a thunderbolt."<sup>37</sup> The simile holds great significance regarding this moment of realization, in that it is quick, sudden, enlightening, but at the same time violent and difficult to experience. Orestes becomes "the hero who understands that the act is his and only his," while acknowledging the inevitable consequence that he will also be the only one who has to face the consequences of this act.<sup>38</sup> Electra claims that the burden of the act is too heavy to bear, because a committed act cannot be reversed or undone, the actors "are no longer free to blot it out."<sup>39</sup> It is at this point that the burden of freedom is experienced in different ways by each of the siblings.

While Electra's previous determination fades against the irreversibility of matricide and begins to feel the crushing burden of the act, Orestes is pleased with its weight, considering this burden to be freedom itself.<sup>40</sup> Failing to face the anguish born from the act, Electra finally rejects her brother altogether and begs Zeus to save her. While she considers the newfound freedom as "misery and squalor," she falls into an inconsolable state, vowing to become a "creature" and a "slave" to Zeus in a final act of repentance,<sup>41</sup> rejecting her human condition and becoming almost "thing-like."<sup>42</sup> This reveals that Electra had been in fact playing "the self-assigned role of tragic heroine with theatrical

<sup>37</sup> SARTRE (1989: 105).

<sup>38</sup> GUICHARNAUD (1962: 66).

<sup>39</sup> SARTRE (1989: 105).

<sup>40</sup> SARTRE (1989: 105).

<sup>41</sup> SARTRE (1989: 121).

<sup>42</sup> O'DONOHUE (2005: 68).

passion."<sup>43</sup> Her previous acts of rebellion served merely as fuel for her hatred and revenge, despite the fact that she never acted on this emotion. Now, with the act of revenge already finalized, she has nothing left to motivate her existence. Thus, Electra succumbs to the comfort of guilt.

Electra's response reveals what Sartre calls "patterns of flight," processes of distraction that one follows in order not to face the burden, anguish and uncertainty of freedom.<sup>44</sup> These patterns lead to the elusive destination of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*), where the individual, while being conscious of the truth of the situation, lies to himself, becoming simultaneously the liar and the lied upon.<sup>45</sup> However, the essence of this contradictory position rests in the fact that to be a liar, one has to be conscious of the truth. Therefore, while outwardly appearing as blind to her capacity for free action in the last act of the play, Electra emerges as a character entirely conscious of this freedom. After all, Orestes, the clearest example of true freedom, is standing right in front of her at this point. It is her conscious choice of attempting to evade this inescapable path that demonstrates Electra's final position as a character in bad faith.

In contrast, Orestes not only embraces the burden of the newfound freedom, but even identifies with it, declaring "I *am* my freedom."<sup>46</sup> Therefore, he not only acknowledges and accepts the crime that he has committed as an act of his own deliberate choice, but expresses his readiness in facing its consequences as well. In redefining himself to Zeus, Orestes states:

Foreign to myself – I know it. Outside nature, against nature, without excuse, beyond remedy, except what remedy I find within myself.

<sup>43</sup> O'DONOHUE (2005: 65).

<sup>44</sup> SARTRE (1978: 40–41).

<sup>45</sup> SARTRE (1978: 49).

<sup>46</sup> SARTRE (1989: 117).

But I shall not return under your law; I am doomed to have no other law but mine.<sup>47</sup>

Declaring himself outside and against nature, Orestes echoes Sartre's concept of the theatre of situations, where the fixed nature of the character is disregarded and rejected, together with its psychological and emotional background, as well as any preconceived and external ideas that contribute to this concept of fixity. Instead, the character is shaped by his actions and reactions to a certain, usually restrictive, situation. Moreover, Orestes does not have and does not offer an excuse for his act, since it was a deliberate and free choice, made in full consciousness and not based on any other reasons but his own judgment. Lastly, he recognizes that he is beyond redemption, because the weight of the acknowledgment of his freedom has already been placed upon his shoulders, and he will have to carry it from now on. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties of this position, Orestes reaffirms the understanding of his individuality, together with the fact that, being unfixed and unattached to any sort of external ideology, belief or value system, he is solely responsible for his actions.

The conclusion of the play demands further consideration; there are more questions, because Sartre presents an open-ended resolution to the situation of *The Flies*. Orestes claims that from this point he will have to open the eyes of his people, so that they can tear from their eyes "the veils" that Zeus has laid on them, in order to comprehend their own freedom.<sup>48</sup> However, the specifics of this mission are not discussed any further, adding a notion of uncertainty. Nevertheless, it is important to note that uncertainty is inherent to the existentialist way of thinking. Being constantly in a situation, one's chain of decisions and choices exists

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<sup>47</sup> SARTRE (1989: 119).

<sup>48</sup> SARTRE (1989: 119).

in continuity. Therefore, an absolute and everlasting acknowledgement of freedom, together with its consequential authenticity and responsibility, is unattainable. As Morgan argues, it is “the constant redefinition of one’s situation that both allows for and defines the process of *becoming*.”<sup>49</sup> In demonstrating the act of free choice in an isolated situation, Orestes becomes “the character from Sartre’s plays who best embodies Sartre’s idea of a free man.”<sup>50</sup> Yet, the isolated nature of this situation, together with the fact that other situations will follow, indicates that this process of becoming is continuous and its results uncertain, considering that the individual has to constantly renew his commitment to this way of thinking. *The Flies* demonstrates this fact through its formal open-endedness, surpassing the limits of performed play or written drama, and ultimately becoming a “situation” to which the audience member and the reader can react and exercise their free judgement.

### Conclusion

Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Flies*, in its rendering of the myth of Orestes, demonstrates that classical myths can serve as a suitable source material for modern drama, not only from the obvious plot device that their reimagined versions still hold appealing and timeless relevance, but also as narratives that can illustrate complex ways of thinking, such as existentialism. They provide an adequate amount of familiarity to engage even the average reader or audience member, yet the distance arising from their fictitious nature enables such application. While the recurring motif of fate and destiny may seemingly present a challenge to the emphasis that existentialism puts on the notion of freedom, Sartre transforms the motif into the concept of situational circumstance. As an

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<sup>49</sup> MORGAN (2013: 90).

<sup>50</sup> MORGAN (2013: 101).

example of Sartre's theatre of situations, *The Flies* treats prophecy and fate as prerequisites for the hero's enactment of his freedom, as situations to which characters can react in pure and conscious reflection.

It is a fundamental aspect of the theatre of situations to limit its scope to a certain situation, without any preconceived idea or thesis serving as a foundation. It is the course of events presented throughout a play that should reflect and result in the formation of some idea, not the other way around. Therefore, while the commonplace interpretation of *The Flies* has at its starting point Sartre's philosophy, it is an analysis of the play itself and the way how actions unfold that ultimately depicts some characteristics of the human condition that reveal an existentialist manner of thinking. The characters of *The Flies* are not initially indicative of any philosophical formulation, considering that they do not have any fixed essence. It is the reactions to the situation presented in the play that shape each character. Thus, upon experiencing the anguish caused by the recognition of individual freedom, Orestes finally emerges as a hero of freedom, acknowledging his inherent capacity for free and deliberate action, together with the consequential responsibility that it entails, whereas Electra, in the attempt of subduing this anguish, ends up as an agent of bad faith. These deliberations are evidently concerned with an individualistic standpoint. The indeterminate conclusion of the play, on the other hand, reflects only an anticipation or suggested intention to open the eyes of the people towards the recognition of their freedom. Thus, it provides an opportunity to expand this analysis beyond the scope of this paper, to further ponder whether the realization of individual freedom may have a wider social impact.

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