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### Existential Aspects of Franz Kafka's "A Country Doctor"

Franz Kafka, although not a philosopher in the strictest sense, used many philosophic elements in his stories. His writings, including "A Country Doctor," exhibit a number of points that illustrate a movement of thought that has come to be known as existentialism, a philosophy that emphasizes "the individual, the experience of choice, and the absence of rational understanding of the universe" (Eliot 230).

The protagonist of this story, the unnamed country doctor, embodies several of the main concerns of existentialism. The doctor is a man who struggles with the issues of responsibility and freedom. He is torn between his responsibility as a doctor toward his patients and his concerns for the safety of his servant, Rose. Even as the horses are harnessed to the gig, ready for the journey, the doctor pauses and addresses the groom, "You're coming with me...or I won't go...I'm not thinking of paying for it by handing the girl over to you" (Kafka 221). Later, while examining the sick boy, the doctor is still plagued by fears over his servant's well-being and bemoans the fact that he "should have to sacrifice Rose" (222).

At several points in the story, the doctor tries to assert his own freedom: first, by ordering the groom to accompany him, then by trying to control the runaway horses. He again attempts to exert control over the horses when he leaves the patient's house, but, in each of these instances, the doctor must come to the realization that his freedom, although highly desirable, is quite limited, and he finally concludes, "I do not want to think about it anymore" (225). It may even be

said that his freedom is actually nonexistent, and this certainly adds to the confusion and anxiety faced by the protagonist. Symbolically, the doctor experiences the tension that all humans must face between uncontrollable events and the responsibilities we must assume in society, and he is burdened by the “dread or sense of absurdity in human life” (Eliot 232).

In “A Country Doctor,” Kafka also demonstrates the ultimate meaninglessness of the universe. The inability of humans to determine their own fates and the absence of any supernatural authority work together to create this existential lack of purpose. The doctor’s own fate is beyond his control. If he is summoned, he must attend the patient, “the whole district [making his] life a torment with [his] night bell” (Kafka 223). The doctor’s inability to control the speed with which he travels to and from the village is another example of being subject to forces beyond his control. Try as he might, he is unable to change the pace of the steeds. The doctor is also brought to the realization that he can not save others. He is unable to rescue Rose from the ravages of the groom, and he is equally unsuccessful in saving the boy from his illness. Both of their fates are beyond any of his attempts at salvation.

The doctor is not the only character who demonstrates man’s ultimate lack of control. From the very beginning of the story, Rose is not allowed to make up her own mind. She is a servant who is given orders, and she must obey. She is told to find a substitute for her master’s own dead horse, then to assist the groom in harnessing the two steeds that have miraculously appeared. In the course of fulfilling this mission, she is attacked by the groom who leaves the red “marks of two rows of teeth” upon her cheek (221). She is subsequently left alone to face the threat of further assaults. She is a victim of circumstances that are not initiated by her and that she can not control.

The sick boy is certainly another existential casualty in this story. When the doctor finds him, he is lying helpless in his sickbed, almost too weak to say a word. The horrific wound in his side, open and nearly “as big as the palm of [the doctor’s] hand,” becomes symbolic of man’s mortality, the universal symptom of man’s inability to control his own fate (223). The worms living in the wound, “as thick and as long as [a] little finger...wriggling from their fastness in the interior of the wound toward the light,” display the dual nature of man’s mortality (223). The inevitability of death is set in contrast with its ability to help define life. Existentially speaking, human beings are able to place a value on life only because we know that it will one day end, and this knowledge, to a limited degree, brings meaning to the meaninglessness of the universe.

Franz Kafka manages to pull together a number of existential threads in this story, so that the nightmare experienced by the country doctor can then become the allegory of all human life. We must, like the doctor, come to the realization that we have very little actual control over the events in our lives, but then see that this lack of control and the inevitability of our own mortality work together to create an essence to life that is worthy of individual celebration.

Works Cited

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