

## **Interpreting How Much Land does a Man Need: A Sartrean Existentialist Perspective**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Jean Paul Sartre, one of the key figures in the philosophy of Existentialism, explores man and the world from the perspective of human consciousness and puts forward the concept of subjectivity, believing existence precedes essence. Leo Tolstoy, one of the heavyweights in the literary world, has produced a number of impressive short stories with philosophical wisdom, among which stands How Much Land does a Man Need. Pakhom, the protagonist of the story, totally gripped by his lust for land, meets the end of his existence after making a series of choices. From the perspective of Sartrean existentialism, this paper analyzes the tragic existence of Pakhom and holds that it is Pakhom who should and must bear full responsibility for the destruction of his existence which is resulted from his inner desire on one hand and the state of contradiction and opposition among people on the other.*

**KEY WORDS:** Sartrean Existentialism, subjectivity, existence, *How Much Land does a Man Need*

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As one of the leading figures in 20th-century French philosophy, Jean Paul Sartre has been an advocate of the existentialist literature, which later swept Europe and became a main genre of modern literature. Sartre himself also produced such existentialist works as *Nausea* (1938) and *Being and Nothingness* (1943), in which the former, as his very first novel, reveals the absurdity of the world through Antoine's series of diaries in which he began to doubt his own existence and a sense of nausea attacked him; the latter embodies Sartre's thoughts on the relationship between man and the world, which attracted a large number of readers after the end of World War II in 1945, making existentialism the most influential ideological trend in the 1950s. It is from *Being and Nothingness* that the central claim of existentialism, that is, "existence precedes essence", is originated and this book therefore in some way serves as a manifesto of Sartrean existentialism.

### **Sartrean Existentialism**

Sartre believes that there are Christian existentialists as well as Atheistic existentialists sharing the same roof under the umbrella term existentialism. In spite of this, both hold the belief that existence precedes essence. By “existence precedes essence”, Sartre explained as an atheistic existentialist that “man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself”, such a proposition, to some degree, puts the existence of God and human nature into doubt. Since there is no pre-established essence to shape how man should be like, “man is condemned to be free”. In other words, man is endowed with subjectivity, the freedom to choose what he will be and such a choice can never be avoided. Once he made a conscious decision, he should take full responsibility for his actions as well as the consequence brought about by his actions. In this sense, man is “nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life”. Sartre further pointed out that the aim of existentialism is to “make every man conscious of what he is, and to make him solely responsible for his own existence”.

It can be seen that Sartrean existentialism is at odds with the traditional philosophical view that the property or the concept of a thing is prior to its mere fact of being, that is, existence precedes essence. Therefore, a number of charges are brought against existentialism. Under this circumstance, Sartre composed *Existentialism is a Humanism* in 1946, a work based on his lecture by the same name delivered one year ago, to defend his existentialism against such accusations. On one hand, since man is solely responsible for his existence, there is no excuses or values available to legitimize his actions, which makes existentialism vulnerable to such condemnation for its potential for leading to quietism or inaction, which is refuted by Sartre claiming that the commitment, far from preventing man from acting, is actually “the condition of action itself”. To put it another way, it is man’s conscious awareness of the responsibility must be taken that reminds him of choosing carefully. On the other hand, existentialism is censured for considering man as an isolated being and neglecting the solidarity of humanity, which is regarded by Sartre as a misinterpretation of existentialism itself. It is manifestly demonstrated in his defense that though man is supposed to make his own choice and face whatever consequences arose as a result, such a choice or action is in fact made not only for the individual himself but also for all men as what is quoted from Sartre “in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men”. Since the choice of a single man concerns all mankind, a sense of anguish, abandonment and despair overwhelms every individual, which offers man the possibility of individual choice.

The whole world, in the eyes of atheistic existentialists, is in itself absurd. It is human choices and actions that give it its meaning, which runs counter to the traditional theistic perspective that the purpose of life is to fulfill God’s commandments. Men are thrown

into this chaotic and meaningless world without specific purpose for their existence, a world in Sartrean terms named “Intersubjectivity” where man decides what he is and what others are. Although Sartre denies a pre-determined human nature, he still confirms that there is a universal human condition, that is, “man is bound to be in the world, to work in it, to live out his life in it among others, and, eventually, to die in it”. It seems that for want of God to prescribe a way of life and guide men to live, men are alone in the universe and responsible for imposing values on himself and other objective existence based on his own interpretation of whatever in the world. Such a subjective interpretation to some degree defines and determines what a man will be like in the future, hence no one is born to be coward or heroic and it is his act of giving up or going forward that produces who he is.

Man in such a meaningless world is inevitably associated with others inhabiting the same world, for others serve as the mediation through which one discovers and knows about himself and thus is essential to the existence of an individual. Every man in the universe is endowed with subjectivity and conscious awareness which distinguish him from the objective and material beings and such a consciousness helps man perceive all others and define himself in the presence of others. The existence of others, in a way, more or less may hinder the freedom of decision of another individual for one constructs and fashions a certain image by determining whom he will be like which is “valid for all the other and for the whole era”. Such a sense of commitment requires man to make conscious decisions to maximize his own freedom to live in such an intersubjective world while respecting others’ subjectivity. However, there do exist a group of people standing on the opposite side of the human image, making no contribution to the existence of the others, and this is what Sartre defined in his play *No Exit* (1944) that “hell is other people”, indicating a perpetually struggling relation among men.

Such a conclusion can be drawn that Sartrean existentialism, with what Dostoyevsky wrote “If God does not exist, everything is permissible” as its theoretical basis, declares that man should be defined in relation to his actions and his destiny lies in the hands of himself. If there is one thing that is universal, it must be the universe of human subjectivity, meaning there is no legislator other than the man himself that can make his own choices. In this sense, man is nothing more than the sum of his actions, through which the meaning is imposed on his existence. Such an action manifesting and later deciding who a man is going to be is the result of a series of freely-made choices that is impossible to avoid and the choices made without any support or help not only involve the man himself but also concern all men. In the world of intersubjectivity, the ultimate significance of the action is the quest of freedom itself. However, such a freedom cannot be attained solely by an individual but depends on the freedom of others and the existence of the Other may hinder the freedom of one man if the other does not

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take others' freedom into consideration. Anyway, man himself is condemned to bear the full responsibility for everything he does and every choice he made for his own individuality as well as for all men. Such a full and profound responsibility provokes a sense of anguish which, according to Sartre, serves as "the condition of man's action". With the existence of man in the universe and relationship between man and the world as its core, Sartrean existentialism belongs to the family of humanism in the sense that it confirms individual subjective consciousness to achieve a goal in the form of freedom to define and further realize himself as a true man.

### ***How Much Land does a Man Need by Leo Tolstoy***

Leo Tolstoy, best known for his *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1878), occupies an important position in the literary world. His short stories are overwhelmed by philosophical wisdoms and are always thought-provoking. *How Much Land does a Man Need* is a case in point. Pakhom, the protagonist of the story, was a peasant who, lying over the stove, overheard his wife and sister-in-law argue over the benefits of life as a merchant's wife and that as a peasant. He afterwards confessed that his only grievance was the want of enough land and boasted that "give me enough of that and I'd fear no one—not even the Devil himself", which was taken seriously by the Devil who decided to play a game with him. Shortly afterwards, a few other peasants, in the name of village commune, bought the land from a landlady in separate lots and each got a section which he could afford. A boom in land purchase swept among his neighbors and it seemed that everyone was buying land, which made Pakhom very envious. He was so afraid that his neighbors would buy up all the land and nothing was left for him. Therefore, after conferring with his wife, Pakhom, with great difficulty, managed to scrape together half the money to pay the deposit. Due to the excellent harvest, within a year he had paid off all his debts and became a landowner filled with joy.

Leading a comfortable and happy life, Pakhom gradually became possessive of his land, which put himself in conflict with his neighbors. As a result, one year later, he started selling up all his estate and decided to leave for a new settlement where the land was fertile and allotted without charge as described by a peasant working in Samara. He lived a better life here with plenty of arable lands and pasturage. However, he was not content with that for he had noticed that farmers in the neighborhood with large homesteads were becoming wealthy and tried to buy some freehold land. Soon after, he met a merchant selling the land off very cheaply. After some haggling, he learned that the land in Bashkirs was vast and people there were as stupid as sheep for land could be attained for practically nothing. Having heard that, Pakhom prepared to set off for Bashkir settlement and made up his minds to buy as much land for as low a price as he can negotiate. When the elder of the Bashkirs learned of his purpose, he allowed

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Pakhom to choose his own land, but the land was sold by the day, that is, however much one could walk around in one day would be his. Pakhom readily made an agreement with an elder that he would set out at sunrise and be back at the starting-point by sunset or his money would be forfeited.

Excited and delighted, Pakhom hardly slept that night. At dawn he dozed off and had a strange dream. In the dream, he heard someone laughing and went out to find the Bashkir elder sitting with his back to him laughing, and as he came closer, the man was the merchant who had led him to Bashkirs, and still closer, the merchant turned into the peasant who had introduced Samara to him. When Pakhom took a closer look he saw that it was the Devil himself that was laughing before a dead body which was himself. He woke up in a cold sweat and found that it was already daybreak. So Pakhom got up and called the Bashkirs and its elder to set off with him. They finally came up on to the open steppe just as the sun was rising. Once the starting point was determined, Pakhom set off hastily with a spade, a small bag of bread and a flask of water. He was so intent on occupying more land that he seldom stopped to rest. As he walked forward, he kept looking back at the land he had walked around, filled with joy. When the sun was half way to the horizon, Pakhom realized that it was no good to trying to grab too much, so he decided to turn back. The journey back was hard for he was tired but could not rest or he would never get back by sunset. With all the strength he had left, Pakhom lurched forwards with his full weight and he arrived at the starting-point—and everything suddenly became dark. He dropped dead. His workman dug a grave only six feet from head to heel for him, indicating that six feet of land is exactly what a man needs.

### **Sartrean Existentialism in *How Much Land does a Man Need***

The tragedy of Pakhom in this short story is shocking and impressive on the first reading but there is a trace of philosophical wisdom in it that emerges on closer examination. Therefore, this paper employs Sartre's Existentialism to analyze the existence of Pakhom in the absurd world. The first principle of Sartre's existentialism is "existence precedes essence", that is to say, the existence of the life of an individual is the premise of his essence. Man first exists, then confronts himself, and defines his own essence through conscious action. In this short story, Pakhom is an active subject that exists objectively in the universe, whose existence is independent of anyone's will. The existence of individual life provides the premise for all his activities, meaning the essence is only available when existence is possible. Pakhom, as a physical being, has shaped his own personality through a series of conscious choices and written his own life tragedy. In the process of Pakhom's transformation from peasant to landowner, the fact of his existence does not change, which is not the case for his essence. As Pakhom occupied more and more land, he became more and more greedy and possessive of the land, and this kind of human depravity laid the basic tone of his tragic life.

As a philosophy advocating humanist freedom, existentialism emphasizes that human beings enjoy a kind of inherent freedom, the core of which is human subjectivity. Subjectivity has two levels of meaning. On the one hand, it means that people can freely choose what kind of person they want to be, define themselves through behaviors, and construct the meaning of their existence. On the other hand, it refers to the nature that human beings cannot transcend their subjectivity. That is to say, as long as human beings exist, they must make choices. It is impossible not to make choices, because not making choices is also a choice in a sense. Once the choice is made, people ought to take full responsibility for their choice and its consequences, which is due to the fact that such choices, as the embodiment of human free consciousness, are made by people with conscious awareness, not forced or misled by others. In this sense, Pakhom directs the tragedy of his life single-handedly. Between not buying land and being satisfied with the status quo and buying land to become rich, he chose the latter and embarked on a road of land acquisition. The argument between his wife and his sister-in-law at the beginning of the short story, to some degree, foreshadows his tragic ending. His wife felt that although the life of peasant was poor, it was stable and long without ups and downs, while her sister-in-law argued that town life was rich and colorful, delicate and free. As the area of land under Pakhom's control increased, his life style was to some extent transformed from that of a peasant to that of a merchant. He became worried and obsessed with expanding his fortune, and such a greedy totally controlled him, dominating his choices and determining the course of his life. His tragic end can only and must be borne by him.

However, it should be noted that although Pakhom's tragedy is the result of a series of free choices and actions made and performed by he himself, his choices are not only for himself, but also influenced by others. That is to say, individual choice, while free, is not arbitrary, but a choice based on a range of possibilities, and the choices of others and their consequences provide a potential set of choices for individual choice. In other words, when a person makes a choice for himself, he also makes a choice for others, so he is responsible for himself as well as for all others. When Pakhom faced the choice of whether to buy land, he had clearly known the consequences of two choices, namely, the life would be wealthy if the land was purchased, and the life would still remain poor if the land was not purchased. Others who choose to buy land, when making choices for themselves, inevitably construct an image for the communal people that men should strive to make their lives better. This kind of human condition in construction may indirectly leads Pakhom to make the same choice, but it is still up to Pakhom to decide what kind of action should be taken to approach the constructed image. However, for an image to make a difference, the group which help to construct it needs to realize that he is making choices not only for himself but also for others. However, other people

who chose to purchase land in the story did not realize that their freedom was based on the freedom of others. Therefore, when exercising their right of free choice, they did not take into account the historical situation of others, which hinders the free choice of others. To be specific, it was the fact that everyone was buying land that caused Pakhom to feel anxious, and he realized that if he didn't make the same choice, there would be no land left for him, and he would be eliminated from society. But Pakhom himself did not have the financial foundation to buy the land, therefore he needed to sell his property in order to buy it. From this point of view, the existence of Pakhom loses its authenticity in the sense that he does not exist in accordance with his own free will, but in order to keep up with the steps of other people's choice, which leads to the consequence that his existence will not last long and eventually leads to the end of his own life. This also proves from the side Sartre's famous argument that "others are hell".

The tragedy of Pakhom, from the macro level, is not the tragedy of him alone, but that of the group living in the same absurd world as him, which is the true portrayal of Sartre's "universal human condition". Although Sartre's existentialism denies the existence of universal humanity, it believes that all people in the world share a universal condition of existence: he has to work in it, to live out his life in it among others, and, eventually, to die in it. In this sense, Pakholm was perhaps one of the thousands of men of his time who were enslaved by the land. People in the world are busy in struggling all their lives to occupy a place in the universe. In this process, he needs to make a lot of choices which are seemingly free but in fact not that free for it is not possible to give up choosing and the final direction of one's life is determined by the causality of this series of choices. In this sense, everyone's tragedy is actually caused by the individual himself, and he should and must bear the full responsibility for it. However, from another perspective, the inherent right of free choice limits individual freedom to a certain extent. That is to say, the biggest obstacle of a person is precisely the inability to get rid of freedom, which plunges him into an inauthentic state of being.

In addition to being influenced by the choices of others, such an inauthentic condition of existence is actually the result of the underlying despair and anxiety within the individual, which stem from the fact that the individual has no recourse or access to help in making choices that determine the reality of life, resulting in a feeling of desperation and helplessness. Sartre's existentialism also recognizes such kind of feeling and emphasizes that to overcome the pessimism invited by anxiety and despair, individuals need to act without hope or illusion and do everything in their power to make their own existence and the whole world meaningful. From this point of view, the tragedy of Pakhom is also caused by his own infinite desire for land. After he got his first piece of land, he wanted to get more, moving from Samara to Bashkir in order to get as much land as possible at the lowest price. His greed is the key to the Devil's

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success in the game. The Devil in the story, as the Other in the world of Pakhom, plays an important role in his existence and has a metaphorical significance: In the guise of a peasant, the Devil first persuaded Pakhom to leave Volga for Samara, then lured him to Bashkir in the name of a merchant, where he pretended himself as an elder and sent Pakhom to his grave. Thus, it can be seen that it is the Devil who leads Pakhom all the way to the tragic end. If Sartrean existentialism is employed to analyze the image of the Devil, it can be found that the Devil is actually the incarnation of Pakhom's inner desire, which leads Pakhom to his destruction in the name of a peasant, a merchant as well as an elder. That is to say, at first glance, it is the existence of the Devil, that is, the Other other than Pakhom himself, that causes his tragedy. In fact, it is Pakhom's own inner desire that prompts him to make a choice and leads to his destruction step by step. In this way, the tragedy of Pakhom is precisely because of his illusion and desire, which runs counter to what Sartrean existentialism promoted "act without hope".

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, the following conclusion can be drawn by analyzing Pakhom's existence and life tragedy under the guidance of Sartre's existentialism: First of all, Pakhom, as the sum of his choices and actions, is the director of his own personal tragedy. He is endowed with what existentialists call subjectivity. On one hand, he enjoys the freedom of choosing what he will be, on the other hand, he is unable to transcend his subjectivity. In other words, he has to make choices all the time, which are free but not arbitrary. He makes his choices based on a realm of possibilities provided by the choices of the Other. Although it is not up to Pakhom himself to decide on the potential options, which one he is going to choose is actually the result of his own choices. In this sense, Pakhom must take full responsibility for his choices and for the consequences come along with them.

Secondly, the end of Pakhom's existence is the result of his own desire and the opposition between the Other living in the same absurd world and he himself. On one hand, Pakhom does not limit himself to thinking only about those things that depends on his will, or on the set of probabilities that enable his cation. Instead, he always has fantasies about what life will be like after owning land, hoping that he can become as wealthy as other people. Such actions with hope cause him to generate more and more strong desire, making himself under the control of the Devil, leading to the inauthentic existence, and finally to the end of his existence. On the other hand, in this world full of intersubjectivity, Pakhom and the Other living in the same absurd world are prescribed to implement their own subjectivity, but the freedom between people is mutually contained and determined, which makes people remain in a state of contradiction and opposition, that is, "others are hell". In the story, everyone is eager to



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acquire land in order to control or even subjugate everyone other than himself, and Pakhom is no exception. The existence of the Other restricts the freedom of Pakhom, and Pakhom, to some degree, also obstructs the freedom of the Other when the condition of his life has transformed from being a peasant to being a landowner, which brings about a devastating end to Pakhom's life.

Finally, Pakhom's tragedy is not only his personal tragedy, but also the tragedy of the whole human being, which reflects Sartre's "a universal human condition", that is, although the necessity for a man to be in the world varies, "everyone needs to work in it, live out his life in it among others, and, eventually, to die in it". In other words, man, to begin with, is nothing and he only becomes something after making a series of choices, meaning man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. Therefore, he must actively engage himself into various enterprises and struggle to make a living in the world so as to make his existence more meaningful until death puts an end to it. This is all about what the tragic life of Pakhom has reflected in terms of the universal existential condition of whole human race.

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