



Journal of Language and Education Policy
ISSN:2691-6061 (Print)2691-607X (Online)
Issue: Vol. 7; No. 1; January 2026 (pp. 7-18)
Website: www.jlepnet.com
DOI: 10.48150/jlep.v7no1.2026.a2

AN EXISTENTIALIST APPROACH TO UNAMUNO'S *NIEBLA*

Lisa Montes, Ph.D.
Lecturer of Spanish
University of Michigan
Department of Romance Languages &
Literatures
Modern Languages Building # 4417
Ann Arbor, MI 48109

Miguel de Unamuno's "nivola", *Niebla*, one of the most highly regarded examples of Spanish existentialist literature, relates the story of Augusto Pérez and his futile quest for happiness. His life reveals a succession of unfortunate events which ultimately leads to disappointment, rejection, and deception by those in whom he had confided. Upon close examination and self-reflection, Augusto deems himself and his attempts at finding pleasure in life as failures and decides to end his misery by taking his own life. He discovers, however, that even the act of committing suicide is out of his control, when he realizes he does not truly exist. Augusto is merely a fictional entity whose actions and fate are decided by his creator: real author, Miguel de Unamuno. Unamuno's metafictional presence is paramount to the reader's understanding of fundamental existentialist issues presented in the novel, including the drastic decision of ending one's own life. This investigation employs theories of various philosophers to illustrate how Unamuno's *Niebla* highlights themes such as autonomy, free will and the human condition, particularly in the case of the main character. By employing philosophies of Kant and Kierkegaard to analyze the thoughts and actions of the main characters as well as the ideas around suicide presented by Seneca, Camus and Sartre, the permeating question arises: In what ways does *Niebla* examine existential themes of freedom and individual choice through the character of Augusto Pérez as he struggles with his perception of agency?

Throughout *Niebla*, Unamuno continuously intersects the reader's world with the fictional one he creates. This is immediately evident in the prologue, when one of the characters interacts with the reader, blurring the lines of reality and fiction. The prologue is written by Augusto's best friend, Víctor Goti. Víctor's role, however, is not revealed until later in the story. In *Ni novelanivola: the Purpose of Metafiction in Unamuno's Niebla and Merino's Los invisibles*, Maria R. Rippon notes:

Unamuno begins with the apocryphal Víctor Goti and uses the space of the prologue, which would normally provide true details regarding the writing of a work –its historical context or its inspiration, for example – to create the first assault on reality. So insidious and complete was the invasion that Víctor Goti acquired flesh-and-blood status as the actual prologuer of *Niebla* (2018).

It is not revealed until later in the story, that Víctor, too, lives at the mercy of the real author. In the post-prologue, Unamuno threatens to make Goti disappear: "And my friend and prologist Goti must be very careful when debating my decisions, for if he annoys me too much, I will end up doing to him what I did to his friend Pérez, and that is letting him die" (Unamuno, 84). Here the reader discovers that much like the protagonist of the story, Víctor's freedom and individual choice may ultimately reside beyond the realm of his autonomous control. As the title, *Niebla (Mist)*, alludes, the boundaries between reality and fiction are hazy, creating a nebulous effect on the mind of the reader. In the article *Niebla: Una ficción basada en la realidad*, Sicong Yu writes:

La confusión se siente a lo largo de toda la obra a través de diferentes personajes y distintos casos. Augusto Pérez, el protagonista de la novela, no es la única persona que se encuentra en una vida envuelta en niebla... Toda la novela está llena de dilemas y contradicciones, la vida de todo el mundo se ve envuelta en una espesa niebla nivolesca. (2015).

Given these misty boundaries of reality and the undefined power of the real author, how then does the lack of agency of Augusto, and to a lesser degree, Víctor play in *Niebla's* exploration of existential concepts such as freedom and the nature of individual choice?

To better comprehend this question, the behaviors of certain characters as well as the protagonist should be evaluated, as their attitudes and actions contribute to Augusto's mindset. These behaviors can be assessed by employing various existentialist philosophies, the first pertaining to the initial section of Immanuel Kant's *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*. In this work, Kant juxtaposes two concepts of "good". These distinctions may be applied to analyze the behaviors of Orfeo, Eugenia and Augusto. In the first section of *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Kant creates a dichotomy between the unconditionally good and the qualifiedly good. In his explanation of these concepts, the only act that can be good without qualification is "goodwill". He theorizes:

A good will is good not because of what it performs or effects, not for its aptness for the attainment of some proposed end, but simply by virtue of the volition, that is good in itself, and considered by itself to be esteemed much higher than all that can be brought about by it in favor of any inclination, nay, even of the sum total of all inclinations (18).

Therefore, everything else that is perceived as good is regarded as so only with qualification.

According to Kant, a good will cannot be dependent on the value of its acts. To better illustrate the idea of goodwill, he explains the difference between a person doing his duty and doing his duty *because it is his duty*. "They preserve their life *as duty requires*, no doubt, but not *because duty requires*" (22). The value of an action must solely be based on having carried out that duty for its own sake, not for the purpose of benefiting from the consequences it may generate. What sort of principle, then, is able to determine the will without having concern for any of the effects it may produce? "Kant claims it must be a principle that requires one act so that the reasons one has for so acting could themselves be principles of the will" (Sayre-McCord, 2000). Given this explanation, how would one explain the difference between a moral and an immoral action? Kant provides the example of an individual who is deciding whether to make a false promise. Is the purpose of the act of not being truthful solely to serve one's vested interests, or does it coincide with one's obligation? Kant holds that this action would be considered immoral if it cannot be commended as a principle that should guide the actions of all people.

Upon analyzing the behaviors of Orfeo, Eugenia and Augusto, one may apply Kant's distinction between the unconditionally good and the qualifiedly good. To illustrate the difference between these concepts, I will compare the actions of these three characters and how they impact Augusto's struggles with identity and autonomy. As discussed earlier in this investigation, Kant states that the only thing in life that can be unconditionally good is *goodwill*. When someone is exhibiting goodwill, they are being good for the sake of being good. He is not concerned with how he will be affected by his actions. Orfeo represents a character who demonstrates the concept of being unconditionally good. Upon discovering the deceased Augusto in his bed, Orfeo grieves uncontrollably. His outpour reveals his unconditional love for and sincere loyalty to his human friend. Throughout the story, Orfeo demonstrates an authentic devotion to and appreciation for his rescuer, never taking him for granted.

The epilogue illustrates Orfeo's feelings of utter devotion to Augusto. "Porque su amo era para él como un dios. Y al sentirle ahora muerto sintió que se desmoronaban en su espíritu los fundamentos todos de su fe en la vida y en el mundo, y una inmensa desolación llenó su pecho" (227). Orfeo was a loyal friend to Augusto, expecting nothing in return. His sole duty was to be his faithful companion, which he fulfilled without contemplation of any potential effects it may have produced. In the epilogue this mutual unconditional love is even more apparent. "...their relationship seems to exemplify what Unamuno considers the only pure, ideal love: love between animal and master, uncomplicated, at least on one side, by human frailty" (Moran, 1970)^I. Orfeo so grieves the loss of his friend, that when Augusto dies, he follows suit. His death is not the calculated result of any attention-seeking or manipulation tactic; Orfeo dies of a pure, unadulterated broken heart, desiring nothing more than to be reunited with his master, much like his namesake. In the myth, the hero, Orfeo (Orpheus) travels to the land of the dead to bring his wife back to the land of the living. (Nihilvs, 2019). Given the freedom to make his own choices, it can be assumed that if permitted by the real author, the heartbroken dog would have stopped at nothing to save the human he so dearly loved, further exemplifying his unconditionally good spirit.

Unlike Augusto's selfless companion, epitomizing the concept of being qualifiedly good is Eugenia. As one soon discovers, her behavior tends to be more opportunistic than altruistic. The pianist does not exemplify characteristics of being good for the sake of goodness. Eugenia's behavior is one of ulterior motives. Upon first crossing paths with the young woman however, Augusto fosters an idealized image of her, which she later proves inaccurate. In *Unamuno's Concept of the Tragic*, Ernesto Hernández discusses the concept of the two types of people^{II}:

For Unamuno there are two notions of man, the 'concrete substantive' a man whose constitution is of 'flesh and blood.' It is a man that is 'born, suffers, and dies...' the man that occupies a physical place in the world and society, is the common man. The other notion of man is a 'man from nowhere', from neither here nor there, neither of this age or another, who has neither sex nor country, who is, in short, a mere idea... This generic type is non-existent, it exists only in the minds of the first type of men, the existing-common man. (2010)

Contrary to the idea concocted by Augusto that Eugenia's nature is unconditionally good, the measures taken by the pianist demonstrate a drastic departure from this classification. In the Nihilvs article, *Mist/Niebla 1914*, the author describes the two versions of Eugenia that exist in the story: the ideal Eugenia, as imagined by Augusto, and the Eugenia who exists in the flesh:

The material Eugenia is ephemeral contrary to the hallucination, the ideal, the form, the thought. Everything about the flesh Eugenia is related to chance while the ideal is eternal, therefore it is suggested that the only way Augustus can really fully have Eugenia is to have the Ideal, complete and Eternal Eugenia, which is quite the opposite from the flesh Eugenia, which is not only controlled by chance, but also capricious, she does not obey to rules – sure not the ones of her aunt and uncle, she refuses any attempt of forcing a certain trajectory in life which is not coming from herself, she defies an outside pattern. (2019)

Eugenia's attitude and actions reflect the unapologetic selfishness of her true character. She consistently behaves in a manner that serves her best interests, a stark contrast to the innocent, benevolent young woman Augusto has created in his mind. Using Kant's example of whether making

^IWhile this secondary source is not current, I have included it do to its relevancy.

^{II} The term "man" refers to all people.

a false promise is immoral, in the case of Eugenia, it would be. The purpose of the lie is not for the greater good of the community but is designed for her personal benefit and that of Mauricio. Agreeing to marry Augusto under false pretenses and deserting him shortly before the wedding, the unscrupulous Eugenia is unconcerned with the harmful effects that will result from this deception. It is due to her actions that the inconsolable Augusto descends into his depressive spiral, ultimately leading to his desire to end his life, an act he would later learn lies beyond his control. Through Augusto's confrontation with his sense of agency, we are again confronted by the question of how *Niebla* delves into existential ideas of personal freedom and individual decision-making.

Whereas the distinction between Orfeo and Eugenia is quite clear, Kant's concept of good is more nuanced in terms of analyzing the behaviors of Augusto. This is apparent in chapter six when the young man arrives at the building of his love interest whose aunt has just dropped the birdcage of her beloved canary, sending it plummeting to the ground. Fortunately, Augusto was there to retrieve it before any harm was suffered by the animal. Extremely grateful, the elderly woman invites the young suitor into the home where, at last, he will have the opportunity to meet Eugenia. "Subió Augusto a la casa, con el canario agitándose en la jaula y el corazón en el pecho" (54). While there are several instances in the story where Augusto's actions are obviously unconditionally good, his act of rescuing the bird is not as clear. Would he have reacted so swiftly to save the fallen canary had he not intended to enter the home of his love obsession? Or did he do so as an effort to appear more gallant to the young girl's guardians, thus rendering his actions as qualifiedly good? In line with Unamuno's formulation of man is that his actions are informed by his mental states or states of consciousness, beliefs and intentions. "In other words, his *hombre de carne y hueso* ('man of flesh and bone') is also an *hombre de carne y seso* ('man of flesh and brains')." (Shaefer 2017) Therefore, it could be argued that, in this instance, unlike in the adoption of the stray dog, Augusto's chivalrous rescue of the bird may have been inspired by his desire to impress the aunt of his love interest. Was this act, however, calculatedly designed by the real author as a means for Augusto to finally have the opportunity to meet his love interest, hence jumpstarting the tragic series of events that would lead to his harrowing conclusion? Did the protagonist ever stand a chance at exercising individual freedom or was this all part of the insidious plan of his creator?

While Kant's theories provide an assessment rooted in what constitutes goodwill, a second philosophical concept that can be applied to the characters of *Niebla* is Kierkegaard's idea of the three stages of life. Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, considered by many as the "father of existentialism", wrote of the nature and existence of human beings. Kierkegaard maintains that there are three developmental stages of life through which one must travel: the aesthetic, ethical, and religious (theological). In their article, *Kierkegaard's Aesthete and Unamuno's Niebla*, Evans and Evans write:

We believe that Unamuno was profoundly influenced by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works which (1) see the self as something that one must choose, (2) define the stages of existence (aesthetic, ethical, religious) and (3) set forth the need for communicating indirectly when talking about authentic existence, so that the individual can freely appropriate truth. (2004).

When one first encounters Eugenia, she exhibits a quality that pertains to the ethical, or second, stage. Upon entering this stage, one begins to take a direction in life and shows a deeper concern with good and evil. The individual feels the need to make a commitment, which Kierkegaard advocates can be of any nature. His actions reveal consistency and coherence. An individual must be accountable for his/her life and actions and does not use others as objects.

The ethical person has a genuine and non-fragmented identity, role, and places in life, defined by his commitment to others and self, and has now chosen himself whereas before, in the aesthetic stage, there was no self behind the empty and transient role. (Percy, 2002)

When making decisions, the ethical person considers how choices will affect others in the community. Eugenia appears to be at this level due to one characteristic: her occupation as a piano instructor. As Kierkegaard points out, the individual who is in the ethical sphere, demonstrates he or she is capable of making a commitment. This dedication is revealed in the dialogue between Augusto and the woman who works at the entrance of Eugenia's apartment complex. Augusto inquires:

- Y dígame..., dígame...-sin sacar los dedos del bolsillo-,
- ¿Cómo es que sale así sola? ¿Es soltera o casada? ¿Tiene padres?
- Es soltera y huérfana. Vive con unos tíos...
- ¿Paternos o maternos?
- Sólo sé que son tíos.
- Basta y aún sobra.
- Se dedica a dar lecciones de piano.
- Y lo toca bien?
- Ya tanto no sé. (28-29)

In this conversation, one discovers that Eugenia is committed to giving piano lessons, but that is all that is revealed as the door person does not elaborate on this dedication. At this point one merely knows that she is a piano instructor, whether she excels at what she does, or whether she enjoys her occupation remain unmentioned. Another vague aspect of this exchange between the characters involves the disposition of Eugenia. While inquiring about her to the woman at the door, Augusto does not ask anything regarding her personality or character. The questions he asks are objective in nature: her marital status, whether she has parents and how well she plays the piano.

Later in the story, Eugenia makes her profound disdain for her career as a piano teacher apparent. On page 71 she illustrates her true feelings toward her occupation in a conversation with Mauricio:

- ¿Y de qué vamos a vivir?
- De mi trabajo hasta que tú lo encuentres.
- ¿De tu trabajo?
- ¡Sí, de la odiosa música!
- ¿De tu trabajo? ¡Eso sí que no! ¡Nunca!,nunca!, ¡nunca! ¡Todo menos vivir de tu trabajo! Lo buscaré, seguirébuscándolo, y en tanto, esperaremos...

Although discontented with her dedication as a piano teacher, Eugenia nonetheless appears to belong to the ethical stage based on her ability to commit. One questionable aspect, however, is her hatred toward music. According to Kierkegaard, when one is part of the ethical sphere, he or she exhibits a deeper appreciation for the arts. Clearly, this is not the case for Eugenia. As her character becomes more developed, one begins to question where she resides in Kierkegaard's scaffold of life stages. Possibly not as self-indulgent as an individual pertaining to the lowest level of the first stage, Eugenia's actions do, however, reveal that she exists in the aesthetic. Further illustrating this point is her treatment of Augusto. The truly ethical consider the consequences of their actions. Someone existing at this level takes responsibility for his or her life and contemplates how choices will affect others in the community. Eugenia deceives her suitor, leaving him desperate and alone three days before the wedding. After using him for selfish purposes, she is unfazed by the consequences of her actions.

“This first stage, the aesthetic stage, is the stage in which man acts in such a way that will bring pleasure or happiness to himself- that is the main motivation and concern” (Percy, 2002). There are varying degrees of aesthetic existence, ranging from the purely consumerist to the truly irresponsible. The least sophisticated individual merely exists to satisfy his physical senses. Higher

on the scale, but still within the aesthetic stage, is the “busy man of affairs”. He engages in activities in the world that are designed to bring success to himself. This is demonstrated by Eugenia as she manipulates Augusto, leading him to believe that she loves him, when her intentions are impure. The highest level of the aesthetic stage is the aristocratic level. The appreciation of culture may be more refined, but still motivated by the pleasure and pleasure-seeking principle. This self-indulgence is demonstrated by the pianist as she uses Augusto’s generosity in order to improve her way of living.

Also characterizing an existence at the aesthetic level, is Eugenia’s fiancé, Mauricio. He embodies all the aspects of the most basic degree of this sphere. Only considering his vested interests, Mauricio devises the plan to deceive the unsuspecting Augusto. The reprobate is unconcerned with how his actions affect any of the other characters in the story, not even Eugenia, as Mauricio suggests she marry Augusto for economic purposes and then leave him once she has gained financially. Essentially, he insists upon prostituting the woman he supposedly loves, so that he may reap the monetary benefits, clearly proving his existence at the most crude level.

At another point in the *nivola*, Mauricio references Don Juan Tenorio, the literary figure who, according to Kierkegaard, best exemplifies existence at the aesthetic level:

Mauricio se quedó un breve rato como suspenso; más pronto se repuso, encendió un cigarrillo, salió a la calle y le echó un piropo a la primera moza de garbo que pasó a su lado. Y aquella noche hablaba, con un amigo, de don Juan Tenorio. (114-115)

Kierkegaard regards Don Juan as the ultimate selfish aesthete. Always seeking pleasure for his personal interests, the iconic character never repeats the act of love with the same woman as repetition dulls the gratification. The egoistic philanderer thinks only of himself. In the conversation about don Juan in *Niebla*, Mauricio’s friend jokingly compares him to the literary libertine. Mauricio, however, denies this claim and states that the one with the true power of seduction is his counterpart, Eugenia. Despite the ruthless and deceitful nature of their actions, the shameless couple do not face the same struggle as their unsuspecting victim. They have been granted individual freedom and agency, which sadly, leads to the eventual demise of Augusto, who represents certain aspects of Kierkegaard’s third stage of life.

The last stage of the developmental process of life is the religious or theological stage. While bearing many similarities to the former stage, an important distinction should be made: one can be ethical without being religious but cannot be religious without being ethical. As with the ethical sphere, in the religious sphere, there is an awareness of a reality that gives substance to actions. The difference, however, lies in the individual’s commitment to God. Throughout the story, Augusto remains concerned with the well-being of others and the possible consequences of his actions. This preoccupation for others is demonstrated in chapter five when he first encounters Orfeo. Upon seeing the dog, he exclaims, “¡Pobrecillo! Lo han dejado recién nacido a que muera; les faltó valor para matarlo” (51). Lamenting the poor condition in which the emaciated puppy has been abandoned and left to die, Augusto assumes responsibility for the stray dog and takes him home, expecting nothing in return.

Another characteristic of the religious stage, echoing that of the ethical, is the ability to make commitments. Throughout the story, Augusto demonstrates this capability in a variety of ways. For example, he shows his willingness to commit in matrimony to Eugenia. Additionally, he accepts responsibility for the caretaking of his pet. Other characters to whom Augusto appears to be committed are his servants Domingo and Liduvina. Employed by his family from the time of his deceased mother, Augusto continues to provide them with work, despite his living alone and not requiring a great amount of assistance. As noted earlier, the ethical and the religious stages bear similarities. There is one important characteristic, however, that must be present in the former and

not necessarily the latter. This characteristic is having faith in God. As shown throughout *Niebla*, Augusto expresses his belief in a higher power. On page 26, for example, he states, “Esto cambiará en el cielo cuando todo nuestro oficio se reduzca, o más bien se ensanche, a contemplar a Dios y todas las cosas en Él”. At this point, Augusto’s faith in God is illustrated, an aspect that allows him to progress from the ethical stage to the religious or theological.

The reader must ask however, *who* is God for Augusto: the omnipotent figure in the heaven of his religion or his true creator, don Miguel? By appearing as a character who interacts with Augusto, Unamuno distorts the line between creator and creation, further raising existential questions about free will and autonomy.

While the main character displays characteristics of the progression from the ethical to theological stage as mentioned above, Evans and Evans assert that Augusto simultaneously resides in the aesthetic realm, due to his desire but inability to control his life and relationships. Comparing Augusto’s actions to those of the main character in Sartre’s *Either/Or*, they write, “Augusto does not abandon Eugenia as the Seducer abandons Cordelia, but the point at which he no longer has control of the situation is a point of major distress” (2004). Unable to control Eugenia, Augusto at least tries to control his fate. Upon learning from Víctor that they both are no more than characters in a novel, a confused and desperate Augusto resolves to kill himself. His maturation has not come to the point of believing enough in his own existence to choose to live and enter the ethical stage. However, wanting to show that he is able to make his own decisions, he plans to die by his own hand. Soon, however, he will learn that the choice is not his and his sadness deepens as he struggles with his lack of agency. By inserting himself into the story, Unamuno reveals himself as the determiner of the characters’ fates, calling into question whether humans truly possess autonomy or if they are controlled by predetermined forces. “The main protagonists of Unamuno’s narrative fictions are lonely, conflicted, and self-divided figures, marked by the anxieties of existence, the longing for survival, and extreme forms of emotion” (Vendrell-Farran, 2019).

As this investigation attempts to answer how *Niebla* portrays Augusto Pérez’s internal conflict with agency, and what it reveals about the novel’s exploration of existential themes like freedom and individual choice, it is important to acknowledge that other theories exist regarding the main character and his lack of autonomy in his death. For example, one theory explores the idea of an illusionary reality in which the lines between fiction and reality have been blurred to the point of interpreting the protagonist’s fate as a dream. Instead of dying in his bed, could it be that this was all a metaphoric dream which included Orfeo’s emotional eulogy, thus validating his unconditional love for his master? Therefore, in this scenario, upon waking, Augusto’s “death” represents the termination of the illusion. In her article, *Perspectiva de Niebla de Miguel de Unamuno*, Melissa Sánchez Castro postulates, “...a mi parecer este libro es algo así como un sueño dentro de un sueño, la verdad es que al principio del final del texto me generó mucha incertidumbre sobre el verdadero papel de Don Augusto, de Víctor y de Miguel de Unamuno (autor), pude llegar a la conclusión de que se trata de la misma persona” (2015). According to Sánchez Castro, the haziness of the plot reveals a dream within a dream, wherein the main character, his best friend and their creator are manifestations of the same being whose splintered personality is only revealed in the subconscious.

A second theory is that Unamuno’s decision to extinguish Augusto’s life is a means to end the story. In this case, the authorial intervention functions as a termination of the narrative. In *Niebla*, Unamuno appears as himself, engaging in a direct conversation with Augusto and ultimately informing the defeated man of his inevitable demise. From a metafictional standpoint, the death of Augusto is not literal, but fictional, marking an official closure to the narrative. His death reinforces the idea that he is confined to the story and once it ends, so too, does his existence. Not only confusing to the characters, the real author’s appearance in the story also has the potential to cause confusion in the mind of the reader. In *Niebla: Una ficción basada en la realidad*, Sicong Yustates:

Lo mismo pasa con los lectores, que se han convertido en juguetes del escritor y no saben distinguir lo real y lo ficticio al leer esta novela. De allí, se ve el éxito que obtiene Miguel de Unamuno, en crear a través de una ficción literaria, un mundo semi-real y semi-ficticio, basada en la realidad, dejando a todo el mundo en una gran confusión, como ha dicho en su obra. (2015)

According to this theory, Augusto's death is a metafictional device rather than a literal suicide, although not immediately obvious to the reader. This authorial control addresses how Unamuno's presence as an author within the text itself determines the nature of Augusto's fate.

A final, yet not exhaustive alternative perspective, contradicts the former as it considers Augusto's death as a continuation of life beyond the text. Despite his death in the novela, Augusto survives in the mind of the reader. His death is not the end of his existence but a transition to the imagination of those who read his story. Immortalized in the consciousness of the reader, Augusto makes his eternal return each time the novel is read. "Taking boundaries down and through an exploration into metafictional consciousness as diachronic cultural phenomenon, it is possible to appreciate its variances in explicitness without being constrained by temporal boundaries" (Vivas García, 2019). Augusto's story does not end but is perpetually revived whenever the reader interacts with it. In this way, the main character has more life than his creator as Augusto indefinitely continues as long as his story continues to be read.

Contrary to the previously presented theories, my investigation asserts that the death that occurs in *Niebla* is intended as an attempted suicide, not a metaphorical death. Although Augusto ultimately does not have the ability to end his own life as he had planned, one may still analyze his desire to do so according to the perspectives on suicide of thinkers Seneca, Camus, and Sartre.

The Roman philosopher, Seneca, belonged to the ancient tradition of Stoicism. Stoics followed the basic logic of Aristotle but added a theory on the origins of knowledge and the criterion of truth in which knowledge enters the mind through the senses. The mind was believed to be a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, and knowledge arises through sensual experiences. This is a clear opposition to Plato's idealism in which the senses are a source of error. Stoics deny the reality of concepts because they have no reality beyond consciousness. How does one distinguish between reality and imagination? According to the principles of Stoicism, truth cannot reside in concepts because they are of our own making. The truth is only revealed through our sensual impressions. It is not present in our thoughts, but in our feelings. Therefore, there is no universal criterion for truth. Perhaps, one of the most well-known Stoics was Seneca. Considering himself a Socratic philosopher, he spoke directly to the people about issues of practical importance. According to Seneca, "suicide is a duty/privilege" (Bates, 1906).

Given his position that the act of suicide should be considered a privilege or duty, Seneca would most likely support Augusto's idea to take his own life if he were able, as the philosopher feels that the act falls within the scope of a human being's natural rights. In letter 70 of *Letters from a Stoic: Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, the Stoic postulates:

Must I await the cruelty either of disease or of man, when I can depart through the midst of torture, and shake off my troubles? This is the one reason why we cannot complain of life; it keeps no one against his will. Humanity is well situated, because no man is unhappy except by his own fault. Live, if you so desire; if not, you may return to the place whence you came. (58)

According to Seneca, who ended his own life by severing his wrists, the possibility of suicide provides one an empowering freedom. For some, it is through this act that tranquility, virtue and happiness may be attained. Living in constant despair, what purpose would be served by Augusto's

persistent existence? In his depressed state, Augusto should be afforded the privilege to end his misery without judgement from those who disapprove of his decision. Augusto's existential crisis revolves around his discovery that he is merely a fictional character, controlled by his creator, Unamuno. Seneca proports that humans have the right to autonomy, and if autonomy is lost, suicide may be seen as a justified act. In the case of Augusto, though, he is powerless to complete the action.

Contrastingly, Albert Camus, would disagree with Augusto's desire, as the French Existentialist philosopher, does not share in Seneca's notion of suicide as a possibility. He considers this act the fundamental moral philosophy. It is the central subject of his work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus does not appear interested in the traditional motives and justifications for taking one's own life (such as personal tragedy or an escape from a terminal illness, etc.). For him, suicide is a response to the absurd, and he claims it is not an option. The only morally valid response to dealing with the absurd is to continue living. Therefore, he would discourage Augusto from committing the definitive act. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the main character resists the lure of suicide by continuing to perform the nonsensical task of repeatedly rolling a giant bolder up a hill only to have it roll down again. Camus argues that some choose to evade the absurdity by either committing suicide or filling one's life with hope- that is, applying an external meaning to life and the world (being a God, another meta-narrative, etc.). He views the second strategy as another example of evading the absurd. The solution to confronting the preposterous is to be the *absurd hero*, who recognizes and understands that he must deal with absurdity while still focusing on his present life. Camus states, "a man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound by it...so has ceased to belong to the future" (31). Camus contends that philosophical reflection prepares us for death, through reflective readiness to embrace the finality of the self. (Blas González, 2020) He would encourage the miserable protagonist to persevere and become the absurd hero. Most likely he would agree that the circumstances in Augusto's life are indeed absurd but would not advise him to prematurely take his life. Suicide, according to Camus, is nothing more than an escape from reality.

In his investigation, *Albert Camus: Philosophical Suicide, Physical Suicide, and the Absurd*, Jeffrey Miiller explains, "Camus argues that we should 'revolt' against the absurd, which requires us to remain fully conscious of the absurd at all times, to be fully aware of our inevitable mortality, and to accept that there may be no life beyond this current one" (2019). Augusto should face his problems bravely and continue his existence, no matter how ludicrous his situation and despite knowing that the afterlife may not exist. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, however, the philosopher acknowledges that this is not an easy act:

Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering. (10)

His explanation implies that one is of a sound mind and capable of reflecting upon his situation in a rational, logical manner. He goes on to describe the difficulty of examining one's struggles in such an empirical manner when suffering emotionally. Paramount to *Niebla* are Augusto's crisis of agency and the absurdity of his purposeless existence. His eventual realization that he is no more than a fictional character leads to a form of existential emptiness, where his "death" could be a surrender to the meaninglessness of his existence.

Like Camus, Sartre feels a preoccupation for human beings' contemplation of the world. He regards suicide as the opportunity to stake out the understanding of our essence as individuals in a godless world. Perhaps the most striking difference from Camus is his conception of the absurd. For

Sartre absurdity belongs to the world prior to activity of consciousness. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre claims that, “man presents himself at least in this instance as a being who causes Nothingness to arise in the world” (61). Humans are unlike other beings. They have absolute freedom which stems from negation, and ultimately leads to anguish. One can either accept freedom or remain in anguish to flee the struggle, which Sartre refers to as *bad faith*. For Sartre, suicide could be a reaction toward this absolute freedom, a right Augusto lacks.

In *Death and Liberation: A Critical Investigation of Death in Sartre's Being and Nothingness*, Brian Lightbody claims, “According to Sartre, freedom is neither a positive property nor an essential aspect of the human being: we do not have freedom as if we ‘possessed’ freewill...Rather, freedom is best described as a lack of essence, a lack of being, in short as a nihilation of being” (2009). In the case of Augusto, however, does this ultimately apply, as it is later revealed that he has no freedom or authority to make his own decisions? After much self-reflection and contemplation of his misfortunes, Augusto entertains the idea of taking his own life. Seeking advice on the issue, he travels to Salamanca in a very thought-provoking chapter where he meets with the real author of *Niebla*, Miguel de Unamuno. During this meeting, Unamuno informs Augusto that he is incapable of committing suicide, as he is merely fictional, and his existence depends wholly on the pen of the man he journeyed so far to see:

- Es que tú no puedes suicidarte, aunque lo quieras.
- ¿Cómo? –exclamó al verse de tal modo negado y contradicho.
- Sí. Para que uno se pueda matar a sí mismo, ¿qué es menester? - le pregunté.
- Que tenga valor para hacerlo -me contestó
- ¡No-le dije-, ¡qué esté vivo! (206)

According to Sartre's perspective, the act of suicide allows an individual to comprehend his essence in a world that promises nothing upon one's demise. There is no promise of an afterlife. In the final act of his play, *No Exit*, Sartre claims that “hell is other people” for man. While often interpreted as a literal proclamation of the hellish behavior of others, the “hell” to which the existentialist refers is the difficulty of coexistence and the alienation it may bring. There may be no freedom in life whilst we are trapped by the perceptions of others. In the case of Augusto, characters such as Eugenia and Mauricio are the *others* that create the hell in which Augusto lives. In all reality, however, none of these perspectives matter for Augusto, as he learns his existence and autonomy are nothing more than illusions. Therefore, in Sartrean terms, in addition to the Machiavellian couple, for Augusto, hell is Unamuno, his creator and destroyer. In her article, *La muerte en la acción unamuniana: Una encrucijada entre el conocimiento y la identidad individual*, Gorka Bilbao Terreros writes, “...el suicidio en los textos unamunianos ha sido tratado por la crítica tradicional como un método por el cual sus personajes consiguen escapar de una realidad universal que les aliena y les niega como sujetos autónomos y libres”(2014). In the case of Augusto, however, even the act of taking his life lies beyond his control, as the metafictional presence of Unamuno denies him such agency.

When applying the above-mentioned philosophical concepts to *Niebla*, it becomes strikingly evident that the human conditions of existence, freedom and fate lie beyond the grasp of the main character. According to Cabrera Martínez:

The most important event in the novel is when Augusto, the main character, goes to see Unamuno: ‘But before carrying on with his purpose [...] it occurred to him to come and consult it with me, author of all this tale(259).’ The writer appearing in some shape or form within their novel is not unique, Cervantes already did it in *Don Quixote*. What is newfangled is that the interaction occurs while the author is writing the novel. (2001)

This literary strategy allows the reader to realize Augusto's lack of autonomy at the same time as the main character, accompanying him as he falls into hopeless despair. "A deliberating blur between the process of reading, meaning the realization of the literal fictional universe, and the reality that that reality is creating. This blurring of the partition between the reader and the book has a metaphysical result" (Nihilvs, 2019). The first-time reader discovers this bleak awareness along with the desolate Augusto in real time.

When Eugenia leaves the naive Augusto three days before the wedding, demoralized and ridden with despair, he contemplates suicide (a decision that would be undoubtedly uncontested by Seneca), and ventures to Salamanca to visit Miguel de Unamuno, a philosopher, who has written an essay on the topic of one taking his own life. It is here that Unamuno informs Augusto that the downtrodden man does not exist. He is nothing more than the philosopher's fictional creation. Unamuno controls Augusto's destiny and his fate has already been decided: soon he will die, but not by his own hand.

Hysterical, Augusto returns home, explaining his ill predestination to his servants while eating in gluttonous excess, perhaps as a reaction to his absurd life circumstances. Fearing that the young man is ill, the servants put him to bed. Before falling into an eternal sleep, Augusto hands his servants a letter written for Miguel de Unamuno. It reads, "Se salió usted con la suya. He muerto (You got your way. I have died)" (220). Upon discovery of Augusto's dead body, the character appearing the most grief-stricken is his loyal dog, Orfeo.

In *Unamuno's Niebla: Existence and the Game of Fiction*, Carlos Blanco Aguinaba contends that the real author's self-insertion not only demonstrates that he, and not Augusto, controls the main character's fate, but simultaneously immortalizes himself by doing so:

...the most important thing about this chapter, the most obvious and surely the least observed, is not that, in it, Augusto tries to escape the world of Fiction, but that, in it, a new character finally leaves his mist and enters the novel: a character by the name of Miguel de Unamuno. Only when we read chapter XXXI this way—as perhaps one more effort by Unamuno to achieve some sort of immortality by making sure he appears in a realm where he will always be seen by mortals—only then do Augusto's words make sense. (1964)

As the *nivola* concludes, the question arises as to who technically is responsible for Augusto's death. Does he take his own life, or does the dramatized author, don Miguel, kill off his main character? In the prologue, Víctor assures the reader that it was Augusto who brought about his own death. Augusto's housekeeper, Liduvina, verifies this. But don Miguel enters the narrative to claim responsibility and to wonder whether he should bring Augusto back to life, again confirming he has the authority to manufacture or demolish his characters with the stroke of his metafictional pen.

As demonstrated, Miguel de Unamuno's *Niebla* is a *nivola* to which many philosophical theories may be applied as the reader accompanies Augusto on his existentialist journey. The story is replete with themes of freedom, autonomy and fate. By examining character behavior through the lenses of Kant and Kierkegaard as well as applying the existentialist perspectives of Seneca, Camus and Sartre to Augusto's contemplation of the controversial act of suicide, more clarity is gained on how *Niebla* portrays Augusto Pérez's internal conflict with agency, as well as what it reveals about existential themes like freedom and choice. While suicide is a prominent element in *Niebla* as well as one's authority to make decisions to serve his or her interests, the metafictional intervention of Miguel de Unamuno prohibits the main character from achieving his goal of ending his own life. Unamuno's *Niebla* demonstrates that Augusto's character is not fully defined but rather in a state of arrested development. Employing these concepts of existentialist philosophers deepens our understanding of the characters of the *nivola*, shedding light upon their respective behaviors and how their actions not only affect those they encounter, but also impact the greater society.

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