

# Charles University in Prague

Faculty of Education

Department of English Language and Literature

## DIPLOMA THESIS

Existentialist Perspective in Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* and  
Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Román Sally Rooney *Kdepak jsi, krásný světe* a román Ottessy Moshfegh *Můj  
odpočinkový rok z pohledu existencialismu*

Bc. Lucie Maňasová

Thesis supervisor: doc. PhDr. Petr Chalupský, Ph.D.

Study programme: Teacher Education of English Language for Secondary Schools

Year: 2023/2024

I hereby declare that I have written this diploma thesis by myself using the list of sources in the List of cited works section.

Prague,

.....

Signature

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my supervisor doc. PhDr. Petr Chalupský, Ph.D. for his time flexibility and guidance.

## **ABSTRACT**

This diploma thesis examines traits of existentialist philosophy in Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. The text consists of two main parts, the theoretical part and the practical part. The theoretical part of the diploma thesis is further subdivided into two segments: the first one summarizes the essence of existentialism, with its main focus on the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, while the second one is predominantly concerned with the lives and works of Sally Rooney and Ottessa Moshfegh. The practical part presents two separate analyses of the aforementioned literary works, beginning with *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, and ending with *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. The conclusion presents a comparative analysis of both selected literary works.

## **Keywords**

Existentialism, Sally Rooney, Ottessa Moshfegh, Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, Irish literature

## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato diplomová práce je zaměřena na zkoumání prvků filosofie existencialismu ve dvou nedávno publikovaných románech: *Kdepak jsi, krásný světe* irské autorky Sally Rooney a *Můj odpočinkový rok* americké autorky Ottessy Moshfegh. Text diplomové práce se skládá ze dvou částí – teoretické a praktické. Část teoretická je dale rozdělena na sekci věnující se filosofii existencialismu, s důrazem na myšlenky Jeana-Paula Sartera a na podkapitulu věnující se životu a dílu Sally Rooney a Ottessy Moshfegh. Praktická část se skládá ze dvou samostatných analýz dvou zmíněných románů – *Kdepak jsi, krásný světe* a *Můj odpočinkový rok*. Závěr obsahuje komparativní analýzu obou literárních děl.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

Existencialismus, Sally Rooney, Ottessa Moshfegh, Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, Irská literature

## Table of contents

Introduction .....	6
THEORETICAL PART .....	9
1 The roots of the philosophy of existentialism and its basic tenets.....	9
1.1 Jean-Paul Sartre and the basic tenets of existentialism.....	12
1.2 Existentialism in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century .....	19
2 The life and works of Sally Rooney.....	21
3 The life and works of Ottessa Moshfegh.....	24
PRACTICAL PART.....	27
1 Beautiful World, Where Are You.....	27
2 My Year of Rest and Relaxation .....	38
Conclusion .....	45
Bibliography .....	50

## Introduction

My first encounter with Sally Rooney dates back to June 2020 when I decided to borrow her debut novel, *Conversations with Friends* (2017), at Prague Municipal Library. A decision based solely on whim. One that terrified me. Usually, I try not to concern myself too much with books adorned with frequent stickers with the word “bestseller” on them. Because then one might start asking questions, like bestselling where? What is the target audience? Is marketing the main reason for its alleged success? How long did they wait before they put the sticker on? Etc.

I had of course heard of Rooney before. She emerged as a literary superstar in her late twenties, being praised for her unique minimalistic writing style together with an unprecedented understating of the *millennial* generation. Nevertheless, such labels should be treated with caution. Succumbing to the author's fame and popularity before reading the book has been a source of disappointment for me for a long time.

Eventually, *Conversations with Friends* (2017) sparked an interest in me, with Rooney becoming a subject of fascination. I could hardly describe the novel as gripping or remarkable and yet it filled me with an inexplicable awe of something beyond my understanding. Rooney's second and most popular novel, *Normal People* (2018), became nominated for the Man Booker Prize, securing her a position as one of the most respected authors of her generation. Her literary efforts culminated in 2021 with the publication of *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, the novel that has been described as her best one. Rooney's books have been repeatedly subjected to scrutiny from the point of view of Marxist literary criticism and the author herself publicly identifies with socialist values. Social class is a common and recurring theme in all of her novels, together with lengthy discussions about the politics of Ireland and the Middle East.

Nonetheless, Rooney's “Marxist view of the world” (Ingle) is of no particular interest to the purpose of this diploma thesis. However, a vast majority of her main protagonists show traits that could be, in my opinion, interestingly interpreted from the perspective of existentialist philosophy. I have chosen to examine *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021) because it differs significantly from her previous novels. It is a multi-layered piece of realistic fiction dealing with the nature of intellectual friendship between two women, sexual relationships, interpersonal communication, climate change, mental health and self-loathing, the importance of contemporary novels in the rapidly changing world and the anxiety caused by fame.

The second author of importance for this diploma thesis is an American novelist of Croatian and Iranian descent, Ottessa Moshfegh, whose debut novel *Eileen* (2015) was shortlisted for

the Booker Prize. However, it was her second novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) that brought Moshfegh to my attention. The story follows a young unnamed female in her mid-twenties, a recent art history graduate and a rich heiress, who is determined to sleep, with the help of psychopharmaceuticals, for an entire year. This boldly innovative novel, containing an unsympathetic main antihero and a variety of other disturbed characters, presents an ideal field for an existentialist analysis.

This diploma thesis aims to examine the novels *Beautiful World, Where Are You* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* from the perspective of existentialist philosophy. The theoretical part of this diploma thesis is comprised of two main chapters. The first one focuses on the roots of the philosophy of existentialism and its selected pioneers that influenced the rise of the existentialist movement later on. Two philosophers in particular will be mentioned, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), respectively, whose work is both challenging and irreplaceable.

Additionally are mentioned the elements of existentialism in literature from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century forward with an emphasis on the influence of French philosopher and author Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and his pivotal work *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946).

The primary sources for the theoretical part are the biography *Jean-Paul Sartre* (2006) written by British specialist on French existentialist philosophy Andrew N. Leak, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* (2006) by American philosopher Thomas Flynn (1936-2024), Sartre's aforementioned *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), Sartre's autobiography *The Words* (1963) depicting his childhood, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (fourth edition, 2013) and an anthology of selected existentialist works called *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre* (1956) by German philosopher and translator Walter Arnold Kaufmann (1921-1980). Additional sources are provided by an undergraduate research *Jean-Paul Sartre: Existentialism and Literature through World War II* (2006) written by Marc Rickenbach and selected works of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche.

The second and third chapters briefly examine the backgrounds and works of Sally Rooney and Ottessa Moshfegh. For these parts, several online reviews and interviews with the authors are used as primary sources. Authors' other works are mentioned and referred to as well.

The practical part is subdivided into two parts. The first one contains a comprehensive analysis of *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021) from the existentialist perspective; while the second

one is written in the same manner but is focused on *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018). The conclusion offers a comparative analysis of both novels.



## THEORETICAL PART

### 1 The roots of the philosophy of existentialism and its basic tenets

The online Cambridge dictionary characterises the term *existentialism* as follows:

A system of ideas made famous by Jean-Paul Sartre in the 1940s in which the world has no meaning and each person is alone and completely responsible for their actions, by which they make their character (Online Cambridge Dictionary).

“Existentialism is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy” (Kaufmann, 1956, 11). The term does not denote any group of thinkers or authors with an equivocal set of tenets and a unified view of the world. The expression has been used freely to label a variety of philosophers and authors whose opinions and publications often differed significantly (Kaufmann, 1956, 11-12). Although the existentialist movement became famous due to Jean-Paul Sartre, it consisted of many other influential authors and philosophers who contributed to the discourse. Even though they did not always see eye to eye they commented on each other's work and, thus, expanded the horizons of the existentialist scope.

Perhaps due to heavy criticism of their writing, the only thinkers of prominence who publicly admitted to being existentialists were Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir (Flynn iv).

However, despite its indisputable connection with Sartre and the years following the end of World War II, the roots of existentialism follow a long tradition in the history of Western philosophy, dating, at least, to Socrates (469-399 BC). Its focus was on the proper way of acting and living rather than on an abstract set of theoretical truths. Ancient Greeks distinguished between two different kinds of truth: the scientific and the moral. The former sought answers to the fundamental questions of life that resulted in the rise of science. On the other hand, the latter was concerned with the well-being and self-care of an individual. The scientific truth was accessible to anyone regardless of character while the moral truth required a certain type of person to reveal itself. Regular meditations, attention to diet and control of one's speech were just a few of the selected conditions to access the moral truth. Principles that eventually cost Socrates his life. It is in this larger tradition that existentialism as a philosophical movement can be located (Flynn 1-2).

Two prominent philosophical figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), both occasionally nicknamed as “fathers of existentialism” (Flynn 3), have had a profound impact on the development of existentialism as a philosophical movement (Flynn 3).

Kierkegaard, Denmark's most prominent philosopher and a pioneer of theistic existentialism, emphasized subjectivity and freedom. In his essay *The Present Age* (1846) Kierkegaard claims that society has entered a period of rapid change and superficiality. The present age, “with its sudden enthusiasm followed by apathy and indolence” (Kierkegaard, 1864), is characterized by “reflection” but people cannot take decisive action or make meaningful commitments. “Reflection” in the Kierkegaardian sense means the inability to take a spontaneous action without thinking about the consequences first. Such thinking produces fear and indecisiveness and eventually results in apathy. Rather than risk causing harm, one does not do anything meaningful. Subsequently, an individual is subsumed into the mass, there is a lack of individuality and authenticity and people are driven by social expectations and superficial desires. Gone is the action driven by genuine beliefs and conviction. Following the existentialists, Kierkegaard emphasizes the importance of the individual resisting conformist tendencies and embracing individuality by taking responsibility for one's actions.

In his first published work, *Either/Or* (1843), Kierkegaard introduces the theory of stages. The publication examines the process of how one becomes an individual human being. Each state has its characteristics and is compared to a morality tale (Flynn 26). The first stage is called the Aesthetic stage and, according to Kierkegaard, the majority of people spend their whole lives living solely in the Aesthetic stage (Flynn 29). Such a person is “focused on the present and remains indifferent to the past as repentance or the future as obligation except in a calculating manner geared to enhance the present” (Flynn 29). A typical representative of the Aesthetic stage is Don Juan (Flynn 26), an infamous seducer and aesthete, who “is incapable of the choice that enables him or her to be a self” (Flynn 31). The Ethical stage functions as a transition point between the Aesthetic and the Religious one and is illustrated by the example of Socrates. One moves from the aesthetic to the ethical stage by making ethical decisions. “Life is an ongoing choice and the failure to choose is itself a choice for which we are equally responsible” (Flynn 33). The person chooses a life comprised of rules instead of meaningless bliss and is interested in how his actions influence others (Vu). The final

stage is the one that Kierkegaard values the most. The Religious stage is represented by the Biblical character Abraham, who is perceived as the prototype of the Christian faith. Abraham believed he was commanded by God to sacrifice his only son in exchange for becoming the father of many nations. However, he could not reasonably prove that it was God who asked him to commit such an immoral act. Abraham experiences the anguish caused by his freedom to decide between his faith and morals (Flynn 34).

Besides other things, Kierkegaard was invested in the criticism of the modern mass media and the State church, two major tools of conformity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Copenhagen society (Flynn 26). His other profound contribution to the existentialist philosophy was the concept of the aforementioned anxiety or anguish. Kierkegaard claimed that by trying to maintain individuality, a person experiences anxiety, a fundamental and unavoidable human emotion that arises from our awareness of personal freedom and responsibility and from the confrontation with the vast amount of possibilities that lay before us (Flynn 7). On the other hand, anxiety could be understood as a positive emotion that compels people to confront their values. Due to his moral values and his ascetic and isolated life, he was an epitome of what Nietzsche described as a true philosopher: “He shall be the greatest who can be the loneliest, the most hidden, the most deviating, the human being beyond good and evil” (Nietzsche in Flynn 25-26). Friedrich Nietzsche's immersion into existentialism was slightly different. Unlike Kierkegaard, who was a deeply religious person, Nietzsche's view of the world was rather atheistic. His philosophy was crucial for the shaping of the existentialist movement considering his focus on the individual's struggle and the alleged meaninglessness and chaos of human existence. One of his key contributions to existentialism was his emphasis on the individual's responsibility to create their purpose in life and to rise above the “herd” (Flynn 25). In *The Gay Science* (1882) Nietzsche proclaimed his perhaps most famous conviction: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him... What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives” (Nietzsche in Kaufmann, 2013, 105). In other words, the traditional religious beliefs that had provided meaning and purpose in life were no longer relevant (Flynn 40) because the Age of Enlightenment transformed the Western way of thinking. However, mankind has yet to realize that it lost its God and once it does, universal madness will break out (Kaufmann, 2013, 97). This idea encouraged existential thinkers to confront the existential void and embrace the freedom to create their own values.

Rather than Christianity, a degenerative religion that caused the acceptance of “slave morality” (Kaufmann, 2013, 792-793), Nietzsche claimed that the impetus of all human beings is an irrational instinct called the “will to power”, the fundamental drive for power and domination. The will to power does not mean physical or military power, for Nietzsche had no major interest in these spheres of life (Kaufmann 420), the statement is more connected to a desire to fulfil one's potential. Because “for one thing is needful: that a human being attains his satisfaction with himself... only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold” (Nietzsche in Kaufmann, 2013, 420-421). Nietzsche describes the execution of the will to power “as giving style to one's character – a great and rare art. Conversely, it is the weak characters without power over themselves who hate the constraint of style” (Nietzsche in Kaufmann, 2013, 420). He also argued that the will to power is often obscured by social norms and religious beliefs.

Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche proved to be invaluable assets to Western philosophy, influencing not only the newly forming existentialist movement but many spheres of human life for decades to come. Apart from these philosophical giants, others contributed with their share of thoughts.

### **1.1 Jean-Paul Sartre and the basic tenets of existentialism**

Existentialism was the first modern philosophical movement intertwined with literature; the authors communicated their ideas through short stories, philosophical polemics, novels and plays. The influence of existentialist ideas on literature was so strong that some would prefer to characterize it as a literary movement (Flynn 16). Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, several pivotal literary authors demonstrated existentialist characteristics and whose work was of significant cultural importance. Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), Franz Kafka (1883-1924), Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994), Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) amongst others (Flynn 16).

Nevertheless, there was one character that, from the current point of view, overshadowed his literary predecessors and peers in terms of his philosophy. This individual was Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), “the last great writer before the war and the first after it”, who was born in Paris to “parents of petite bourgeoisie standing” (Rickenbach 2). Jean-Paul's father, a French naval officer, died of illness when he was only two years old. Shortly after his death, his mother relocated them to live with her parents in Meudon, a small town in the southwest of France famous for its scientific

research. Her father Carl Schweitzer, a teacher of German, introduced Jean-Paul to the world of classical literature and mathematics. The loss of his father, as he later admitted in his autobiography *The Words* (1963), had a liberating effect on his person. He was certain that the burden of the father-son relationship would have, eventually, crushed him (Leak 10). Leak describes Sartre's early childhood in the following manner:

Deprived of a father, he is also deprived of a destiny. A father would at least have given him something to revolt against. But, burdensome as it may be, the Father's law at least keeps the son anchored in reality. The absence of a father had endowed him with an incredible lightness that, at times, became unbearable (Leak 11).

Jean-Paul learned how to read at an early age and soon became acquainted with the contents of his grandfather's library. Soon, his mother decided that the toms containing the works of Racine, Voltaire and Flaubert were not suitable for a mere child and furnished the library with popular comic books and famous childhood classics of that era, such as *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and the works of Jules Verne (1828-1905) (Leak 12).

Shortly, young Sartre began to exhibit a writing talent. His prowess, however, was highly frowned upon by his grandfather, who held professional writers in high contempt. Carl Schweitzer, being a professor himself, imagined his grandson to follow in his footsteps of "quiet mediocrity" and become a teacher (Leak 13-14).

Until the age of ten Sartre was educated at home by his mother and grandfather (Leak 11) until he entered a Lycée in 1915 where he spent two years. When he was twelve years old, in 1917, his mother remarried and finally became financially independent of her parents (Leak 15).

Sartre's already complicated relationship with his mother, whom he had simply addressed as Anne-Marie, took a different turn. When they lived with Jean-Paul's grandparents in their family house at La Rochelle, the family was patriarchal and Sartre's mother did not appear to him as a figure of authority. In his autobiography, he describes their relationship as follows:

Whom would I obey? I am shown a young giantess, I am told she's my mother. I would take her rather for an elder sister. That virgin who is under surveillance, who is obedient to everyone, I can see very well that she is there to serve me. I love

her, but how can I respect her if no one else does? There are three bedrooms in our home: my grandfather's, my grandmother's and "the children's". The children are we. [...] She tells me her troubles and I listen compassionately (Sartre, 1981, 21).

One point specifically is a recurring phenomenon in Sartre's musings. Anne-Marie desired a daughter but her prayers had been ignored. Nonetheless, her desire was so strong that she occasionally feminized her son. Until the age of seven, Jean-Paul had a long mane of blond curls that gently complimented his youthful face, a thing that greatly irritated his grandfather who eventually decided to dispose of the "angelic" curls, against Anne-Marie's loud protests. This incident resulted in the realization that he is, in fact, ugly and insufficient, and the only thing that kept it hidden were his curls (Sartre, 1981, 103-104).

After Anne-Marie's triumphant marriage to Joseph Mancy, whom Sartre detested, the family moved away to the west coast of France (Leak 15). Her mother's marriage "further alienated the young boy, leaving Sartre with a foul taste in his mouth regarding his childhood and steered him toward an individualistic lifestyle" (Rickenbach 3). Literature and writing became a source of comfort, for Jean-Paul was bullied for his gradually showing medical condition and delicate physique. Sartre suffered from strabismus, a condition resulting in a wandering right eye that caused him great difficulties when reading or writing. "On the rare occasions that Sartre could be persuaded to recall his adolescence, the themes that recur are violence and humiliation" (Leak 16). France was at war at that time and boys were under the impression that they were allowed to exercise violence while their fathers were away (Leak 16).

During his second year at the Lycée Sartre discovered his newly formed interest in philosophy, having previously regarded it as dull (Leak 18). It was a philosophy that he decided to pursue at the university because it aligned with his perception of his future career as a professional writer. Philosophy was, after all about discovering the hidden truths of the world and its inhabitants, not unlike writing. He also perceived philosophy as a means of earning an income through teaching while writing (Leak 19).

The four years spent at the university were the happiest in his life. Sartre gained a reputation for his unorthodox mind, hard work and fondness for sarcasm and soon became a prominent member of the local intellectual circles (Leak 20). During the academic year of 1928-1929, Sartre met a woman who would shape the next fifty-one years of his life. Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was an exceptional person who

refused to succumb to the expectations of her era about the traditional roles of women in society. Although the couple never married, they remained partners until Sartre's death in 1980. De Beauvoir, with characteristics that could be described as masculine, gently complimented Sartre's hidden feminine side and proved to be an intellectually challenging sparring partner (Leak 22-23).

During his years at the Lycée, Sartre remained surprisingly unmoved by the political situation in France and Europe in general. It was only after the liberation of France during the Second World War that Sartre became involved in politics. Until then he failed to take notice of the society (Flynn 91). Initially, he took a liking towards “the non-communist politics of the Left but, as the Cold War developed, he shared political and social concerns with his former critics, the French Communist party” (Flynn 91), who had labelled his philosophy as “contemplative, luxurious and bourgeois” (Cohen-Solal 10). Sartre never officially joined the Party but his relationship with the French Communists could be described as a “love-hate relationship” until the 1960s, with the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia when his sympathies vanished irretrievably (Flynn 91-92).

Nonetheless, the main reason why he decided to deliver the famous lecture on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October 1945 in Paris was to explain his philosophical stance to a wider public and make peace with the French Communist Party, an attempt that failed in terms of the latter (Elkaïm-Sartre in Sartre, 1996, 12). The aim of the lecture, known worldwide as *Existentialism is a Humanism*, was “to convince people about the humanistic nature of his doctrine” (Elkaïm-Sartre in Sartre, 1996, 7).

Sartre's previous works *Being and Nothingness*, *The Age of Reason* and *The Reprieve* were met with contempt and were criticised for the alleged cynicism of their characters which was deemed as inappropriate in the years following the Second World War. Sartre faced criticism from the major intellectual groups of his time; Christians were not bothered by his atheism, however, “they chastised him for being a materialist, while Communists reproached him for not being one” (Elkaïm-Sartre in Sartre, 1996, 9). [...] “His ideas on contingency, abandonment and anguish repelled both sides” (Elkaïm-Sartre in Sartre, 1996, 9).

Sartre disagreed with the allegations in the following manner: “I think what bothers people most about my characters is their lucidity. They know what they are, and that is what they chose to be” (Sartre in Elkaïm-Sartre 8). The main character of the two aforementioned volumes, *The Age of Reason* and *The Reprieve*, a philosophy teacher

Mathieu, has three days to seek money to pay for his girlfriend's abortion to maintain his freedom (Rickenbach 16). A character by no means positive, however, his sole asset is his search for a free life.

The controversies around Sartre's proclamations, which were often taken out of context, were enhanced by the attention of the media and resembled the current practices of some openly hostile sensation-seeking media of the modern era (Elkaïm-Sartre in Sartre, 1996, 8). One such example could be illustrated in Sartre's memorable replica of his one-act play *No Exit* (1944) where one of the characters famously declares that "Hell is other people!". Such a statement could be perceived as offensive without the proper knowledge of the context, nevertheless, the play is literary set in Hell and its three main characters, "recently deceased individuals forced to interact with one another", are trapped together in one of the Hell's rooms without any means to escape (Binder). By employing the famous quote Sartre meant that we are forced to co-exist with other human beings who often pose a threat to our individuality (Binder). Sartre's other infamous replicas were subjected to the overt attention of the tabloids as well. The majority of his critics stressed that, in their eyes, Sartre was becoming "an anti-humanist par excellence by demoralizing the French society at the time when France, lying in ruins, most needed hope" (Elkaïm-Sartre in Sartre, 1996, 9).

*Existentialism is a Humanism* is the only publication that Sartre openly regretted making. Regardless, the stenographer's transcript, slightly altered by Sartre, remains Sartre's most famous work up to this date. "The lecture became one of the mythical of the post-war era, the first event of its time, giving rise to the Sartre phenomenon" (Cohen-Solal in Sartre, 1996, 11). "In the past philosophers were attacked only by other philosophers. The general public did not understand philosophy at all, nor did they care. These days, philosophy is shut down in the public square" explained Sartre in one of his interviews (Cohen-Solal 11).

Throughout the lecture, Sartre attempted to explain the main principles of the philosophy of existentialism to the broad public. He spoke without notes in a crowded room and began by addressing every concern voiced by his Communist and Catholic detractors. During the lengthy lecture, Sartre articulated a variety of principal tenets of the existentialist philosophy, himself and only afterwards defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because, to begin with, he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is



not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism (Sartre, 2007, 22).

To summarize, Sartre rejects the idea of a predetermined human nature and asserts that humans are defined by their actions and choices. He defines his philosophy as atheistic existentialism and, thus, mentions the absence of God, a concept further elaborated on in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Employing the first principle of existentialism also means accepting subjectivity, the expression used as a reproach against the existentialist philosophy. “What we mean to say is that man first exists; that is, that man primarily exists – that man is, before all else, something that projects itself into a future and is conscious of doing so” (Sartre, 2007, 23).

“Existence precedes essence” is a concept inseparable from the Sartreian understanding of freedom and personal responsibility:

Thus, the first effect of existentialism is to make every man conscious of what he is and to make him solely responsible for his own existence. And when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is only responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men (Sartre, 2007, 23).

Each man has to choose his own path in life and by doing so he automatically chooses for other men, for mankind, as well by setting a desired example, such is the nature of individual responsibility. One's personal choice “affirms the value of what we choose because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good and nothing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all” (Sartre, 2007, 24). Sartre recalls Abraham's inner mental struggle and claims that every man should ask himself: “Am I really a man who is entitled to act in such a way that the entire human race should be measured by my actions?” (Sartre, 2007, 26-27).

Once an individual realizes the extent of his or her responsibility he or she experiences anguish (anxiety), “which denotes our implicit awareness of our freedom as the sheer possibility of possibility” (Flynn 70).

The term was assigned its philosophical meaning by Kierkegaard and was further elaborated on by the existentialists who contrasted anguish with fear. Fear has a concrete

recipient; a man is always afraid of something. However, anguish is the lingering awareness of our capability to make decisions, albeit irrational ones that have a negative impact on our well-being, like jumping off a cliff (Flynn 70-71). The feeling of anguish is connected with the responsibility a person holds over everyone else and with the need to make decisions, although trivial ones. Anguish is a common emotional state in many societies of the modern era. People are forced to discover their purpose in life by going through a variety of different possibilities and career paths.

“For existentialists, the ethical considerations are paramount” (Flynn 6). Nietzsche in two of his philosophical volumes, *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, famously proclaimed the death of God. Nietzsche claimed that people are not yet aware of God's absence and predicted the approaching eruption of chaos, once they realize it. Sartre claimed that “existentialists are strongly opposed to a certain type of secular morality that seeks to eliminate God as painlessly as possible” (Sartre, 2007, 27-28). At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, several French professors attempted to formulate such secular morality by rendering God a worthless and costly anachronism that would soon be forgotten when ignored and that “nothing will have changed if people encounter the same standards of honesty, progress and humanism” (Sartre, 2007, 28). Existentialists were significantly troubled by this approach, claiming: “If we are to have a morality, a civil society and a law-abiding world, it is essential that certain values be taken seriously; they must have an a priori existence ascribed to them” (Sartre, 2007, 28). “Nowhere is it written that good exists, that we must be honest or must not lie, since we are on a plane shared only by men” (Sartre, 2007, 28). In the words of Dostoyevsky: “If God no longer exists everything is permissible” (Dostoyevsky in Sartre, 2007, 28-29). That is one of the starting points of existentialism. Because if existence precedes essence then there is no determinism. Subsequently, if God does not exist there are no values or truths to rely on and people are left to fend on their own. This is what Sartre meant by asserting that “the man is condemned to be free” (Sartre, 2007, 29). Condemned because “once he is cast into the world he becomes responsible for his actions” (Sartre, 2007, 29).

“Man is nothing other than his project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life” (Sartre, 2007, 37). That is why people criticised the existentialist philosophy because it terrified them; it reminded them of their imperfections. People could no longer blame the “circumstances” for their misfortune. (Sartre, 2007, 37).

One of the criticisms Sartre had to face was an assertion that existentialist philosophy is anti-humanistic. Nonetheless, “existentialism is a person-centred philosophy. Its focus is on the humans' pursuit of identity and meaning amidst the social and economic pressures of mass society for superficiality and conformism” (Flynn 8).

## **1.2 Existentialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

“Admittedly, as a phenomenon of popular Western culture, existentialism reached its high point in the years immediately following the end of the Second World War” (Flynn 104). Sartre's philosophy caused an uproar because it dealt with sensitive personal questions concerning a person and their role in society. People in France during the 1940's had no interest in pondering such topics so soon after the end of the Second World War. Existentialism made them angry because they did not understand the message it was trying to convey. The philosophy that advised people how to live their lives to the best of their ability was interpreted by the general public and even by some philosophers as offensive and nihilistic.

Common people were not usually skilled enough to understand this kind of subject matter and, in the past, they had no interest in such topics. This time, the situation was different. The connection of philosophical thoughts shared through the means of mainstream media such as theatre plays, short stories and novels was an unprecedented one. In relation to Sartre's ensuing celebrity status caused by the delivery of *Existentialism is a Humanism*, the general public needed time to adjust.

Often it has been claimed that existentialism was replaced by structuralism in the 1960s, followed by post-structuralism in the 1970s (Flynn 107), however, Jean-Paul Sartre is still perceived as the greatest philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a person who influenced the course of philosophy for the subsequent fifty years.

Existentialism is quite possibly the most up-to-date philosophical movement whose principles are widely applicable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The rise of technologies poses questions about the authenticity of human existence in a digital age. Social media are presenting people's embellished side that does not necessarily correspond with their true selves, “challenging the existential pursuit of authenticity” (Kennedy).

Meanwhile, the climate crisis highlights the absurdity of human actions in the face of impending environmental catastrophes. Activists like Greta Thurnberg draw attention to the concept of collective responsibility. “This represents a paradigm shift from

individualism to a more communal form of existentialism” (Kennedy). Housing crises in selected countries and political instability around the globe are other sources of anguish, existential despair and feelings of alienation, especially for younger people. In connection with the sudden increase in mental health issues such as depression and anxiety following the pandemic of COVID-19, modern-day society is faced with a difficult challenge. All of the aforementioned social issues are represented in the two contemporary novels, *Beautiful World, Where Are You* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, which are further analysed from the existentialist perspective in the practical part of this diploma thesis.

Regarding the existentialist traits in contemporary literature, the number of works that could be labelled as existentialist is extensive. Except for Sally Rooney and Ottessa Moshfegh, two authors that are explored throughout this diploma thesis, there are many recent influential novels with the traits of existentialist philosophy. For instance, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt (1992) contains a main male protagonist who finds the nature of life absurd. *Boy Parts* (2020) a debut novel by a young British literary talent Eliza Clark (1994) explores the twisted mind of a disturbed young woman in contemporary society. A literary sensation that seeped through even into the Czech literary circles is a young British author Coco Mellors who impressed the public with her debut novel *Cleopatra and Frankenstein* (2022). The novel tells the story of a newlywed couple that is facing an existential crisis, addictions and many other difficulties.

From the foreign non-English authors it is worth mentioning Karl Ove Knausgård (1968) and his series of provocative autobiographic novels published in six volumes or the Japanese author Sayaka Murata (1979) and her English-language debut *Convenience Store Woman* (2016) about woman that is emotionally fixated on her job in a convenience store because it is the only thing that makes sense to her in the world full of absurdity and ambiguousness. In *No One is Talking about This* (2021) Patricia Lockwood explores the impact of social media on our interpersonal communication and self-perception. The author highlights inauthenticity and alienation as the main consequences of one's excessive usage of social media.

## 2 The life and works of Sally Rooney

“The first great novelist of the millennial generation” (Dubey) was born in Castlebar, a county town located in the rural western part of Ireland, in the year 1991. As the daughter of the director of a community arts centre, she attended exhibitions and theatre performances with her parents and two siblings regularly (Dubey). Her affinity for literature bloomed already in her teenage years when she attended meetings hosted by the arts centre and wrote short stories that she subsequently shared with her colleagues (Rooney in Brookes). By the age of fifteen, she completed a novel. She attended an all-girls Roman Catholic high school, an experience she “loathed” (Pearson-Jones). In general, Rooney's relationship towards institutional schooling was a complicated one. In a later interview for *The New Yorker*, she described her experience in the following way: “I just found it kind of baffling, the whole institution of school. I was, like, does no one see that this is repressive and that there are more of us than there are of them?” (Rooney for Collins). She reaffirmed this statement in a recent interview for *The Guardian* by claiming: “I don't respond to authority very well. I fundamentally don't agree with accepting authority that you haven't agreed to in some way“ (Rooney for Armitstead). Rooney's authority issues together with the religious nature of St. Joseph's Secondary School posed a considerable challenge for the young artist (Pearson-Jones) who was struggling with the dress code, homework policy and the mandatory lectures discouraging premarital sexual intercourse (Dubey). “Years later, themes of sexuality and partnership outside of marriage would be central to her novels“ (Dubey).

Subsequently, Rooney attended Trinity College in Dublin, an alma mater of the majority of her future main literary characters. She graduated in 2013 with a degree in English literature. She reinvented herself while at Trinity and joined the local debating team, eventually winning the title of the best debater in Europe at the age of 22 (Pearson-Jones). Afterwards, she quit the team and published an essay in *The Dublin Review* where she explained her decision to leave. The essay, titled *Even if you beat me* (2015), sparked an interest in its literary qualities (Dubey). In the following year, she wrote her debut novel, *Conversations with Friends* (2017), causing an auction for the publishing rights between seven publishing houses (Dubey) and ending with Faber and Faber as the winning party (Alter). *Conversations with Friends* follows the complex relationships and lives of two Trinity college students and former girlfriends, Frances, the narrator, and Bobbi. Both girls occasionally perform their slam poetry at various clubs. One evening they get noticed

by a renowned journalist and essayist Melissa, a meeting that would shape the rest of their lives. Melissa invites them home and introduces them to her husband Nick, an actor grappling with his waning career and a creeping depression. Eventually, Frances begins an affair with Nick and Bobbi forms a close friendship with Melissa, which causes tension within their social circles. “The novel highlights how complex interpersonal relationships can help people develop their individual and political identities” (Dubey). Written without the use of quotation marks, *Conversations with Friends* explores themes of love, friendship, jealousy, capitalism (Ingle) and personal insecurities, underscored by the strong presence of left-wing politics. The novel took Rooney three months to write and it earned her the nickname “Salinger for the Snapchat generation” (Clark), a label that she is rather uncomfortable with, stating: “I feel a lot of anxiety about being ‘chosen’ or labelled the voice of a generation because I represent a privileged slice of that generation—I’m not really a representative emissary” (Rooney in Hart).

Rooney's second novel *Normal People* (2018) was one of the most talked about books of the year. The book focuses on the complex relationship between two students, Marianne and Connell, who live in County Sligo located in the north-west part of Ireland. Marianne comes from a wealthy Irish family with a complicated background. With a history of domestic abuse from her male family members and a cold relationship with her distant mother, she develops a variety of coping mechanisms to survive. Regardless of her exceptional intelligence she remains known as the least popular girl at school with no social circle she could lean on.

Connell lives with his young mother in a small house, not far away from Marianne's place. He is one of the most popular boys at school, a status that stems from his place on the school football team and his good looks combined with superior intelligence. Connell and Marianne know each other from school but they choose to ignore one another despite their connection. Connell's mother supports herself as a cleaner and occasionally works at Marianne's house. On such occasion, Connell must give her a lift home. In the meantime, he talks with Marianne. Despite their social differences, they develop a strong personal connection that quickly grows into a sexual one. However, Connell is ashamed of their relationship and decides to publicly date another girl, one that his friends would accept. In a few short months Marianne and Connell meet again at Trinity College in Dublin but this time the situation is diametrically different. Marianne is suddenly known as the most popular girl at school, attending parties and winning competitions and scholarships. Connell, who had already lost contact with his former friends, is struggling both

financially and socially. Marianne takes him under her wing and the couple rekindles their romance.

The novel follows their meetings and email conversations from their teenage years into adulthood. Marianne and Connell's complicated dynamic is shaped by their unsolved insecurities and past traumas, ultimately leading them to question their place in the predominantly capitalist patriarchal society (Dubey).

Both, *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, delve into the characters' inner thoughts and emotions, shedding light on the complexities of human relationships and the desire for human connection and mutual understanding. “Rooney has expressed an affinity for writing dialogues and terse ironic conversations that populate her novels. She employs contemporary communication methods, particularly email and text messages, as literary tools. Her spare prose has earned her comparisons to Ernest Hemingway” (Dubey). Rooney's third, and, allegedly, the best, novel was released in 2021 (Marriott). *Beautiful World Where Are You* is the main subject of analysis in the practical part.

Sally Rooney is extensively vocal about her political views, citing a strong influence of her upbringing. Her parents were “passionate about passing on socialist values” (Pearson-Jones). Rooney, a self-described Marxist feminist, often explicitly expresses her Marxist values in her work, stating: “The way I see the world today is most through a Marxist Framework“ (Pearson-Jones). She is also publicly commenting on a variety of political and social issues, for instance, the housing crisis in Ireland and the Israel-Palestine war (Dubey).

As of June 2024, two of Rooney's novels were adapted into TV series. At first *Normal People* (2020) starred Daisy Edgar-Jones as Marianne and Paul Mescal as Connell. *Conversations with Friends* followed in 2022 with Alison Oliver as Frances and Joe Alwyn as Nick. The author's upcoming novel *Intermezzo* is set to be published in September 2024 (Knight 2024).

### 3 The life and works of Ottessa Moshfegh

Perhaps less famous but of the same literary prowess, Ottessa Moshfegh entered the literary scene with the Man Booker Prize nomination for her debut “dark noir” novel *Eileen* in 2015. The story of Eileen, now an elderly woman who is reminiscing about a one week of her life from fifty years ago, was adapted into a movie starring Thomasin McKenzie as Eileen and Anne Hathaway as the recurring character Rebecca in 2023 (Moshfegh, 2023). Before *Eileen*, Moshfegh had supported herself by publishing short stories in *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review* (Kelleher). However, unlike many other debut authors, she was confident in her skills and was not perturbed or surprised by the Man Booker Prize nomination (Moshfegh, 2023). Her main goal was to earn a living by publishing books (Kelleher). On the other hand, publishing a fully-fledged novel felt surreal to her.

In an article for *The Guardian* in November 2023 she describes her experience with creating *Eileen* as follows:

Writing a full-length novel that resembled something a normal person might read felt like an act of underhanded rebellion. [...] I felt that I was feeding the beast of a capitalist book industry while using my artistic sensibilities to sneak in some subversive ideas in order to feed myself and maintain my creative integrity (Moshfegh, 2023).

Her family had to leave Iran in 1978 due to the Islamic Revolution (Moshfegh in Cummings). Three years later, Ottessa was born in Boston, Massachusetts; her mother is of Croatian descent while her father is an Iranian Jewish. Both of them are professional musicians which initially inspired Ottessa to follow in their footsteps. When she was fourteen years old she began to pursue writing instead (Kelleher). During her tumultuous teens, she developed an eating disorder and an alcohol dependence. Throughout her twenties, she attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings to sort out her past (Kelleher).

After receiving a bachelor's degree in English at Barnard College in 2002, she moved to China, to teach English (Kelleher) and work in a punk bar (Levy). Two years later she returned to the United States and applied for a job at the publishing house as an assistant to the former editor of *The Paris Review* in New York City. Following



a successful start in the United States, she published her first book, a prizewinning historical novella, called *McGlue* (2014). It tells the story of the eponymous sailor who is accused of killing his best friend while drunk. Moshfegh had noticed an article from 1851 at a local library describing the event and she felt compelled to “transform the work into a piece of historical fiction” (Kelleher).

Working on her breakthrough novel was, in a way, an unconventional process. Even prior *Eileen*, she had been praised as “a crucial new voice in American fiction” (Laity), nevertheless, her award-winning short stories and *McGlue* were not overly profitable (Moshfegh in Laity). In an interview for *The Guardian* swiftly following her Man Booker Prize shortlisting, Moshfegh boldly claimed that her motivation had been purely financial:

I didn't want to “keep my head down” and “wait 30 years to be discovered ... so I thought I'm going to do something bold. Because there are all these morons making millions of dollars, so why not me? I'm smart and talented and motivated and disciplined and ... talented: did I say that already? I said: fuck it. Which was also: fuck them. I was pretty hostile. I thought: I'll show you how easy this is. I went out and bought a book called *The 90-Day Novel* by Alan Watt. It's ridiculous, to claim that anybody can write a great book, and quickly too. And I thought if I were to do this, what would happen, would my head explode? So I followed it for 60 days – it was so boring. [...] So ... it started out as a fuck-you joke, also I'm broke, also I want to be famous. It was that kind of a gesture (Moshfegh in Laity).

The character of Eileen Dunlop sparked a controversy and a wave of resentment. Moshfegh portrayed her main heroine as a deeply unlikable, negative and ugly self-hating character who is obsessed with her own body and body odour and is not ashamed to describe her life with an eating disorder and alcoholism (Moshfegh, 2023). Even her profession caused some upheaval because Eileen, “the female version of Holden Caulfield” (Sielinski) worked at the juvenile detention centre where she occasionally spied on the masturbating juvenile boys. Her self-perception was altered slightly with the arrival of a new colleague, a mysterious psychologist Rebecca, who takes a sudden interest in Eileen.

Moshfegh's following publication was a collection of fourteen selected short stories called *Homesick for Another World* (2017). The stories had been previously published

in various magazines throughout the years. The collection received some predominantly positive reviews.

*Death in Her Hands* (2020), a satirical parody of detective stories, was met with less enthusiasm. It is the story of a newly widowed elderly lady named Vesta who discovers a mysterious note in the woods that says "Her name was Magda. Nobody will ever know who killed her. It wasn't me. Here is her dead body" (Moshfegh, 2020, 1). With nobody in sight and no intentions to call the police, Vesta becomes obsessed with solving the mystery. However, she is an unreliable narrator, partially due to her age and partially because of her complicated past. Vesta is a self-isolating character living alone with her dog in extreme solitude. The majority of the rather claustrophobic novel is set mainly in the mind of Vesta who is thinking relentlessly about the enigmatic Magda and her faith. Magda's mystery might serve as a coping mechanism for the death of her controlling husband, a German scientist Walter (Thomas-Corr).

Moshfegh's latest novel was written during the pandemic of COVID-19 and released in 2022. *Lapvona*, "named after its fictitious setting, a medieval eastern European hamlet rife with rape, murder and cannibalism" (Cummins), was supposed to be a different novel entirely, yet, Moshfegh felt the urge to give in to the sudden absurdity of the COVID-19 pandemics and to create something different. *Lapvona* is a nihilistic tale of violence narrated in the third person by several struggling and hapless characters. In the author's own words: "The world is violent. Why should fiction pretend it's not?" (Moshfegh in Cummins) For the first time, Moshfegh avoided the first-person narration because she could not stand the notion of being trapped in her consciousness while in lockdown (Moshfegh in Cummins). Moshfegh is an avid movie fan and often seeks inspiration in cinematography. *Eileen* was influenced by Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) (Moshfegh, 2023) and for *Lapvona*, she drew from Ingmar Bergman's (1918-2007) *The Virgin Spring* (1960) a tale about the rape and murder of a teenage girl in medieval Sweden (Cummins).

"Depraved, delusional, and drawn to self-destruction, her protagonists are difficult to love, but hypnotizing to watch" (Sojit-Pejcha). Moshfegh's second novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) is the subject of analysis in the practical part and, thus, will be examined later.

## **PRACTICAL PART**

### **1 Beautiful World, Where Are You**

Sally Rooney's third novel was published in 2021 and it has often been regarded as her best one. Much like in her two previous novels, Rooney examines the interpersonal relationships of characters from different social classes and illustrates their difficulties in successfully communicating with one another. The strong presence of Rooney's Marxist worldview is once again prevailing, a perspective that she is proud of as she often mentions during interviews. This time, however, Rooney delivered a multi-layered contemporary novel that differs from her previous work substantially. Her characters at the novel's beginning are no longer in their teens they are nearing their thirties. They are trying to find a place in the constantly changing world that neither of them truly understands, struggling with existential anguish and alienation. Once again, the book lacks the traditional linear plot one would expect from a novel and, thus, it has been labelled as an "antinovel" by several literary reviewers. Individual chapters from the points of view of the four main characters are alternating with chapters composed of epistolary correspondence between the two main female protagonists. Eventually, the characters meet in person resulting in the climax of suppressed emotions. The novel finishes with two chapters already set during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rooney tells a story of four protagonists, however, the novel is centred on Alice and Eileen, two 29-year-old Irish women and best friends. Alice is a typical Rooney female protagonist, her personality could be characterised as that of an intellectual elitist whose behaviour oscillates somewhere between arrogance and insecurity. After obtaining a degree in English literature at an unspecified university in Dublin, she felt the need to fill the void in her life caused by a painful break-up and began writing a novel. Following the unexpected success of her work, she suffered a mental breakdown and spent several weeks at a psychiatric hospital, deciding to spend some time away from public scrutiny afterwards, she moved to a rectory in a smaller town. The character of Alice is gradually unfolded through the written and spoken interactions with her best friend Eileen, their mutual friend Simon and Felix, a young man she met through a dating "app". Eileen received a Master's degree from Irish literature and began working as an editor for an unknown literary magazine. She was an anxious and often ill child, always compared to her popular and ambitious older sister Lola. During her studies she received several awards for her essays. Her long-time boyfriend just broke up with her, which only fuels her

depression and feelings of inferiority. Eileen is in love with Simon, an older childhood friend who grapples with his problems.

This part of the diploma thesis is focused on finding the basic traits of the philosophy of existentialism in the novel *Beautiful World, Where are You*. The analysis attempts to adhere to the structure of the theoretical part and thus begins with frameworks of Søren Kierkegaard followed by the implications of Friedrich Nietzsche's proclamation "God is dead" within the context of the novel. The analysis culminates with the principal tenets of existentialism that Jean-Paul Sartre mentioned in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, primarily: Sartre's proclamation that "existence precedes essence", alienation and anxiety, freedom and personal responsibility and finishes with humanism. After deliberate consideration, several references to the literary works of Albert Camus were integrated into the analysis as well, although they are omitted in the theoretical part of this diploma thesis.

Rooney's protagonists could not lead their lives without feelings of absurdity and meaninglessness. They became almost a "trademark" of her novels. Those feelings have either a validating purpose and allow the protagonists to navigate the courses of their lives in some way or they are all a part of the bigger picture that could be analysed from the point of view of Kierkegaard's theory of stages. Either way, they seem to be inevitable. Kierkegaard claimed that for a person to become an individual human being and lead an authentic life, they have to go through a series of three spheres of existence, the Aesthetic, the Ethical and the Religious. Alas, the majority of people remain only within the confines of the aesthetic sphere for the entirety of their lives. The ethical sphere functions as a transition between the aesthetic sphere and the religious one. The third sphere of existence is extremely difficult to achieve because one has to confront their fears and make decisions, regardless of their worry, just like the biblical Abraham. Alice and Eileen are momentarily trapped within the snares of the Aesthetic sphere. As the novel unfolds, their mutual correspondence which functions as a parallel to their inner speech, shows an overlap to the higher sphere of existence, i.e. the Ethical one. Perhaps the biggest evolvment throughout the novel underwent Eileen who eventually neared the Religious stage by accepting her fear of the unknown, although the shift in her thinking seems slightly rushed and artificial.

Eileen is convinced that life is meaningless and absurd because "we're living in a period of historical crisis" (Rooney, 2021, 38). She is convinced that modern life as they know it is going to end sooner or later due to the climate crisis and, therefore, she cannot truly form a relationship

with the world; her stance is dissociative. In an e-mail to Alice, she lengthily describes the collapse of civilization during the Late Bronze Era and contrasts it with the present. That passage to some extent resembles Kierkegaard's thoughts in *The Present Age* where he glamorized the past for its enthusiasm and denounced the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his present age, for its indifference. Kierkegaard criticized his present age for its “sudden enthusiasm followed by apathy and indolence” (Kierkegaard, 1864). Considering he managed to form this opinion in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one could only speculate how he would cope with the contemporary era. Eileen and Alice ponder the question of the approaching civilizational collapse and ask themselves whether they would notice such a thing happening because in the past those truly “civilised” were not abundant, hence the majority of the population changed very little.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the whole novel is the character of Simon who raises the book onto another plane of existence. Simon is openly religious; he prays to God and regularly attends masses. He works as a political advisor for the Irish liberal party and is a genuinely good person. Alice and Eileen look up to him and perceive him as a moral authority because of his calmness and adherence to religious values. Nevertheless, his inner struggle and inability to maintain happiness in his life remain the same as theirs. Importantly, he, together with the other protagonists, is aware of the sources of his suffering.

The girls repeatedly proclaim the nonexistence of God but not entirely in the Nietzschean sense that would imply the loss of universal moral beliefs. They respect the values stemming from Christianity because they are “right”, even though, as they admit, they could not possibly know whether those values are the correct ones because God does not exist. But it is a generally accepted opinion, even though “if we're all just going to die in the end, who's to say what's right and what isn't?” (Rooney, 2021, 83). Alice perceives Jesus in the same manner as any other literary character that inspires and fascinates her but in a more personal and stronger manner. She is fascinated by his deeds, his alleged good looks and his humble personality: “Everything about his life moves me. I feel toward him a kind of personal attraction and closeness that is most reminiscent of my feelings for certain beloved fictional characters” (Rooney, 2021, 185). Jesus arouses strong feelings of admiration and even something akin to love within Alice, however, “rather than filling me with spiritual peace, the example set by Jesus only makes my existence seem trivial and shallow in comparison” (Rooney, 2021, 186). What is disregarded in the novel is the presence of the institutional religion as the moral authority, even though Simon is a regular attendee of the Masses. For the first time in a Rooney novel, religion plays

an important role for the development of her protagonists. Even though three out of the four main protagonists are more atheistic than religious, the absence of God inspires them to question the validity of some established life truths.

Alice claims that the new religion of modern society is celebrity worship and that the “fans” or “worshippers” praise their idols but they also have a strong tendency towards forming generalised beliefs, idolising a person they self-constructed in their minds to match their desires and expectations. Such a description of modern toxicity might originate from Rooney's own experience as an internationally celebrated author. Anyhow, it could be assumed that for Alice, the literary celebrity, the meaning of Sartre's “hell is other people” is, indeed, valid. Her mission was to publish novels, she did not attempt to become famous. This point is examined in detail later on.

The main protagonists are typical cases of existentialist literary characters, similar to those of Sartre. Alice was even called a literary “antihero” by several reviewers. The themes of alienation, existential anguish, authenticity and responsibility are present throughout the whole novel, even though they are not explicitly labelled by Rooney as existentialist. The only type of organized thoughts of any kind that she publicly praises as her source of inspiration is Marxism. Nonetheless, it would be wise to examine another major aspect of the existentialist philosophy and that is Sartre's famous proclamation “existence precedes essence”, later explained and published in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. According to Sartre, humans are defined by their actions and choices. Factors like the predetermined nature of human beings, one's social background and upbringing are deemed irrelevant by the existentialists. A person is born, however, it is only later on, during his or her life that one forms the essential qualities that make the human being unique. People are condemned to be free and the only factor that hinders their decisions is their fear of accepting responsibility for their actions, which results in anxiety and existential anguish. In the novel's context, Alice is an example of a “self-made” woman who rose above the expectations of her family while Eileen is portrayed as the poor girl who achieved very little in life and is constantly compared with her ambitious older sister Lola. In all of her novels, Rooney keeps emphasizing the social class of her characters as something that shapes their life decisions and interpersonal relationships because this opinion is deeply ingrained in the way she sees the world. A worldview that could be very limiting if one decided to accept it wholeheartedly. Existentialism completely disregards such beliefs, stating “the man is condemned to be free” (Sartre, 2007, 29). Condemned because “once he is cast into the world he becomes responsible for his own actions” (Sartre, 2007, 29). One cannot blame his or her

failure on external forces because then they would lead a life of self-deception. The main protagonists of *Beautiful World, Where Are You* tend to do exactly that. Their freedom manifests primarily in the form of anxiety and anguish. The ability to make decisions paralyzes them and anchors them in their passivity. Especially Eileen, who under the pretence of intellectual conversation blames the environmental crisis and capitalism for the fact that she has not been able to rise to her potential, yet.

Alice has been struggling with feelings of alienation and existential anguish for the majority of her adult life. Throughout her studies at university, she was not able to fit in due to her personality. She was prone to picking fights with the teachers she disagreed with politically. The distance she had from her family and peers was only the pinnacle of her unhappiness. Alice, just like the main and predominantly male protagonists in Sartre's literary works, finds the absurdity of life suffocating and cannot bring herself to care about anything specific. Her moving to the rectory could symbolize her quest to find a purpose in life. However, the locality of her new whereabouts speaks of insecurity, contradiction and even liminality. She desperately wants to see her friends but she never brings herself to make the arrangements, in fact, it does not even cross her mind. In their e-mail correspondence, Alice suggests several times for Eileen to come and visit, yet it still takes them several months before they see each other personally. In the meantime, Alice embarks on several business trips, however, she makes sure that her flight from Dublin is always either late at night or early in the morning.

In the first chapter, she has a first date with Felix at a local hotel. Felix is of the same age as Alice and works in a warehouse. At first, he is perplexed and a bit intimidated by her peculiar, cold and distant personality and has doubts about her profession as a novelist, thinking she is just showing off. When he learns of her living conditions at the rectory, he begins to manifest feelings of contempt towards her. Alice eventually subconsciously decides that Felix might be a suitable candidate for a relationship, although he seems to openly dislike her. It is as though she prevents herself from being happy by finding the one candidate who keeps testing her mental boundaries and patience. On the other hand, his cultural ignorance and the “living-in-the-moment” attitude has a soothing effect on her nerves. Felix does not like reading books and, thus, does not care about Alice's status as a literary celebrity. In fact, it seems he had no idea a person could become famous by writing novels. Only when he invites Alice to the party at his house does he realize that she is famous.

Felix is prone to substance abuse and, especially towards the end of the novel, enjoys triggering certain behaviours from the other three protagonists, causing them to confront suppressed emotions and past conflicts. In an intrusive, almost Socratic, way he raises uncomfortable questions to help the others towards a more authentic and happy existence. That does not mean Felix is the epitome of authentic living, far from it. He has also suffered a mental breakdown following his mother's death and had to be medicated with antidepressants, just like Alice. However, he has yet to confront his feelings regarding the family inheritance, something that he has been actively avoiding for weeks, hoping the problem would simply disappear. Subsequently, he lost his job and began working in a warehouse, a position he hates but he refuses to seek a way out because “they wouldn’t be paying me to do something I liked, would they?” (Rooney, 2021, 5). A worldview of silent misery with no way out.

One of the central themes of the whole novel and one of the sources of Alice's discomfort is anxiety of fame. Experiencing long-term anxiety was not a new occurrence for her, this time however she suffered a mental breakdown due to her newly acquired fame. Being famous is something she has never wanted, asked for or even aimed at. One of her e-mails to Eileen begins in the following manner:

Every day I wonder why my life has turned out this way. I can't believe I have to tolerate these things – having articles written about me, seeing my photographs on the internet, and reading comments about myself. When I put it like that I think: that’s it? And so what? But the fact is, although it's nothing, it makes me miserable, and I don’t want to live this kind of life. When I submitted the first book, I just wanted to make enough money to finish the next one. I never advertised myself as a psychologically robust person, capable of withstanding extensive public inquiries into my personality and upbringing. People who intentionally become famous – I mean people who, after a little taste of fame, want more and more of it – are, and I honestly believe this, deeply psychologically ill (Rooney, 2021, 54).

One of the many drawbacks of fame is the person's responsibility towards their audience. According to Sartre and his fellow thinkers, a person is responsible not only for himself and his or her social circle but for everyone, for mankind. One decision can have an impact on many people, for instance, the implementation of concentration camps during the Second World War had an impact not only on the people involved in the project but on the millions of deceased prisoners and their families for generations to come. One of the interesting consequences is the



notion of collective guilt experienced by some German citizens even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The situation of the fictional novelist Alice Kelleher or any other author, maybe except for Salman Rushdie and his influence, is, of course, marginal compared to the impact of the Second World War, nevertheless the example sufficiently illustrates the meaning of the word “responsibility” from the existentialist perspective.

Alice refuses to accept responsibility for her newly acquired celebrity status by avoiding it. When giving an interview she offers generic superficial answers not because she would be afraid of cancel culture but because she wants to keep a low profile. In yet another e-mail to Eileen, she acknowledges her position: “In public, I’m always talking about care ethics and the value of human community, but in my real life I don’t take the work of caring for anyone except myself. Who in the world relies on me for anything?” (Rooney, 2021, 187). Having suffered a psychotic breakdown, she claims to be burned out and except for reviews, she is not able to write anything else because her writing is not relevant politically and there is a very small chance she could change something in society through her current work. But it is a source of frustration, nevertheless. Yet, she does not consider changing her working field given the fact that she feels privileged earning money by doing something she enjoys. When in fact, she could change the narrative by embracing her celebrity status to at least raise awareness of certain topics. By not doing so she implicitly chooses not to change anything in the world and to live an inauthentic life of conformity. Such inertness is a prototypical feature of the majority of Sally Rooney protagonists whose major concern is the state of society together with capitalism, patriarchy and an impending ecological catastrophe that threatens their lives, notwithstanding their objections are always in the form of either a pretentious conversation or a lengthy e-mail but never in the form of an active revolt.

Alice's decision to physically isolate herself in the countryside only reconfirms her passivity. She confides to Eileen as follows: “We hate people for making mistakes so much more than we love them for doing good that the easiest way to live is to do nothing, say nothing and love no one (Rooney, 2021, 187). A proclamation that could resonate with Eileen's attitude to life as well. Eileen and Alice spend a lot of time contemplating the environmental crisis, historical events and the future of modern society. In the epistolary chapters, Alice shares some of her thoughts and feelings from her first days at Ballina, her new home, while Eileen is fixated on the meaningfulness of art and her anxieties.

By far Alice is not the only protagonist who is struggling with personal responsibility and alienation throughout the novel. Her best friend Eileen used to be a talented author while at university, winning student prizes for essays, but despite that, she found a low-wage job as an editor of an unknown literary magazine and withdrew from life. She enthusiastically published one essay that managed to pique an interest of a literary agent who was about to offer her a book deal, if she did not opt to ignore the message instead. Her fear of failure and, perhaps, a knowledge that she would never be able to surpass Alice has kept her from writing anything else. Regarding her intimate relationships, she behaves similarly. Since childhood, Eileen has been in love with her “emotionally inaccessible” friend Simon, who is six years older. Simon reciprocates her feelings but due to his insecurities, martyr's complex and an aura of his superiority he is unable to open up and maintain a serious relationship. However, throughout the novel, he makes several attempts to win Eileen over but she either thinks he is joking or makes an excuse and refuses his advances, preferring to wallow in self-pity instead and, thus, supporting her inauthentic existence.

Eileen's implicit decision to not do anything meaningful is a decision to lead an inauthentic life, or as Sartre would have said to live “in bad faith”. “Sartre seems to agree that our usual inclination is to deny responsibility for our situation” (Flynn 70). By avoiding that responsibility one lives in a self-deception as Eileen does. Her situation changes towards the end of the novel when she experiences a cathartic moment and realizes she has been a fool for not accepting Simon as her partner. Interestingly, one of the truly authentic literary protagonists of the last two centuries was the one who had only two choices in his later life: to commit suicide or to accept responsibility for his previous actions. Albert Camus' Sisyphus chose the latter and he did so with grace and even happiness. He was punished by the Gods to push a boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down again once it reached the top. Sisyphus refuses to yield and keeps performing the task with a sense of determination and accomplishment. By accepting this responsibility he leads an authentic and, in his own way, a happier life because he can accomplish the task he had been given.

Perhaps it might seem slightly bold to compare a beautiful physically healthy woman with a mythical character condemned to the eternal struggle of meaningless labour but Eileen believes that her life has been relegated to the life of absurdity, claiming: “If we have to go to our deaths for the greater good of humankind, I will accept that like a lamb, because I haven't deserved this life or even enjoyed it. [...] I don't want to live like this” (Rooney, 2021, 74). In the same e-mail to Alice, she writes that “people who take action are criticized. Oh, that's all

very well, but then, what action do I ever take? In my defence, I'm very tired and I don't have any good ideas. [...] I could disintegrate into a heap of dust, for all the world cares, and that's as it should be" (Rooney, 2021, 75). Eileen realizes that her life lacks meaningful action but she stopped caring a long time ago because she is depressed and does not see a point in trying to change things, even though she wants to but the idea is too exhausting.

Simon, who is six years older than the girls, feels constantly miserable because his job is frustrating and the love of his life wants him as a close friend and a father figure at the same time. His job frustrates him because he feels like he is unable to truly make a difference and help others, except that he has been working in the same position for almost twenty years. He is unconsciously doing everything to avoid responsibility for his own life choices by appearing younger and surrounding himself with a whole range of much younger girlfriends who are not interested in having a serious relationship. Rooney offers very little insight into his thoughts but his actions, or their lack, speak for themselves. He is anchored in the present, behaving as if the time stood still. Contrary to Alice and Eileen he does not seem to exhibit any outward signs of existential anxiety due to an impending climate crisis. "Simon believes there's a difference between right and wrong. I suppose you can't believe that if you think it all means nothing in the end" (Rooney, 2021, 82). In a conversation with Eileen, he describes his complicated relationship with his father: "But in his view, I'm only nice to everyone because it makes me feel good about myself" (Rooney, 2021, 150). This proclamation is an interesting parallel to another famed work of fiction penned by Albert Camus, *The Fall* (1956), nevertheless, the character of Simon could not be any more different than the main protagonist of the Camus novel who seeks the praise of others to maintain his own sense of superiority. Simon does not seek praise but perhaps he likes to perceive himself as a morally superior being because of his independence. Rooney describes him as "emotionally unavailable" which in the novel's context means that he refuses to ask for help from others but he gladly offers his own, refusing to address his needs verbally.

An aspect that could be easily forgotten when examining a book from a certain perspective is its title. The meaning of *Beautiful World, Where Are You* is prone to several interpretations. Either it could be understood negatively and judged in the same manner as Jean-Paul Sartre's literary works in the 1940s - as openly pessimistic, or one could choose a more positive approach. Negatively, it would imply that the world is inherently ugly and even though the protagonists might have had some ideals earlier in their lives, their perspectives shifted as they grew older. This, to some extent, is the correct interpretation because Alice and especially

Eileen perceive some aspects of life as “meaningless”. However, an interpretation that is perhaps more fitting is the positive one, due to the novel's ending and several tender passages that would be addressed later. It might imply that the world indeed is beautiful when people decide to make it that way. The world is the same at the beginning of the novel as it is in the end, however in the end the characters decide to accept the possibility of happiness and realize that all the big questions of life and history do not matter because their time on this Earth is limited and they can only do as much. This aligns with Sartre's “man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life” (Sartre, 2007, 37).

The last two chapters are peculiar when compared to the rest of the novel; their tone is suddenly excessively positive and full of hope for the future as if it were a part of a completely different book. Despite the novel's general seriousness accompanied by mild nihilistic tendencies, certain passages throughout the book seem to be almost tenderly positive, a rather unexpected novelty for Rooney's work. For instance, the portrayal of friendship plays a significant role in the protagonists' lives, maybe except for Felix who seems to stand out. One of the central themes of the novel is, in fact, a humanistic one. Although Rooney depicts two budding romantic heterosexual relationships, the narrative is centred on a strong intellectual friendship between two young women. In the first e-mail to Eileen, Alice claims: “Our correspondence is my way of holding on to life, taking notes to it, and thereby preserving something of my – otherwise almost worthless, or even entirely worthless – existence on this rapidly degenerating planet” (Rooney, 2021, 15). Another time, Alice begins contemplating the crisis of the contemporary novel, resulting from the fact that contemporary authors know nothing about ordinary life, hence, they write their stories under false pretences, hoping they would gain the sympathy of the general audience and sell more copies. She calls her work “the worst culprit in this regard” and claims that this is the reason she might never publish another novel (Rooney, 2021, 96). Subsequently, Alice muses on the fact that people are a priori interested in the romantic aspects of the fictitious characters, the major concern of an average reader is whether the girl kisses the boy and vice versa. Eileen adds that the problem of contemporary novels is only a fragment of a much bigger picture, claiming that it is a problem of contemporary society. In a world where everything is about to collapse, the only things people are interested in are sex and friendship:

But at the same time, that is what I do every day. We can wait, if you like, to ascend to some higher plane of being at which point we'll start directing all our mental and material resources toward existential questions and thinking nothing of our own families, friends,

lovers, and so on. But we'll be waiting, in my opinion, a long time, and in fact will die first. After all, when people are lying on their deathbeds, don't they always start talking about their spouses and children? And isn't death just the apocalypse in the first person? So in that sense, there is nothing bigger than what you so derisively call breaking up or staying together (!), because at the end of our lives, when there's nothing left in front of us, it's still the only thing we want to talk about (Rooney, 2021, 111).

Although Rooney's tone is outwardly negative, this underlying theme of hope indicates the humanistic aspect of the whole novel. "And isn't death just the apocalypse in the first person?" (Rooney, 2021, 111) is a beautiful way of saying that every person, in the end, experiences their own "apocalypse", regardless of humanity "being on the cusp of extinction" (Rooney, 2021, 138).

## 2 My Year of Rest and Relaxation

Our narrator should be happy, shouldn't she? She's young, thin, pretty, a recent Columbia graduate, works an easy job at a hip art gallery and lives in an apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan paid for, like the rest of her needs, by her inheritance. But there is a dark and vacuous hole in her heart, and it isn't just the loss of her parents, the way her Wall Street boyfriend treats her, or her sadomasochistic relationship with her best friend, Reva. It's the year 2000 in a city aglitter with wealth and possibility; what could be so terribly wrong? *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is a powerful answer to that question. Through the story of a year spent under the influence of a truly mad combination of drugs designed to heal our heroine from her alienation from this world, Moshfegh shows us how reasonable, even necessary, alienation can be. Both tender and blackly funny, merciless and compassionate, it is a showcase for the gifts of one of our major writers working at the height of her powers (Goodreads).

Such is the annotation of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* that teases the novel's potentially shocking content. Moshfegh's book overflows with existentialist traits that are examined in this part of the diploma thesis. The analysis attempts to adhere to the structure of both, the theoretical part and the analysis of *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. However, some changes were made, mainly due to the individualistic nature of the novel. The analysis begins with a general commentary on the novel's context and continues with an analysis of selected existentialist traits. The framework of Friedrich Nietzsche is mentioned next, followed by the analysis of the basic principles of existentialism, as explained by Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, primarily: Sartre's proclamation that "existence precedes essence", alienation and anxiety, freedom and personal responsibility and finishes with humanism. It is true that the novel's tone is rather nihilistic, however, the author of this diploma thesis would like to emphasise its positive message. An analysis of the main protagonists' behaviour based on the framework by Søren Kierkegaard is mentioned several times within.

Ottessa Moshfegh did not deem it necessary to equip her main heroine with something as trivial as a name. After all, her name is irrelevant because the novel could depict any daring person of the female gender brave enough to orchestrate what she did. Following its publication in 2018 the novel faced rave reviews as well as criticism for depicting a deeply unlikable female character. Unlikable, because Moshfegh's female protagonists defy the general vague expectations of the society impinged upon women. Her heroines are no meek housewives ready

to nurture children and look pretty at the same time. In any case, the confusion surrounding the reception of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* consists of the superficial description of the unnamed protagonist, for the purpose of this diploma thesis addressed as the “Blondie”. In *Eileen*, its eponymous character was described as a disturbed average female in her twenties with obsessive behaviour and a drinking problem. In other words, her personality aligned with her looks. The female protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is a 26-year-old tall blonde beauty, an art history graduate, who has recently inherited a large sum of money from her parents' inheritance. Probably that is why her behaviour, as portrayed by Moshfegh, was so baffling to certain critics and readers as if a life of privilege automatically equals happiness.

Blondie obtained a job as the secretary of the director of an art gallery in New York, an easy work that required no further preparation and passed time as any other young beautiful woman in a big city, by attending parties, shopping for clothes and treating herself with various cosmetic procedures. Nevertheless, she could feel only contempt and hatred for everyone and everything in her vicinity. Her only sources of joy and happiness are sleeping and movies and TV shows with Whoopi Goldberg, whom she addresses as the person that saved her life. Other than that, she is emotionally empty and stuck in her meaningless life. She develops a habit of napping at work, every day at noon for an hour or longer she lies down in the supply closet and drifts away: “Oh, sleep. Nothing else could ever bring me such pleasure, such freedom, the power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of my walking consciousness” (Moshfegh, 2018, 46). The novel lacks the religious theme as presented in *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. From the Nietzschean perspective, it could be stated that the absence of God is obvious but not explicitly addressed because it is taken for granted. Nietzsche criticised religion, especially Christianity, for its acceptance of “slave morality”. Moshfegh's main heroine often thinks of conformity in the same manner. Slave morality could be, to some extent, synonymous for conformity and its followers are “herd”, another of Nietzsche's terms describing people without the ability to live by their own principles. This contempt is apparent in Blondie's treatment of Reva who represents the conformist “herd”. Their parting ways towards the end of the novel symbolizes Blondie's successful rise above the herd.

Blondie feels constantly tired as if the life had already left her body and she is only an empty vessel, a zombie, trying to pass as a human being. Soon, she embarks upon an ambitious project: to take a gap year from life and sleep for an entire year, hoping to cleanse herself of her unhappiness and depression and wake up a new freshly born person. She quits her job, explaining: “There was no sadness or nostalgia, only disgust that I'd wasted so much time on

unnecessary labor when I could have been sleeping and feeling nothing” (Moshfegh, 2018, 49). As a goodbye token she, “takes a shit” near the newest exhibition because she has a feeling it would look more authentic and leaves the premises. Sleeping is her religion. She cherishes the time when she can simply drift away.

Blondie manages to get hold of Dr. Tuttle, an insane conspiratorial psychiatrist who likes to prescribe her clients medications for their side effects, to avoid suspicion from the insurance company. She declares “Sometimes I feel dead. And I hate everybody” (Moshfegh, 19) and claims to suffer from insomnia, hoping the doctor would prescribe her something strong that would “knock her off” for a long time. Her visits with Dr. Tuttle become regular because her dosage seems to lose its effect as she builds her tolerance eventually and Blondie is rapidly becoming desperate, forcing Dr. Tuttle to ask:

When you say you're questioning your own existence, do you mean you're reading philosophy books? Or is this something you thought up on your own? Because if it's a suicide, I can give you something for that. And give the Infermiterol a try. Studies have shown it wipes out existential anxiety better than Prozac (Moshfegh, 2018, 111).

Eventually, Blondie becomes resilient enough to try the “stronger stuff” Dr. Tuttle had given her. Samples of a revolutionary, and also a fictitious, drug called Infermiterol cause Blondie to lose the sense of herself for three days. This culminates with her waking up on the train heading to her friend Reva's hometown to attend her mother's funeral, despite her initial decision not to go anywhere near mourning people who might destroy her cleansing project: “It concerned me that I was venturing out of the apartment while unconscious. It seemed antithetical to my hibernation project” (Moshfegh, 2018, 86).

Blondie's mental state rapidly deteriorates when her VHS player breaks down and she can no longer binge-watch Whoopi Goldberg's filmography. Following this unfortunate incident, she begins “harassing” her occasional boyfriend Trevor, an unpleasant older man who treats her as a simpleton. Soon after another disaster strikes, Reva confiscates all of her pills out of fear she might overdose and die. Blondie realizes her project is failing and decides to take action by contacting one of the artists from the art gallery, a talented Chinese young man called Ping Xi, where she was previously working. She asks him to lock her inside her apartment for four months and tells him he can use her body for an art project of his liking because when on Infermiterol, she would not be able to remember anything anyway. Before making these arrangements, she donates all of her clothes and jewellery to Reva and the furniture and some



remaining things to charity. By giving Reva the only thing she so desperately desires, Reva no longer has a reason to maintain contact with her. After four months Ping Xi releases her from the apartment. Her project worked, and Blondie woke up as a completely new person, capable of feeling happiness from the simplest of things. She is amazed by everything as if encountering the world for the first time. A beautiful proof of Sartre's proclamation that "existence precedes essence". Blondie refused to accept her potential fate of an angry and miserable person determined by her upbringing and decided to act. She realized she is a work in progress and that her choices define her future, her prior existence is not the decisive factor. Even though she might appear as an incredibly passive human being because she intends to sleep for the whole year, watch the same movies on repeat and do nothing, her project takes a strong will, courage and a lot of determination, making Blondie an incredibly active literary protagonist who is ready to fight for her happiness or die trying. Despite its nihilistic tone, "existence precedes essence" and the quest for authentic life is the main message of Moshfegh's novel.

Blondie had a specific childhood; both of her parents were cold and distant. Her father, a university professor a decade older than his wife, died of cancer a few years before the beginning of the novel and her mother committed suicide by mixing a combination of pills with alcohol shortly after. During their lives, they were not close and chose to ignore one another even when sharing the same household. The death of her father affected her substantially but, having received zero emotional support from her emotionally unavailable mother, she had to face the loss on her own. During her childhood she often had to suppress her emotions because her mother detested them, claiming that she was not her nanny to console her. When she was little, her mother had fed her crushed Valium to keep her subdued. Her childhood experience (possibly together with genes), intensified by the death of her father, most likely caused Blondie's absolute alienation from the world of "normal" people. The only people seeking her company were those who envied her good looks. As a result, she was not able to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships and attracted only those who were similarly dysfunctional, like Reva who began to idealize and hate her at the same time. Reva's major goals in life are to "fit in" and be slim and happy. Reva is portrayed as the epitome of conformism, a female caricature that desperately desires to be happy but cherishes only the superficial things in life, i.e. glamorous clothes and a slim figure. She is obsessed with her looks but also with Blondie because she feels special and seen while in the company of someone as stylish and beautiful as she is. They detest each other; Blondie does not like her because Reva represents everything she would like to cleanse herself of while hibernating and Reva is jealous of her because of her

money and good looks. Blondie does nothing to support their relationship, if anything, she barely tolerates her and, in a way, behaves like her own mother did.

Blondie soon realizes that in order to recover she also needs to eliminate Reva's presence in her life: "She couldn't or simply wouldn't understand why I wanted to sleep all the time, and she was always rubbing my nose in her moral high ground and telling me to face the music about whatever bad habit I'd been stuck on at the time" (Moshfegh, 2018, 8). Reva, equipped with a pair of keys from her apartment, comes and goes whenever she pleases:

I was both relieved and irritated when Reva showed up, the way you'd feel if someone interrupted you in the middle of suicide. Not that what I was doing was suicide. In fact, it was the opposite of suicide. My hibernation was self-preservational. I thought that it was going to save my life (Moshfegh, 2018, 7).

While Blondie's approach to life could be characterised as nihilistic with brief instances of hope and newly formed determination to change, the character of Reva is a walking definition of anxiety. Reva has been trying to achieve her own happy ending for a long time, by obsessing over self-help books, spending her free time at the gym, and naively thinking her boss would leave his wife because of her. Blondie muses: "She was a slave to vanity and status, which was not unusual in a place like Manhattan, but I found her desperation especially irritating. It made it hard for me to respect her intelligence. She was so obsessed with brand names, conformity, fitting in" (Moshfegh, 2018, 9).

Like Blondie, Reva experiences alienation from the world because she constantly desires to fit into different social circles and fails. Reva's attempts are futile and Blondie does not wish to interact with her influence. Her attempt for a change is radical and dangerous but she knows her life in its current state is not worth living and if she dies, nothing that tragic happens anyway because her current life already feels like death. This determination makes her quest for authentic living a noble one due to its semblance to Kierkegaard's final stage of life. Blondie, just like Abraham, cannot predict the impact of her decision to self-medicate with a variety of pills for twelve months but she takes the risk anyway.

The existentialist traits in this novel are strong and abundant. Blondie despises the shallow and conformist nature of the New York artistic world and desires to live differently. Everywhere she goes she sees only superficial glamour of which she is a part. She spends her money on expensive fashion brands and because she does not know what else to do, her life is empty and

she feels nothing, only hatred towards everything and everyone. Her favourite activity is sleeping. Only when unconscious she can feel happiness owing to the fact that when asleep, she does not feel anything at all. Surprisingly, the thoughts of suicide cross her mind only briefly, even though she posthumously appreciates her mother for accepting responsibility for her miserable life by ending it: “If, when I woke up in June, life still wasn’t worth the trouble, I would end it. I would jump. This was the deal I made” (Moshfegh, 2018, 260).

From the existentialist perspective of Sartre and Camus, a person avoids their personal responsibility and gives up on a meaningful life by committing suicide. Unknowingly, Blondie attempts to live her life with existentialist values, in spite of the fact that she, indeed, contemplates suicide as the very last option. Because “what if the only way to sleep is death?” (Moshfegh, 2018, 227). She is determined to change her mentality and discover a different, happier, existence. At first, she needs to accept responsibility for her own mental state and change the way she sees the world. She strongly believes that the key to attaining an authentic, meaningful life is to cease living for the whole year to recharge:

This was good.... I was finally doing something that really mattered. Sleep felt productive. Something was getting sorted out. I knew in my heart – this was, perhaps the only thing my heart knew back then – that when I'd slept enough, I'd be okay. I'd be renewed, reborn. I would be a whole new person, every one of my cells regenerated enough times that the old cells were just distant, foggy memories. My past life would be a dream, and I could start over without regrets, bolstered by the bliss and serenity that I would have accumulated in my year of rest and relaxation (Moshfegh, 2018, 51).

The character of Reva could symbolize the “bad faith” attitude to life or a comparison more fitting due to the novel's context, a tumour that needs to be extracted. Sartre said that living in bad faith means living in a lie. He was not able to answer why is this way of living an erroneous one, he only said it is “wrong” because one blocks the most precious value of all: freedom. Certain human beings are not able to accept that people are “condemned to be free” because their life choices bring them only unhappiness. In totalitarian regimes, this notion is heavily restricted and the inability of people to “handle” life causes them to yearn for “good old times”. Both, Blondie and Reva are not equipped to handle their lives, yet. Reva is desperately trying to fit into the upper class which only makes her look pitiful and needy while Blondie realizes she just wants to lead a simple life and be happy. In the second half of the novel, she gives away all of her belongings except for the basic necessities to start fresh. All of her valuables go to

Reva. This act of cleansing marks the end of their friendship because Blondie no longer possesses the things Reva is attracted to, they now belong to Reva. Blondie's peculiar behaviour and loss of interest in anything “glamorous” only make it easier for Reva to let go of their toxic friendship. Reva could not understand Blondie's hibernation project because she was stuck in the Kierkegaardian Aesthetic sphere and even though she desperately wanted to change her life, her narrowmindedness did not offer her enough solid options. Eventually, she gets promoted and relocates to the World Trade Centre. In the final chapter, Blondie re-watches footage of an unknown woman falling from one of the buildings following the terrorist attack on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, persuaded that it must have been Reva and that in her last moments, she finally achieved what she wanted from life: eternal beauty. In this moment, Blondie finally sees her as her own person with feelings and troubles, not only a simple caricature with an externally imposed identity full of conformity and empty phrases. In her own way, Reva also managed to find peace.

Blondie could be easily called the worst sort of woman invented in literature, partially because of her treatment of Reva while her mother was dying. However, she had her reasons for such behaviour - her mind was occupied with her own life-changing agenda together with the fear of the unknown and a drug-induced haze. She knew that Reva was “a mess” and always has been but she had given up any subtle or blunt attempts to bring her to her senses, hoping she would eventually “wake up” on her own. The humanistic nature of Blondie's hibernation project could be difficult to detect because of the novel's openly pessimistic tone but due to her individualistic quest for a better life, Blondie could be described as a harbinger of hope for a similarly depressed audience.

## Conclusion

*Beautiful World, Where Are You* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* are novels with a strong presence of existentialist traits. Nonetheless, their manifestation differs within each novel. Rooney's aim most likely was not to address the philosophy of existentialism in any of her works. She has always been vocal about her affection for Marxist values but existentialism has never openly been her agenda. On the other hand, Moshfegh's values are nondescriptive. From her interviews, she oozes an aura similar to her unnamed protagonist. Moshfegh likes to shock people and do her own things, regardless of conventions.

This conclusion attempts to summarize major distinctions between both novels in terms of existentialist traits. First of all, Rooney's characters are predominantly passive while Moshfegh's unnamed hero is very much active. Throughout the majority of the novel, Alice and Eileen are looking for excuses that would contradict the essential premise of existentialism, thus, Sartre's several times mentioned proclamation that "existence precedes essence". According to existentialists, a person's faith is decided based on their actions, its nature is not predetermined or dependent on external factors. A fact that takes a long time for Rooney's protagonists to come to terms with. Alice is hiding in the countryside, refusing to acknowledge the fact that her work might not be politically meaningless if only she made an effort and embraced her status as an influential public person. Eileen is convinced that she has been condemned to a life of unhappiness and professional unfulfillment simply because of who she is. As a child, she was an introverted girl with a rich inner life, a condition that did not always suit those around her, especially her older sister with a vicious streak. She feels threatened by her feelings for Simon because if their relationship failed she would have nobody in her life to retreat to when in need.

It is perhaps strange to describe a protagonist who decides to spend a whole year sleeping as "very much active" but Moshfegh's main protagonist sacrifices everything to accomplish her goal of waking up as a better and happier person. Blondie actively pursues her goal by making thorough preparations and maintaining discipline to remain in her drug-induced haze of sleep. Like Alice and Eileen, she also feels there is something wrong with this world but she does not blame external forces or conformity for her problems, because Blondie realizes that the place where she lives is an epitome of shallowness. Instead, she longs to change her worldview. She realizes the change has to come from within.

Alienation and anxiety are another significant existential traits that permeate both novels. Both notions are mentioned at the same time because they complement each other. Their presence in *Beautiful World, Where Are You* is a strong one and has a substantial impact on the behaviour of both female protagonists. Their anxiety is partially triggered by their feelings of alienation from the world and the people inhabiting it. Alice is struggling with several forms of anxiety, the strongest one being the anxiety of fame which harms her perception of self and hinders her upcoming work. She feels like a stranger within her own family; after achieving global success she barely talks to her mother and brother. Her feelings are identical when she has to attend a literary festival and associate with her readers and colleagues, her inability to fit in and feel comfortable is a significant source of anxiety for Alice. Eileen is a victim of existential anguish and experiences anxiety in its purest form. She also feels like an intruder in her own family because she senses her parents' favouritism towards her older sister Lola. She is concerned by the environmental crisis, the horrendous state of the world and an inevitably impending apocalypse.

*My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is adorned with two anxious female protagonists who regularly experience alienation as well. Nevertheless, their anxiousness has very little in common with the main characters from Rooney's novel. There are no references to environmental crisis or politics. Blondie's alienation stems from her childhood trauma and her beauty. She is not able to fit in because people only see her looks and manifest either envy or lust towards her body. It seems that except for hatred and indifference, she does not feel any other emotions. Her anxiety is caused by the amount of different contradicting pills she decides to take regularly. Neither Alice nor Eileen experience hatred towards the world, they only express worry for the state of the world while pitying themselves. Blondie despises pity just like she despises Reva who likes to pity herself often. Reva is trying to overcome her issues by seeking comfort in things that are causing her anxiety in the first place, i.e. alcohol, and obsession with her own body, among other things. She feels anxious because she thinks she is not slim like all those supermodels she sees on the covers of fashion magazines and her desire to look chic only makes her look tacky. She experiences alienation at her workplace where her boss treats her as inferior despite having an affair with her. Lastly, her mother is dying of cancer and she does not know how to accept that. Blondie offers very little help because she refuses to recall emotions she had felt when her parents died, thinking that such strong feelings would have a negative impact on her hibernation project.

Freedom and responsibility are other central principles of the existentialist philosophy. According to Sartre, people are “condemned to be free”. In other words, they need to accept responsibility for their actions to become the best possible versions of themselves. It is in their power to make decisions and it is, in fact, imperative to make them because inaction is a form of negative action that could make one's situation worse. Eileen and Simon, the protagonists of *Beautiful World, Where Are You* deny their freedom and opt for inaction instead. They love each other but it takes them years to confront their feelings. Alice avoids responsibility for her status as a public person and fuels her anxiety and alienation as a result. Her new secluded residence indicates her desire to hide from her friends who might object to her unhappiness. Simon avoids responsibility for his life by refusing to change his job to a more fulfilling position and focuses on the happiness of others instead. The character of Felix resembles the unnamed protagonist, “Blondie”, from *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* in his bluntness and substance abuse. Felix is trying to “wake up” the remaining trio from their passivity and unhappiness with uncomfortable questions, just like Blondie occasionally attempted to treat Reva. Early in Moshfegh's novel, Blondie decides to change the course of her life by indulging in the “year of rest and relaxation” comprised of a twelve-month-long drug-induced sleep. This move is a perfect example of Sartreian responsibility and acceptance of one's freedom. She is determined to succeed with her mission and nothing and no one is allowed to stop her.

The humanistic aspect of both novels could be more difficult to detect. Both of them appear to be outwardly negative but underneath the pessimistic layers is hidden the characters' longing for hope. Both novels explore the theme of coming to terms with one's own existence. Alice and Eileen eventually realise that despite their worries for the future of the world they need to live their lives and focus on the things that matter the most – love and friendship. On the contrary, Moshfegh's main heroine does not see the importance of maintaining interpersonal relationships. She is a very individualistic protagonist who does not seek the company of others. In the end, she finally sees the world's beauty for the first time and finds happiness in the simplest of things.

The decision to place the frameworks of Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard at the end of this comparative analysis was a difficult one because it violates the already unstable structure of this diploma thesis. However, Kierkegaard's thoughts were mentioned in the analysis of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* several times and always in connection to something else. In the theoretical part, Kierkegaard was listed next to Nietzsche which corresponds with the structure of this conclusion.

Nietzsche's famous quote "God is dead" was mentioned within the context of *Beautiful World, Where Are You* where religion is a recurring theme. For the most part, the religious undertones in the novel are rather agnostic or even atheistic. The only religious protagonist is Simon who indirectly influences others to think about God and the nature of good and evil. Rooney suggests that the new religion of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is celebrity worship and portrays Jesus as the literary character that he is. The absence of God in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is striking. Moshfegh's heroine has her own religion: sleep together with the glorification of psychopharmaceuticals. She wholeheartedly believes sleep is the solution to her depression. Additionally, if there is one presence within the novel that has a slight semblance of God it is Whoopi Goldberg. She would probably appreciate such a comparison. Nonetheless, Moshfegh's heroine mentions Whoopi as the person who saved her life through her movies after her parents died. During her hibernation project, she experiences a mental breakdown when her VHS player breaks down and she can no longer watch *Sister Act* (1992), *Ghost* (1990) or *The Colour Purple* (1985). Moshfegh addressed her affinity toward cinematography in a variety of interviews and, thus, such an interpretation might not be completely nonsensical. Furthermore, the comparison of Whoopi Goldberg to a God-like figure corresponds with Rooney's aforementioned notion of celebrity worship as the new contemporary religion.

Danish philosopher Kierkegaard was mentioned in the practical part due to his introduction of three stages of life in his publication *Either/Or* (1843). Its relevance to Rooney's book could be illustrated by the characters' evolvment throughout the novel from the basic, Aesthetic stage to the Ethical stage, with Simon resulting in the final Religious one. The character evolution of Alice and Eileen at times felt strained, as if Rooney did not know how to properly finish the novel. Moshfegh's unnamed heroine behaves as if attempting to reach the Religious stage of existence by making the difficult choice to stay on large doses of pills for the duration of twelve months, even though it might kill her. On the other hand, the character of Reva is trapped in the Aesthetic sphere with her adherence to conformist values. Kierkegaard's final contribution to this diploma thesis was hidden in his essay *The Present Age* (1846) where he criticized the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his present age, for its inaction and shallowness and praised the past, revolutionary, age where people acted with interest and passion. This remark is relevant to *Beautiful World, Where Are You* because Alice and Eileen, the main female protagonists, exchange a series of e-mails contemplating a similar topic. This notion is fairly absent in Moshfegh's novel where the main protagonists try to navigate their lives in the present, ignoring the important historical events that Alice and Eileen assign some momentous importance.



Despite Rooney's occasional artificial pretentiousness and Moshfegh's impertinence and honesty, both novels address the same themes of one's inability to handle life and society with its conformist expectations. The main protagonists of *Beautiful World, Where Are You* need the courage to transform their intellectual discourse to action. Alice longs to make a difference politically but is not ready to accept the implications of such power, while Eileen hesitates to let herself live the life she desires, fearing she will fail. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* features a bold heroine who struggles with severe depression and hatred towards the world and its inhabitants. She successfully finalizes her “cleansing project” by terminating her friendship with Reva, who symbolizes the world of conformity and unhappiness, two things she would like to dispose of during her “year of rest and relaxation”.

## Bibliography

### Theoretical part

1. Alter, Alexandra. *Sally Rooney to Publish 'Beautiful World, Where Are You'*. Online. The New York Times, 2021.
2. Armitstead, Claire. *Sally Rooney: 'I don't respond to authority very well'*. Online. The Guardian, 2018.
3. Binder, Marnie. *"Hell Is Other People": Sartre's Famous Quote Explained*. Online. The Collector, 2023.
4. Brockes, Emma. *Sally Rooney on the hell of fame: 'It doesn't seem to work in any real way for anyone'*. Online. The Guardian, 2021.
5. Christensen, Lauren. *Otessa Moshfegh Is Only a Human*. Online. The New Yorker, 2020.
6. Clark, Alex. *Conversations with Sally Rooney: the 27-year-old novelist defining a generation*. Online. The Guardian, 2018.
7. Collins, Lauren. *Sally Rooney Gets in Your Head*. Online. The New Yorker, 2018.
8. Cummins, Anthony. *Otessa Moshfegh: 'I'm not brainstorming ways to freak people out'*. Online. The Guardian, 2023.
9. Doyle, Martin. *Why is the announcement of a new novel by Sally Rooney being greeted with such fanfare?* Online. The Irish Times, 2024.
10. Dubey, Anna. *Sally Rooney*. Online. Britannica, 2024.
11. Flynn, Thomas R. *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
12. Hart, Michelle. *Sally Rooney Gets Real About Normal People, Her New Novel—and Finding Literary Stardom*. Online. Oprah Daily, 2019.
13. Ingle, Róisín. *Sally Rooney: 'I'm really paranoid about my personal life. I feel self-conscious'*. Online. The Irish Times, 2021.
14. Kaufmann, Walter. *Existentialism: From Dostoyevsky to Sartre*. Meridian Books, 1956.
  - Contains *The Gay Science* by Friedrich Nietzsche.
15. Kaufmann, Walter. *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. Princeton and Oxford Princeton University Press, 2013.
16. Kelleher, Dylan. *Otessa Moshfegh*. Online. Britannica, 2024.

17. Kennedy, William. *The Crises of Existentialism in the 21st Century*. Online. Medium, 2023.
18. Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Present Age*. 1846.
19. Knight, Lucy. *Sally Rooney turns down an Israeli translation on political grounds*. Online. The Guardian, 2021.
20. Knight, Lucy. *Sally Rooney's new novel Intermezzo is to be published in September*. Online. The Guardian, 2024.
21. Laity, Paul. *Ottessa Moshfegh interview: 'Eileen started out as a joke – also I'm broke, also I want to be famous'*. Online. The Guardian, 2016.
22. Leak, Andrew N. *Jean-Paul Sartre*. Reaktion Books, 2006.
23. Levy, Ariel. *Ottessa Moshfegh's Otherworldly Fiction*. Online. The New Yorker, 2018.
24. Lorentzen, Christian. *Ottessa Moshfegh's Collection Homesick for Another World Charms with Grotesquerie*. Online. Vulture, 2017.
25. Marriott, James. *Beautiful World, Where Are You by Sally Rooney: A Tale of Beauty and Seriousness*. Online. The Times, 2021.
26. Moshfegh, Ottessa. *Death in Her Hands*. Vintage, 2020.
27. Moshfegh, Ottessa. *'Everyone asked me why I had written such a disgusting female character'*. Online. The Guardian, 2023.
28. Pearson-Jones, Bridie. *The VERY successful Marxist author who became a household name: How Sally Rooney, 31, drew on her own experiences growing up in rural Ireland to write hit novels that are peppered with her political beliefs*. Online. Daily Mail, 2022.
29. Rickenbach, Marc. *Jean-Paul Sartre: Existentialism and Literature through World War II*. Undergraduate Library Research Awards, 2006.
30. Rooney, Sally. *Conversations with Friends*. Faber and Faber, 2017.
31. Rooney, Sally. *Normal People*. Faber and Faber, 2018.
32. Rowland Hill, Matt. *What critics don't get about Sally Rooney*. Online. The New Statesman, 2023.
33. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Yale University, 2007.
  - Contains a *Preface* to the 1996 French Edition by Arlette Elkaim-Sartre.
  - Contains an *Introduction* by Annie Cohen-Solal.
34. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Nausea*. New Directions, 1969.
35. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Words*. Vintage, 1981.

36. Sielinski, Grace. *The literary world has been Moshfeigh-ified. What now?* Online. The Michigan Daily, 2024.
37. Sojit Pejcha, Camille. *Otessa Moshfeigh writes not what we asked for, but what we need.* Online. Document Journal, 2024.
38. Thomas-Corr, Johanna. *Death in Her Hands by Otessa Moshfeigh review – whodunnit and other questions.* Online. The Guardian, 2020.
39. Vu, Richard. *Kierkegaard: Leap of Faith.* Online. Study.com, 2023.

### **Practical part**

1. Moshfeigh, Otessa. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation.* Penguin Press, 2018.
2. Rooney, Sally. *Beautiful World, Where Are You.* Faber and Faber, 2021.