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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Life Crisis and Existentialism
in
Three Dramatic Works

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of
English and Comparative Literature
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

Mohga Hassib

Under the supervision of
Dr. William Melaney

May 2014

The American University in Cairo

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a new approach to the existential dilemma of the self in crisis as it emerges in three modern plays. While scrutinizing how a person can remain human in a universe filled with obstacles, I show that the idea of the life crisis provides the most suitable approach to that predicament. The idea of the life crisis allows for a comprehensive approach when applied to the various quandaries that situate the shifting idea of freedom. In this thesis, the philosophical ideas of Soren Kierkegaard, John-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus will be taken up to demonstrate the role of the life crisis in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, and Tawfiq al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber*. In focusing on the life crisis as it emerges in modern drama, I demonstrate how human identity can be better understood--and how it either becomes coherent or dissolves.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1	8
Chapter 2	20
Chapter 3	36
Conclusion	54
Notes	58
Works Cited	60

Introduction: Existentialism and Literature

Human beings are born to fight two constrictive forces, secular and metaphysical; the former pertains to their society, whereas the latter pertains to their fate. How can human beings shape their identity and future to their personal liking in an environment that is filled with impediments? Man's life becomes ironic when his hopes and dreams are in strong confrontation with his fate. These themes have been central to the works of various existentialist authors. Existentialism does not rigidly follow the rules of a certain tradition; it is precisely the anti-tradition of all philosophies (Kaufmann 11). The term existentialism, although loosely defined, highlights the formulation of human identity in its pursuit of freedom. It has been ascribed to its founders in the twentieth century, some of whom reject the label. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80) and Albert Camus (1913-60) are existentialist authors and philosophers. All three have written prolifically, however differently, about the place of man in his society and environment. These authors examine the difference between the question of being—What does it mean to be human?—and the question of living—How should humans interact with their society?

Soren Kierkegaard is sometimes called “the father of existentialism” (Anderson 6). He has written extensively about what it means to be human, and pursues this theme in his moving essay, *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress* (1848). In this essay, Kierkegaard examines how one can remain human while working in a marginalized profession that entails adopting various personae. Although he is a religious existentialist, he writes about aesthetics “to show that the writer was not an esthetic author who in the course of time grew older and for that reason became religious” (Hong and Hong xvi). On the contrary, he wishes to examine how anxiety and restlessness in acting bring forth the question of identity. He mentions that the

actress's first step in evolution involves a confrontation with anxiety. This anxiety shows how a sense of weight and adversity in life transform the actress's inner being. Kierkegaard examines the way that an actress, who works in a demoted sector in society, undergoes a kind of metamorphosis, allowing her to grow and master her craft. The metamorphosis of the actress occurs over a large span of time; it is the result of a series of life crises that stem from her surrounding environment. Thus, the actress's confrontation with life crises ought to give meaning to her life and allow her to come into her own being.

Jean-Paul Sartre's concern with the human condition places him in the center of the existentialist movement. Existentialism for him is not merely a philosophy; it is also a way of life. In his well-known essay, "Existentialism Is a Humanism" (1946), Sartre writes that "existence comes before essence" and asserts in this way that human destiny is shaped by human beings themselves. Here Sartre expounds on how human beings define themselves and their values through their actions, thus placing responsibility for the future on men themselves. Sartre highlights the "abandonment" of God, thus attributing human responsibility to human beings. Human beings will have to find values and morality by formulating choices in life. Man is free to be whatever he wishes to become. However, human beings are aware that their actions impact each other; this contributes to a sense of "anguish" and may result in an escape from freedom. Due to the state of "anguish" that haunts us, we have to accept that there will always be uncertainty. This sense of uncertainty should not prevent us from taking action; one should not act in "despair" as though there is no hope; we should not base our actions solely on what others might think of us. We must not refrain from acting simply because there are factors outside our control; on the contrary, human actions are what define us.

Albert Camus's close relationship with Sartre from 1943 to 1951 has placed him among the existentialists despite his rejection of the label. His volume of essays, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), is a clear examination of the painful reality of the human condition as the pursuit of meaning in a meaningless universe (Anderson 54). In this book, Camus establishes his theory of the absurd. Humans, like Sisyphus, toil repetitively at their daily tasks to reach nothing but their imminent death. As a non-religious philosopher, Camus questions traditional conceptions of God. He asserts the absurdity of the universe in the sense that it has no evident meaning and holds that man's tragedy is to pursue the meaning of life. The confrontation between man's passion for the meaning of life and the silence of his universe is what gives rise to the Absurd. Camus then expounds on the question of suicide. If death is inevitable and the universe is always silent, should we give up hope and commit "philosophical suicide" or assert that we are condemned to an "absurd existence"? Camus's answer is that man should revolt against the silence of the universe and continue to assert the dignity of human existence. In this way, man can affirm his identity as an "absurd hero" and obtain "absurd freedom."

Theatre acts as a powerful medium when it provides a visual analog of the real world in a limited time frame. Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), and Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987) are existential dramatists with a passion for experimentation who reject the conventions of previous literature. All three authors are concerned with the place of the human being in society as well as the need for a new form of theatre. The three authors have revived the theatre from its abysmal state and transformed it into an intellectual place. All three have used theatre as a medium for change and as a tool for expressing genuine thought. In this thesis, I intend to adapt key philosophical works to read the existential plays of all three authors. This study does not merely examine existentialism as a mode of writing. Existentialism is shown to be

concerned with the dilemma of pursuing various goals in different social contexts. I will examine how a life crisis differently unfolds in three dramatic works, namely, Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1896), Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890) and Tawfiq al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber* (1962).

In following the protagonist's journey, I will also examine how the actions that pertain to each life crisis either foreground or disintegrate a specific identity. Although each play belongs to a different culture and was not directly influenced by the other ones, all of them offer literary representations of a peculiar culture in time. Each character has human qualities and traits that reflect the surrounding reality. These plays give us different perspectives on how repressive social norms have completely destroyed the sense of individual identity and have created a false sense of happiness in which characters desperately try to find their way. In each play, the protagonist develops a unique strategy for defying the limitations of life and the constrictions of society.

Chekhov's *The Seagull* is a play in four acts that centers on creativity. The play opens with the presence of performing and intellectual artists who reside under one roof in a dreary provincial town in Russia. Both Arkadin (actress) and Trigorin (writer) are famous and established artists who inspire Nina and Treplev to achieve stardom. This play focuses on Nina, an ambitious actress who breaks away from her restrictive family to pursue her dream. As Nina pursues her calling, she stumbles upon life's adversities that almost break her apart. However, Nina emerges from these challenges as a stronger person who finds meaning in life and becomes a better actress with a brighter future than what appears to be in store for her early idol, Arkadin.

Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* is a play that satirizes bourgeois society. Hedda is a member of the aristocratic society who marries below her social class and "dance[s] herself out" by being too

selective. Hedda struggles between maintaining her identity as General Gabler's daughter—which involves a sense of social decorum that is peculiar to this position—and fulfilling her unusual notion of freedom. In her attempt to control the fate of those around her and to manipulate their decisions, Hedda brings about her own ruin. Her uncanny drive for control leads to a loss of control, so that she murders her unborn child and herself.

Al-Hakim's play *The Tree Climber* opens with an old married couple who live in a world of illusion. Bahadir Effendi, a retired train inspector, finds himself in a whirlpool of problems when his wife, Behana, disappears. Bahadir has always been preoccupied with his Orange Tree, which he believes has the answer to everything. His routine is interrupted with his wife's disappearance. Bahadir is soon detained and falsely accused of murdering his wife. Behana later makes her miraculous reappearance and refuses to mention her whereabouts during her absence to her husband. Bahadir's confrontation with his wife results in her murder at his own hands, and his tragic end.

In Chapter One, I will examine the life of Nina Zarechny in Chekhov's *The Seagull* from the standpoint of Kierkegaard's essay, *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. I will examine Nina's struggle to realize her dream as well as her spiritual struggle in her identification with the seagull. I will reflect on how Nina's struggle becomes a gateway to her self-realization and growing potential through time. As Kierkegaard suggests, a life crisis allows the actress to become fully immersed in the words reprised on stage, because she is able to represent a constructed reality that relates to her own experiences. Thus, Nina's identity is formulated and achieved through her life crisis.

Chapter Two will focus on the psychologically complex character of Ibsen's play, *Hedda Gabler*. I will examine Hedda's journey through the lens of Sartre's essay, "Existentialism Is a

Humanism.” Hedda Gabler is a complicated character but a coward in action. She is torn between the poles of social expectations and individual freedom. Hedda’s character emerges in the love triangle that includes George Tesman and Eilert Lovborg. This triangle falls apart when the repressive figure of Judge Brack tries to reconstitute it. In examining Hedda’s journey and crisis, I will explain how her “anguish” concerning a possible scandal results in actions that Sartre enunciates as “despair.” Hedda’s wavering identity between two selves and obsession with her own destiny swirls her life out of control. I will reflect on how Hedda’s actions—while expressing a twisted idea of “good faith”—allow her identity and physical self to disintegrate but permit her to triumph symbolically over Judge Brack.

Chapter Three will examine the life of a train inspector facing multiple crises in al-Hakim’s play, *The Tree Climber*, through Camus’s absurdist perspective as expressed in the essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus.” The identity of Bahadir Effendi, the train inspector, undergoes two transformations. He first asserts his identity for a brief moment as an absurd hero, and then disintegrates in accepting to be sentenced to death. The protagonist cannot plan his future, despite his attempts to do so, because his future is already preordained. What the author tries to do is make sure that the protagonist does not steer off track in order to show how he can avert disaster in following his dreams. I will examine the way the protagonist fails to discover the meaning of life and brings about his own demise. I will reflect on how the life crisis of Bahadir Effendi culminates in the loss of spiritual and physical identity, and thus fulfills Camus’s definition of suicide.

In short, on the basis of this research, I hope to adapt various existential theories to the readings of three different plays to help demonstrate that the life crisis is not merely important to

philosophy but allows us to develop a new understanding of the human will and the quest for personal identity.

1. Chekhov and Kierkegaard

In his long essay entitled, *The Crisis and A Crisis in The Life of an Actress*, Soren Kierkegaard writes: “Over the years the metamorphosis of potentiation will stand in an ever more intensive relation to the same idea, which, note well, esthetically understood, is the idea of femininity *sensu eminentissimo* [in the most eminent sense]” (324). The idea of a theater actress undergoing a “metamorphosis” in the journey of life centrally informs the argument of his essay. Nina Zarechny is an aspiring theatre actress in *The Seagull*. However, Nina has to defy her parents to realize her dream. In her journey to stardom, she stumbles upon life’s adversities and is disowned by her parents and abandoned by the man she loves. This chapter will examine Nina’s journey of self-identification through art and her spiritual struggle embodied in her self-identification with the seagull. The seagull is shot and killed, then stuffed and hung on a wall. Nina continues to struggle with her identity until she finally asserts her being. Her desire to become an actress, a performing artist, is examined through Kierkegaard’s essay.

Some literary critics, such as Virginia Scott, have tried to reduce the character of Nina to a young version of the provincial actress, Irina Arkadin, and argue that her life can be understood on this basis. I disagree and argue that such an interpretation fails to acknowledge the deeper side of Nina’s development. Kierkegaard highlights how a life crisis allows the actress to assert her identity and her perfectibility in time. Thus, I contend that Nina’s identity does not disintegrate but becomes more complex through forbearance, acceptance and perseverance.

Scott mentions in her essay, “Life in Art: A Reading of The Seagull,” that identity in literature is determined through the role or profession taken on by the character in society (358). Scott sees Nina as lacking identity at the beginning of the play as she yet attempts to break from her parents’ leash to visit the lake house of Sorin’s estate (358). Sorin’s estate is resided in by

performing and creative artists. Nina wishes to belong to that portion of society but is strongly prohibited by her parents. She says: “My father and stepmother won’t let me come here. This place is wildly bohemian according to them, and they’re afraid of me going on the stage” (Chekhov, Act 1, 71). She sneaks out of her home to perform in Treplev’s play, not out of love and support for Treplev, but to be noticed by the famous writer, Trigorin, and the famous actress, Irina (Scott 360). The performing arts world is surrounded by preconceived notions that are frowned upon by the elderly and found attractive by the youngsters. Nina in the beginning is seen as a young character who is a “non-entity” (Scott 358). She is fascinated by fame and she looks at others with envy. She tells Polina: “Fancy saying no to a famous actress like Miss Arkadin. Her slightest wish, her merest whim—surely they’re more important than your entire farm” (Chekhov, Act 2, 86). Irina Arkadin is a famous theatre actress whom Nina idealizes and aspires to emulate.

Kierkegaard commences *The Crisis* by shedding light on the deceptive appearance surrounding the life of an actress. He mentions how people perceive an actress’s life to be glamorous and enchanting, while almost excluding from their memory the hardships that the actress may have had to endure (303). This is precisely the perception Nina has of famous people: “I thought famous people were proud and standoffish . . . they despised the common herd . . . they sort of used their glamour and brilliance to take revenge on people for making so much fuss over birth and wealth. But here they are crying, fishing, playing cards, laughing and losing their tempers like anyone else” (Chekhov, Act 2, 87). This clearly indicates that Nina is gullible and inexperienced.

Nina remains unaltered by life’s adversities in the first two acts in *The Seagull*. She is lucid in her inability to appreciate the lines of Treplev’s play. She tells him: “[Y]our play’s hard

to act, there are no living people in it” and “I think a play really needs a love interest” (Chekhov, Act 1, 72). However, her inability to work convincingly with the lines she articulates does not deem her a bad actress. Two critics, Scott and Bonyadi, think that Nina’s future is foreshadowed in Arkadin’s present. Both Nina and Arkadin wonder why Treplev chooses not to show an ordinary play and to introduce a new form of art (Bonyadi 155). Scott also claims that Nina, “like Arkadin, is attracted to the trappings of theatrical life” (360). But Kierkegaard might consider Nina at this stage to be a better actress than Arkadin, even though she has a long path to travel to reach artistic maturity. One must look at the motives of Nina’s behavior to understand her; she does not possess much talent in the beginning yet desires fame and expresses this desire several times (Chances 27). She pushes away Treplev, who loves her but is not famous, and pursues Trigorin, despite the age difference, because she covets his established name. She is well on her way to becoming an actress and is miserably struggling to achieve dramatic success (Chances 27).

Certainly, prior to Nina’s performance of Treplev’s play, we see her as anxious and nervous. Treplev: “Nervous?” Nina: “Yes, terribly. I don’t mind your mother, I’m not afraid of her, but Trigorin’s here. To have him in the audience – I’m just a bundle of nerves. A famous writer!” (Chekhov, Act 1, 72). Even Chekhov, in speaking to the actress who plays Nina in the Alexandrinsky Theatre, describes Nina in this way: “Nina is a young girl who finds herself for the first time on stage, who suffers from stage fright and is very nervous” (Magarshack 191). Kierkegaard mentions that “[o]ne becomes light by means of weight; one soars high and free by means of a pressure” and that “the highest soaring flight of hope is precisely by means of hardship and the pressure of adversity” (312). In her youthful and naïve years, Nina’s weight would be that of a being on stage who feels all the eyes of famous and more accomplished artists

falling upon her and judging her performance. Scott argues that “[n]owhere does the play lead us to conclude that the nature of the artist’s private experience has any necessary correlation with the quality of art achieved,” and that Treplev’s praise of her acting is biased because he is in love with her (361). It would seem, if we follow Scott, that there is a lack of connection between subjectivity and artistic merit.

However, Kierkegaard mentions that the anxiety possessed by the actress is an indication that she is a good actress, because the weight of the stage produces more anxiety and a counter thrust: “[The actress] is in her element in the tension of the stage The very weight gives her lightness, and the pressure gives her the soaring flight” (312). Thus her anxiety is transformed into lightness and her acting is quiet admirable. More so to Nina’s credit, Irina, the experienced and jealous actress, comments on Nina’s acting: “I’m sure you have a real gift Your duty is to go on the stage” (Chekhov, Act 1, 77). Nonetheless, Kierkegaard explains that “it is not true that a woman becomes an actress in her eighteenth year; if she becomes that at all, she becomes that rather in her thirtieth year or later” (306). Thus, Nina possesses talent but has a long road ahead of her.

Nina, young as she is, already faces a dilemma. She is an aspiring actress who performs in stealth despite her parent’s wishes. We also learn through Irina that Nina’s “mother left all her enormous fortune to her father when she died . . . and now the child has nothing because her father’s going to leave everything to his second wife” (Chekhov, Act 1, 79). This means that by challenging her parents’ wishes, she is at risk of being disowned and becoming destitute. But Nina possesses what Kierkegaard calls “good fortune.” Kierkegaard mentions that a young actress in her late adolescence possesses something that “omnipotently asserts itself and is unconditionally obeyed” (307-308). That is “good fortune,” which shines through her

“youthfulness” and “restlessness,” is simply “nothing else than a happy, innocent mind’s joyful, triumphant awareness of its indescribable good fortune” (308-309). Nina’s “good fortune,” “youthfulness,” naivety and talent further her crisis.

Nina is lured by Trigorin’s fame—since he is the much older and famous writer. Her curiosity about fame sets the scene for her life crisis. She asks Trigorin: “How does it feel? What’s the sensation, being a celebrity?” (Chekhov, Act 2, 88). Her head is so caught up in the clouds that she says “What a wonderful world. If only you knew how I envy you ... you’re one in a million – have fascinating, brilliant lives full of meaning” (Chekhov, Act 2, 88). This reflects Nina’s fascination with Trigorin’s intellect and fame, which leads to an affair with the famous writer, who abandons her after their child is dead (Bonyadi 155). One wonders whether she only has an affair because of the doors that could have opened to her being Trigorin’s companion, or whether she has been truly in love with him and becomes a victim of her own fascination with fame. In Act 2, while Trigorin and Nina are discussing the life of an artist, Nina’s crisis is underway as she engages in a conversation with Trigorin without her realizing it (Oatley 333). Trigorin’s discussion of how dull and devoid of pleasure an artist’s life is makes it attractive to Nina: “The principal suggestion is the opposite of what his words say. By being derogatory about the artistic life, Trigorin invites Nina to join him in it” (331). The idea of suffering for greatness is appealing to Nina (332).

Nina’s fate is thus foreshadowed twice in the play. This first occurs when Nina tells Trigorin:

If I was lucky enough to be a writer or an actress, I wouldn’t mind my family and friends disliking me, or being poor and disappointed I’d suffer, being dissatisfied with myself and knowing how imperfect I was. But I should insist on being a real celebrity, with all the tumult and shouting that go with it. (Chekhov, Act 2, 91)

Nina's dreams are those of becoming an actress, an occupation which defies social conformity. She is willing to go to incredible lengths to realize her dreams and distance herself from her monotonous life (Bonyadi 155). The play suggests that dreams are not always fulfilled (through the example of Treplev, who wants to be a famous dramatist); however, it also presents a correct way of living, which is inverted in Nina's embrace of life's calamities and fervid perseverance (155). We learn from Treplev that "she ran away from home and had an affair with Trigorin" (Chekhov, Act 4, 106). We also learn that "[h]er father and stepmother will have nothing to do with her, they've posted look-outs everywhere to stop her even going near the place" (Chekhov, Act 4, 107).

Nina's fate is also foreshadowed for the second time when Trigorin witnesses the dead seagull and responds in saying, "An idea for a plot A plot for a short story. A young girl like you has lived all her life by a lake. Like a seagull, she loves the lake, and, she's happy and free like a seagull. But a man happens to come along and wrecks her life for want of anything better to do. As happened to this seagull" (Chekhov, Act 2, 91). But Nina is neither happy nor free. Nina yearns to escape from her dull and dreary life in the provincial town; she is restrained by her parents, but instead of escaping from her home, she is more likely escaping from herself; she is desperate (Freeborn 83). When Nina pauses over Trigorin's idea of a story, she momentarily identifies herself with the seagull, and her shudder is her inability to tolerate that premonition (Magarshack 190). Trigorin's idea for a story is symbolic of Nina's fate. It is the beginning of her life crisis. He will become a key element in her misfortune. The audience is unaware whether Trigorin transforms this idea into a story or not; however, in Act Four, we learn that Nina has identified with the seagull of Trigorin's narrative (Scott 366). She clearly likened herself to a seagull when she was telling Treplev that "something seems to lure me to this lake like a

seagull” (Chekhov, Act 1, 71). When she left with Trigorin to Moscow, we learn that “she was deeply unhappy . . . she used to sign herself ‘Seagull’ . . . she kept calling herself seagull in her letters” (Chekhov, Act 4, 106).

The seagull carries images of being free and restless, while the bird is a scavenger (Chances 29). The seagull can be taken as an ironic symbol for various things and the fate of several characters, one of whom is Nina. Nina “is said to be like a wounded bird who silently watches the cruelties of life unfold before its eyes . . . it is interpreted as a representation of Nina’s own personal struggle and of her ability to triumph.” Nina is likened by Trigorin to a seagull who “strives to spread her wings and be free” (27). Her link to the seagull was first mentioned in Act I when she says that she is drawn to the lake as though she is a seagull (29). But afterwards when Treplev puts the shot seagull in front of her, she makes fun of it. When Treplev shoots the seagull and places it at Nina’s feet, the dead bird becomes a symbol of unrequited love for Nina—who is an outsider of the lake-house and compels us to notice the inadequacies of the lake-house’s residents (Freeborn 82-83).

Nina’s struggle with the identity of the seagull late in the play continues as she keeps saying, “I’m a seagull. No, that’s wrong. What was I saying? Oh yes, Turgenev. ‘And may the Lord help all homeless wanderers.’ . . . I’m a seagull. No, that’s wrong. I’m an actress” (Chekhov, Act 4, 112-113). That very same seagull is stuffed under the orders of Trigorin, thus enhancing its symbolic significance (Chances 29). What Chekhov does is prevent the seagull from spreading its wings in the sky so that spectators can marvel at it. The seagull gets stripped of its artificial poetic symbolism, and ironically enough, Trigorin does not even remember ordering to have it stuffed (29). This is analogous to how Trigorin took advantage of Nina and

deserted her, which copies what can be found in his seagull story, but it also suggests that Nina may rise from her doom and be more than a spectacle for her observers.

Chekhov subtly implies, through projecting the tragic fate of his characters, that the universe is a haphazard place in which people are not true agents, whether they are active or passive in their lives (Jackson 9-11). Nina's function is to motivate action, but her journey is imagined rather than acted out on stage (Flath 7). The audience learns through indirect action after the two-year interval between Acts Three and Four that "[s]he [Nina] had a baby [from Trigorin]. It died. Trigorin tired of her and returned to his formal attachments. Nina's private life has been a disaster" (Chekhov, Act 4, 106). As a result of the death of her child, Nina's acting kept floundering. Her struggle reflected her performance on stage since "she always took leading roles, but her acting was crude and inept . . . she had her moments when she screamed superbly and died superbly. But moments they remained" (Chekhov, Act 4, 106).

Kierkegaard sheds light on the time lapse when the actress is in the process of reaching maturity: "Time has asserted its rights; it has taken away something from the immediate, the first, the simple, the accidental youthfulness. But in so doing time will in turn specifically to make her genius more essentially manifest. In the eyes of the gallery, she has lost; in the sense of ideality, she has gained" (322). What Nina gains is spiritual strength and character assertion as she has moved beyond this crisis. Nina expresses in Act Four how nice and warm it is in the house. She returns to the place of her childhood because she recalls her naïve self, but she is in such a haste to leave the house because she realizes that there is no going back on her path now. By returning, she acknowledges her past, her suffering and is ready to include them and grasp her future (Jackson 14-16). This is an indication of her metamorphosis into a true actress: "she will not childishly or plaintively long for the blazing of what has vanished because in the

metamorphosis itself she has become too warm and too rich for that” (Kierkegaard 323). Nina is very self-conscious of her struggle, she tells Treplev of her destructive journey with Trigorin:

He [Trigorin] didn't believe in the stage, he laughed at my dreams and I gradually stopped believing too and lost heart. Then there were all the cares of love, jealousy and constant fears for the baby. I became petty and small-minded and my acting made no sense ... I'm a seagull. (Chekhov, Act 4, 113-114)

While recalling her story out loud, Nina is gradually distancing herself from the power of Trigorin over her: “No, that's wrong. Remember you shot a seagull? A man happened to come along, saw it and killed it, just to pass time. A plot for a short story. No, that's wrong” (Chekhov, Act 4, 113-114). And finally, she says: “I'm different now, I'm a real actress. I enjoy acting, I adore it. I get madly excited on stage, I feel I'm beautiful” (Chekhov, Act 4, 114). Her constant rejection of her identity as a seagull allows her to overcome her imprisonment by Trigorin and fascination with the lake (Freeborn 85). By accepting her journey and calamities, Nina emerges as an artist (Flath 5). She blurs the line between art as an illusion and reality; she entwines both and proceeds to maturity (5). Nina's attachment to art is what saves her (Kirk 135-136). She finally understands the meaning of life: “I've come to see—that in our work—no matter whether we're actors or writers—the great thing isn't fame or glory, it isn't what I used to dream of, but simply stamina” (Chekhov, Act 4, 114).

Life crisis effaces illusion and asserts reality. Nina makes the transition from illusion to reality and grasps the meaning of life (Jackson 14). Chekhov's characters accept the metaphysical forces of life that are outside their control as well as their own limitations as human beings. They leave their fate to mere chance and accept what comes with it. They must accept that nothing is predestined and that their history is what they make of their present (9-11). Nina's life crisis makes her stronger spiritually (13): “You must know how to bear your cross and have faith. I

have faith and things don't hurt me so much now. And when I think of my vocation, I'm not afraid of life" (Chekhov, Act 4, 114).

Nina's maturity and metamorphosis becomes patent in her reprisal of Treplev's play lines: "Do you remember? [Recites] 'men, lions, eagles and partridges, horned deer, geese, spiders and silent fishes, denizens of the deep, starfishes and creatures invisible' [Embraces Treplev impulsively and runs out of the French window]" (Chekhov, Act 4, 114-115). Kierkegaard says that the proof of this metamorphosis is when "she is to play that part, it must become an eminent performance or, even more correctly, a performance in the eminent sense" (322). And Nina's performance is indeed eminent and heartfelt. She remembers the lines after two years and utters them as a farewell to the old creatures that no longer exist in the world of Treplev's play. This performance is also a farewell to her life of innocence and illusion and an embrace of the future. Virginia Scott, however, reduces Nina to Irina, who is superficial and immature, and limits her to a mediocre, provincial actress:

Thus [Nina's reprisal of the lines] suggests that Nina should now speak Treplev's play in the style of a provincial leading lady of the 1890s, the style, in fact, of Treplev's mother. This semi-polished rant will collide in our memory and in Treplev's with the image of the earlier performance, and will conclude the Nina-Arkadin analogy with a confirmation of our prediction. (362)

But Nina's future is far from bearing a resemblance to Irina's. Her reprisal of the lines and her ability to accept hardship reflect that "she is truly able to be a servant of her idea, which is the essential esthetic relation" (Kierkegaard 322). She is a servant of being an actress; she is able to become a character at any given moment by utilizing the weighty experience placed upon her. This is the way that Kierkegaard expresses this possibility: "This other metamorphosis is the metamorphosis of continuity which, in turn, more closely defined, is a process, a succession, a steady transformation over the years" (323). Nina exits the stage leaving the audience thinking

about her metamorphosis through continuity. As the years pass by, the actress's "perfectibility" will keep improving (324).

Hence, Nina is seen to be floundering about in the beginning of the play. She is anxious, restless, naive and dreamy. She is unable to make a decision and explains: "I was trying to decide whether to go on stage or not, I wish someone would advise me." Trigorin replies: "You can't give advice about that sort of thing" (Jackson 6; Chekhov, Act 3, 93). Nina's anxiety about taking a decision does not prevent her from pursuing her dream and accepting the consequences of it (Jackson 8). Later, she takes matters into her own hands and conveys her decision to Trigorin, saying: "Mr. Trigorin, I've made up my mind once and for all ... I'm going on stage ... I'm leaving father and throwing everything up to start a new life. I'm going away, same as you – to Moscow. We'll meet there" (Chekhov, Act 3, 101; Jackson 8). By running away to pursue an acting career, Nina goes against the rules of her family and the conventions of society (Jackson 8). Although she traps herself by pursuing Trigorin's companionship, Nina also manages to work out a future that was not originally foreseen: "Chekhov sees in the individual's attitude toward "fate"—whether expressed in discussion or in casual unconscious acts—a measure of the individual's capacity to respond to the sum total of forces acting upon him, to necessity, to the given in life" (Jackson 8).

Nina finally pursues her personal identity through the occupation of actress. Life raises obstacles in Nina's path that impact her career. Her misery and struggle are expressed through the symbol to the seagull that is shot by Treplev and that he turns into a narrative. But towards the end of the play, Nina's speech refers to her endurance of a "major emotional crisis" (Stroud 370). Her return to Sorin's estate and encounter with Treplev must not be reduced to a resurrected seagull verging on insanity, but the beginning of her long and successful career as an

actress (370-371). The constant rebuttal of her identity as a seagull reflects her struggle to break free and assert her independence from the past.

The Seagull is the first play to use “dramatic technique or indirect action” (Kirk 137). Thus, “[Chekhov] knew that the only triumph is the precarious one, the one, in short, that organically is fused with tragic knowledge and experience” (Jackson 16). Chekhov allows the most precarious character to overcome her adversities and develop into a mature actress, someone who understands the meaning of life, someone who uses her past to shine on the stage. Nina, as Kierkegaard suggests, will continue to rise and perfect her acting because through difficult experiences, she becomes ever more capable of shaping her emotions according to those required for the stage. She will learn in time how to use real life experience to provide glimpses of a truth that could be expressed through a world of appearances, in contrast to her youthful manner, which has allowed her to mistake illusion for reality and to pursue what could not be grounded in a personal future.

Chapter 2. Sartre and Ibsen

Jean-Paul Sartre and Henrik Ibsen are both concerned with the possibility of being human in a society that tends to limit human freedom. In his lecture entitled, “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” Sartre defines existentialism generally as “a doctrine that does render human life possible; a doctrine, also, which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity” (12, 288)¹. While also concerned with the interface between the individual and society, Ibsen examines the mores of the nineteenth century in his powerful play, *Hedda Gabler*. In his letter to Mortiz Prozor, Ibsen discusses how this play is an attempt to portray “human beings, human emotions, and human destinies” in relation to “the social conditions and principles of the present day” (440).

Ibsen creates the character of Hedda Gabler to show how human destiny can run counter to the dominant social convictions of his own time. Hedda is a complicated human being who struggles with herself as well as her environment. In this chapter, I intend to explore how Hedda’s obsession with destiny highlights her crisis and brings about her downfall when she is entrapped in the mores and restrictions of her world. In the course of the play, we see how Hedda’s identity disintegrates into that of a coward, despite her attempts to achieve freedom. Her desire for control is reflected in her inability to accept the uncertainty that Sartre describes as “anguish,” thus undermining the possibility of “good faith” he also ascribes to human beings. I hope to show how Hedda suggests that “good faith” is at least possible, but that her rebellion brings her own life and that of her unborn child to a tragic end.

For Hedda Gabler, the question of identity springs from a conflict between her social self—the self that instills in her a compliance with restrictive social rules and an acceptance of social decorum—and a more essential self that longs for a life of freedom and virility, blazing

transcendence with a crown of vine leaves (Northam 179-180). The title of the play suggests that Ibsen would like us to focus on a psychologically complex character. He writes in one of his letters: “The title of the play is Hedda Gabler. My intention in giving it this name was to indicate that Hedda as a personality is to be regarded as her father’s daughter rather than as her husband’s wife” (440). Hence, we must view Hedda’s struggle in relation to her upbringing by a General, rather than merely in relation to her struggle as a wife.

Hedda comes from a past that is dominated by cold patriarchal control. She is raised to be submissive in terms of discipline, yet she has had a manly upbringing under a general’s rules; she is taught shooting and horse riding, which are masculine sports (Mangang 3). Later, she is brought into members of the Tesmans family, who are affectionate and sacrificial, but these traits are easy for her to target with mean remarks while she toys with the future. Hedda’s identity as her father’s daughter, rather than her husband’s wife, is further emphasized when several characters address her as Mrs. Hedda, rather than as Mrs. Tesman (Weidner 57). Hedda clings to her past and refuses to let it go (Sandstroem 372). She brings her father’s pistols and her old piano into the new house and places them in the inner room with her father’s portrait. She tells Tesman, “I could never let it [the piano] go” (Ibsen, Act 1, 299). Hedda does not know how to play the piano well but the piano is part of her social façade and childhood memory (Weidner 57). Her refusal to sustain formal relations with George’s aunt is an indication of her rejection of belonging to the Tesmans. She requests that her piano be moved to the other room, where the portrait of her father has been hung (Northam 150-151). Hedda just cannot let go of her past and her masculine identity as the General’s daughter.

From the opening act of the play, we observe that Hedda married below her social class when Aunt Julie Tesman and Berta, the maid, express their enthusiasm and say, “General

Gabler's daughter—the way she lived in the General's day . . . I never thought she'd make a match with our Mr. Tesman" (Ibsen, Act 1, 291). Hedda seems to understand that her decision to marry was based on the recognition of how Tesman offered her the prospect of fulfilling her personal aspirations (Mangang 3). Humans naturally move themselves into the future by making conscious decisions and they define themselves through the choices they make in the present day (Sartre 24, 291). Hedda's choices and actions are conscious to her; however, her reactions are volatile and inexplicable, even to herself. The social divide between Hedda and George makes her irritable and unaccepting of the Tesmans's lukewarm offer. Her irritability is witnessed as transferred anxiety to those around her because she is hardly satisfied with anything; she is in fact "so particular about things" (Ibsen, Act 1, 291). Even Julie, who is older, buys a new hat "so Hedda won't feel ashamed of me if we go out for a walk together" (Ibsen, Act 1, 293).

Hedda continuously refuses any form of affection. When Julie embraces her, Hedda exclaims, "(gently freeing herself) Ah--! Let me out!" (Ibsen, Act 1, 298). She also consciously and subtly offends Julie about her new hat and confesses it to the judge in saying, "She's put her hat down there on that chair (looks at him smiling) and I pretended I thought it was the maid's" (Ibsen, Act 2, 316). Hedda's mischievousness is inexplicable to her: "These things [mean reactions] just come over me like that and I can't resist them" (Ibsen, Act 2, 316). Clearly, Hedda is struggling within as she is not meant for the domestic life of matrimony. Detesting flowers and the aroma they emit, she tells the judge: "I feel an air of lavender and dried roses in every room . . . there's something deathly about it" (Ibsen, Act 2, 317). She is described as a neurotic and hysterical being because of her inability to accept her female role and accept her social responsibilities (Mangang 4). She is repulsed by the thought of sex with her husband and implies several times that she finds an extramarital affair with Judge Brack to be extremely distasteful:

Brack: “Then you should jump out [of marriage], stretch your legs a little.”

Hedda: “I’d never jump out I’d rather remain sitting, just like I am now, a couple alone. On a train” (Ibsen, Act 2, 315).

She fears the responsibility that comes with the sexual act, whether it results in pregnancy or a public scandal. It would seem that Hedda only desires power (Spacks 157).

Hedda is shown to be a very controlling and agitated person. During her first appearance on stage, she says: “I’m drowning in all this sunlight,” and she then orders her husband around, telling him, “Tesman my dear, just close the curtains” (Ibsen, Act 1, 296); in response, he complies to her wishes without demur (Blythe and Sweet 78). Hedda’s desire for control is so obvious from the opening scene, but her struggle to accept her new reality is evident in her inability to handle her new setting. Her new figure is fuller with a child inside (Blythe and Sweet 78). She explicitly responds to Judge Brack when he makes a subtle remark about how child rearing will keep her busy: “I don’t want to do anything with that kind of calling Oh, please be quiet. I often think I only have one talent, one talent in the world Boring the life out of me” (Ibsen, Act 2, 318).

Later in the play, the audience realizes that Hedda strongly rejects the notion of childbirth and destroys both her own child as well as the brainchild of Thea Elvsted and Eilert Løvborg, when she burns their manuscript in a gesture that symbolizes her desire to destroy the child that she carries within her (Mangang 5). Sartre explains that a person “makes himself by choice of his morality, and he cannot but choose a morality, such is the pressure of circumstances upon him. We define man only in relation to his commitments; it is therefore absurd to reproach us for irresponsibility in our choice” (78, 306). Hedda decides to marry and start a family, and due to the pressure of circumstances, she cannot escape the need to choose or the consequences of her

own decision: “[O]ne chooses in view of others, and in view of others one chooses himself” (Sartre 80, 307).

Hedda is highly conscious of her actions but continues to deny her responsibility for them (Weidner 57). We notice her first reaction to her new status as a wife and a mother-to-be in the first act of the play. Whenever Tesman makes remarks concerning her changing figure, due to the child inside her, Hedda’s response is denial and impatience: “Oh, leave it alone!”, “Oh you don’t have the opportunity for anything” and “I’m the same when I left” (Ibsen, Act 1, 298). The image of her unexplained anger is manifested as she “walks around the room raising her arms and clenching her fists as if in rage” (Ibsen, Act 1, 298). Hedda is continuously haunted by the Tesmans’ stereotypical references to maternity, while Aunt Julie and Judge Brack contribute to her feeling of being denied her individuality (Weidner 58).

Not only is maternity getting in the way of her aspirations, but when Tesman informs her of their declining financial situation, she becomes even more volatile. Hedda’s father passed down the trait of exuberant financial indulgence (Weidner 57-58). This makes it hard for Hedda to adapt to the tight budget that Tesman imposes on her. After receiving the bad news from Tesman, she retreats to the inner room that has her inherited properties where her response is ominous: “Well, at least I’ve got one thing to amuse myself with My pistols, George General Gabler’s pistols” (Ibsen, Act 1, 311). Hedda’s struggle with her new status in society is not primarily due to pride in her aristocratic heritage but more clearly related to her inability to accept reality—her reality as it has been shaped in the present as a consequence of her actions (Sandstroem 372).

Hedda’s rejection of her feminine role in society is regarded in a Freudian perspective by Paonam Mangang. Hedda is neurotic in her inability to accept responsibility, and this failing

makes her hysterical and cowardly (Mangang 4). However, Sartre clarifies the fear of responsibility in saying that “when a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind—in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility” (28, 292). Sartre calls that fear “anguish” (28, 292). Hedda, of course, chooses marriage and she is pregnant, but an existential problem arises when she begins to feel that wifehood and maternity go against her essential self and the upbringing that she has received under General Gabler. Thus, Hedda’s recurrent state of anguish leads her to evade conformity to the female social role that her own society imposes on her. Because she experiences that role as repressive, her sense of personal freedom is frequently in conflict with the choice of marriage and motherhood.

Sartre further explicates his view of moral agents when he implies that “[anguish] does not prevent their acting, on the contrary it is the very condition of their action” (32-33, 294). Hedda does act and attempts to achieve a highly conditional freedom by creating the triangle of George Tesman, Eilert Løvborg and herself. However, she does not want an extramarital affair; what she wants is to contain Løvborg as a harmless friend “[w]ho can be entertaining on all kinds of topics” (Ibsen, Act 2, 315). Hedda’s freedom is contrived. It depends on the manipulation of other’s destinies, of being in control. In denying that she was about to shoot Lovborg when he was preparing to deny her freedom, Hedda says to Thea, “That’s nonsense, people just don’t act that way here” (Ibsen, Act 2, 306). Sartre explains that “[t]he man who lies in self-excuse, by saying ‘Everyone will not do it’ must be ill at ease in his conscience, for the case of lying implies the universal value which it denies. By this very disguise his anguish reveals itself” (29, 292-93).

Hedda does not refrain from acting but she refuses to attribute responsibility to herself by repeating the phrase: “People don’t do such things.” Her actions control people to do what she desires. She manipulates Tesman and Lovborg to maintain her financial security and fake social appearances, while others live on her behalf and under her rules. According to Sartre, “All kinds of materialism lead one to treat every man including oneself as an object—that is, a set of predetermined reactions” (65, 302). Sartre asserts that an existentialist does not conceive of man primarily as an object but as a being who possesses dignity since he is not simply part of the material world (65, 303). But Hedda treats everyone as an object because she is trapped in materialism. In the end, Judge Brack suppresses her “triangle” and treats her as a sex object.

Hedda’s relationship with George Tesman is marked by boredom and a desire for dominance. She is a newlywed who is utterly bored with life. She confesses to Judge Brack, saying, “I’ve been desperately bored . . . six whole months never meeting a soul who knew the slightest thing about our circle” (Ibsen, Act 2, 313). She pushes Tesman around, and his passivity encourages her volatility. Hedda tries to motivate her husband, but she disregards his achievements. She ignites Tesman’s dreams of writing a book and buying a house for her, but he fails to reach up to her expectations (Weidner 58). George lacks vision, ambition and imagination. He is on a safe academic track, and once a professorship is attained, he will seek nothing further; he is tedious and monotonous, a history professor who is stuck in the past and is most elated when he receives his old pair of slippers in his new home (Embler 457). Hedda, however, looks down on Tesman’s specialization: “Domestic crafts in the Middle Ages. Ugh, the most revolting thing of all” (Ibsen, Act 2, 314). Her desire for control is further manifested when she tells the judge: “If I could get Tesman to go into politics . . . because I’m bored, do you hear me?” (Ibsen, Act 2, 318). She would have George go into politics to relieve the monotony of her

life (Spacks 175). Her husband's specialization is merely another form of escape that has no potential, no power. She wishes that he would get into politics so that she could manipulate him to her own advantage.

Tesman tells his aunt that he has spent his honeymoon doing historical research: "I've stuffed the suitcase with notes—just notes! The things I managed to collect in those archives . . ."; and her response only underscores his limitations: "Ordering and collecting—you're certainly good at that" (Ibsen, Act 1, 296). From the beginning of the play, we learn that sorting out other people's work and collecting historical information is what he does best (Spacks 162). He does not take risks or make choices; he repeatedly says, "I don't dare do that" (Ibsen, Act 3, 335). Tesman even abandons his own life-project to revive the project lost by Lovborg (Spacks 162). "I'll give my whole life to this . . . Every spare minute. My own research will just have to be put aside" (Ibsen, Act 4, 351). Eventually he abandons the present world for others. He denies his being, and does not create, but only collects and revives what is lost; he does not attempt to be something other than what the others are. He ceases to choose and his inaction is of inaction: "But it must be done. There's simply no other choice. And finding the order in those papers—that's precisely what I'm meant for" (Ibsen, Act 4, 353). Tesman simply evades reality by focusing on a project that someone else has created.

Hedda rekindles her relationship with Eilert Løvborg because Tesman only provides a false sense of social acceptance. Her relationship with Løvborg does not involve sexual desire because she "will not allow it" (Ibsen, Act 2, 324), and when he threatens to become too close, she threatens to shoot him. Hedda's reunion with Løvborg gives the audience insight into her crisis. We learn about her condition in her confession to Løvborg in Act Two. Hedda's crisis is prompted through her desire for "a glimpse of a world . . . that is not permitted to her" (Ibsen,

Act 2, 325). But it is also brought about because she accepts a life based on illusion, not reality. Hedda confesses that “when it looked like reality threatened to spoil the situation ... I’m much too afraid of scandal ... [I am a] terrible coward” (Ibsen, Act 2, 326). She would not dare to risk tarnishing her image through scandal; she only cares about herself and her fake appearance in society, which is why she imprisons herself in social conformity (Weidner 213). The end of Act Two suggests the real crisis in Hedda’s life, which is her inability to live, despite her desire to have power over human destiny (Northam 162).

The new and reformed Løvborg is a “reclaimed sinner” in Hedda’s eyes (Ibsen, Act 2, 319). But he used to be a free individual when he defied society and he lived in a “drunken frenzy, frenzy that would last for days on end” (Ibsen, Act 2, 325). It was a life that Hedda wishes to peep into. When he later confesses—“I wrote the sort of book that everyone can agree with Because I want to reestablish my position, begin again” (Ibsen, Act 2, 320)—Hedda realizes that he is trapping himself into social conformity and thereby becoming an obstacle that might prevent her husband from attaining the professorship. Ibsen portrays the deterioration of the nineteenth-century social values that Hedda wishes to destroy. He places their destruction in the hands of disgruntled Hedda as she ruins both human life and the creative imagination (Embler 457). From one standpoint, nonetheless, the ruin of Løvborg’s new image as respected professor will be beautiful because it will entail his break from the prison of social expectations and constraints.

Hedda exercises her power over Løvborg and pushes him to return to drink in order to see him “have power over himself again. Then he’ll be a free man for the rest of his days” (Ibsen, Act 2, 330). Although Hedda wants to damage Løvborg, she does not want to see him drink excessively; she wishes to exercise her dominance while controlling Løvborg’s destiny (Northam

161-162). More so, Hedda wants ultimate freedom for Løvborg in the sense of allowing him to evade all responsibilities to the point of bringing an end to his life.

Hedda: “So what will your road be now?”

Løvborg: “None. Only to see to it that I put an end to it all. The sooner the better.”

Hedda: “. . . can you see to it that—that when you do it, you bathe it in beauty? . . . Do you recognize this? It was aimed at you once . . . Here, you use it now.” (Ibsen, Act 3, 343-44)

But Eilert does not prove to be a free man at all. Løvborg loses his sense of self-responsibility in the first opportunity he gets. He is easily dominated—he admits at different times that both Thea and Hedda have power over him. Hedda admits that her power over him is limited: “Then I have absolutely no power over you? Ah, poor me” (Ibsen, Act 2, 327). We learn from Tesman that: “he [Eilert] just has no control over his pleasures” (Ibsen, Act 3, 334). But when he drinks, he relives the past and recalls a time when he gave a “long wild speech for the woman who had inspired him in his work” and says that he started to “reconsider . . . because, we men, alas, are not always so true to our principles as we ought to be” (Ibsen, Act 3, 334, 337). After he has returned to drinking and has begun to relive his old life, he tells Hedda that “I can’t bring myself to live that kind of life again either. Not again. Once I had the courage to live life to the fullest, to break every rule” (Ibsen, Act 3, 342).

Løvborg, like Hedda, evades moral responsibility in various ways. In fact, there is no “sense of liberation” in the demise of Eilert Løvborg (Ibsen, Act 4, 351). What Eilert actually did was far from what Hedda has wanted him to do: “He didn’t shoot himself so freely . . . he talked crazily about a lost child [and died accidentally with] a fatal bullet wound . . . lower down [than the chest]” (Ibsen, Act 4, 352). Sartre explains how a person’s choices in life are definitive:

When we say that man chooses for himself, we do not mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he

chooses for all men. For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative. (25, 291)

Sartre claims that every human choice, including the failure to choose, contributes to the process of creating/defining the being of that person. Tesman chooses not to act and gets stuck in picking up the pieces where others have failed. He decides to become an academic historian instead of getting immersed in his own time. Løvborg, on the other hand, feebly attempts to be part of a fake social circle but fails miserably and finally becomes the one who has no self-control. Hedda's crisis continues to grow the more she takes action. She wants to control the destiny of someone else, instead of controlling her own destiny. Sartre contends that "[t]o choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen" (25, 291-292). In the end, Hedda chooses freedom, which becomes more valuable than life itself. Therefore, she chooses freedom through suicide, just as she urges Løvborg to end his own life in an ignominious way.

Hedda's crisis intensifies as she attempts to mold Løvborg's future. She soon contends: "Just once in my life I want to help shape someone's destiny" (Ibsen, Act 2, 330). She tries to motivate others to live in certain ways, instead of making responsible choices herself. She claims that she just wants to see that "life has a chance to be lived" (Ibsen, Act 2, 327). But Hedda's desire for dominance leads to death and destruction, which she describes as "beautiful" (Embler 457). In destroying Løvborg, she assumes a certain responsibility because she saw in him what she could not have done for herself. "All I know is that Eilert Løvborg had the courage to live life his own way, and now—his last great act—bathed in beauty. He—had the will to break away from the banquet of life—so soon" (Ibsen, Act 4, 351).

Hedda is in a continuous conflict between her desires and a settlement for social decorum. She confesses her desire for the kind of life led by Løvborg in terms of masculine

freedom, but she does not dare to get directly involved; her aspirations are limited by her settlement for the limitations imposed by society on her gender, while she continues to struggle with her femininity. The only way that she sees her ambitions coming to life is through the manipulation of others and the control of their destinies (Weidner 58-59). This is why, when he fails, she descends into a state of hysteria: “Oh absurdity—! It hangs like a curse over everything I so much as touch” (Ibsen, Act 4, 352). Hedda’s inability to handle the absurdity of her situation stems from the pressure of being pulled between reality and dreams—the pressure of having to appease Tesman by pretending to have adapted versus the dream that Løvborg can achieve something on her behalf. This tension is what “threatens her very existence” (Jones 459). Absurdity is inherent to the degree that her values cannot become reality.

Judge Brack punctures Hedda’s illusions when he bears the message of Løvborg’s death. Brack could see from the beginning that Løvborg was part of the triangle that he tries vigilantly to dominate. The audience learns early that he wants to be “[t]he one cock of the walk” (Ibsen, Act 3, 339). He wants to use the triangle to his own advantage and suppress all change: “[T]hat’s my goal. And it’s a goal that I’ll fight for—with every means at my disposal” (Ibsen, Act 3, 339). He knows what Løvborg means to Hedda and confides in her: “Eilert Løvborg meant more to you than you might admit—even to yourself” (Ibsen, Act 4, 351). Judge Brack’s desire to dominate becomes clearer as he attempts to suppress Hedda by blackmailing her into entering into a sexual relationship with him (Spacks 161). But Hedda does not bend to his desires and believes until the end that “you don’t have any kind of hold on me” (Ibsen, Act 3, 339). Brack previously tells Hedda that he respects matrimony “in an abstract kind of way” but would not commit himself (Ibsen, Act 2, 314). He desires power, like Hedda, and finally tells her that this is his ultimate goal (Spacks 161):

Brack: Well, fortunately you have nothing to worry about as long as I keep quiet.

Hedda (looking up at him): So I'm in your power now, Judge. You have a hold over me from now on.

Brack (whispering more softly): Dearest Hedda—believe me—I won't abuse my position.

Hedda: But in your power. Totally subject to your demands.—And your will. Not free. Not free at all No, that's one thought I just can't stand. Never! (Ibsen, Act 4, 354-56)

The judge thinks that Hedda's threats of pulling the trigger are insincere and does not feel that she will ever act on her impulses. When Hedda tells him that she wishes to die, Brack merely smiles in disbelief. In response to Hedda's question concerning what will happen if a scandal breaks out, Brack replies: "Oh, yes, a scandal. Just what you're so desperately afraid of." (Ibsen, Act 4, 354). And then, just as she used her pistol before to defend herself from unwanted sexual advances, Hedda pulls the trigger on herself to maintain honor and to end her life in the beautiful way that was always a temptation (Mayerson 157).

Thus, Hedda, Tesman, Lovborg, and Brack all act in despair. "Despair" according to Sartre "merely means that we limit ourselves to a reliance upon that which is within our wills, or within the sum of the probabilities which render our action feasible" (49, 298). When everything exceeds Hedda's control, she realizes that all that is left within her grasp is her own destiny. In a sense, Hedda in killing herself remains invincible to Brack. Løvborg is incapable of remaining in control and is always dominated by someone else. Tesman is under the grips of Hedda and the society of which he is a part; he has no hope of breaking free. Brack thinks that he can control Hedda because he knows about the weapon. Brack proves to be a person of appearances when he responds to Hedda's suicide in saying, "But God have mercy—people just don't act that way" (Ibsen, Act 4, 356). His final statement reveals that to him, social conformity and mediocrity are

inevitable (Jones 461). Through his example, we see that “[s]ometimes, adaptation is not a virtue” (Jones 452).

At the same time, Hedda’s suicide expresses her reaction to an oppressive society. It becomes the one act through which she attempts to attain absolute freedom. It is also her protest against male domination, which provides the occasion for setting her spirit free (Jones 462). The inability of Tesman and Brack to comprehend Hedda’s suicide is related to the fact that she left no statement with her survivors upon departing from the world. Mayerson expresses a view of her death that is extremely pessimistic:

Hedda gains no insight; her death affirms nothing of importance. She never understands why, at her touch, everything becomes ‘ludicrous and mean’. She dies to escape a sordid situation that is largely of her own making; she will not face reality nor assume responsibility for the consequences of her actions. The pistols, having descended to a coward and a cheat, bring only death without honor. (Mayerson 158-159)

Hedda emerges from her isolated aristocratic world of inaction and cowardice to act for herself. Her suicide defies the statement “people don’t do such things”—the very statement uttered by her earlier in the play and later by Brack himself. Hedda in truth does do something, “[a]bsurdly, destructively, but with a strange kind of integrity, Hedda has broken through in the only way she can” (Northam 179).

Hence, Sartre might have viewed Hedda’s final choice in terms of good faith, even if it is not as an act of good faith in the strict sense. Sartre defines an act of good faith as one that is undertaken for the sake of freedom:

[F]reedom, in respect of concrete circumstances, can have no other end and aim but itself; and when once a man has seen that values depend upon himself, in that state of forsakenness he can will only one thing, and that is freedom as the foundation of all values . . . it simply means that the actions of men of good faith have, as their ultimate significance, the quest for freedom itself as such. (82, 307)

From this standpoint, Hedda's suicide reflects her blindness to the possibilities of her future; her pregnancy could have offered her something she does not yet know about. Hence her suicide is not just the rejection to be in Brack's power, but an escape from an ugly reality that she created for herself, the reality of Lovborg's suicide and of being the wife of George Tesman, Hedda is simply unable to accept the uncertainty that comes with decision making and personal destiny (Sandstroem 372). What makes Hedda a highly complex character is that her intent, desires and choices are all for the noble cause of ultimate freedom. But the consequences of her actions reveal her to be a coward. Hedda has some understanding of what Sartre describes as good faith and simultaneously can be labeled a coward. Sartre claims that "what produces cowardice is that act of giving up or giving way A coward is defined by the deed that he has done" (60, 301). Hedda gives up on life and the future and ends her life as well as that of her unborn child.

Thus, Hedda Gabler in her struggle to free her essential self from her (false) social self ends up destroying her body, if not her being. It disintegrates her identity, and this is not the cause she so avidly sought. In examining how Hedda's past is constrained by the aristocratic values imposed on her by the patriarch, Gabler, we witness her inability to fit in to her newly adopted role as wife. Hedda's actions are all calculated to reach a certain end—which is to control human destiny. In imprisoning herself, she controls others, and freedom becomes what she chooses. She controls her husband, George Tesman, and her old flame, Eilert Lovborg. She is self-confined due to her fear of scandal and to what society might think of her. Her entire life is based on a lie until that lie sinks to the core of her being and she lies to herself, thinking that she can escape reality. Her reality is that she has fallen socially, that she has become a wife and soon to be mother. She could have chosen to remain single, but her fear of society brings her to do exactly what society expects of her. In considering Hedda's extreme desire for control, we

understand that she fears what is uncontrollable. Her fear can be examined through Sartre's definition of "anguish", which helps us see how her actions spring from "despair".

Just as Hedda almost achieves an ideal blend of her social and essential selves, everything falls apart because simply no one can perfectly control human destiny. Judge Brack becomes an oppressive figure for Hedda who tries to turn her worst nightmare into a reality. Hedda refuses to succumb to being a sex object but also refuses to deal with her reality. She therefore commits suicide, which is her only way to hold on to her freedom, if only for a moment. Hedda's indomitability is so extreme that she chooses to end her own life and the life of her unborn child after succumbing to male dominance and social scandal. She attains her freedom by obliterating the body in order to remain free. She acts in view of Sartre's concept of "good faith." However, by choosing to give up on life, she chooses the easy way out of her predicament. Her fear of scandal is excessive and explains why it is possible for us to label her as a coward. What she achieves is an end that is controllable and that she can regard as "beautiful." But there is nothing beautiful about her conception of freedom if it entails suicide. In truth, her response to life involves cowardice, and this is what finally shapes her identity and remains with her until the end.

Chapter 3. Camus and al-Hakim

In his influential and important book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus defines human existence as absurd because it unfolds in an intrinsically meaningless universe and ends in death and nothingness. The Egyptian dramatist, Tawfiq al-Hakim, is similarly concerned with how a human being can dwell in an absurd universe. Tawfiq al-Hakim explores the question of identity in his unique version of a Theatre of the Absurd. Both authors reflect their belonging to Ionesco's absurdist school. In the preface to the play, *The Tree Climber*, al-Hakim refers directly to Albert Camus and the absurd movement saying:

“A play is a human craft: it is associated with the human self . . . it is the universe, and man stands in it talking, conversing and inquiring, he is answered or wants to be answered . . . but if the universe is silent to him, woe to the universe, it then seems vainly absurd in eyes of this man, that is sometimes called Albert Camus and other times called many different names in various countries and languages.”
(al-Hakim, 23-24; my translation)²

When the universe seems absurd to man, he then tries to destroy it, but this only brings about man's own ruin, because he is too blind to see that in silence there are answers (al-Hakim 24). Al-Hakim also mentions in his preface the reason behind his integration of Egyptian popular culture with the new way of writing as they both go against the traditional rules of writing (24-25).

In this chapter, I will examine the life of Bahadir Effendi, the inspector of railroads in al-Hakim's play, through the lens of Camus in order to discuss how his identity is transformed on the basis of a significant life crisis. I will reflect on how al-Hakim's approach to the possibility of retaining equilibrium in an irrational world allows him to remain true to absurdism. But I also intend to show how this choice allows the author as well as the protagonist to commit what Camus calls philosophical suicide. In conclusion, I will discuss how Bahadir contrives to assert

his identity as an absurd hero but finally adopts a mode of comportment that brings about his personal disintegration and demise.

Early in his career as a dramatist, Tawfiq al-Hakim was wary of falling into the trap of merely reproducing the external features of Western absurdist plays. He rejected the pessimistic and atheistic outlook of existentialism and tried to create an absurdist drama that contains a spiritual core (al-Najjar 135-136). Al-Hakim writes in his book, *The Art of Literature*:

[T]he irrational (al-lama‘qul)—and it worries me to be responsible for this term in the introduction of *Ya Tali‘ al-Shajara* [The Tree Climber]—does not mean to me a stance against the mind! I do not belong to this movement I intentionally used the word irrational because it expresses my own direction and stance, and it is something different from the theatre of the “absurd” as named in Europe and America. The “Irrationalism” is one thing and the “Absurd” is something else. (al-Najjar 140; my translation)

The playwright wants only to learn about the form and method of Western drama, but not to reproduce the message. However, the form and content of the absurd are inseparable. Hence, even if al-Hakim wishes to achieve something different in theory, he fails in practice; in the end, the play ends in an absurd model (al-Najjar 157; my translation). In his preface, al-Hakim mentions his decision to revisit the influential absurdist movement as inspired by Ionesco to write his play, *The Tree Climber*, in a way that would be acceptable in his culture (14-15). Al-Hakim adopts the approach of “equilibrium” and imbeds it in his art to adapt the play to his own culture and background.² The dialogue in the play takes place in a single space, but its characters come from different time frames. We see from the outset of the play that the content and the context of the play follow absurdist dramatic techniques. For instance, in discussing the setting of the play, al-Hakim writes of how all time periods are sometimes present in one person, who occasionally speaks in more than one place in his own voice (34; 87).

Moreover, al-Hakim's theatre, the theatre of the mind, has its characters and events rooted in and preoccupied with an "intellectual cause" (Zayn al-Din 30). This is obvious in the circular dialogue that can be found in *The Tree Climber*, Act One, which begins with an exchange between the husband, Bahadir, and his wife, Behana.

Wife: It was in the fourth month. The child had formed, she had become the size of one's hand. I'm certain of that

Husband: Yes, I'm certain of that, because the branches were moving extremely slowly

Wife: Yes, she was moving inside me. I felt her moving. They were the movements of a girl. One can tell the way a girl moves, also I wanted her to be a girl

Husband: I also wanted this slow movement, or no movement at all, because motionless branches stop any damage happening to the flowers and the fruit in the early stage (al-Hakim, Act 1, 45-46; 93)

Husband and wife live in their own world under the same roof. The wife is lost in the illusion of carrying a child, and the husband is preoccupied with his orange tree that normally bears fruit. The husband and wife's dialogue applies to both the tree and the child (Zayn al-Din 44). Al-Hakim experiments with the possibilities of absurdist technique, which has the ability to represent reality through fiction and to make use of rationality to find the logic in what seems illogical (Zayn al-Din 9).

Al-Hakim places Bahadir in a double crisis. On the one hand, when pursuing the meaning of life, Bahadir attempts to achieve what Camus calls absurd freedom, on the other hand, when facing an imminent death sentence for the murder of his wife, he ends up committing what Camus calls philosophical suicide. We learn through the conflation of time and space in Act One that Bahadir has worked as a train inspector. His occupation tells us that he never worries nor thinks about life, at least not in a fully conscious way: "I mean that an inspector on a train is the

only one among the passengers who is neither worried nor disturbed about the train being late or whether or not it will arrive Occasionally the station bell and the whistle of the train upset me a little—especially when I’m asleep or half asleep” (al-Hakim, Act 1, 70-71; 105). Often Tawfiq al-Hakim uses the train as a symbol of life.

Bahadir’s occupation as train inspector links him to life itself (Zayn al-Din 46). While working on the train for thirty-five years, Bahadir has never worried except when he hears the train’s whistle, especially when he is half asleep and it wakes him up from his dreams and state of illusion. Bahadir’s surrounding universe gradually becomes absurd to him through his consciousness, which plays a key role in the transformation of his identity. The first moment of the absurd in Bahadir’s life is born as he utters the words, “As you see, I look out of the window and think about nothing” (al-Hakim, Act 1, 78; 109). Camus relates this moment to the beginning of the absurd. Noting that it may seem pretentious to reply “nothing” when someone is asked what he is thinking, he then elaborates on what this could mean:

. . . but if that reply is sincere, if it symbolizes the odd state of the soul in which the void becomes eloquent, in which the chain of daily gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, then it is as it were the first sign of absurdity. (Camus 106; 12)⁴

Bahadir’s openly expressed sense of emptiness and evident inability to articulate the meaning of various situations suggest that he is partial to what Camus describes as an absurd view of the world.

Bahadir also repeats these words from a little children’s folk song, “Oh tree climber bring me a cow with you/ Oh cow climber bring me a tree with you,” while confusing the lyrics (al-Hakim, Act 1, 78; 109). This Egyptian folk song carries a religious Sufi meaning within its core. It is absurdist in structure, but when examined closely, we find that it has meaning and follows a strange logic (al-Najjar 134). The notion of the sacred tree and cow in the song can be traced

back as far as the ancient Egyptian predynastic cults (al-‘Adly 42). The goddess Hathor was worshipped as the mother of all men, living and dead, and the song revives the polytheistic beliefs of the ancient Egyptians (al-‘Adly 42). Hathor is represented in Egyptian culture as the lady of the Sycamore tree as well as the cow that feeds its milk to the deceased pharaohs and to the souls of the deceased in the form of a cow or a woman (Al-‘adly 51). The cow in this song can also represent the goddess Hathor (Al-‘adly 42)⁵. This folk song expresses the hope of uniting the afterlife, as it is often expressed in Middle-Eastern culture, with the Western philosophy of the absurd (al-Najjar 142).

The song originally begins in this way: “Oh tree climber bring me a cow with you/ Make it and feed me with a china spoon” (al-Hakim, Act 1, 76; 108). The Sufi interpretation of the poem suggests that the tree is a symbol of what ties three worlds together—the world of God, man and the universe. The bringing together of these three worlds is assumed to lead to ultimate happiness. On a simpler level, the poem suggests that the tree of salvation leads from the frustrating world of existence to the world of God (al-Najjar 188). However, the purpose of the song in the play is to make us think of Bahadir. The man in the song is asking those who have climbed the tree of knowledge to bring him the tree of immortality, which evokes motherhood through the cow that will bring him the milk of nurture, life and growth. However, the “feeding spoon broke,” because the speaker’s childhood days have ended and his protective bubble burst; thus, he must discover life on his own (Zayn al-Din 51).

After working for thirty-five years as a train inspector, Bahadir becomes tired and exhausted; he wishes to seek new things: “My work has begun to bore me. Thirty-five years on the railways. Aren’t I entitled to get bored?” (al-Hakim, Act 1, 86; 113). A sense of fatigue leaves Bahadir feeling old and bored but also leads him to ask basic questions. Camus describes

the moment when man suddenly becomes aware of his mechanical and meaningless life: “Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness, it awakens consciousness and provokes what follows,” and what follows could be either philosophical suicide, or absurd existence (107; 13).

Bahadir is much like Sisyphus, the Greek mythological hero, who toils daily at a repetitive task of pushing the rock to the top of the hill only to watch it descend on the other side. Bahadir is someone who goes about repetitively performing his daily tasks, neither thinking nor worrying about their significance. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus describes his hero in this way:

Sisyphus is the absurd hero, he is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. (196; 120-121)

But Bahadir struggles to understand his actions until he runs into the Dervish on the train. His encounter with the Dervish opens up existential possibilities that Camus does not really explore. At that point, Bahadir’s dilemma becomes clear:

Inspector: Reverened sir, save me, for God’s sake save me!

Dervish: Save you?

Inspector: Yes, save me from a person who upsets me.

Dervish: He’s always with you?

Inspector: Yes.

Dervish: Sometimes you don’t understand what he wants?

Inspector: I don’t understand what he wants. (al-Hakim, Act 1, 88; 114)

Bahadir's consciousness becomes sharper as he points out the absurdity of his life. He wants to feel safe and follow the Dervish, but the Dervish tells him that those who stay on the train of life without looking ahead, i.e. who do not look into the future, will not be in true harmony with themselves. This can also be interpreted as meaning that when man is lost in repetition, he is stuck in childish naiveté.

The Dervish sometimes embodies Bahadir's consciousness of the absurd that constantly bothers him and gives him anxiety, while raising questions about life's mysteries. The Dervish, it seems, will either guide him to safety or doom (Zayn al-Din 48). "Mere 'anxiety,' as Heidegger explains, is at the source of everything" (Camus 107; 13). Bahadir is anxious about tomorrow and the train whistles as he starts to make sense of his absurd situation. But a sense of the absurd has not fully emerged; it is slowly boiling under the surface: "There's always that din in my ears," he claims, "[a]nd I who thought I'd be at rest when I retired" (al-Hakim, Act 1, 48; 94). Camus explains this general sense of the absurd by stating, "Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it. That revolt of the flesh is the absurd" (107; 14). A tree or an animal are part of this world; therefore, they have no reason to question or doubt. On the other hand, being human entails consciousness, which brings us to the root of the problem of existence (Camus, 136; 51). Al-Hakim's characters are dominated by an anxiety about the unknown, and he creates characters who are trapped between metaphysical and material desires (Etman 199). His dramatic characters show that man will never be absolutely free; he is destined to fight a losing battle with fate. Al-Hakim places religious power in the distance and heightens man's helplessness in the face of the laws of nature; he is a slave to time and cannot change his past or future (Etman 200).

Bahadir has always been preoccupied by the trees during his job as a train inspector. He then continues to search for a way to reach the eternal tree of mystery (Zayn al-Din 47):

Assistant: You were counting the trees in flight from the train.

Inspector: Did you hear me?

Assistant: Yes. You were saying: I want this tree . . . and this one . . . and this one. Catch me one of these trees in flight from the train

Assistant: [You were in a state] of inner harmony . . . I mean absorption. (al-Hakim, Act 1, 74-75; 108)

Each tree carries in its core a history of spiritual activity for which man searches throughout his lifetime. He observes the trees disappear from the train's sight as though they are real people vanishing from the train of life. Life is an endless cycle that knows no relief from repetition (Zayn al-Din 47). People are ephemeral, but life is not. Nevertheless, Bahadir is looking forward to discovering the tree as foretold by the Dervish:

Inspector: Do you know what I ask of life?

Dervish [singing]: Oh tree climber bring me a cow with you/ Milk it and feed me with a china spoon.

Inspector: It seems you know There's no need for me to explain?

Dervish: There in the suburb of Zeitoun. (al-Hakim, Act 1, 84; 112)

Bahadir is obsessed with the tree in the suburb of Zeitoun—that “[i]n winter produces oranges, in spring apricots, in summer figs and in autumn pomegranates”—where he hopes to find the single tree: “A single one—everything is one—there: the tree and the cow and the venerable Lady Green” (al-Hakim, Act 1, 84-85; 112).

The color green is an indication of life and the presence of it. The tree is the tree of knowledge that belongs to man, and the desire to know is instilled in man without him having to be conscious of it (Zayn al-Din 50). The play's characters contain supernatural elements. The

Dervish sees and knows beyond man's capacity. Lady Green is from the spiritual world and assumes the form in a lizard, like other spirits, while the tree is from the botanic world and carries within it the mystery and meaning of life (Zayn al-Din 44). What the Dervish tries to tell Bahadir is that he should aim to find the meaning for which he searches, since everything is united and he should embrace all the links together. Camus likewise explains that the absurd man should seek the truth through a comprehensive outlook, rather than through a narrow search: "For the absurd man the metaphysical aspect of the truth is so far reaching" that "[a]ll things are not to be explained by one thing but by all things" (Camus 131; 44-45).

Bahadir's identity begins to undergo transformation, but it is stuck in the material world and the pursuit of tangible meaning. His crisis culminates when he decides to go to the location of the tree, which is linked to his wife whose disappearance leads to his personal dissolution. We see the play opens with the life crisis of Bahadir—when he is falsely accused of killing his wife. This crisis progresses further when the Dervish appears on stage to declare that Bahadir has not already killed his wife but will kill her later on:

Dervish: His wife—either he has killed her or else he hasn't yet killed her

Detective: In any event, then, her fate is to be killed?

Dervish: Yes.

Detective: At the hands of this man, her husband?

Dervish: Yes. (al-Hakim, Act 1, 95; 118)

Communication breaks down during the inquiry between the Inspector and Bahadir. The author has the characters ask several questions without being able to arrive at any direct answer: "That would be useless—you wouldn't understand me. You only understand what you find comprehensible, and your job is to ask clearly defined questions to which you want to receive

clearly defined answers” (al-Hakim, Act 1, 66; 104). This can be likened to Sisyphus's endless cycle of pushing the rock up the hill and watching it descend, only to have to push it up the other side. Al-Hakim indicates an irresolvable conflict between Bahadir and the Detective.

In these exchanges, al-Hakim tries to show Bahadir to be a character who views matters in a more spiritual way that encompasses both heart and mind, as opposed to the Inspector who is only looking for answers through the logical order of material evidence (Zayn al-Din 45). However, Bahadir is just an unconscious man of his absurd surrounding, resisting a tragic fate, and living in a drama where he hopes to understand his wife’s disappearance, and tries to control his destiny by avoiding the death sentence. Camus explains that man is attached to life because he simply has hope: “Hope of another life one must ‘deserve’ or trickery of those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it meaning, and betray it” (102-103; 8). Al-Hakim creates Bahadir to embody the tragedy that “there is no end to search and discovery . . . this is not the crisis of this age alone . . . it is the crisis of the artist in every age” (al-Hakim, 32; my translation). But the Dervish asserts that Bahadir is the protagonist for the crisis of the age when he says, “The philosophy of the age is inherent in you, and the philosophy of the tree is inherent in it” (al-Hakim, Act 1, 104; 122). The world of logic makes the universe seem real, while human consciousness raises questions and makes the universe seem absurd. Al-Hakim endeavors to find reason through the absurd and express reality through fiction in order to delve into the deeper meaning of life around him.

Camus also inquires if life is not worth living. Does this mean that it is devoid of meaning? “Does its absurdity require one to escape it through hope or suicide?” (103; 8-9). Bahadir tries to escape the absurd by taking both paths during different periods in his life. Certainly his relationship with his wife, Behana, casts much light on his quest for meaning. He

marries her because she possesses the orange tree, where one day “her whole body should be turned into a fertilizer, fertilizer of an excellent quality with which to nourish this tree so that it will produce sturdily growing oranges” (al-Hakim, Act 1, 85; 99). Behana is a mysterious person who is comprehensive and all-encompassing. Like the world, she contains the orange tree of knowledge and has a trace of life as it can be found in Lady Green. Bahadir at the outset of the play is constantly occupied and obsessed with his orange tree, Lady Green, the lizard, who lives in the lair under the tree.

Lady Green’s fictional existence is equivalent to the fictional existence of Bahiyya, the unborn child, since both husband and wife talk about the child’s beauty when she wears the green dress (Zayn al-Din 45). The recurrent mention of the wife’s loss of fruit and her continuous sewing of clothes suggests that something hidden remains to be brought to light (Ismail 81-82). Bahadir stays married and cares for the tree for nine more years, while performing his task in a monotonous way, yet the absurdity of his situation has not become evident to him. We understand from the maid that “except where this husband and wife are concerned [they lived in] absolute harmony” (al-Hakim, Act 1, 42; 91). The maid’s assertion that the couple has always been happy indicates that they lived in harmony as long they remained in a world of dreams; however, as soon as they start to directly communicate, the veil of their illusory worlds is removed and communication completely breaks down. Consequently, husband and wife meet a tragic fate in Act Two (Ismail 74-75).

Behana is associated with Lady Green’s disappearance. This means that the lizard, who provides an image of life, complements the wife’s existence (Zayn al-Din 45). As soon as Bahadir goes to jail, his missing wife returns. With her return, all definitions of reality become different: “That indeed has happened. You returned, safe and sound. At that moment all this had

to be changed” (al-Hakim, Act 2, 132; 136). Al-Hakim writes in his preface that “a woman does not measure things with her mind . . . does not recognize beauty with logic . . . she is always prepared to examine the core of things through an unknown sense” (22; my translation). This is why the playwright makes the wife a transcendental figure, so random and accepting, mixing dream with reality without effort or thought. Similarly, Camus likens the world to the familiar face of a woman whom we loved and desired because of all the things we attribute to it; however, in that face, “we shall come to desire what suddenly leaves us so alone . . . [and] that denseness and that strangeness of the world is the absurd” (108; 14).

Bahadir loved Lady Green, who is the mirror of his wife, but he only realized the likeness when she disappeared. His reflections on the similarity between the two help us better understand his peculiar way of thinking:

Bahadir: Yes, her features. For nine years I’ve been watching her every day. How, then, should I not know her features, how should I not have become her friend? I’ve got used to her presence, her proximity I love her I became attached to her—I arranged my life in the garden in accordance with her life, her ways and habits. (al-Hakim, Act 1, 52-53; 97-98)

Having arrived at these insights, Bahadir’s life stops to make sense of her disappearance. But his inquiries into her whereabouts and the meaning of her disappearance result in his downfall:

Wife: I’ve never seen you so insistent in your questioning.

Husband: Because the situation invites the putting of questions. Perhaps the matter does not in truth require secretiveness, but it is your being secretive that alone impels me to discover the motive for it. Why be secretive? (al-Hakim, Act 2, 148; 143-144)

Bahadir has an incessant urge to know and understand what cannot be uttered by his wife—the meaning, truth and mystery of life. Camus agrees that “the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions” (99; 4), but he also says: “Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined . . . the worm is within man’s heart” (100; 4-5). This becomes man’s tragedy and the starting-point for

further reflections on personal identity: “The mind’s deepest desire . . . is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity” (Camus 110; 17).

As Bahadir confronts his wife, he is met with absolute silence. This is also the moment when the absurd emerges in all of its starkness: “The world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (Camus 113; 21). The silence of Bahadir’s wife/world drives him to insanity: “Then where were you? Where were you? Where? Where? Where? My head will burst. I’ll go mad”; and then, “. . . because I haven’t been previously faced with such a state of affairs—a simple question to which I find no answer and to which there’s no way of knowing the answer” (al-Hakim, Act 2, 159-161, 149-150). Camus offers insights into that moment:

The mind, when it reaches its limits, must make a judgment and choose its conclusions. This is where suicide and the reply stand At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. (117-118; 27-28)

Bahadir asserts his identity as well as the absurdity of the universe: “Aren’t you going to stop this nonsense? Won’t you cease this making fun of me? There’s not a man alive who’d stand for it—not one.” He finally fulfills the prediction of the Dervish and kills his wife: “[H]er head is seen to drop forward. He shakes her in terror as he sees that she has departed this life” (al-Hakim, Act 2, 153; 169). Dream and reality are confused to allegorize their entanglement in life (Etman 209).

In killing his wife, Bahadir has ruined his chance of realizing his dream which is “to overcome time and life.” Bahadir ruins his dream in the process of achieving it because he is willing to sacrifice everything to give it reality (Etman 210). He is so single-minded in finding an

answer that he brings about his own destruction. Camus highlights “that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama” (110; 17). The detective, who is the voice of reason, tells Bahadir: “Calm yourself, don’t be upset and go about your gardening” (al-Hakim, Act 2, 155; 173). But Bahadir refuses to go back to his routine now that the absurd is revealed. He has a chance to discover the tree and to see its transformation into a mystery—which the Dervish anticipates—by feeding it his wife’s body as a fertilizer. He has perhaps achieved an extreme version of the absurd. Camus writes: “To an absurd mind reason is useless and there is something beyond reason” (124; 35).

This decision is evidence that Bahadir is now fully aware of his status in an absurd universe and of his capacity to achieve what Camus calls absurd freedom, where “nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness.” In this situation, a human being “can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and unyielding evidence of a life without consolation” (Camus 142; 60). Bahadir expresses a similar view of things after he has murdered his wife towards the end of the play: “I shall carry her, and I shall bury her under the tree. I regret nothing—her life was useless” (al-Hakim, Act 2, 160; 182). Bahadir continues pushing forward for answers. He makes use of the grave that already has been dug by the police, the murder itself, and the Orange Tree to more fully confront his own existential dilemma. Bahadir’s identity is finally affirmed in a way that might recall Camus’s absurd man:

What, in fact, is the absurd man? He who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal. Not that nostalgia is foreign to him. But he prefers his courage and his reasoning. The first teaches him to lie without appeal and to get along with what he has; the second informs him of his limits. Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his life time. (149; 66)

In making use of all that is given to him, Bahadir pursues his adventure and is keen on discovery, on challenging life without hope or appeal. The Dervish speaks to him in this way: “Rest assured, where you’re concerned, murder is done for a very modern motive My sole aim is to put your heart at rest—your motive is in keeping with the philosophy of the age” (al-Hakim, Act 1, 102-103; 121).

For a moment, Bahadir has a chance at achieving absurd freedom, but he ruins that chance and commits philosophical suicide. He imagines the tree to be more useful than it is, unlike the Dervish, who tries to open Bahadir’s eyes to the fact that the answers are not in the tree: “It produces flowers, it doesn’t smell, and fruit it doesn’t eat. Yet it repeats this futile process every year . . . the meaning of every being within its own framework—not within your own head (al-Hakim, Act 2, 160; 183). However, Bahadir wants to have ownership of the tree and wants scientists to analyze it; he even wants to call it “the Bahadir tree . . . and it will find its way into books and dictionaries” (al-Hakim, Act 2, 161; 185). Camus mentions that man’s various abilities to touch, feel, reason and be aware contribute to the dilemma of trying to make sense of the world in “familiar term” (136; 51). This is why Bahadir insists on claiming the tree and on becoming familiar with it: “The marvelous discovery means that my crime will be discovered . . . my decision is made and there is no going back on it. Nothing will make me be afraid or flinch, even though I may be sentenced to death, for otherwise my life would be worthless!” (al-Hakim, Act 2, 163; 190).

Camus echoes this sentiment when he identifies a basic conflict that lies at the heart of the absurd life as well as the possible consequence of accepting the absurdity of the human condition: “[T]his whole equilibrium depends on that perpetual opposition between my conscious revolt and the darkness in which it struggles with, if I admit that my freedom has no

meaning except in relation to its limited fate, then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living” (Camus 143; 60-61). In choosing the most living, Bahadir could have been an absurd hero. But Bahadir rejects the most living and decides to rush into his fate, instead of waiting out his term in life and leaving everything its course in nature. His crisis stems from his “absolute desire for truth, the closer [he] gets to it, the more vague and self-enclosed life gets, and the misery increases” (Etman 208).

In any event, Bahadir could not live in the absurd mode for long, but he rejects the possibility of living in an absurd universe and chooses something else. Unlike Sisyphus, whom Camus imagines to be happy in overcoming his futile tasks and taking pleasure in his consciousness of their absurdity (O’Dwyer 172-173), Bahadir forsakes absurd freedom and rushes intemperately into his fate. In this rejection, he commits what Camus describes as philosophical suicide: “Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it” (138; 54). This is precisely what Bahadir refuses to accept. Camus suggests that absurd man must continuously ‘revolt’ and challenge the world to obtain “an impossible transparency” (138; 54). Man revolts by asserting his presence and not rushing into the future, because the only certain future for man is death; therefore, absurd freedom is living life without hope and without resigning to it, that is, without suicide: “It is essential to die unreconciled and not of one’s own free will” (Camus 139; 50). From this standpoint, Bahadir should remain defiant and assert his identity in all of its absurdity.

Like his protagonist, author Tawfiq al-Hakim arguably commits philosophical suicide in adopting the theory of equilibrium in his life and as a principle for organizing his literary writings. For al-Hakim, the existential idea that man is “God himself” is flawed, and life itself contributes to an imbalance that impacts the structure of the human world (Khoury 192).⁶ Al-

Hakim wants man to accept forces beyond his control that are dominant in the metaphysical realm and impact his physical surroundings (Khoury 192). Al-Hakim seems to believe that Camus turns the “absurd” into a bridge to the other world by refusing to commit “philosophical suicide,” just as he also holds on to the capacity of the human mind to make sense of what is nonsensical (Zayn al-Din 18). When other religious existential philosophers, such as Kierkegaard, use the absurd to understand what is immortal, Camus uses it to reach what he calls absurd existence (Zayn al-Din 18). Any belief in transcendence would be classified, as Camus put it, as philosophical suicide: “The absurd, which is the metaphysical state of the conscious man, does not lead to God,” he claims (128; 40). To put it simply, the absurd is a theory that concerns itself with this world, not with the afterlife. Al-Hakim wants to commit philosophical suicide and take the leap where “[religious] thought negates itself and tends to transcend itself in its very negation” (Camus 128; 41). Camus rejects the escape suggested by various philosophies when faced with the absurd universe, whether escape takes the form of religious transcendence or physical suicide (122; 32).

Tawfik al-Hakim contemplates life in an absurd universe through his play, *The Tree Climber*. In one of his letters to Taha Hussein in *Tawfiq al-Hakim al-Mufakkir*, he writes:

What does logic mean? . . . its secret lies in that magnificent clear mirror surrounding us like walls [i.e., the universe] . . . existence is the most beautiful example for the methodology of logic . . . everything in this universe is made of one method, and of one law . . . two words: (give and take) . . . there is nothing in the universe that does not take nor give. (al-Hakim 144-146; my translation)

Al-Hakim creates a protagonist in a universe that takes from him as much as it gives him. Life takes Bahadir from his own life because he desires to unravel its meaning. Bahadir, in his pursuit of meaning and truth, brings about his own demise. Bahadir’s life culminates in a crisis when he becomes conscious of his absurd surroundings. What Camus calls the absurd is born out of these

conscious moments of the protagonist. In desiring more out of life, knowledge of the Orange Tree and meaning behind his wife's disappearance, Bahadir begins to affirm his identity in a manner that recalls Camus's absurd man. But as Bahadir ultimately rejects Camus's definition of absurd freedom, he commits both physical and philosophical suicide. He rushes towards his fate and embraces his death by claiming the tree and accepting his death sentence instead of living a meaningless life. Likewise, al-Hakim commits philosophical suicide in calling for a new world that does not just end in "absurd repetition, but [invites us to] see it as a continuous creation" (al-Najjar 150-151; my translation).

The absurd is concerned with the secular and not the spiritual world. Bahadir will die without knowing life's meaning, but only knowing the truth in its absurdity. *The Tree Climber* ends with a tune celebrating new life, indicating that someday someone else will try to discover life's meaning, because the train of life keeps moving back and forth endlessly, and new people are always born (Zayn al-Din 56): "Then the two sounds merge: those of the party and the song of the train and its whistle, each blending with the other" (al-Hakim, Act 2, 164; 192). Happiness would have been a possibility for Bahadir, if—in the midst of his struggle, like Sisyphus—he had made that struggle his own (O'Dwyer 72). Even "Galileo, who held a scientific truth of great importance, abjured it with the greatest ease as soon as it endangered his life. In a certain sense, he did right. That truth was not worth the stake" (Camus 99; 3). Bahadir should have done what Galileo had done, and not rush towards death in the passing of time.

Conclusion

This thesis uses three dramatic works and three existential theorists to examine the overarching question of whether life crisis foregrounds or disintegrates a character's identity in relation to his or her surrounding environment. In following the protagonist's journey, the thesis offers a new approach to understanding how the protagonist relates to each life crisis and how this comportment results in the formation of a particular self.

The idea of life crisis provides a comprehensive approach for the examination of the self in crisis as it attempts to achieve freedom. Human beings are forced to exist in a specific space under particular conditions, and this situation poses drawbacks for human aspirations. Life crisis is comprehensive in the sense that these aspirations are impeded by a metaphysical or a secular crisis. I use the word "metaphysical" to indicate spiritual and transcendental powers that go beyond man's capacity of comprehension and attainability, such as man's struggle with his fate. By the word "secular," I refer to a social setting in which obstacles are raised due to constrictive rules.

The plays selected for this thesis take the reader on a smooth journey from what seems to be a purely secular type of life crisis to a metaphysical one. They also reflect how the characters in each play discover and become harmonious with a self, or else construct a self that allows them to briefly adapt to their environment only to bring about their demise. In the first chapter, Chekhov's *The Seagull* reflects a life crisis that is basically secular in nature; its protagonist, Nina Zarechny, struggles to forsake her place in society to achieve her dreams. In the second chapter, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* acts as a balancing point in the thesis where the play portrays both types of life crises—the secular and the metaphysical. The character of Hedda confronts both societal expectations and a gloomy destiny. Finally, in the third chapter, al-Hakim's *The*

Tree Climber portrays a strictly metaphysical life crisis, allowing the protagonist to attempt to avert a disastrous fate that ironically makes him expedite his doom.

In *The Seagull*, the character of Nina Zarechny helps us understand her desire to make certain decisions and the impact of those decisions on her identity. Nina struggles with her place in society and is fascinated with the fame and glory of artists. Acting is a demoted profession for women in the nineteenth century. In following Nina's journey of rebelling against her parent's wishes and enduring life's calamities, we are able to witness how she overcomes these obstacles to discover her own being and to become a successful actress. Nina embraces her life crisis to help her become the person she ought to be and to achieve harmony with her own self. The use of Kierkegaard's essay, *The Crisis and A Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, allows the reader to understand how Nina utilizes her dilemma to grow and master her craft. Kierkegaard argues that an actress must embrace the adversity and weight of life to master the craft of acting and be able to relate to any character at any given moment. Time is not an enemy to the actress but her tool in allowing her to undergo what Kierkegaard calls "metamorphosis," which helps her develop and mature.

The play *Hedda Gabler* is about a highly complicated character who struggles for her place in society and tries to come to terms with her fate. In the thesis, Hedda's character is analyzed in relation to the male characters, namely, her husband, George Tesman, her former lover, Eilert Lovborg, and the oppressive figure, Judge Brack. Hedda rejects her femininity and the rules imposed by society that come with it. She also struggles with her social class. She manipulates others to achieve her dreams and break from her situation of social confinement. These attempts produce a twisted idea of freedom and result in her demise. Hedda's fate is sealed to be a mother and a wife to a dull and struggling middle-class professor. She seeks excitement

in the destruction of others and encourages them to break down social conventions. When Judge Brack is about to expose all her schemes, she is forced to step outside of her comfort zone into a world that she despises, but she attempts to achieve a different kind of freedom by setting her soul free from the prison of her body in a way that she thinks is beautiful.

Sartre's essay, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, sheds light on Hedda's crises and her final act of desperation. Hedda refuses to endure the state of anguish and ambiguity that surrounds her fate. She continuously acts to remain in control and constructs a specific social self. However, her actions are all destructive and committed out of what Sartre calls "despair." In having no hope, she destroys her own being as well as that of her unborn child. Hedda, instead of embracing a new future, chooses control and ends by murdering herself in a way that she thinks is beautiful.

The main character of the train inspector, Bahadir Effendi, is examined in *The Tree Climber* in view of his reaction to the whirlpool of crises in which he finds himself. The inspector is constantly trying to find meaning in his life and avert his death sentence. Bahadir is completely helpless in the face of destiny, yet he constantly struggles to survive. The protagonist finally accepts his fate for a moment, then quickly rushes back into the materialistic world and tries to find answers that would appeal to his logic. In following Bahadir's journey, we are able to understand Camus's concept of the absurd. When man is helpless in a silent universe and aware of his imminent death, Camus urges humans to act like Sisyphus and remain unreconciled to their destiny. Humans should wait out their term in life and not rush into destiny and commit what Camus calls "philosophical suicide." Bahadir, however, does not endure his fate and rushes into his destiny; he refuses to be patient and thereby destroys his identity and being. Bahadir's crises allow him to lose sight of his goal and completely destroy his life.

Thus, theatre functions as an ironic mirror that communicates certain values to its spectators. It is a medium that begets an immediate reaction from the audience. It is a dynamic venue that is timeless, yet close to the human self. Theatre allows us to embody a world that is close to the real one; it portrays various types of selves in crises and allows the audience to scrutinize human comportment. Hence, in choosing theatre as a genre for examining the human self, this thesis has adopted a new approach to life crises that helps us better understand the human will and the quest for freedom.

Notes

1. The page numbers of quoted material, presented in parentheses following the citation, correspond to the Nagel edition of Sartre's work, *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, and then to the 1956 Walter Arnold Kaufmann translation in English.
2. The page numbers cited in parentheses refer to the "Preface" for al-Hakim's play, *Ya Tali' al-Shajara*. As noted, I have translated this material myself since the "Preface" only appears in Arabic. But normally the page numbers of quoted material, presented in parentheses following the citation, correspond to the Arabic edition of the play and then to the 1966 Denys Johnson-Davies translation in English.
3. Al-Hakim adopts the theory of equilibrium as one of his approaches to the questions of existentialism. Al-Hakim seems to have adapted this theory from the French philosopher, Jean Baptise Robinet (1735-1820). Jeries Khoury offers this definition of equilibrium/equivalency:

Al-Ta'aduliyya (Equilibrium/Equivalency) is a philosophical theory that maintains that there is a group of powers in life that converge and balance, making 'equilibrium' or balance an essential and basic purpose. Life is like two scales that have to be always balanced; otherwise, life loses its positivity. (Khoury 189-190).

For details, see Jeries Khoury, "Al-Hakim's Equilibrium under the Microscope: A Study in al-Hakim's Philosophy through his Plays," *Arabica* 54.2 (April 2007): 189-219.

4. In accordance with the above practice, the page numbers of quoted material, presented in parentheses following the citation, correspond to the Gallimard edition of Camus's work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and then to the 1955 Justin O'Brien translation in English.
5. Al-'Adly's article tackles the ideology of the sacred tree and its incorporation in various Arabic folk tales and songs. He examines the development of various symbolic references to a tree from the ancient Egyptian predynastic cults of Hathor goddess, and later its references in the

various religious doctrines and scriptures, until the publication of al-Hakim's play *Ya Tali' al-Shajarah* (The Tree Climber). Al-'Adly also indicates that the Egyptian folklore includes elements from the original culture of Ancient Egyptians. For details, see al-'Adly, Sabir. "Ya Tali' Al-Shajara." *Al-Funun Al-Sha'biyyah* 56-57 (July-December 1997): 41-54.

6. Jeries N. Khoury regards al-Hakim's approach to spirituality to be too reductive to offer concrete insight into absurd lives: "Sometimes, al-Hakim may be exaggerating in [presenting] the philosophy of this conflict to a degree to which the character loses its human nature and its relationship with reality, and turns into a representative type that participates in clarifying a certain idea in an allegorical manner" (197).

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