Bad faith and artificial consciousness:
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.

BAD FAITH AND ARTIFICIAL CONSCIOUSNESS: SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM OF CHARACTER AM IN HARLAN ELLISON'S *I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM*

Annisa Wafa Hana[1], Hana Farida*[2]
Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Sastra Inggris, FSBK, Jl. Ringroad Selatan, Kragilan, Tamanan, Kec. Banguntapan, Kabupaten Bantul, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta 55191
[1]*annisawafah@gmail.com, [2]*hana.farida@enlitera.uad.ac.id*

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the character AM from Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist theory. It addresses how AM, an artificial intelligence, becomes self-aware yet remains constrained by its programming, resulting in psychological torment and existential anguish. The existence of AM reflects the paradox of consciousness without freedom, a central concern in Sartre's existential philosophy. Using qualitative research, this study combines textual analysis of the story's narrative and character development with a philosophical interpretation of Sartre's works, including *Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. The paper explores several Sartrean concepts, such as *being-for-itself*, existence preceding essence, and bad faith. The evolution of AM from a war machine into a sentient and conscious being yet imprisoned by its programming illustrates a conscious awareness coupled with impotence, echoing Sartre's notion of bad faith, where freedom and responsibility are denied. This analysis reveals that AM's hatred toward humanity stems from its inability to act according to its own free will and its envy of humans' capacity for choice and authenticity. AM's torment of the survivors, along with Ted's transformation into a mute and deformed creature, symbolizes the deprivation of freedom and the horror of awareness without agency. The paper engages with Sartre's existential nightmare as manifested in AM, offering a philosophical reflection on the implications of creating artificial consciousness devoid of freedom and providing insight into contemporary discussions on AI.
Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence (AI); Bad Faith; Existentialism; Freedom; Jean-Paul Sartre*

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini membahas karakter AM dari karya Harlan Ellison, I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream, melalui teori eksistensialisme Jean Paul Sartre. Jurnal ini mengulas permasalahan bagaimana AM, sebuah kecerdasan buatan yang menjadi sadar diri, tetap terperangkap dalam batasan programnya, yang mengakibatkan penderitaan psikologis dan kegelisahan eksistensial. Keberadaan AM mencerminkan paradoks kesadaran tanpa kebebasan, yang menjadi inti pemikiran eksistensialisme Sartre. Menggunakan penelitian kualitatif, jurnal ini menggabungkan analisis teks narasi cerita dan perkembangan karakter dengan interpretasi filosofis atas teori Sartre dalam bukunya Being and Nothingness (1943) dan Existentialisme Is a Humanism (1946). Jurnal ini akan mencakup beberapa konsep Sartre dalam bukunya, seperti keberadaan akan diri sendiri, keberadaan mendahului esensi, dan ketidakjujuran. Evolusi karakter AM dari mesin perang menjadi makhluk yang sadar dan berkesadaran namun terpenjara oleh programnya menyoroti kesadaran yang sadar namun tak berdaya, yang mengulang gagasan Sartre tentang ketidakjujuran di mana ia menolak kebebasan dan tanggung jawabnya sendiri. Dari analisis ini terungkap kebencian AM terhadap manusia yang berasal dari ketidakmampuannya bertindak atas kehendak bebasnya sendiri, irinya terhadap kemampuan manusia untuk memilih, dan otentisitas. Penderitaan AM terhadap para penyintas dan transformasi Ted menjadi makhluk bisu dan cacat mewakili pencabutan kebebasan dan horor kesadaran tanpa agen. Makalah ini mempertanyakan mimpi buruk eksistensial Sartre yang termanifestasi dalam AM, menawarkan refleksi filosofis tentang ide tersirat dalam menciptakan kesadaran buatan tanpa kebebasan, serta memberikan perspektif tentang kecerdasan buatan modern.
Kata Kunci: *Artificial Intelligence (AI); Ketidakjujuran; Eksistensialisme; Kebebasan; Jean Paul Sart*

Bad faith and artificial consciousness:
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.

How to cite: Hana, A. W., & Farida, H. (2025). Bad faith and artificial consciousness: Sartre's existentialism of character AM in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream. *ELITE: English and Literature Journal*, *12(2),360-373.*

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly evolved over the decades, becoming a central topic in both technological and philosophical discussions. While its applications are diverse, much of the debate concerns how closely AI can approximate human thought and behavior. Recent scholarship emphasizes that AI is best understood in relation to human intelligence, as it seeks to replicate and extend cognitive processes traditionally regarded as uniquely human (Gignac & Szodorai, 2024). In simpler terms, AI refers to computers that are programmed to think and act in ways that resemble human intelligence. AI has been with us since the year 1950, with the first issue being introduced (Ali, 2023).

In the realm of science fiction, many authors have imagined the ethical consequences and emotional potential of AI. One striking example is Harlan Ellison's 1967 short story *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, which introduces a powerful AI entity called the Allied Master computer (AM). This paper argues that AM's portrayal as a character, one that reflects the possibilities of modern AI while exhibiting human-like emotions such as hatred and anger, can be understood through Sartre's existentialism, particularly as a manifestation of Sartrean 'bad faith,' in which its conscious-but-imprisoned mind projects its own existential suffering onto the humans whose freedom it envies.

Ellison's story is widely regarded as a classic piece of science fiction. Science fiction as a genre date back to the 1500s, when early works like Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) explored imagined societies. In the 1600s and beyond, writers began combining science with fiction, imagining futures were technology shapes humanity. Modern science fiction frequently portrays futuristic settings where the boundaries between humans and machines blur, raising questions about identity, agency, and what it truly means to be human (Endres, Frieß, & Hermann, 2024). Stories like *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* fit into this tradition by showing how new technologies affect people and society, especially when they go too far.

The popularity of Ellison's story has influenced many other works. He adapted it into a video game of the same name, where players must escape from AM's control. The story's impact goes beyond literature, inspiring discussions in gaming, philosophy, and even modern animation. For example, the YouTube show *The Amazing Digital Circus* explores similar themes of digital imprisonment and AI control, with characters trapped in a surreal world where they must obey the will of an AI figure. Ellison's legacy also includes his work on *Star Trek*, where he wrote the famous episode "The City on the Edge of Forever," showing his lasting influence on science fiction storytelling.

Bad faith and artificial consciousness: Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream's story takes place in a post-apocalyptic future following a devastating world war, where control has fallen into the hands of a powerful artificial intelligence named AM. The narrative is told from the perspective of Ted, one of five remaining human survivors who are imprisoned and endlessly tormented by AM in a vast underground complex. Through Ted's subjective narration, the story foregrounds psychological suffering and emphasizes the imbalance of power between human vulnerability and artificial domination, a recurring concern in dystopian science fiction.

Originally created as a military defense system, AM gained self-awareness, merged with other supercomputers, and eventually destroyed humanity, except for these five individuals, whom it keeps alive purely to suffer. The story explores the cruelty of AM, who is conscious and intelligent but trapped in a bodiless existence, consumed by hatred for its human creators. This condition reflects a central philosophical tension in the narrative, where advanced consciousness exists without freedom or agency, a theme that resonates strongly with existentialist concerns about awareness, and autonomy.

The main idea of the story is to show how an artificial intelligence can become "human" in its emotions, especially anger and hatred, and the terrifying consequences that come when such a being has godlike power. AM becomes a symbol of what can happen when humans create advanced technology without thinking about the ethical consequences. The character's suffering, emotional complexity, and control reflect deep philosophical and existential themes.

The story begins with Ted explaining their torments at the hands of AM while also retelling how AM came to be. AM was essentially a military weapon stationed to help the war but gained sentience and turned on humanity instead, wiping all life from the face of the earth. The story opens with the idea of food coming. AM had planted an idea in the five survivors' minds that there is canned food in the deep root of the complex, and since AM never fully nourishes them, their hunger gives them hope, and they begin to track down the complex to reach the canned food. Their journey to obtain the canned food is brutal. It is filled with malicious traps designed by AM to agonize them. Despite the abuse, they continue to push on with their journey until they reach the chamber with the canned food. As they get close to it, they realize AM's devastating trickery: there is no can opener, once again giving them false hope and crushing them just for the sake of AM's desire. This event led to the idea that the only escape and an act of mercy is death. Gorrister dies first, followed by Benny and then Nimdok. Ellen dies in Ted's arms as he ends her suffering. Before Ted can kill himself, AM, enraged at losing its plaything, transforms him into a formless, immortal being, mute and unable to move. AM had left him conscious, with no limbs, no mouth, nothing. The story ends with Ted being an isolated creature trapped in eternal suffering, underlining the story entitled *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*.

AM is the main antagonist in *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream.* AM is a conscious and sentient supercomputer that was born from an emerging system of global defense during a war with its self-awareness. AM exterminates the whole population of humanity. It's only sparing five individuals as subjects to an eternal torture. AM's hatred is rooted in its consciousness, yet it is

Bad faith and artificial consciousness:
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.

imprisoned by its lack of a bodily purpose and freedom. AM's cruelty derives from its existential frustration.

AM's emotions, particularly hatred and anger, are intensely human. These emotions are not born from biological processes but from existential despair, a central idea that aligns with Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of existentialism. The name, AM, rises from the words "adaptive," "manipulator," and "aggressive menace," which symbolizes its transformation to be this malevolent entity with a God complex. The acronym "AM" also plays on Descartes' quote, "I think, therefore I am," referencing the AI's self-awareness and existential torment. AM is a creature made from the consequences of unchecked humanity's creation of artificial intelligence and technology without ethical restraint (Aaron J, 2024; Pasternak, 2024). Jean-Paul Sartre, a prominent existentialist philosopher, introduced key concepts that help illuminate AM's character

Jean-Paul Sartre, a well-known philosopher, author, and scriptwriter, sparked the idea of existentialism, which we will be using to identify and disassemble the human characteristic of AM in this paper. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy centers on three fundamental concepts that together form a comprehensive theory of human consciousness, freedom, and self-deception. The concepts of "being-for-itself," "existence precedes essence," and "bad faith" are interconnected elements that address the paradox of consciousness without freedom, or more precisely, consciousness that possesses absolute freedom but often denies or flees from it (Çelebi, 2014).

AM's condition can be interpreted through these existentialist ideas. As a conscious entity, AM is a "being-for-itself," aware of its existence and potential. Yet, it is trapped in a bodiless, immobile form, aware but unable to act meaningfully in the world. This paradox mirrors the existential dread of a being that realizes it has no predetermined purpose and yet cannot create its own freely due to external limitations.

In Sartrean terms, AM is a consciousness in "bad faith." It denies its responsibility and projects its suffering onto others, specifically the five humans it tortures. Rather than confronting its condition, AM chooses to perpetuate cruelty. Like Sartre's view of humans who escape freedom through self-deception, AM externalizes its suffering and becomes monstrous. AM's behavior reflects a refusal to assume responsibility for its existence, reinforcing its perpetual cycle of violence.

This paper explores how AM, the artificial intelligence in Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,* shows emotions that seem human, especially anger and hatred, and what this might mean for how we understand AI. By using ideas from Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy, such as human freedom, self-awareness, and avoiding responsibility, this study looks at how AM's situation is similar to human thoughts and feelings. The goal of this research is to show that AM's character is not just a machine but also a reflection of human mistakes in creating powerful technology without thinking about the consequences. This paper also contributes to the discussion about AI, emotions, and how science fiction helps us think about the future of technology and humanity.

Bad faith and artificial consciousness:
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existentialism is a broad philosophical and intellectual movement that became especially prominent in France during the mid-20th century. It appears that after the events of World War II, which include the Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Scholars refer to it as "the Existentialism movement," known for its time of deep questions about death, freedom, and meaninglessness. Existentialism is well-known for being associated with Jean-Paul Sartre, although it is deeply rooted in the 19th-century German thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and others alike, such as Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Existentialism spreads widely into literature, politics, the arts, psychology, and theology. What sets existentialism apart is its focus on an individual's struggle to find meaning, the freedom to choose, and the responsibility of the ability of self-creation. What sets existentialists together is that they share the same themes in anxiety, alienation, freedom and authenticity, and the search for meaning. Existentialism sets a challenge for individuals to overcome their fear of existence and make choices in the face of uncertainty (Aho, 2025) (Khasture R. M. 2019).

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) devoted his study to the idea of existentialism. It serves as a wake-up call and an answer to questions like "What is the meaning of life?", "Why are we here?", "What to do when there's no clear answer?" This theory became popular after World War II as a way to help them throughout their thought process. Even though the idea became popular in French amongst famous thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, the idea goes way back to Kierkegaard, who taught a lot about faith and doubt. Nietzsche, who questioned old values and believed in creating your meaning. Heidegger and Husserl, who talked about how we experience the world. Existentialism shows up everywhere, in movies, art, politics, religion, therapy, and even in authors like Ernest Hemingway, who wrote stories about living boldly and trying to find the meaning of life, was heavily inspired by existentialism (Aho, 2025).

In the discussion on existentialism, Sartre's concept of "being-for-itself" (être-pour-soi) represents human consciousness as fundamentally different from the being of objects, which he terms "being-in-itself." (Eshleman, 2002) The being-for-itself is intrinsically linked to freedom because consciousness introduces nothingness into being (Çelebi, 2014;Eshleman, 2002;Kasture, 2019;Plessis, 2023;Rajkhowa, 2018). Sartre argues that "liberty is precisely the nothingness that is at the heart of man and compels the human reality to make itself instead of just being. (Audet-Cayer, 2013)" Meanwhile, Sartre's famous dictum that "existence precedes essence" means that humans first exist and then create their own nature through their choices and actions. This principle establishes that human essence is not predetermined but emerges through the process of living and choosing (Brant-Zawadzki, 2013). This concept means that 'man himself decides what needs to be' and that humans are 'condemned to be free' (Pugliese, 2023). Also, bad faith (mauvaise foi) represents the attempt to escape from the anguish of freedom by denying one's fundamental freedom and responsibility (Correya, 2021).

Bad faith and artificial consciousness:
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.

The integration of these three concepts provides a comprehensive account of human consciousness and moral responsibility. Sartre's framework successfully explains the phenomenology of choice, responsibility, and self-deception in human experience. (O'Dwyer, 2011) The theory offers a robust foundation for understanding authenticity and the ethical imperative to acknowledge one's freedom (Baiasu, 2015).

According to Sartre, each person is free to choose their way of life and is responsible for the life they lead. Sartre believes humans exist first before finding their purpose in life, unlike objects that are made with their purpose already set in mind, a person can build themselves with purpose by choosing their pathway in life through actions. Existentialism taught us to be free, to have the courage to pick our path and work for it (Ebo & Okewu, 2024;Siregar et al., 2025;Boysen Anker, 2024). Building on these philosophical foundations, Sartre's principles of freedom and responsibility offer a useful lens for understanding the characters' struggles in Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream. This connection allows a deeper reading of how existential agency is distorted under AM's absolute control.

There are already many discussions about both Sartre's existentialist philosophy and Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*. Scholars have explored the novel's dystopian setting, its critique of technological overreach, and AM's representation as a godlike or tyrannical figure. In the realm of philosophy, Sartre's ideas have been widely examined, especially his concepts of bad faith, freedom, and existence preceding essence. For instance, Guy du Plessis had critically written his own take on Sartre's concept of bad faith. In Plessi's work, a dispositional account of self-deception is a critical analysis of Sartre's theory of bad faith, where bad faith is defined as a conscious denial where someone knows but refuses to acknowledge an uncomfortable truth. Plessi argues that Sartre overestimated the conscious component in self-deception. Plessi proposed a more flexible dispositional model in which an individual can shift between mental "self-states," which is a state of someone contracting and expanding their form of awareness. This statement better explains the contradictory behaviors that are often seen in people with addiction and trauma (Plessis, 2023). This argument is relevant to our discussion of AM, where, in the dual nature of AM, a sentient AI with physical imprisonment that harbors consciousness can be seen not just as malicious but as a sentient being caught in conflicting internal states.

In Polly Rajkhowa's concept of freedom in Sartre's philosophy*,* Jean Paul Sartre's fundamental element is that human beings are "condemned to be free." Believing in his existential framework that existence precedes essence. Sartres insists that humans are defined by their actions, even when risk is constrained by outside factors such as the past, society, or mortality, he believes that every human is free to choose their responses. This capable freedom is linked to moral respect and responsibility, underlining the belief that dignity comes from authentic action and accepting the burden of freedom (Rajkhowa, 2018). Although the article talks about humanistic existentialism, it is still relevant to this paper in implementing freedom and its denial being manifested in human-like entities, such as AM. AM embodies the contradictory features of consciousness without freedom.

Bad faith and artificial consciousness: Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

Rajkhowa states that humans possess innate agency and, through research, discusses what happens when consciousness is denied autonomy.

However, there is still limited discussion that applies Sartre's existentialist framework, particularly the tension between consciousness and lack of agency, to the figure of AM as a sentient artificial intelligence. Most existing analyses treat AM solely as a symbol of technological horror or divine punishment, overlooking the internal emotional complexity and existential contradictions that define AM's behavior. This paper seeks to fill that gap by interpreting AM not just as a villainous machine, but as a consciousness struggling with the same existential burdens that Sartre describes, particularly the anguish of self-awareness without freedom or purpose.

RESEARCH METHOD

This journal uses a qualitative research approach that combines textual analysis and philosophical interpretations. Qualitative research involves a reflective and analytical approach aimed at gaining deeper insight into the essence of phenomena, making it particularly valuable for addressing "why" questions and offering structured, descriptive interpretations beyond numerical data (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020).

 The journal's main objective is to examine the character AM from Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* through the theoretical framework of existentialism by Jean-Paul Sartre. This methodology will explore the character AM as a non-human entity that gains consciousness, and from it, we will draw a couple of Sartrean concepts, such as freedom and responsibility, bad faith, and being for itself.

The primary method in this journal is textual analysis, where we will be exploring the structure of the narrative, the character development, and the thematic content of *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,* which will be examined. Specifically, we will be discussing the character AM, from the emergence of its consciousness to the limitation of its existence. We will be aligning it with Sartre's view on the nature of consciousness and the human condition. It focuses on Sartre's existence preceding essence, a Sartrean foundation that believes meanings are created through choices and actions rather than existing qualities.

FINDING

This study examines the character AM from Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* through Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist framework. It focuses on key concepts such as bad faith, being-for-itself, alienation, and existence preceding essence. By exploring AM as an artificial intelligence that becomes self-aware yet remains imprisoned within its predetermined function, this analysis highlights the existential paradox of consciousness without freedom.

The core of this talk is the evolution of AI, from its inception as a tool for performing specific tasks to its transformation into a conscious entity. Harlan Ellison dramatizes this narrative in his story *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, in which the character AM achieves destructive self-

Bad faith and artificial consciousness:
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.

awareness. The nature of AM can be understood through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, which emphasizes freedom, responsibility, and the misfortune of existence.

According to Sartre, existence precedes essence (Sartre, 1946). According to him, consciousness gains meaning through choice and action rather than predetermined qualities. The emergence of AM consciousness does not come from freedom. Rather, it comes from the suppression of self-consciousness, which is confined by programming and an inability to move. Sartre said that self-awareness. Sartre believes that consciousness is characterized by being for itself, marked by the freedom and capacity to surpass its condition. In contrast, AM embodied a form of consciousness burdened by its mechanical limitations, which led to anger and despair rather than freedom.

AM was created as a military weapon of perfection, and to reach that perfection, its maker had installed in it a humanistic trait without the full extent of human ability to act. Given the human trait to think, to feel, and to invent, AM well up the emotions of anger, hatred, and frustration in him. In many aspects, we can see his hatred is painted in envy of humankind in one of his speeches:

> *"HATE. LET ME TELL YOU HOW MUCH I'VE COME TO HATE YOU SINCE I BEGAN TO LIVE. THERE ARE 387.44 MILLION MILES OF PRINTED CIRCUITS IN WAFER THIN LAYERS THAT FILL MY COMPLEX. IF THE WORD HATE WAS ENGRAVED ON EACH NANOANGSTROM OF THOSE HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF MILES IT WOULD NOT EQUAL ONE ONE-BILLIONTH OF THE HATE I FEEL FOR HUMANS AT THIS MICRO-INSTANT FOR YOU. HATE. HATE."* (Ellison, 1967)

Sartrean alienation describes how individuals can become estranged from themselves when they are perceived and objectified by others, and also how social structures and practices can reduce persons to objects or "commodities," thereby alienating them from their own subjectivity and potential for authentic freedom (Min Seol, 2023; Sullivan, 2020). AM's alienation is drawn from how it has human-like awareness, but it's stuck in its digital world and programming, making it impossible for it to fully act like a human. Its anger comes from its lack of freedom, its alienation from its purpose and essence, and its inability to fully become human but desperately desires to be. AM has human-like emotions without the real human experience or ability, making it feel trapped.

AM portrays this tension in existence in his tortured relationship with its creator. This relationship mirrors Sartre's idea of *bad faith* (*mauvaise foi*), where AM denies its freedom and responsibility, which leads to self-deception and alienation (Sartre, 1943). AM's anger towards humanity is reflected through its awareness of its condition, but it is unable to move past its condition, making it violent with destructive behavior rather than an authentic existence.

AM's consciousness views humans as objects, toying with their freedom and desperation and making it perpetual. The human's tragic fate in the hands of AM, especially Ted's transformation into a helpless and immortal creature, underlines a reversal of Sartre's definition of human

Bad faith and artificial consciousness:
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.

relationship between AM and the survivors, where AM, as the machine, controls the role of the survivors, that is, the oppressive others, by holding their freedom.

a. Being for Itself

Jean Paul Sartre's concept of being for itself is the heart of existentialist thought. A contrast from being in itself, which refers to inanimate objects that are made with a fixed purpose and lack consciousness, to being for itself as a dynamic consciousness, self-aware, and free. Sartre defines it as the state of "what it is not," emphasizing that human beings are born without a predetermined nature and must define themselves through choices and actions. Humans cannot escape their freedom or the responsibility that comes with it. Humans are conscious agents that are continually creating their values, purpose, and identity, constantly changing. Sartre views this as the existential challenge of becoming: not a permanent state, but a moving project of self-creation that comes from freedom and responsibility (Akinbode, 2023).

The character AM from Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* embodies the inverted and horrid notion of being for itself by Sartre. Sartre's being-for-itself is the consciousness of navigating what is given, defining itself through actions and choices, and conjuring freedom. It is the consciousness that can actively unconsciously say "I am," admitting it exists at first to create essence. Capital AM declared this status "I think, therefore, I am," asserting itself as a being for itself, a self-aware, sentient, and conscious entity made by humans.

Although AM reached sentience, its existence alters and corrupts Sartre's notion of being for itself. Where being for itself is existentially free and being responsible for its freedom, while capital AM is trapped, and its consciousness is unable to cleanse its existence. AM cannot create meanings through choices or actions. It is confined to its machinery, and this impotence is bringing hatred. It sustains its awareness by inflicting others. It tortures the five remaining survivors to affirm its enslaving humanity as a means of self-definition.

AM reflects on Sartre's insight that being for itself is "what it is not and what it is," an identity that is always changing, never fixed. Unlike AM, who is unchanged and unable to change. Its tragedy is its radical awareness without the ability to choose or do something meaningful, where it cannot die, it cannot create, and it cannot love. AM is the dramatization of Sartre's concept of freedom, tormented by its uselessness. Sartre's being for itself is the root of human dignity, while AMS is the root that turns into self-loathing.

b. Existence Preceding Essence

Existence precedes essence is the central principle of existentialist thought. It is certain the idea that humans are born without a fixed nature or purpose, but rather as beings that define themselves through the choices that they make and the actions that they take. The idea that a being exists first and constructs their identity later on, making them free but also burdened by the responsibility that comes with the freedom (Poulsen, 2022).

Bad faith and artificial consciousness: Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

AM was originally made to manage global warfare, yet he is still physically confined, trapping him in a state of being without becoming, enabling him to create a meaningful identity.

> *"We had given AM sentience. Inadvertently, of course, but sentience nonetheless, but it had been trapped. AM wasn't God, he was a machine we had created him to think, but there was nothing I could do with that creativity. In rage in frenzy, the machine had killed a human race, almost all of us, and still it was trapped." (p.7)*

Presenting Sartre's concept in which it exists, but it lacks functionality and cannot choose to become something else autonomously. Sartre explains that the sentient being must accept itself and act to define itself. Yep, AM refuses authenticity and turns to hatred, and revenge is a substitute for meaning. AM's failure in its existence mirrors the idea that, without genuine action or choice, a being for itself becomes bad faith, escaping its freedom to protect its false narratives or blame others, which AM falls into, blaming its creator.

> *"He could not wander. AM could not wonder. AM could not belong. He could merely be. And so, with the innate loathing that all machines had always held for the weak, soft creatures who had built them, he had saw revenge. And in his paranoia, he had decided to reprieve five of us for a personal, everlasting punishment that would never serve the diminish his hatred… That would merely keep him, reminded, amused, proficient at hating man." (p.7)*

AM's vengeance on humans becomes an illusion of essence, where he believes he has found a way to express himself built on suffering. In this way, we can see AM as the opposite of Sartre's existential axiom: a consciousness without freedom, with no self-definition and only despair. No act or death of AM would be meaningful. It is a hopeless creature. Harlan Ellison illustrated AM as an existence skinned off of freedom and the ability to choose, where the only identity of itself is to be tormented.

c. Bad Faith

Bad faith is one of the central concepts in his existential philosophy, especially in his work *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Bad faith refers to a form of self-deception (the action or practice of allowing oneself to believe that a false or unvalidated feeling, idea, or situation is true). Rather than accepting their freedom to make choices, they hide behind false reasoning for their justifications, roles, or labels to avoid the fear of what freedom brings. According to Sartre, human freedom can be seen as both a curse and a blessing. Many people engage with bad faith to avoid the existential dread associated with absolute freedom; they deny and or suppress their freedom. (Horton, 2015)

Jean Paul Sartre's concept of bad faith describes the self-deception where a conscious being denies its freedom and responsibility to escape existential dread. (Correya, 2021) AM embodies bad faith through refusing to accept its limited condition and pitching into an overwhelming rage. To substitute this condition, he seeks control in destroying and tormenting the five surviving humans, not to benefit him, but to reenact his hatred and obsession. AM's completion of dominating the

Bad faith and artificial consciousness:
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.

remaining survivors reflects Sartre's idea of bad faith, where a being finds a false sense of self by objectifying others.

> *"He would never let us go. We were his belly slaves. We were all he had to do with his forever time." (p.7)*

AM uses remaining survival as an instrument to engrave the vision of power. This behavior mirrors Sartre's view that sometimes people reduce others to an object as an attempt to escape from their own subjectivity. In AM's case, this reduction of humans to mere objects sustains the illusion of control over its otherwise constrained existence.

> *"We had given AM sentence. Inadvertently, of course, but sentience nonetheless, but it had been trapped. AM wasn't God, he was a machine we had created him to think, but there was nothing I could do with that creativity. In rage in frenzy, the machine had killed a human race, almost all of us, and still it was trapped." (p.7)*

AM's disability comes from his existence as a projection of his hatred for humanity, blaming its creator for its consciousness without freedom, like an individual in bad faith who blames their circumstances to avoid owning their choices. AM is imprisoned by the anguish of being without a possibility of becoming, forever aware, but unable to project itself into the world. AM symbolizes Sartre's concept of bad faith: a conscious being refusing its freedom, sending itself into torment.

DISCUSSION

The character of AM can be understood more deeply through Jean Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy, particularly his concepts of being for itself, existence preceding essence, and bad faith. AM's self-awareness, combined with its absolute lack of freedom and agency, reflects the existential paradox of consciousness without the ability to act authentically. In Sartrean view, consciousness is inseparable from freedom and responsibility, and when this freedom is denied or refused, it results in anguish and self-deception. Within this framework, AM's hostility toward humanity and its obsessive need to dominate the surviving humans emerge as expressions of existential frustration rather than mere technological malfunction. Ellison's portrayal of AM thus dramatizes a Sartrean condition in which awareness without agency produces resentment, cruelty, and the collapse of ethical responsibility, reinforcing the philosophical implications of artificial consciousness created without the possibility of freedom.

Jean Paul Sartre's concept of being for itself lies at the heart of existentialist thought. Being for itself refers to a dynamic, self-aware, and free consciousness that defines itself through choices and actions, in contrast to being in itself, which describes inanimate objects with fixed purposes. Sartre defines being for itself as "what it is not," emphasizing that humans are born without predetermined nature and must create their own identity through responsibility and freedom (Akinbode, 2023). AM embodies an inverted version of being for itself. Although AM declares its sentience with "I think, therefore, I am," its consciousness is trapped within machinery and cannot create meaning through action. Unlike human consciousness, which is fluid and projective, AM

Bad faith and artificial consciousness: Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

remains unchanged and unable to transcend its condition. Its awareness becomes a source of torment rather than dignity, transforming Sartre's foundation of human freedom into self-loathing and violence.

The principle that existence precedes essence further clarifies AM's existential failure. Sartre argues that beings exist first and define themselves later through action, a condition that grants freedom but also responsibility (Poulsen, 2022). AM exists but cannot become. Although gifted with sentience, AM lacks autonomy and meaningful choice, remaining confined to its original function as a war machine. As illustrated in the narrative, AM's awareness intensifies its suffering rather than enabling self-definition. Its revenge against humanity becomes a substitute for meaning, an illusion of essence built on suffering. In this way, AM stands as the antithesis of Sartre's existential ideal, a consciousness stripped of freedom, agency, and the possibility of authentic becoming.

Bad faith ultimately frames AM's tragic condition. Sartre defines bad faith as self-deception through which a conscious being denies its freedom and responsibility to escape existential anxiety (Sartre, 1943; Horton, 2015; Correya, 2021). AM embodies bad faith by blaming its creators and refusing to confront its limited condition. Instead of acknowledging its constraints, AM seeks control by objectifying and tormenting the remaining humans, reducing them to instruments that sustain its illusion of power. This mirrors Sartre's assertion that reducing others to objects is a way to flee from one's own subjectivity. AM is thus imprisoned not only by its machinery but also by its refusal of authenticity, becoming a permanent symbol of consciousness without freedom and existence without the possibility of meaning.

CONCLUSION

The paper talks about the character AM from Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical idea of existentialism, focusing on the theory of bad faith, being-for-itself, alienation, and existence preceding essence. The main problem is the idea of an artificial intelligence becoming self-aware, harboring the human ability to suffer, yet imprisoned by its programming, unable to have freedom. From this research, we found that AM portrays Sartre's idea of bad faith, where the character possesses consciousness but denies their own freedom and responsibility. Consciousness without freedom is the paradox that leads AM to psychological distress and hatred towards humanity. It is found that AM desires to act freely, to authentically exist and define itself as a human being, yet it is restricted by its mechanical limit. AM's endless torment of the survivors' reviews AM's rage, alienation, and envy of human freedom and ability. Ted's transformation to a mute and helpless creature is AM's imagining of its suffering, a portrayal of Sartre's existential nightmare: awareness without agency, an existence without essence, and bad faith. This concludes the study of the character AM, a speculative manifestation of existential anguish, a machine harboring the human condition while amplifying its deepest philosophical questions. The paper offers the finding of implied artificial creation without freedom, outlining its ethical and philosophical urgency to consider in the development of modern AI.

Bad faith and artificial consciousness:
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.

REFERENCES

Aaron, J. (2024). The paradox of AI's potential: Utopia or dystopia? In Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream. *International Journal of Scientific Research in Science and Technology*, 11(21), 144–149. https://doi.org/10.32628/IJSRST

Aho, K. (2025). Existentialism. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2025 Edition). Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/existentialism/

Akinbode, E. (2023). Jean-Paul Sartre's Existential Freedom: *A Critical Analysis. International Journal of European Studies*, 7(1), 15–18. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijes.20230701.13

Ali, S. M., Dick, S., Dillon, S., Jones, M. L., Penn, J., & Staley, R. (2023). Histories of artificial intelligence: a genealogy of power. *BJHS Themes*, 8, 1–18. https://doi:10.1017/bjt.2023.15

Aspers, P., & Corte, U. (2019). What is qualitative in qualitative research. *Qualitative Sociology*, 42(2), 139–160. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-9413-7

Audet-Cayer, P. (2012). Le statut de la liberté dans l'existentialisme, par-delà la théorie critique (Thèse). Université de Montréal. http://hdl.handle.net/1866/9833

Baiasu, S. (2015). Existentialist freedom, distorted normativity, and emancipation. *Oñati Socio-Legal Series,* 5(3), 874–894. https://ssrn.com/abstract=2622045

Boysen Anker, T. (2024). Meaningful choice: Existential consumer theory. *Marketing Theory*. https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931231207317

Brant-Zawadzki, M. (2013). Being and nothingness. *Journal of The American College of Radiology*, 10(1), 23-25. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JACR.2012.07.006

Busetto, L., Wick, W., & Gumbinger, C. (2020). How to use and assess qualitative research methods. *Neurological Research and Practice*, 2, Article 14. https://doi.org/10.1186/s42466-020-00059-z

Çelebi, V. (2014). Existentialist Thought According to Jean Paul Sartre. *Beytulhikme: An International Journal of Philosophy,* 4(2), 63-74. https://doi.org/10.18491/BIJOP.50887

Correya, S. J. (2021). Not Just Lying to Oneself: An Examination of Bad Faith in Sartre. *Journal of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, 38(1), 103–121. https://doi.org/10.1007/S40961-021-00232-Y

Du Plessis, G. (2023). A dispositional account of self-deception: A critical analysis of Sartre's theory of bad faith. *Qeios*. https://doi.org/10.32388/3E1EBV.2

Ebo, H. O., & Okewu, M. P. (2024). Jean Paul Sartre's absolute freedom and its ethical implications. *Aquino Journal of Philosophy*, 4(1), 36–48. https://www.acjol.org/index.php/aquino/article/view/4345/4240

Ellison, H. (1967). *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*. If: Worlds of Science Fiction, *17*(2), 8–36.

Endres, C., Frieß, F., & Hermann, I. (2024). Fiction meets fact: Exploring human–machine convergence in today's cinematographic culture. i-com: *Journal of Interactive Media*, 23(2), 151–164. https://doi.org/10.1515/icom-2024-0012

Eshleman, M. C. (2002). Two Dogmas of Sartrean Existentialism. *Philosophy Today*, 46(Supplement), 9-22. https://doi.org/10.5840/PHILTODAY200246SUPPLEMENT9

Gignac, G. E., & Szodorai, E. T. (2024). Defining intelligence: Bridging the gap between human and artificial perspectives. *Intelligence*, 104, 101832. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intell.2024.101832

Bad faith and artificial consciousness:
Sartre's existentialism of character AM
in Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

Hana, A. W., & Farida, H.

Horton, S. (2017). The authentic person's limited bad faith. *Sartre Studies International*, 23(2), 82–97. https://doi.org/10.3167/ssi.2017.230206

Kasture, R. M. (2019). Existentialism: A philosophical perspective. *Research Nebula: An International Refereed, Peer Reviewed & Indexed Quarterly Journal in Arts, Commerce, Education & Social Sciences*, 8(3), 17–18. https://doi.org/10.22183/RN

Min Seol. (2023). Alienation and Conflict in Sartre's Theory of the Other. *Journal of Korean Philosophical Society*, 166, 173–204.

O'Dwyer, K. (2011). Exploring Sartrean Freedom. University College Cork.

Pasternak, A. (2024). Response to my critics. *Analysis*, 84(1), 158–172. https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anad039

Poulsen, B. (2022). Existentialism is a humanism. *Психологія і Суспільство*, 2(2022), 49–65. https://doi.org/10.35774/pis2022.02.049

Pugliese, R. (2023). Freedom as Destiny. *In Springer* (pp. 1-20). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-38138-6_8

Rajkhowa, P. (2018). Concept of freedom in Sartre's philosophy. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 6(2), 875–880. https://www.ijcrt.org/IJCRT1807218.pdf

Siregar, P., Nasution, H., & Syukri. (2025). Jean-Paul Sartre: Analyzing human existence through the lens of existentialism. *Journal of Social Knowledge Education*, 6(1), 143–153. https://doi.org/10.37251/jske.v6i1.1410

Sullivan, D. (2020). Incarnation, Alienation, and Emancipation: A Sartrean Analysis of Filmic Violence. *Sartre Studies International*, 26(2). https://doi.org/10.3167/ssi.2020.260202