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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Existentialism in Philip Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

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**ABSTRACT**

This study scrutinizes existential themes in Philip Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) that focus on the impotence of man and his suffering, living in a world devoid of apprehension. The study argues that Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* presents an existential philosophy as it conglomerates different important canons of existentialism, including individualism, importance of choice, absurdity, despair, alienation, death, individual freedom, and the perception that existence precedes essence. The methodology applied in this study is qualitative-descriptive. The study is significant as it links literature with philosophy. The purpose of the study is to reveal prominent configurations of existentialism in Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* that are omnipresent across its tapestry. As for the findings, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* involves an intricate mesh of the philosophical gospels of existentialism that raise questions about existence and the human condition.

**KEYWORDS**

Existentialism, Absurdity, Individualism, Death, Despair, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

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### 1. Introduction

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* has profuse existential features. Existential percepts focus on gloominess and a profound sense of anguish. The literature which deals with man's distress, exasperation, futility, solitude, and forlornness following WWII is said to be existential (Kumar Meena, 2022, p.89). Existentialism accentuates that the human condition is inextricably associated with his or her individualization and subjective acuity. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is important as it applies the philosophical grounds of Existentialism. Personal responsibility, self-determination, agitation, glumness, and estrangement are prevailing themes that are probed in existentialism (Philology, n.d.).

In *Do Androids*, Dick has canvassed the drapery between literary and philosophical studies. In the novel, philosophy and literature are well-symmetrical. While philosophy provides imperishable themes and queries that brought up anew from generation to generation, literature provides lurid incarnations of the piquancy of philosophical conjectures.

From the theories of Kierkegaard and Sartre within the existentialist philosophy, this study examines Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Anticipating to make a further contribution, the study proposes exhilarating and insightful ideas in the aesthetics of philosophy, criticism, and literature. The objective of the study is to provide the important tropes of existentialism as reflected in Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*.

The novel is a penetrating diagnosis of the human existence, and it is an erudite and provocative inquisition of the human condition. The novel seeks to ask important questions, to pin down and delineate deeper truths, to create some kind of symmetry from the confusion of the world. As a philosophical novel, *Do Androids* is an epitome of imagination cemented together with reasoning.

Review of Related Literature:

Existentialism appeared in the mid-19th century and flourished in late 20th century. The peculiarities of existentialism are intertwined with the essence of human existence (Dia, n.d). The main principle of existentialism is based on the philosophy that meaning in life is constructed by humans. In this study, it is discussed that Deckard, the protagonist, creates a meaning and a purpose for himself. Jean-Paul Sartre introduced the tenets of Existentialism. Responsibility and freedom are two concepts that are pivotal to his philosophy (Sartre, 1957). Responsibility cannot be severed from freedom according to Sartre's existential philosophy. Sartre bestows greater agency in the hands of man. One of Sartre's main philosophical percepts is that existence precedes essence (Sartre, 2007, p. 21). Sartre believes that the individual has the freedom to decide and select his/her actions, and it is through those actions that an individual's essence is created and developed. This study illuminates how Deckard's essence is formed after creating a purpose and leading a life full of empathy.

There are different articles and reviews that have discussed *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* In a review entitled "Absurdity at its Finest: A Review of do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" (2018), it is stated that the novel is superficially a fragmented, awkwardly-paced; however, it underneath addresses the most important questions humans face. Actually, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* presents a plethora of issues that human beings always contemplate although it seems fragmented. In another review entitled "The Lasting Brilliance of *Do Androids dream of Electric Sheep?*" (2018), it is mentioned that although the genre of the novel appears to be science fiction, Dick succeeds to paint a grim and fantastically realistic portrait of a futuristic earth. The novel analyzed in this study offers a grim critique of technology, concentrating on its future hazards and influence on society. In a research article entitled "*Do Androids Dream of Black Sheep?* Reading Race into Philip K. Dick" (2021), the novel is described as multifarious that explores a plenitude of subjects such as humanity, race, and consciousness. *Do Androids* tackles racism, ferocity, and the degradation of an entire class of people. In the novel, the racial experience is presented in Mars, where robots have been enslaved. In a research article entitled "Segregating the Chickenheads: Philip Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and the Post/humanism of the American Eugenics Movement" (2013), the writer states that Dick's novel rebukes the eugenics proponents that promote for expunging the handicaps, minimizing ethnic diversity, and hindering compassion. This study shows how the Chickenheads are presented in the novel as ostracized by other humans, prevented from abandoning the polluted earth, and generally demeaned.

Discussion

One of the quintessential gospels of existentialism is the concentration on individualism. The essence of individualism is encompassed in the deep self introspection and realization of Deckard, the main character of the novel. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre famously epitomized the conception that "existence precedes essence," indicating that human beings are first placed in the world without purpose, and it is by their choices that they find a purpose and create meaning (p.292). The conception that "existence precedes essence" is blended into the novel. When closely correlated with Sartre's phrase "existence before essence," we see that the beginning point and the closing point are not the same for Deckard in *Do Androids*. Deckard exists throughout the period of the novel that takes place post World War Terminus, yet the meaning of his existence switches and twists throughout the novel. Deckard creates a purpose for his existence, which is empathy; Deckard transforms from being non empathetic to empathetic in the span of the novel. Although he accepts his job as a bounty hunter to collect a large sum of money to buy a real sheep, he becomes gradually incapable to surrender that his job demands him to kill androids even if they are nonhumans: "I've begun to empathize with androids, and look what that means. You said it this morning yourself. Those poor andys. So you know what I'm talking about. That's why I bought the goat" (p.78). In the novel, Deckard refuses his essence that is devoid of empathy and decides to construct a new essence prevailed with empathy. Deckard has become a self. Deckard culminates his individualism when he decides to have a real sheep and not follow the herd by having a fake one. John Isidore is also a canonical portrayal of individualism. Individualism considers every human being as autonomous and self-governing who has canonical right to his own life. Isidore takes his own decision in the android society as a reaction against a dictated reality. Isidore takes a decision to shelter all the escaped androids, and he lets them stay with him: "'A-a-all of you" (p.72). Kierkegaard (2000) describes human beings as decision-makers. Actualizing individualism, John Isidore and Deckard challenge being fully conformist. The principle of humanity is an important moral which justifiably eclipse other considerations. Although the novel depicts egoism and individualism but promotes the vehement belief that individuals are each a single thread in the web of society. For example, Iran, Deckard's wife, accentuates the idea that the solidarity people feel through Mercerism has a higher worth than the suffering they face: "How much better we are . . . when we're with Mercer. Despite the pain. Physical pain but spiritually together; I felt everyone else" (p. 173).

*Underlying the predicament of existence is the perturbation between morality and the onslaught of capitalism and self-interest.* The capitalist economy has changed community structures, and has geared cultural paradigms and shaken the established ethical framework, leaving individuals contending with a sense of disconnection and befuddlement (*Existentialist Literature (Concepts & Beliefs)*, 2024). The debatable morality of killing androids is probed here. They are robots, but they are also extant, sentient entities. The main theme of the novel is that man succeeds to invent a "menial" model of human beings as slaves

to exploit them. That's where the existential and ontological aspect touches down: what principally humanizes us and what differentiates human beings from androids? (Wu, 2012). According to the rationale behind the novel, it's empathy. The androids can't socialize and empathize and are accordingly considered inferior. However, not all human beings feel pity and mercy, or at least they don't act accordingly. Dick's concentration is on how human being themselves as hunters become emotionless as they are on their duty. The parallels suggested by Dick between humans and androids provides the rationales for the consideration of human life: Deckard thinks that "so much for the distinction between authentic living humans and humanoid constructs. In that elevator at the museum, he said to himself, I rode down with two creatures, one human, the other android ... and my feelings were the reverse of those intended. Of those I'm accustomed to feel – am required to feel" (113-14). In an article entitled "Representation of Social Groups in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*" (2018), it is stated that the novel does not dispute the dehumanizing scenarios of technology; it demonstrates that the androids help human beings to go back to the humanity that was deserted instead of self-absorbed and egoistic individualism (UK Essays, 2018.)

Absurdity, which is another facet of existentialism, constitutes an important aspect in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* In a world bereft of purpose, human existence comes to be absurd, featured by ultimate uncertainty. This realization of the uncertainty can arouse feelings of nihilism and despondency (Camus, 1955, p. 28). The novel blurs the line between reality and delusion. Accordingly, it becomes almost inconceivable to decide which parts of the novel are quite real, and which parts are figments of delusion. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* brings forth a sense of uncertainty, and this is the core of absurdity. Dick not only breathes life into his human and non-human characters; he exceeds imagination by creating multiple lives for his characters knitting them all together into an intricate strand that pulls each character into a distorted labyrinth of uncertainty. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is a contradiction about a contradiction. For example, Deckard is doubtful about the identity of Luba Lyft. He is confused whether she is android or a real human being: "An android, he said, doesn't care what happens to any other android" (p.45). At the same time, she thinks that Deckard is an android not a human: "You're not human. No more than I am: you're an android, too" (p.60). *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is steeped in false reality, and that contributes to the absurdity of the novel. Deckard ephemerally makes the reader consider him to be an android that has been germinated with an artificial memory rather than a human memory. Isidore is a chickenhead because his mental abilities are badly affected by the radioactive dust. So, he moves hither and thither of reality. Deckard believes in Mercer, who pulls the reader into a mythical state, an illusory reality (p.106).

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* assumes that essence is essentially haphazard. The novel has no fixed meaning, so when we read, we are inclined to misconstrue. It is a mirror of existential worries and trepidations about existence. The novel explores the fundamental premise of existentialism, which is the interminable instability of the existence and the vanity of any attempt to find meaning. In the novel, "kipple" symbolizes meaninglessness: "Kipple is useless objects, like junk mail or match folders after you use the last match or gum wrappers or yesterday's homeopape" (p.30). Kipple denotes the crack-up of the signifier and signified and that symbols are deconstructed of their meaning.

Despair, which is a main tenet of existentialism, is a major theme in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* In the novel, Deckard finds himself in an intricate and often conflicting world, in which he feels in a dilemma between being empathetic and non-empathetic. He feels suffocated by the menaces beyond his control or even consciousness, so despair is a prevalent emotion. The moral conundrum revolving around the loss of humanity contributes to a sense of forlornness, reverberating existential themes of despair. During the course of the novel, the earth is portrayed as demising. Few people are still alive encountering absurdity and senselessness that culminates in despair. This is one of the causes why everyone has an empathy device, a type of simulated reality device that they can sign in to feel connected with other. So, these efforts might themselves be inefficacious. In an increasingly splintered and pulverized world, individuals experience an esoteric disjuncture from themselves, others, and the world at large. Gloominess prevail the novel. The despair and despondence of the existence on earth for those who could not travel to Mars is very discernible. The earth is full of brutality. The earth, deserted and encumbered under the radioactive dust, reflects the spiritual void and desolation of its inhabitants: "So I put it on my schedule for twice a month; I think that's a reasonable amount of time to feel hopeless about everything, about staying here on Earth after everybody who's small has emigrated, don't you think?" (p.4).

Through the depiction of alienation, the author foregrounds the existentialist notion of individual isolation. The theme of alienation prevails the novel, reflecting the deep sense of isolation that individuals experience in present-day society. In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* characters wrestle with feelings of alienation and isolation, longing for genuine connections amidst a world marked by disconnection and estrangement. The novel scouts alienation by portraying characters who are separated from one another in spite of family ties or close daily vicinity. Although Deckard and Iran are married, and they live together, they feel lonely and alienated from each other. Deckard also feels estranged from himself, struggling to build meaningful relationships in an increasingly fragmentary and pulverized world: "But what I've done, he thought; that's become alien to me. In fact, everything about me has become unnatural; I've become an unnatural self" (p.104). According to Djorovic (2022), the characters in the novel,

such as Deckard, Iran, and Isidore, feel alienated. Isidore lives alone in his apartment that is located in a desolate building. He is alienated from people on earth because he is labeled as a 'chickenhead', which renders him to be inferior. Moreover, alienation in the novel reflects the cataclysmic effects of technology. Many people find themselves ripped off from human connections and placed into an alien and emotionless world that has become full of non-human androids: "In connection with this a weapon of war, the Synthetic Freedom Fighter, had been modified; able to function on an *alien* world the humanoid robot - strictly speaking, the organic android - had become the mobile donkey engine of the colonization program" (p.8).

In Existential thought, death is an essential and inevitable side of human existence. Dick constructs a world that is in decay because of the airborne radioactivity that encircles the world. Kierkegaard and Heidegger believe that each individual is aware of his or her own death (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 151; Heidegger, 1927 [1992], p. 321, 338). Deckard is close to death throughout the novel, as it is a consequence to his choice of living on earth, and he does not hide his fear of death (Dick, p. 8). Yet, Dick points out that the world has a way of living, rejuvenating, and reproducing itself through the decay (GradeSaver, 2019). The novel emphasizes "mercerism" by which humans get merged with Wilbur Mercer, who is thrown with stones by bystanders till death, and then he comes back to life again (GradeSaver, 2019). The allusion to the crucifixion and Jesus leads the reader to meditate the human existence. Death is not the twilight of existence. Death is a means of coming into existence in a new form. Because death befalls upon the body and not the soul, so soul always marches on. The cycle of life and death is everlasting with no end: "At the top of the hill he's struck down; he sinks into the tomb world but then he rises inevitably. And us with him. So we're eternal, too" (p.34).

## Conclusion

Existentialist literature functions as a guide, urging readers to nurture self-awareness, defy societal paradigms, and lead a path of self-knowledge (*Existentialist Literature (Concepts & Beliefs)*, 2024). Through the exploration of the human condition, existentialist authors call readers to meditate and ponder their existence, put into question societal norms, and seek their own distinctive route to self-realization. The existential themes in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* have a deep impact on the readers' perception, urging them to contemplate their own existence. By raising key questions about identity, empathy, and the search for meaning, the novel engages readers on a rational and cathartic level. This engagement is a verification of the power of existential narrative, which challenges readers to ponder their position in the world and the options that define them.

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* captures the essence of existentialism by introducing themes of search for meaning and individualism. Deckard's existential predicament demonstrates the existential characteristics of the ambiguity and uncertainty of the life's meaning. The novel offers an enchanting inspection of the human condition, scrutinizing themes of choice, freedom, absurdity, and despair. Through the prism of existentialist philosophy, the author has crafted a novel that questions the very essence of existence.

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