

"the forest dweller" by hermann hesse, essay sample

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In *The Forest Dweller* by Hermann Hesse, the author uses many existentialist themes to authenticate the protagonist's development. Existentialism, which claims that human beings have full responsibility for creating the meaning of their own lives, can be seen given worth when Hesse impedes this search for self actualization with bad faith. Ideals like, Individuality vs Herd/ Society, free will vs responsibility, and the quest for self actualization are all major components of this tale. Fear is also a significant motif within *The Forest Dweller*. Contrary to *The Allegory of The Cave*, where individuals are blinded by their own ignorance and arrogance, in Hesse tale the characters are most kept in the dark by their own fear of the unknown. The story serves as a metaphor for redemption from the restrictive elements of that fear, of which the most confining obstacle is the sanctity of the forest. The tribal nature of Hesse's story allows for the plot to develop while staying true to the most simple and human ideals. The protagonist searches for self actualization within a vacuum that is represented by the forest. This ability of Hesse to isolate the human condition within this controlled environment allows for the protagonist's development to be a very clear and understandable transition. This is very ironic considering how complex many of the concepts are with which Kubu confronts. On top of providing thematic clarity, Hesse's use of the forest as a setting for his story also provides for the adoption of many metaphors within the plot. The metaphor which is easiest to identify can be seen in the tribe's interpretation of the forest.

The forest was their home, refuge, cradle, nest, and grave, and they could not imagine life outside it. They avoided coming too close to its edges, and

whoever, through usual circumstances while hunting or fleeing something, made his way to the edges would tremble with dread later when reporting about the white emptiness outside where the terrifying nothingness glistened in the deadly fire of the sun. (Hesse, p. 186)

Here the narrator equates the mystical relationship the tribe shares with the outskirts of the forest to that which a baby has with birth. The tribe fears the outer regions of the forest, due to their fear of the unknown. The term the narrator uses to signify this fear is *dread*, which is universally understood as a characteristic of existentialism. This dread is so strongly distilled within the hearts of these tribe members it serves as the sole purpose for their adherence to the laws of Dalam, who only holds his high position for being the one who had traveled the furthest near the edge of the forest. The tribe worships and adheres to all of his laws even those which are most harmful to their human nature and conflict with their natural instincts.

When Kubu is first presented as a member of the tribe of forest dwellers, he is already identified as a dissenter from the society, and their cultured fear of Mata Dalam. Kubu's ability to question Dalam's propaganda is the trait that signifies him as the protagonist. He possesses the ability to listen to his natural instincts and question the man made laws that oppose his human nature. His opposition to Mata Dalam can be identified as one of the most core ideals inherent in existentialist theory, which is to oppose the practice of *bad faith*. Existentialists believe that people lie to themselves and create laws or certain cultural or religious practices which coincide with these lies; this leads to them inadvertently negating their own being through an adverse

pattern of behavior. Mata Dalam represents this man made law and practice of bad faith, which Rubu has the insight to question. This conflict between the two only escalates, when Dalam manages to be distracted during one of his detrimental ceremonies. *Kubu and some other young men had shunned this ritual, and they endeavored to convince the young women to resist as well.* Despite Kubu's ability to garner support against this old man, Dalam still manages to maintain significant control over the tribe through fear.

It was when the old man was conducting the new moon ceremony and piercing the left ear of a woman. A bold young man let out a terrible scream while this was happening, and the blind man chanced to stick the thorn into the woman's eye, which fell out of its socket.

This act by Dalam is a heinous and undeniably unjust. At this point where it appears that his power over the tribe will be overthrown, instead, Hesse demonstrates the true hold which bad faith has on the mind's of the people and the reader watches as the tribe allows Dalam to take out another of the girl's eyes. Though Rubu attempts to contests Dalam's authority, it should still be noted that Rubu has doubts, and in his initial confrontation with Dalam he allows dread and fear to overcome him. This can be seen when directly in response to Kubu rushing after Dalam, the old man rises and curses him loud enough to make our hero draw back in fear.

Terrified, Kubu fled, and when he saw that everyone retreated from him, he hid himself far away in a hallow tree trunk and gave himself up for lost (Hesse, pg 189). This anxious demonstration of dread on the behalf of the

protagonist is also a characteristic of the existentialist doctrine in the process towards one's self actualization. Kubu is at first very terrified of the blind elder's reaction to the crime he had committed. This fear eventually fades and Kubu's natural instincts takeover, as shown when the narrator says, *Days and nights he lay there, wavering between mortal terror and spite, uncertain whether the sun itself would break (Hesse, pg189)*. The strength Rubu needs to find faith in himself can be seen when the sun does not break as Hesse metaphorically mentions. When the curse does not befall Rubu and the only thing that does befall him are his hunger pains, he finds the strength need to answer the call of his natural instincts.

After he eats, nourishing his body, the protagonist reflects on his situation in the tribe objectively. He is now able to view the circumstance from an outside perspective. This is represented in the text when the narrator says, *he reflected about everything that had ever aroused his doubts and seemed questionable, especially the priest's drum and his rituals. And the more he thought and the longer he was alone, the clearer he could see. Yes, it was all deceit. Everything had been nothing but lies and deceit (Hesse, p. 190)*.

This great revelation by the protagonist officially marks his point of enlightenment. This is also the knowledge that incites him to return to the village and claim his vengeance against Dalam. Once he murders Dalam, one might recognize this as the moment of redemption for the protagonist, when in fact it is merely the precursor to Hesse's final existentialist metaphor. Still engulfed with the anxiety of never having left the forest, after killing Dalam, and leaving the proof of his deed for the other villagers to find,

Rubu travels to highest mountain in the village that he can find. Despite his fears he climbs to the top and reaches for the rise of the sun, relinquishing himself from all of his prior anxieties.

In sum, *The Forest Dweller* contributes to the long literary tradition of using existentialist themes. It is no different from the *Book of Job*, Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, or the life of Socrates. These themes have long been used to identify with the human experience of self worth, and the trials of existence. Hesse manages to identify the plight of everyman through the concerns of Rubu confined in his forest, and it is relative to the reader because his journey is a human one. In the end, when Rubu finds that he is subject to the power of the sun, it connects him with all other life on earth, as opposed to keeping him isolated. He is redeemed from his former prison and allowed to exist along side all other life earth. He leaves the fantastic and mythical world of his secluded forest and enters the world of the real only to be along side the reader this experience we call life. The most popular ideal of existentialism promoted in the writings of such authors as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, like the validity of existence found through the experience of living is no more clearly represented than in the end of this story. When after overcoming his anxiety, Rubu climbs to the top of the mountain and reaches for the rise of the sun, the fluidity of Hesse's writing allows the reader to be present in the experience, and it becomes undeniably evident we are in an existentialist critique on life.

Work Cited

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Hesse, Hermann. *The Forest Dweller* <http://www.fiu.edu/~ereserve/ba950491.pdf>