



The Existential Hope For Love In Sherwood Anderson's *The Dumb Man*

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Abstract

The research takes an insight look into the complicated representation of love, using the short story of *The Dumb Man* by Sherwood Anderson within the existentialism framework. The deaf and mute protagonist becomes a metaphor for the universal human condition in his search for love and communication amidst a society that cares less. In his tacit quest for love, Anderson exemplifies an existentialist perspective: Love is not a desire—one feels—but a highly conscious effort to assert one's existence in reality, both freely chosen and constrained by society. This analysis is conducted through qualitative method and explorative approach in unpacking meaning from the narrative, with the contention that hopes for love functions as a central vehicle for self-transformation. It is in this quest for love that this story wrestles through the tension of aloneness with man's need to connect, representative of the complex, intertwined relationship between individual independence and the world outside. Ultimately, through this story, how it unfolds existentialism culminates into the relentless, sometimes painful pursuit of love—thereby bringing out the core role of existentialism in the journey towards self-actualization and insight into the human condition.

Keywords : Existentialism, Hope for love, Sherwood Anderson, *The Dumb Man*

INTRODUCTION

Love is the deepest, most multi-faceted human emotion at the heart of human existence and can serve as a lens by which people understand their deepest desires and existential struggles. In Sherwood Anderson's 1921 short story entitled *The Dumb Man*, love arises not only as a personal yearning but as one of the human condition itself (Anderson, 1921). The story beckons one to depths of existentialism, a philosophical framework that places emphasis on the self as an active input in the direction of life and orientation to the values of society.

In existentialism, human beings are solitary and separate individualities that make use of personal choice and self-creation to chart their course of existence. In this light, love is conceived against the backdrop as a power of transformation and mirrored shaping influence upon the existential quest for meaning. On this count, the protagonist of *The Dumb Man* sums up the existential struggle of a loner who cannot communicate due to his muteness and deafness (Anderson, 1921). It expresses an essential existential concept where, on one hand, his exterior life is closed off while on the other hand, the inner experience and longing for relationship manifest that the search for authentic relationships in an otherwise coldly indifferent society is constitutive of this school of thought.

Furthermore, his silence becomes a metaphor for the larger human circumstance, where a person's most inner feelings and aspirations are frequently unspoken and result in a severe sense of loneliness. However, the protagonist's desire for connection is at its most in this state of solitude, illustrating the existential contradiction. It reflects that although love can bring people together and give them purpose, it also highlights how difficult it is to actually bridge the distance between oneself and other people (Anderson, 1921).

In the story, Anderson explores both symbolism and allegory to deepen the inner life of his protagonist and his relations with a society remaining more or less ignorant of his predicament. Notwithstanding any communication barriers, the never-say-die hope of the protagonist in regard to finding love underlines a much deeper existential longing for understanding and connection (Anderson, 1921). His condition seems to be more emblematic of a general human experience of isolation and search for meaningful interaction in most times, toward a world that seems to be indifferent. The yearning for connection survives in spite of the harsh reality of alienation. Anderson's use of symbolism suggests that the protagonist's search for love is both a uniquely human experience and a mirror of the larger human struggle to find meaning and connection in an indifferent universe.

The present study is an attempt to show how the existentialism in *The Dumb Man* unveiled the search for love by the protagonist. From the analysis of the struggling character to the symbolic elements of the story, the expression from Anderson has represented the existentialist view on human freedom and self-creation (Anderson, 1921). The journey of the protagonist somehow explains how hope for love serves as a driving force in finding meaning and

connection with oneself and others. This paper later proves that existentialism shows one basis that can deeply interpret the intricacies of human desire and social interaction as depicted in the story.

METHOD

Through qualitative method, certain concepts and written data are exposed to answer the question in this journal. All research activities take place through explorative approach on books, and journals, on the analysis of the flash fiction written by Sherwood Anderson entitled *The Dumb Man*. The idea is also emphasized through existentialism regarding explorative approach. The data analyses of this paper is content analysis that includes attaining sources, reading the data carefully, comparing the rest with other issues, quoting them into paper, and writing all of them down in reference lists.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Desire, Communication, and Its Prolonged Struggle

In the hands of Sherwood Anderson, in his *The Dumb Man*, the themes of existential isolation and the yearning for connection are inseparably related to the portrayal of a marginalized character. His mute and deaf conditions transcend physical realities into striking metaphors for a deeper existential struggle (Anderson, 1921). In this way, it sounds the depths of human despair and the search for meaning, which is at once addressed as an entreaty of broader existential concerns.

One idea that is clearly reflected in Anderson's short story is the struggle of communication depicted by the main character. Communication or lack thereof, forms the crux of the central character's experience. This struggle finds expression in a telling reflection:

"There is a story—I cannot tell it—I have no words. The story is almost forgotten but sometimes I remember." (Anderson, 1921).

It was in this way that Anderson crystallized the moment when the silence of the protagonist broke out to mean even more than a physical impediment—it stood for a metaphor of existential isolation. His inability to communicate his inner world to others is crystallized into a profound human agony (Anderson, 1921). This silent protagonist also embodies a universal existential struggle: the laborious effort of connecting the self to the external world. The struggle of the protagonist illustrates that there is something inherently impossible in the act of actual communication, a pointer to the philosophic view that everyone's deepest experiences are often inexpressible and, as such, estrange people from others.

By stating so, it also builds such identity that differentiate matters from own aspects compared to otherness. In this spectrum, there is desperate desire to connect in matter of deeper communication. The protagonist's profound yearning to connect with others is vividly portrayed through his imaginative scenarios:

"The story concerns three men in a house in a street. If I could say the words I would sing the story. I would whisper it into the ears of women, of mothers. I would run through the streets saying it over and over. My tongue would be torn loose—it would rattle against my teeth." (Anderson, 1921).

Here, Anderson has used the acts of communication by the protagonist, which are actually futile products of his imagination, to draw out an existential desperation. His imaginary efforts to transcend his state of muteness reflect a deep existential longing for authentic human connection (Anderson, 1921). This desperate longing underlines the existentialist view that human desire is inextricably linked with the need to understand and be understood. His struggle to connect in spite of his condition mirrors the existential reality of seeking meaning in an often quite indifferent world.

The accentuation of communication in deep desire is also related to how love is a target to be found within matters of redemption. Love becomes the final redemption in the midst of all hopes lost through the female character's avid longing:

"The woman upstairs wanted love. That must have been the story. She wanted love with her whole being. She wanted to create in love." (Anderson, 1921).

This desperation for love depicts a deep existential desperation to be connected and complete. Through the character, Anderson works way up to love as a possible sanctuary from existential despair. The woman's insatiable yearning for love amidst her lonely existence symbolizes the existentialist theme that love—though it may occasionally slip away from anyone—is one means through which actualization and redemption can be reached (Anderson, 1921). Her longing crystallizes man's existential struggle with what is supposed to be a meaningful and purposeful life in an otherwise uncaring world, portraying love both as a source of utmost solace and as a metonymy of the human condition's inherent quest for significance.

Furthermore, any interaction desired in the short story is also accompanied by further social apathy. In this case, the outsider is more ignored than the insider, making it closed identity that later also defines further indifference. As seen below, another way the story touches on societal apathy is in the "white one" character:

"The white one said nothing. In his eyes there was no rebuke, no question. His eyes were as impersonal as stars." (Anderson, 1921).

This attitude symbolizes the broader social indifference and lack of empathy, which has made the isolation of the protagonist and the woman even greater. The impersonality of the "white one" catches a much more universal existential problem: how to secure genuinely human understanding and contact in a world that so often seems to act indifferently toward human misery (Anderson, 1921). This lack of understanding and acceptance by the other deepens further the existential sense of alienation and brings forth the painful realist of managing a world that very often misses its deep needs.

Later Anderson further illustrates the apathy of society by depicting various characters as portrayals of social indifference:

"Down the stairs the villain whined and scampered up and down, a lost little hungry pup. The gray one tried to follow him about but now grew tired and lay down upon the floor to sleep. He never woke up again. The dandified fellow lay on the floor too. He laughed and played with his tiny black mustache." (Anderson, 1921)

The representation of social trivia and distractions underscores an even more generalized apathy to human sufferings. It is in their indulgence with petty issues that a deeper, more archetypal state of existential negation is reflected. Anderson's rendering of social apathy functions as a refrain to raise the larger existential question of how to find meaning and connection in the face of a universe that seems to be sometimes totally indifferent to the pains and struggles of existence (Anderson, 1921).

Love and Its Existential Continuations

Multidimensionality in love is the aspect developed within the theories of Bell Hooks, Vladimir Solovyov, Erich Fromm, and Emerson Eggerichs. The depth that these thinkers contribute to the idea makes it highly significant in terms of philosophy. This paper examines love as a unifying factor, a transforming principle, and an empirical art with respect to the existential and metaphysical approach.

There are various aspects of love underlined below. First, Love as a Principle of Unity. The conceptualization of love as a principle of unity by Vladimir Solovyov corresponds to the existentialist idea about interrelatedness and man's search for meaning. Love, according to Solovyov, is a metaphysical power to join the self with the cosmos and the self with others, thus going beyond the boundaries of one's existence (Solovyov, 2019). This view finds a close approximation in the existential philosophy where love is regarded as a kind of means to overcome existential isolation and find a place within the universe.

Existentialism is characterized by human aloneness and the requirement of genuine relations. The existential theme can be easily echoed in the understanding of love one finds in Solovyov: love is that which bridges the gap between the self and the world (Solovyov, 2019; Zournazi, 2023). The idea of love as a principle of unification, therefore, seems to invoke a proper understanding on the part of Solovyov, that love opens the ways to a true understanding of existence and, in some way, even makes it attainable to find, or at least see, one's way into sense in the global fragmentedness of life.

Second, Love as Action and Self-Transformation. Erich Fromm's representation of love as an art requiring active engagement goes well with emphasis laid on personal responsibility and self-creation in existentialism. Fromm postulates that love is not a feeling but practice calling for skill, work, and self-awareness (Fromm, 1956). This converges with the position existentialism takes about individual agency in the shaping of life.

Fromm's accent on empathy, freedom, and responsibility brings out the human potential for transformation through love. Existentialistically, love represents a way of transcendence in which one is able to connect with others and him or herself at a deep level (Calista, et al., 2024; Fromm, 1956). Through the love exercised as an art, one is constantly creating and changing himself or herself, thereby showing that existentialism believes in the power of personal choice and commitment.

Third, Gender Perspectives and Existential Implications. Emerson Eggerichs' *Love and Respect Cycle* brings a gendered perspective to love, positing that men and women have different primary emotional needs (Eggerichs, 2004; Zournazi, 2023). In looking at things from an existential lens, however, these widely agreed-upon gender differences could be understood as nothing but reflections of broader existential considerations. The need to feel respected or loved can be construed to have existential underpinnings of recognition or validation. Such gendered needs, from an existentialist point of view, do further deepen an understanding of human relationships. Freedom and authenticity in the individual, on which the existentialist emphasis falls, are brought into relief against the social expectations and gender roles that structure the experiencing and expressing of love.

Fourth, Love as Metaphysical and Practical Art. The art of love, according to Fromm, views love from a metaphysical understanding base, as well as practical application. Fromm characterizes love as deep self-understanding, empathy, and responsibility for laying the bases of a meaningful relationship. For him, love is practical and existential in the search for self-actualization. Fromm's statement that love has to be experienced actively and understood basically reflects the existentialist concept of love as a vehicle toward authentic engagement with the world (Fromm, 1956; Zournazi, 2023). Loving as an art includes sailing through all the travesties of existentialism to reach out for better connections, a sufficiently philosophical phenomenon considering love to be a personal exercise and a universal force.

Fifth, Philosophical Synthesis of Love's Role. The comprehensive knowledge of love within the philosophical border is represented through the insights from Hooks, Solovyov, Fromm, and Eggerichs. Love becomes the unifying factor across existential gaps, the principle of transformation to personal growth, and the art of living in the real world. These views underline the very deep influence love has on individual and social development. In *The Dumb Man*, the ideals of love that these theorists explained can be further extended in respect to the experiences and struggles of the protagonist. Their ideas will add meaning to the themes of isolation, communication, and relational dynamics developed in the novel.

The active, transformative conceptualizations of love by Bell Hooks are most relevant. Hooks views love as more than any feeling; rather, she calls for the enactment of love in such a way that there is care, respect, and social justice within relationships (Calista, et al., 2024; Hooks, 2000). This concept is related to *The Dumb Man*, when the protagonist struggles to connect with people because he has a problem communicating. According to the understanding of love by Hooks, this poor engagement with the relational meanings of love results in general existential loneliness and inability of the protagonist to form any meaningful relationships (Hooks, 2000). This interpretation further portrays how the protagonist failed to utilize love in any way in which it could have become an agent of transformation and positive change.

The understanding of Vladimir Solovyov of love as unifying force offers still another critical perspective into which to analyze the experience of the protagonist. Solovyov states that love is one of the basic ruling principles bringing unity to all things and that it gets rid of distances between a human being and the world around him (Solovyov, 2019; Zournazi, 2023). The feeling of separation and alienation of the major character from the world can be interpreted as the inability to live through this unifying force of love. As such, one could say that through Solovyov's framework, the protagonist is suffering from alienation due to a lack of such deep unity afforded by love, helping to explain his disconnection on an existential level (Solovyov, 2019).

The proposed model of Emerson Eggerichs provides another layer of explanation. According to Eggerichs, the foremost emotional needs between men and women seem to differ: women typically need to be loved, while men need to be respected (Brunner, 2023; Eggerichs, 2004). This model could be applied to better understand the emotional dynamics and relational conflicts developed in the novel. The problems of the obtained protagonist in meeting these needs could thereby indicate that a broader failure to meet basic emotional needs will thus result in the relational and personal catastrophes of the story.

Further understandings also indicate that the purpose of love is to build and maintain a strong, enduring, and meaningful relationship between partners (Chapman, 2015; pasopati et al., 2024). Chapman explores that each individual has a unique way of giving and receiving love, which he calls a love language. The purpose of knowing and understanding partner's love language is to strengthen emotional bonds and enhance intimacy in the relationship. Chapman explains that there are five primary love languages that can be understood by every individual. Those are ideas of Words of Affirmation, Acts of Service, Receiving Gifts, Quality Time, and also Physical Touch (Brunner, 2023; Chapman, 2015).

Love is intended to give readers insight into what makes some relationships successful in the long term. Using social science and psychology, readers understand how some people are able to build and maintain enduring and satisfying relationships by studying things like communication patterns, conflict resolution strategies, and emotional support systems that characterize long-term relationships. These ideas highlight the existential struggle to make meaningful connections in a world that frequently feels cold and uncaring in the setting of Anderson's *The Dumb Man* in the below analysis.

The narrative implies that although love has the power to unite people, the success of these relationships relies on the existence of sincere comprehension, genuine communication, and the capacity to help one another navigate the challenges of everyday life (Anderson, 1921; Brunner, 2023; Chapman, 2015). By marrying empirical research with theoretical models of development, practical advice on the building of resilient harmonious partnerships could be enhanced. From here, one gets the sense of how truly multidimensional love is and how huge a part it plays in the survival of healthy relationships over time.

Hope for Love in *The Dumb Man*

The character in the story of *The Dumb Man* is undergoing a severe condition of speech difficulty; still, he is full of lust to speak out to society. Though he desires to speak, however, he is well informed about all the barricades standing in the way of his speaking. So, the man with speaking impairment accepted loneliness. One of the principal aspects of this story is that the society doesn't at all concern about the central character's situation. Society, ignorant and aloof, does not realize or care regarding the plight of individuals such as *The Dumb Man*, thus emphasizing social indifference in general toward these classes of people. This indifference marks a common tendency in society to ignore

the plight and difficulties of individuals who are in some way marginalized or incapacitated, and reveals the current lack of empathy and social responsibility that should be prevalent in society as a whole (Lasch, 1979).

Nevertheless, Lasch also speaks of how the quest for happiness and self-fulfillment in American culture, through consumption and recognition, generally ends up with social isolation and the loss of the values of collectiveness arises (Lasch, 1979). In these characters, the young dandified man, the man with a very long white beard, and the figure with the wicked eyes, is manifested the indifference of being. These are representations of characters enclosed within their own lives, unable to communicate or recognize each other despite their situation of loneliness. The continued giggling of the little dandified man shows, whether he is crazy or drunk, just how much he does not care about inconveniencing other people.

Despite his inability to talk easily with the people, the man still retains a deep sense of longing to connect with them (Anderson, 1921). His loneliness and inability to do so do not quench his desire for connection on an emotional level. That he can look, understand, and observe what is around him, despite the inability to utter any sound, shows that there is hope that mediates the drives of his actions: his pursuit of meaning and relationship. Bound in the hope is an ultimate need in man to love and be loved, the central message of the story: the hope of the woman to love and be loved. It is that hope which makes one keep moving on and looking for a connection whenever things are uncertain or tough.

In this case, given such long, persistent hope of the female character, even when she was silent, it shows just how the human spirit could take a stand in any challenge. As an intrinsic motivator, hope compels human beings toward the pursuit of deeper understanding and meaningful connections in the most trying of circumstances. Thus, like Hegel, hope is an internal motivational tool toward the achievement of knowledge and self-realization in the world (Brunner, 2023; Hegel, 1807), and so it is in the narrator's knowledge, going past his bounds; hence the symbolic presence of hope as a deeper pursuit of self-knowledge and orientation in the world – as a motif having a serious role in the story.

In the story of *The Dumb Man*, ideas of love understood by several theorists can be used to extend an understanding of the experiences and problems the protagonist encounters. The views of Bell Hooks, Vladimir Solovyov, Emerson Eggerichs, and Erich Fromm offer plausible interpretations of the novel's themes related to isolation, communication, and relational dynamics.

Particularly relevant are the discussions by Bell Hooks about love as an actively transformative force. According to Hooks, while emotional states make up aspects of love, in reality, it is an active engagement in relationships through care, respect, and social justice (Brunner, 2023; Hooks, 2000). Therefore, taking the context of *The Dumb Man*, given that the protagonist struggles to communicate and connect with others, such struggles indicate an absence of the active practice of love according to Hooks. This, according to Hooks, poor attention to the relational characteristics of love defined the protagonist's existential isolation and loneliness of his person, struggled to establish meaningful ties with others (Hooks, 2000). Such a notion brought to the fore the failure of the protagonist to use love as an agent in effecting transformation and change, just as Hooks had envisioned.

This therefore marks a very imperative way in revealing the experience of the protagonist: Vladimir Solovyov's view on love as a unifying force. Solovyov claimed that love was such an absolutely basic principle that joined everything and everybody, closed possible gaps between human beings and the world around them (Chignell, 2023; Solovyov, 2019). The feeling of the leading character about his being detached and isolated from the rest could be interpreted as the inability to feel the unifying force, an ability of love to bring harmony. Therefore, the framework provided by Solovyov would argue perhaps that the alienation of the protagonist could be a function of a lack of this deeper unity that love is supposed to effect, and, as such, his or her profound existential disconnection (Chignell, 2023; Solovyov, 2019).

Another perspective through which the alienation in a relationship can be understood is through the work of Emerson Eggerichs, who sets forth the 'Love and Respect Cycle'. As Eggerichs writes, "When dealing with our relationship with our spouse, we feel the need for love from her, on one hand, and respect from him, on the other" (Eggerichs, 2004). This model may be applied to appreciate the emotional dynamics and relational conflicts of the novel, whereby the problems of the protagonist in meeting these needs can be raised even more generally in terms of not being able to fulfill core emotional needs that would have explained the relational and personal failures (Candiotto & De Jaegher, 2021; Wulandari, et al., 2023).

It is Erich Fromm who adds depth to the analysis, presenting love as an art form in which acting and practice are at a premium. According to Fromm, love is not some feeling but rather it is an action that requires "conscious knowledge, free choice, effort, and will; it demands a balance between giving and receiving, or freedom and responsibility" (Fromm, 1956). While reading *The Dumb Man*, an example can be seen about the inability of the protagonist to rightly practice the 'art of loving' with an insight into the lack of understanding and empathy within relationships. It also underlines the broader social commentary on deeper meaningful connections, relational, and emotional difficulties of the protagonist, because even an adequacy in engaging with love as an art form is lacking.

That is to say, a proper application of the several theoretical standpoints on love—from Bell Hooks' active engagement, through Vladimir Solovyov's unifying force, to Emerson Eggerichs' emotional needs and Erich Fromm's artful practice—offers a deep lens through which struggles by the protagonist of *The Dumb Man* can be understood. Those frameworks reflect how this would engrain the existential isolation and relational disputes of the protagonist from failure to satisfactorily embody and act out principles of love. This points to the way the novel portrays barriers to communication, emotional disconnection, and, finally, that love ought to be taken as a proactive unifying agent of

transformation (Candiotto & De Jaegher, 2021; Wulandari, et al., 2023). Under such multidimensional scrutiny, the problems of the character are understood against the background of broader, more global issues concerning the practice and understanding of love—a way of suggesting deeper thematic concerns with the novel and its relational dynamics.

In Sherwood Anderson's *The Dumb Man*, existential hope for love indeed goes beyond the characters' physical and emotional limitations. Despite barriers in communication, *The Dumb Man* clings to the hope of forming a meaningful relationship, which depicts the deep human desire to be understood and loved. Anderson emphasizes that love is not just a romantic ideal, but it is a fundamental aspect of human existence that offers solace in times of profound loneliness.

CONCLUSION

The narrative presents a vivid portrayal of the isolation experienced by characters due to their limitations. Through the depiction of The Dumb Man's plight, the story elucidates the profound sense of despair and social estrangement resulting from the inability to communicate effectively. This sense of isolation is not only a reflection of the individual's internal struggles but also serves as a critique of societal indifference towards those with limitations. This desire for connection represents the existential struggle for meaning in a world that often feels indifferent or isolating. The persistent hope for love and connection, despite the barriers faced, underscores a universal human aspiration for emotional fulfillment and social engagement. Ultimately, the story highlights the urgent need for increased empathy and understanding, emphasizing the impact of social neglect on individuals who are marginalized or constrained by their circumstances.

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