Existentialism Study Guide

Existentialism

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Introduction

Existentialism is a philosophical approach that rejects the idea that the universe offers any clues about how humanity should live. A simplified understanding of this thought system can be found in Jean-Paul Sartre's often-repeated dictum, "Existence precedes essence." What this means is that the identity of any one person—their essence—cannot be found by examining what other people are like, but only in what that particular person has done. Because no one can claim that his or her actions are "caused" by anyone else, existentialist literature focuses on freedom and responsibility.

Existentialism attained the height of its popularity in France during World War II. While the German army occupied the country, the cluster of philosophers and writers who gathered together to discuss and argue their ideas at the cafes of Paris captured the attention of intellectuals around the world. The oppressive political climate under the Nazis and the need for underground resistance to the invading political force provided the ideal background for Existentialism's focus on individual action and responsibility.

Although the French war-era writers are most frequently associated with Existentialism, its roots began much earlier. Existentialism can be seen as humanity's response to the frightening loneliness that prompted Friedrich Nietzsche to pronounce in the 1880s that "God is dead." Civilization's loss of faith in religious and social order created an understanding of personal responsibility. This led to literary works that reflect the existentialist's loneliness, isolation, and fear of the uncaring universe. Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels, written in the 1860s and 1870s, show existential themes, as do twentieth- century works by Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, James Baldwin, and Nathaniel West. The French existentialists were so influential on writers throughout the world that it is almost impossible to find a contemporary book that does not show some influence of their thought.

Themes

Atheism

Existentialism seems to necessarily require that one abandon any belief in God, because the concept of God contradicts the idea of personal responsibility that is at the center of the movement. Jean-Paul Sartre, the most prolific existentialist writer, was a fervent atheist, as were Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus. The characters in their novels can be seen as people coping with the loss of the concept of God by trying to determine the proper behavior in His absence.

There is, however, a strong subcategory of existential writers who combine religious feelings with Existentialism. One was Søren Kierkegaard, who solved the question of how to reconcile a belief in God with responsibility of one's own actions in his philosophical works such as *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *The Concept of Dread*. For Kierkegaard, there was no contradiction between freedom and God. In fact, the basis of religious belief was the ability to choose freely to believe. Another religious existentialist was Martin Buber, whose 1923 philosophical work *I and Thou* brought together Jewish, Christian, and humanist beliefs. The book uses personal relationships, such as the ones one forms with other humans ("Thou"), to explain the human relationship to God, who is seen as the ultimate "Thou."

Freedom

Existentialism proceeds from the principle that human behavior is based on nothing except free choice. It rejects those theories that try to find other factors that control behavior, such as economic, social, or psychological systems that exist in order to explain what people do. Existential writers do sometimes recognize such comprehensive worldviews, but they do not accept them as being acceptable explanations or excuses for behavior. Sartre, for instance, was a lifelong supporter of the Marxist theory of class struggle, but he would not accept Marx's theory that certain behaviors were *necessary* for certain classes. Instead, he would explain why members of one class might behave similarly as a choice made by people who were unaware of their freedom to choose.

This sense of freedom sometimes leads the protagonists in existential works to commit actions that are commonly considered "evil," as if to assert to themselves that no universal system of justice will bring punishment down on their heads. Thus, Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Meursault in Camus's *The Stranger*, and Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son* each commit murders with no remorse. In each of these books, the transgression is not punished by divine justice, such as the ways that other writers might have the criminals fall victim to illness or bad luck, but they are prosecuted by the legal system.

Guilt and Innocence

One of the central concerns of existential thought is that, in the absence of divine or biolog- ical rules, people must be responsible for their own actions. This is the price of freedom□with no rules from God or psychological traumas to excuse what one does, the responsibility for each action falls on the individual. Hemingway's characters offer a good example of this. They follow rules of behavior that they establish for themselves, often referred to as the "Hemingway code." While other writers might present characters that are victims of fate, the characters in Hemingway's books and other existential literature are responsible for their own fate. Other examples of this are Sartre's play *Dirty Hands*, which shows its protagonist accepting guilt for murdering an obviously dangerous opponent during wartime, and Beauvoir's *The Blood of Others*, in which a student who is shaken by the inadvertent death of a colleague decides that he must still participate in violent radical political activity.

The presumption of innocence that comes from absolute freedom is inverted in the works of Franz Kafka, most notably in his novel *The Trial*. Instead of being an existential hero who chooses to make himself guilty, Joseph K. is proclaimed guilty by a dense and illogical legal system, for reasons that he cannot understand. Rather than focusing attention on the free individual, Kafka shows the repressive social order that makes it difficult for the individual to realize that he is, in fact, free to decide his own fate. By making the bureaucracy that condemns Joseph K. such an impersonal and irrational thing, Kafka shows how transparent it is. In this novel, the legal system is frightening, but it is not in control of the individual. The superficial charge of guilt helps readers see how shallow it is to believe in any universal system of guilt or innocence.

Identity and Self

Existentialism, like any philosophical movement, is a search for the right way to understand human identity. Other systems might conceive of identity in relation to something, such as when psychologists find the roots of identity in past experiences or in the effects of chemical balances in the brain, or when Romanticism frames identity in terms of humanity's relationship to nature. In Existentialism, however, there is no point of reference for human identity. A person's identity does not exist in anything except that person's actions. As Sartre explained it, existence precedes essence□ there are no rules governing a person's essential identity until after that person exists.

French Existentialism crossed over to America in the early 1950s, at a time that the Civil Rights movement was just beginning to give a voice and identity to black Americans. The two were a natural fit. Blacks who had been treated in American society in accordance with the color of their skin were open to the existential concept that a person creates his or her own identity. One of the preeminent American novelists of the twentieth century, Ralph Ellison, explored existential themes as they applied to the race issue in his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, about a black man's struggle for selfidentity against society's narrow definitions of him.

Alienation

Alienation was considered by many intellectuals throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to increasingly be the condition of civilized humans. It is the feeling of isolation, of not belonging, of standing alone. Since the advent of the Industrial Age, social philosophers like Karl Marx have shown how people are alienated from the work that they do, with the connection severed by the economic system. Psychologists have shown alienation as a rift between the conscious and unconscious aspects of self. Theologians have shown humanity as becoming increasingly alienated from reality as the importance of God has diminished.

Existentialism can be seen as a response to the social phenomenon of alienation. As the feeling of being left out of society grew, so did the existentialist's philosophy that it is natural to be separate from society, because the idea of belonging to society was an illusion all along. It is no coincidence that one of the most prominent novels of the French existentialist movement was Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, which, as its title implies, highlights the idea that its protagonist is outside of the bounds of social order, alienated even from those closest to him. In novels such as *The Deer Park* in 1955, Norman Mailer applied the concept of Existentialism to the particular form of alienation that was felt in postwar America, with fear of the atomic bomb and of Communism. Mailer devised the concept of the "hipster," who reacts to everything with his own wry sense of irony. In fact, the term "existential hero" came to be used to describe characters in books and movies who acted alone, who had no ties to anyone, and who followed the rules of behavior set down by their own understanding of the world.

Style

Persona

Many existential works employ a persona who is a stand-in for the author, with similar life experiences and views. The word persona is a Latin term meaning "mask." Authors in fiction tend to hide behind characters like masks, to get their ideas across in the context of their stories, but this is even more common than usual in existential literature. One can draw strong correlations between characters in Sartre's *Nausea*, for instance, and the people of his early life, and between most of the protagonists in Simone de Beauvoir's novels and her own thoughts. Terry Keefe concluded in his essay "Beauvoir's Memoirs, Diary and Letters" that "in spite of obvious difficulties involved, autobiographical material in Beauvoir's fiction must sometimes be acknowledged to be as telling, or as 'accurate,' as material presented in non-fictional form." The main reason that so many literary works by existential writers feature thinly masked versions of their authors' lives is the genre's strong background in philosophy.

Writers like Sartre and Beauvoir are primarily philosophers, accustomed to pondering themselves and the circumstances of their own lives. The nature of philosophy is to consider the human condition, and to find the individual's place in the world. Existentialism, in particular, rejects the idea that one can understand another person's thoughts in depth. Existential philosophers who have expended most of their energy understanding themselves as unique individuals are naturally inclined to think of the protagonists of their works as masks for themselves.

Mood

Existential literature is often characterized as being grim, depressing, and hopeless. This reputation clings to the movement in spite of the efforts of writers like Jean-Paul Sartre to show it as an optimistic worldview that offers its readers a chance to take control of their own fates. One reason that existentialism is assumed to be bleak is that it consciously tries to change people's minds about their traditional avenues of hope. Those who believe that God will justify the hardship of life after death will find their ideas opposed in existential literature, and those who believe in the ability of science to raise human behavior toward perfection meet the same sort of resistance. Lacking the hope that one can look to these external sources for comfort and salvation, existential thought aligns itself with the sometimes frightening prospect of meaninglessness, directly standing up to the blank void that other philosophies try to fill. The titles of books such as *Fear and Trembling* and *The Concept of Dread* by Søren Kierkegaard, whose works formed the basis of the existentialist movement, give some insight into Existentialism's reputation as a philosophy of despair.

While many works of existential literature do, in fact, tend to emphasize life's pointlessness, it would be too narrow-minded to say that despair is their only message

to the world. The inherent pointlessness of life is almost always followed by an encouraging example about how life can be given meaning by the individual. This is most clearly seen in the short stories of Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway's story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" has two waiters discussing the bleak existence of an old man who comes to their cafe every night. Readers who focus only on the meaninglessness of the old man's life miss the larger point□that he has somewhere to go that gives him comfort. Similarly, Hemingway's "The Killers" shows a washed-up boxer who waits without hope for two contract killers who are coming to get him, but it is told from the point of view of a young man who is unwilling to sit quietly and accept grim fate.

Structure

Because existential writers do not view their characters as being the results of past events, their works seldom use the linear, chronological plots that most novelists and playwrights use. Ordinary narrative structures are built upon the premise of causality, with one event resulting in the next, following each other in succession to create a cumulative result. While other writers present a psychological web that shows how each character's personality is constructed, characters in existential works are not bound to such rigorous, straightforward interpretation. As a result, existential works tend to float across a sequence of events that do not always appear to be related.

Existentialism tends to support an absurd view of the world, one that ignores commonly-assumed rules of reality. In Franz Kafka's short story *The Metamorphosis*, for instance, a man wakes to find himself transformed into a giant bug□the situation is completely improbable, but it helps the author make a point about the unexamined absurdity of common daily life. Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* takes place in an unnamed, barren wilderness, with two people sitting under a tree at a crossroads. The play does not have a plot, just a series of events that happen to occur after one another. The lack of any meaningful causal relationship between the events helps to reinforce the existential idea that life has no inherent meaning or structure.

Humanism

Humanism is the cultural and literary attitude that spread through Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as a response to oppressive church doctrine. At the time, the position of clerics was that human beings were weak and immoral. Humanism offered the optimistic view that humanity was rational, and was thus able to understand truth and goodness without the Church's intervention. To some extent, Existentialism is the ultimate form of Humanism, because it takes all responsibility for human happiness and achievement out of the hands of fate and places it in the hands of humanity.

There has been some debate about whether Existentialism is really a humanistic philosophy. Many existentialists would define themselves as humanists, because of their commitment to human responsibility over reliance on outside influences.

Detractors, on the other hand, say that the philosophy's emphasis on the nothingness and meaninglessness of the world paint too dismal a picture for humanity. They refuse to believe that the existentialist position that action is necessary but pointless can be considered a positive attitude toward humanity. Jean-Paul Sartre addressed this controversy in his early essay "Existentialism is a Humanism."

Historical Context

Antecedents

Philosophies are meant to capture the truth, and so there are likely to be traces of any philosophy at any time throughout history. For example, traces of Existentialism can be found in the life of the Greek philosopher Diogenes, who in the fourth century B.C.E. founded the Cynics, who distrusted civilization's artifice. existential ideas also appear at various times throughout the world's literature, such as when Job in the Old Testament questioned whether his concept of God was truly relevant to his troubles, or when Shakespeare had Hamlet question the purpose of his own existence by asking, "To be, or not to be?" The first philosopher to touch upon existential themes was the French writer Blaise Pascal, who, in the seventeenth century, rejected the idea that rational humans could explain God. Like the later existentialists, Pascal accepted life as a series of irrational paradoxes.

As a formal philosophy, Existentialism began to take form in the 1800s, with the writings of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard thought of life as an impossible choice between two conflicting attitudes: the aesthetic, which is based on immediate experience, or existence, and the ethical, which is based on ideals. He presented the ethical life as false, based upon imaginary concepts, but the aesthetic life was not satisfying either. In fact, for Kierkegaard, the aesthetic life led only to despair, because human consciousness is not satisfied with the sheer, raw experience that might be enough to distract an unconscious being. His writings, particularly his book *Either/Or*, were not essays or treatises. They had a literary style to them, presenting his ideas as character sketches, dialogs, and imaginary correspondences.

Unlike Kierkegaard, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was an atheist who believed that religious belief was a sign of weakness, which would leave society vulnerable to destruction by those who held no such illusions. Nietzsche's completely unsentimental atheism paved the way for the existential view that life is based on nothingness.

The most immediate antecedent to Existentialism was the twentieth-century philosophy of phenomenology, especially as practiced by the German writer Martin Heidegger. Phenomenology raised questions about how humans could ever know the world that they encounter outside of their own consciousness. As with Existentialism, phenomenology relied heavily on examples from literature for understanding, giving the imagined world nearly as much credibility as the experienced world.

French Existentialism

Although earlier philosophers and writers had ideas upon which this philosophy was based, it was Jean-Paul Sartre who gave it the name Existentialism. In school, Sartre

studied the works of German philosophers, wrote his exit exam on Nietzsche, and he studied in his postgraduate years under Edward Husserl, who is widely considered a founder of phenomenology, a philosophy similar to Existentialism. In 1928, at the age of 23, he met Simone de Beauvoir. The two fell in love and spent most of the next fifty years living together on and off, although they never married. In 1938, one of the major texts of existentialist literature, Sartre's novel *Nausea*, was published, giving the world its first sense of the moral despair of the philosophy and the cold, unsentimental intellect of the fiction.

The year after *Nausea* was published, Adolph Hitler gave up any pretense of peace by attacking Poland. France went to war against Germany, and was captured in 1940. While France was occupied by Germany, the new existential movement flourished. The principle figures if the movement were acquaintances in Paris, including Sartre, Beauvoir, and Albert Camus (although Camus would come to resent being called an existentialist when hostilities formed between himself and the others). Their ideas were spread by a magazine that Sartre edited, *Les Times Moderne ("Modern Times")*, and through their plays and novels, which had gained international attention. The war was a perfect backdrop for plays and novels with existential themes, which concerned protagonists who were willing to act politically rather than die passively. The war gave French Existentialism an air of tragic Romanticism, as existential heroes, well aware that nothing they did could change the insanity of the larger social order, still made noble choices, presumably without the false encouragement of sentiment or religion.

After the war ended in 1945, Existentialism became a household word, but the writers who made it famous moved on to other interests. Sartre became increasingly interested in Marxism, and the main circle of French existentialists shunned Camus when he rejected Sartre's political stance. Although Sartre was to identify himself as an existentialist for the rest of his life, his postwar writings never captured the world's imagination as had the radical works produced under the Nazis.

In America, Existentialism reached its height of popularity in the 1950. Since the stock market crash of 1929, the country had suffered desperate times, and the cautious conservatism that had characterized the generations of the Depression and the war gave way to a new youth culture. The disaffected Beat generation, lacking any major political struggle, grappled with meaninglessness, and was ripe for Existentialism's message that the world is absurd and that individuals create their own morality.

Movement Variations

Nihilism

Nihilism is the concept of nothingness or nonexistence. It is generally considered a dark, hopeless philosophical stance, one that recognizes no values and sets no goals for life. The word comes from the Latin phrase *nihil*, meaning "nothing," and was coined by the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev in his 1862 novel *Fathers and Sons*. The concept is related to the philosophy of the ancient Greek skeptics, who rejected the idea of any philosophical certainty, and it has appeared in one form or another throughout the history of Western civilization.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, nihilism was most closely associated with Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher who saw it as more than just despair, but as a force of destruction. In his book *The Will To Power*, published in 1901, Nietzsche argued that the meaninglessness presented by nihilism would win acceptance over other systems of thought, and that nihilism would eventually lead to society's collapse.

When Existentialism became popular all over the world in the 1950s and 1960s, Sartre's idea of life as "nothingness" was seen as a nihilistic position. Leaders of the movement such as Sartre and Camus struggled to show Existentialism as a positive force, but their insistence that true existentialists should embrace life despite its emptiness was not quite convincing. The rejection of external values always led back to the idea that existence must be meaningless. Existentialism became almost synonymous with nihilism; leading to a popular caricature of existentialists as grim, dark, empty individuals. Existentialists, on the other hand, thought of themselves as fighting nihilism by giving life meaning in spite of its natural meaninglessness.

Absurdism

The main philosophers of the French existential movement, including Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus, wrote dramas for the stage in addition to novels and essays. It is fitting, then, that one of Existentialism's lasting legacies has been the Theater of the Absurd. Absurdist dramas followed no direct linear plot line, instead mocking the traditional forms by presenting the unexpected, and by actively defying any attempts to read meaning into the events on stage. There was always a tendency for artists to violate conventions, to make people think by refusing to give them what they are comfortable with, but this tendency increased by leaps and bounds in the early twentieth century, with Dadaism and Surrealism. It was only after Existentialism gained international attention in the 1950s, making the concept of "meaninglessness" a familiar subject among intellectuals, that a school of drama based in absurdity was developed. Samuel Beckett published *Waiting for Godot* in 1953; *The Bald Soprano*, by Eugène Ionesco, was performed in 1956; and Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* played on

Broadway in 1959. These are among the most important and representative works in the Theater of the Absurd.

The term "absurd" was first used to describe literary works by Albert Camus. In 1961, theater critic Martin Esslin's book *Theater of the Absurd* named the movement that was already in full swing. Esslin observed how absurdist drama avoided making statements about the human condition by presenting it in its most raw form. This often led to situations that would be incomprehensible within the common view of reality but which were well suited for the stage. Unlike existential fiction, which focused on the internal struggle for beliefs, drama does not present internal thoughts to the audience at all, and so can focus its energies on the strange instability of the external world. Today, Absurdism is a staple of the theater, with constant revivals of the plays from the fifties and sixties and new plays that, while not purely absurd, incorporate absurdist elements.

Phenomenology

Jean-Paul Sartre, who first put the phrase "Existentialism" into use as a branch of philosophy, based his thought on his studies in the philosophy of phenomenology. The two are very closely linked. Phenomenology is a twentieth-century philosophical movement that examines the relationship between experience and consciousness. The founder of this movement was German philosopher Edward Husserl. In his 1913 text *Ideas: A General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, Husserl studied the structures within consciousness that enabled the human mind to conceive of objects outside of itself. Because the mind is able to think of things that do not exist as well as things that do exist, Husserl focused upon the mind's activity, leaving aside the overall question of existence. Husserl called actions such as remembering and perception "meanings," and the act of examining these meanings "phenomenological reduction."

Although Husserl is credited with generating phenomenology, the name that is most often associated with that movement is that of his colleague Martin Heidegger. Heidegger focused attention squarely on the question of being, presenting the experience of life as "Dasein," or "being there," putting emphasis on experience as opposed to abstract concepts. Language was also a strong part of Heidegger's phenomenology because humans would have no way of contemplating existence without it. As Heidegger phrased it, "Only where there is language is there world." His philosophical works gave serious consideration to the philosophical value of poetry.

In college, Sartre studied phenomenology, and his theories about Existentialism grew out of Heidegger's ideas. The relationship between the two philosophies can even be seen in the title of Sartre's major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness*, which mirrors the title of Heidegger's own 1927 masterwork *Being and Time*. Sartre's Existentialism adapted Heidegger's phenomenology, combining his emphasis on language and experience with Husserl's idea that consciousness is always directed away from itself at objects, and not at the nothingness of the subjective self. Since the 1940s the two philosophies have been so closely related that they are often referred to by the combined term "existential phenomenology."

Representative Authors

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)

Beauvoir was born in Paris on January 9, 1908, and lived there most of her life. She was educated at the Sorbonne, where she met Jean-Paul Sartre in 1929. They began a personal and intellectual relationship that continued the next fifty years. Mostly known for her 1949 book *The Second Sex*, a twovolume examination of the roles of women throughout history, Beauvoir was also a prolific writer of fiction. Her novels, mostly based on events of her own life, provide readers with fictionalized versions of the vibrant intellectual scene in Paris throughout the forties and fifties. They include *She Came to Stay* (1949), based on the romantic complication between herself and Sartre and a young student who lived with them; *The Blood of Others* (1946), about a young man's struggle to remain uninvolved in the political situation around him; and *The Mandarins* (1954), about the dissolution of the Parisian intellectual community after the war. *The Mandarins* won the prestigious Goncourt Prize. Beauvoir also wrote plays and philosophical texts. Her death on April 14, 1986, marked the end of the original generation of existentialists.

Albert Camus (1913-1960)

Albert Camus was one of the most influential figures in the existentialist movement that emerged in Paris in the years before and during the Second World War, although he himself refused to accept the label "existentialist." He was born November 7, 1913, in Mondovi, Algeria, a country in northern Africa that at the time was a colony of France. Soon after France entered in World War I, Camus's father was drafted into the army, and he never returned. Albert Camus and his brother were raised by his mother and grandmother in poverty, in a three-room apartment in the working class section of the city of Algiers.

Camus studied philosophy at University of Algiers. Graduating in 1936, he was unable to work as a teacher because he had tuberculosis. He became affiliated with a leftist theater group and wrote for a newspaper, and moved to Paris just before the start of World War II. In 1942, he published one of the most important and influential novels of his career, *The Stranger*, about a man who, acting out of complex circumstances, kills a man who he does not know. The situation explored in the book, and the protagonist's detached, curious attitude about his own behavior, captured the basic mood of Existentialism, and made Camus an international success. His second most significant novel, *The Plague*, was published in 1947. The novel's depiction of a plague that sweeps across a country was seen as an allegory for the wartime occupation of Nazi forces, and of the struggle of the individual against political oppression.

As his fame grew, Camus distanced himself from the existentialist movement in Paris, rejecting their Marxist political stance in favor of political action free of any party. The

intellectual rift between him and Jean-Paul Sartre became well known in France. Camus's literary reputation suffered, as his opponents painted him as a populist who was afraid of offending the bourgeoisie because his main interest was selling books. He stayed active in the theater, writing plays and sometimes directing, and in 1957, at age forty-three, Camus won the Nobel Prize for literature. He died in an automobile accident near Paris on January 4, 1960.

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881)

Dostoevsky was a Russian novelist whose works examined human existence as a tragedy in which the struggle for rationality was constantly undermined by the universe's inherent senselessness. Born October 30, 1821, in Moscow, he was the son of a surgeon□a cruel and strict man who was murdered by one of his serfs when Dostoevsky was seventeen. In college Dostoevsky studied to be a military engineer, a career path he abandoned after graduation in order to be a writer. His early novels were well received, but they did not anticipate the intellectual achievements he was to later reach.

In his twenties, Dostoevsky began associating with a group of radical socialists, for which he was arrested and sentenced to death. The death sentence was commuted, but the feeling of impending death affected him for the rest of his life. He served for four years of hard labor, followed by four years of military service.

In 1864, he published *Notes From the Underground*, a short novel that presented the view that humans valued freedom over all things, even happiness. This emphasis on freedom is what identifies Dostoevsky as an antecedent of the existentialist movement. His next novel, *Crime and Punishment*, remains his most popular work, and it presents the existential situation of a man who killed another man while robbing him, and learns to cope with the moral ramifications of his action. His novels *The Possessed* and *The Idiot* each address the issue of moral behavior in a world where the actions of humanity are not controlled by God. His final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, was completed just months before Dostoevsky's death from emphysema complications on January 28, 1881. Its plot concerns four sons who each bear some guilt in the death of their father, mirroring the guilt Dostoevsky himself felt after his father's murder.

Franz Kafka (1883-1924)

Kafka was a uniquely talented writer of short stories and novels. His works often provided a surreal look at the world, touching upon themes of modern life such as alienation, absurdity and the deeply felt dread that often appear in existential literature.

Born in Prague, Bohemia (now Czechoslovakia), on July 3, 1883, Kafka spent his childhood in Prague's Jewish ghetto. He was educated as a lawyer and spent some time in a government job, working on workman's compensation claims. He published several important short stories in his lifetime, including *The Hunger Artist* and *The Metamorphosis*. In spite of his request that the manuscripts of his novels be destroyed

after his death, his literary executor saved them and published them. They include *The Trial*, about a man who finds himself accused of a crime, although no one will tell him the charge against him; and *The Castle*, about a similarly indecipherable bureaucracy that keeps the main character from entering the building of the title.

Kafka died of tuberculosis on June 3, 1924, at the age 41. He thought that his literary career had been a failure, when in fact his insights into the fear and confusion caused by modern social life were to make him one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

Kierkegaard was born on May 5, 1813, in Copenhagen, Denmark. His father rose from poverty to amass a considerable fortune, retiring early to devote his time to Christian philosophy. At eighteen, Kierkegaard entered the University of Copenhagen to study theology. On his twenty-second birthday, Kierkegaard's life changed when he found out that his father's Christianity was flawed: the older man had once cursed God, and had years earlier impregnated a servant. This drove Kierkegaard from religious studies to a life of hedonistic excess. Another significant event in his life happened when, at twenty-seven, he became engaged to a beautiful heiress, but called the engagement off two days later. The woman went on to marry and lead a happy life, but Kierkegaard continued to obsess over her throughout his writing career.

Kierkegaard's writings are a mixture of fiction, philosophy, letters, journal entries, aphorisms, and parables. He rejected formal philosophical systems of knowledge, maintaining that no one system could ever offer a complete understanding of the world. His first work, *Either/Or*, was an assemblage of short unrelated sketches aimed at convincing readers that life was a series of choices. He went on to produce over twenty books. The most significant of these, such as *Fear and Trembling* and *The Concept of Dread*, explore the terrible aspects of human freedom. The other significant aspect of his philosophy was that it was fervently Christian in nature but strongly opposed to the organized church.

Kierkegaard died in Copenhagen on November 11, 1855. During his lifetime he was mocked in newspapers and vilified in churches, and his writing was not read outside of Denmark until well into the twentieth century. Today his ideas are recognized as the groundwork of existential thought.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)

Sartre was the single most important figure of French Existentialism. Born June 21, 1905, in Paris, France, and raised by middle-class Protestants, Sartre made the decision at an early age to be a writer, and to expose the hypocrisy of the comfortable life offered to him by his parents and grandparents. In college he studied philosophy, particularly the branch known as Phenomenology, which concerned itself with the fact that life could be experienced but not really known. Throughout the 1930s, he wrote

both fiction and philosophy with equal sincerity, leading, in 1938, to the autobiographical novel *Nausea*, which helped define the uneasy position humanity finds itself in the modern world. A short story collection followed. His reputation as a literary writer established, Sartre distinguished himself as one of the century's most important philosophers with the 1943 publication of *Being and Nothingness*, in which he examined the human situation as the awkward position of existing but being aware of nonexistence.

In the years after World War II, when Existentialism reached the height of its popularity, Sartre remained in the international spotlight as a philosopher, writer, and political activist. He wrote several plays that are still performed today, including *Dirty Hands*, *No Exit*, and *The Flies*, all demonstrating the existentialist motto, coined by Sartre, "To be is to do." In 1964, Sartre was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, but did not accept it because he did not think that such an establishment should define a writer's achievement. Sartre was a familiar face around Paris and was continuously in the news until his death on April 15, 1980, from a lung ailment.

Representative Works

The Brothers Karamazov

Most of Dostoevsky's works concerned the existentialist struggle between freedom and responsibility, but it was handled with significant grace in his last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, first published in 1880. In this book, a son kills his father, while his two brothers, each for his own reasons, feel a sense of guilt over having let the event occur. One chapter in particular, "The Grand Inquisitor," is instrumental in promoting existential themes long before the term "Existentialism" even came into usage. This section, a dream sequence, concerns a debate between an inquisitor who represents the devil, and Christ himself, regarding the question of whether humans are or should be free. This book has long been considered Dostoevsky's most brilliant work, the most thought-provoking novel by one of Russian literature's most philosophical writers.

The Immoralist

André Gide was a great influence on the French existentialists, particularly his 1902 novel *The Immoralist*. It concerns a scholar from Paris who falls ill while traveling with his new bride in Tunis. He survives, but his illness leaves him with a taste for life that he was lacking before, so that he quits his intellectual work, leaves Paris to live on a farm, and eventually ends up traveling away from civilization, further and further south on the African continent. The quest for authenticity, for escaping the familiar and conventional, is one that the existentialist writers would return to again and again, as their characters came to recognize what they thought to be true was really false. Unlike the protagonists of existentialist books like Camus's *The Stranger*, however, Gide's Michael is constantly thinking over his situation, not just reacting, making him a well-rounded character while other existential heroes come off as being hollow.

The Little Prince

The Little Prince, written and illustrated by the French author Antoine de Saint-Exupery, is often categorized with children's books, perhaps because it has cartoon illustrations or because it rejects the arbitrary rules that adults put on life. It is this last element, however, that qualifies it as a work of existential literature. The story is a fantasy about an airplane pilot who crashes in the Sahara desert, where a little prince who lives on an asteroid with a single flower approaches him. He explains his travels to different asteroids and the people that he has met on each. The book offers a satire of serious adults, including a judge and businessman. Its affirmation of childlike innocence has made it a perennial favorite since it was first published in 1943, but the issues that it raises about the superficiality of social structure and the purity of freedom make it one of the more uplifting examples of existential thought.

The Mandarins

Readers interested in the postwar existentialist movement in Paris find two benefits from Simone de Beauvoir's novel *The Mandarins*. First, it is a book true to the existentialist ethos, with characters that struggle to follow their philosophical beliefs while giving in to the basic romantic entanglements that complicate ideological purity. Just as compelling is that it is a thinly veiled autobiography, recording Beauvoir's own affairs and affiliations during the late forties and early fifties, when the world's greatest thinkers sought out the apartment she kept with Jean-Paul Sartre. Beauvoir brings a feminist sensibility to her characters that the male existentialists show no interest in. This book was the winner of France's highest literary award, the Priz Goncourt. Though it is not one of the most frequently read works of existential literature today, it is considered Beauvoir's finest novel.

Nausea

Nausea was Jean-Paul Sartre's first novel, published in 1938. It is a fictionalized account of the author as a young man, and is generally considered to be one of the most influential books in the French existential movement. The book, written in the form of diary entries, presents the life of a writer, Antoine Roquentin, who finds himself feeling sick about no particular complaint, but rather about life itself. Because of its unique style and theme, *Nausea* excited the passions of some literary critics and philosophers when it was first published, while others found it to be too obscure and self-important. Today, readers are interested in it as much for the movement that it created as for the ideas that were made familiar by later writers in the movement.

No Exit

Jean-Paul Sartre's surreal stage play gave the world the phrase "Hell is other people." The setting is minimal: three characters are confined to one room together, none remembering how they got there, carrying on with social interaction until they realize that their small-talk and amenities are the whole point of being there, that they have been damned to each other's company for eternity. Though the catchphrase already mentioned has become the thing that readers and viewers focus upon, the more important point is why these characters have been condemned to hell: they have all lived with "bad faith," which was Sartre's concept of a life lived insincerely, fearing instead of embracing the universe's lack of meaning. This play was instrumental in bringing the concept of Existentialism to America in the late 1940s, and Sartre's storytelling and language are powerful enough to keep the play interesting for modern audiences, so that it is still produced frequently today.

The Stranger

Albert Camus's 1946 novel *The Stranger* is one of the most widely-read books of the twentieth century. Its plot concerns a young Algerian man, Meursault, who kills a man for no good reason after a minor scuffle, and the court trial that ensues. During the trial, the emphasis is not on whether or not Meursault committed the murder, nor even what his motive might have been, but rather on the type of person he is. The prosecution focuses on external matters, such as how the defendant treated his mother and his girlfriend, making it clear that it is his existence, not just his action, that is on trial.

Meursault represents the quintessential existential hero□aloof and cool. He does not think his actions matter much, and is not afraid to accept the responsibility for anything he has done. Some critics have written this novel off as dated□a clear look at a worldview that has passed like any fad. Others believe that the sense of alienation and absurdity Camus has captured will never pass from style.

The Sun Also Rises

Ernest Hemingway is often considered to have looked at the world with an existential point of view, and that is most obvious in his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. Published in 1926, the story concerns a man who has been injured in World War I, who is trying to find meaning to his life by traveling from one destination in Europe to another, always seeking excitement and distraction. Hemingway's distinctive style does not let readers in on the thoughts of his protagonist, Jake Barnes, but his precise descriptions of actions and tightly focused dialog make the feelings of the character known. While later Hemingway novels were to have more tightly structured plots, the disillusionment and freedom in *The Sun Also Rises* made it an ideal vehicle for existential ideals.

The Trial

When Franz Kafka died in 1924, his novel *The Trial* was not finished, but his literary executor put the pieces together to publish it the following year. The story concerns Joseph K., a government bureaucrat who is awakened in his bed one morning and taken off to jail. He is released soon after but is told to report back to court regularly. Throughout the whole experience, no one□not the officers who arrest him, the judge, nor his own lawyer□ tells Joseph what crime he is accused of. As with all of Kafka's works, this absurd situation is used to explore deeper philosophical truths about the nature of society and of the individual, showing how the political system can isolate a person from the basic truths that he once took for granted. The book was written long before the French philosophers coined the term "existentialist" in the 1940s, but its themes and style are the same as the ones they were to use. Though Kafka died in obscurity, he is now considered one of the most talented literary figures of the twentieth century.

Waiting for Godot

Written by Irish playwright Samuel Beckett and first produced in Paris in 1953, *Waiting for Godot* has become a mainstay of modern theater. Its absurdist plot concerns two tramps, Vldimir and Estragon, who wait near a barren tree on an empty stretch of road for someone named "Godot," who clearly represents their pointless hopes. The fact that nothing significant happens during the play's two acts helps to make the existential point of the play□the lack of meaning when life is not actively pursued. Beckett's artful use of language makes it easy for readers and viewers to experience the play without becoming bored. Even when the dialog seems to make no sense, and when the characters seem to be bickering with each other pointlessly, there is a deeper meaning to Beckett's structure that offers a running commentary on the state of modern existence.

Critical Overview

"Existential literature" is a phrase that is seldom used anymore. The description has become, for the most part, irrelevant. One reason that literary works are not labeled existential as much as they used to be is that the movement, which captured the world's imagination during World War II, has faded from public attention since the 1980 death of its most charismatic practitioner, Jean-Paul Sartre. Modes of literature and philosophy that once would have been described as "existential" are now described by different terms. On the positive side, the main reason that the description existential seems so irrelevant is the massive popularity that it had in the 1940s and 1950s. Calling literature existential is almost a way of stating the obvious, since most contemporary literature presumes an existential worldview.

From the start, existential literature was seen as little more than a forum for the existential philosophers to present their ideas. For example, Charles I. Glicksberg, in his 1945 essay "Literary Existentialism," wrote, "Though Existentialist literature, particularly in the field of fiction and drama, does exist, it has thus far contributed nothing by way of innovation in aesthetic form. By and large, it is a literature based upon a philosophy, a Weltanschauung, a method of interpreting the life of man upon earth, his character and destiny." It soon developed that the most important reason for reading the literature produced by the French existentialists was to prove, if only to oneself, that one belonged to their intellectual society. In 1951, James Collins introduced his book *The Existentialists* with an explanation about the relationship between Existentialism and how one lives. Stating his intention to focus his study on disagreements between members of the existential community, he noted that, in studying the people and not their writings, "the picture that [emerges] is drawn more in terms of methods and problems than of a common fund of doctrinal content." As with Glicksburg, the literature was deemed less important than the ideas and the people who lived those ideas.

The shift in Existentialism's relevance in literature came during the 1960s, and can be seen in the writings of Hazel E. Barnes, one of the movement's most prolific observers. In her 1959 book *The Literature of Possibilities*, Barnes begins her exploration of existential ideas with the bold statement, "About the middle of this century novelists and playwrights stopped making men and women to order for psychologists and began to re-create Man." A few sentences later she attributes that view to Jean-Paul Sartre, but only after she has drawn readers in with that challenging claim. By 1967, in the chapter "Existentialism and Other Rebels" of her book *Existentialist Ethics*, Barnes was defending the philosophy from being lumped with other, similar movements with which it might be confused Ayn Rand's Objectivism, the Beatnik or Hipster nihilism espoused by Norman Mailer and others, and Oriental philosophies, especially Zen Buddhism. "Like man himself, philosophy is always 'in situation,'" Barnes wrote, continuing that Existentialism "is acutely aware of its own position in the world order of the twentieth century. It can envision its own transcendence." One of Existentialism's strongest supporters, Barnes could already see it dissolving, losing its character to similar philosophies, new and old.

Today, critics frequently point out existential elements in literary works, usually those set in contradictory or self-defeating situations. While used frequently to describe specific elements of literary works, it is seldom used in an attempt to understand an author's worldview. In literature, the word *Existential* refers to a mood, rather than to a specific philosophy.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
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Critical Essay #1

Kelly is a professor of literature and creative writing at Oakton Community College and College of Lake County and has written for numerous scholarly publications. In the following essay, Kelly argues the case for using Sartre's novel Nausea *as the touchstone for gauging existential literature*.

The concept of "existential literature" is a tricky one. Since Existentialism is a philosophy that means to describe existence, everything that has ever been done or written should rightfully fall within its bounds, since everything exists. Even works meant to illuminate other philosophies could be interpreted by existentialists as the authors' attempts to cope with their existential condition, and might reasonably be categorized as existential. But it is useless to have a category with no distinguishing characteristics to set its members off from everything else: if everything is existential, then there would be no use having the word, because the word "everything" would cover their shared idea well enough.

Another possible way to recognize existential literature would be to limit the phrase to works produced by the members of the French intellectual movement□primarily, Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus□ who named this philosophy during the 1940s, and the writers who followed their example. Since these are the writers who willingly associated their works with Existentialism, they would seem to be the ones who are producing the existential literature. Unfortunately, participation in the existential movement alone does little to help define existential literature. The works of Kafka, Dostoevsky, and early Hemingway are all clearly existential in nature, even though their authors never had the philosophy defined for them. What about Hamlet's dilemma, or Abraham's choice to sacrifice Isaac in the book of Genesis? These are clearly existential moments, if not actual examples of existential literature. Closely associating existential literature with the French existential movement also raises the problem of the people who chose to call themselves and their work by that name when it was in vogue. At the peak of Existentialism's popularity in the 1950s, there were hundreds of fans who used the existential concept of *angst* to describe their unhappiness, or mistook medium-sized disappointments for "dread." Their works are not considered truly existential, whether the writers thought they were or not.

Labels are anathema within a philosophy that can be characterized by the catchphrase "existence precedes essence." It would be dishonest to the core beliefs of Existentialism to make any general claims about the essence of existential literature. It is the nature of the philosophy that each piece of literature, especially the literature associated with it, should be experienced before it is defined. More than other literary movements, such as Romanticism or even Modernism, existential literature cannot be identified by checking it against a preexisting list of aspects to see if it fits some sort of profile.

In the absence of any set criteria, there is still a possibility of calling a body of literature "existential" by recognizing what specific works resemble. This open-ended option for identifying things is like the one used by the Supreme Court justice who could not define

pornography but felt sure that he would know it when he saw it. Maybe there are not and cannot be rules that identify the varieties of existential literature, but there should at least be some useful standard by which any one work, experienced in and itself, could have the term applied to it in some meaningful way.

The most likely candidate for a work of existential literature that can be used to test other literature against would be Jean-Paul Sartre's 1938 novel *Nausea*. It is not the most accomplished or successful novel of the existential movement, nor even the most fully realized literary work that Sartre himself produced, but this novel has particular characteristics, both in its technique and in its historical situation, that identify it with Existentialism in a way that other works lack.

Nausea was Sartre's first published novel. This means that it was the work that launched the literary career of the man who launched the philosophical movement. At the time, Sartre had published some philosophy, but with *Nausea* he put his philosophy into motion on the page, giving his ideas a reality that talking about them could not achieve. The fact that it was published before he attained a widespread reputation as a literary and philosophical genius almost certainly gave him a freedom that he would have to fight for in later years, when he was aware of the weight a whole world of followers would put on his every word. Later, Sartre was to view the ideas in *Nausea* as "dated," noting that he thought so even at the time of its publication. His philosophy moved on, becoming more involved with questions of political commitment than those of simply existing, such as those shown in his next-most-famous literary achievements, the plays *No Exit* and *Dirty Hands*. Readers can argue which of Sartre's novels or plays was the "best," and even which stage of his evolution was most "authentic," but his first novel, *Nausea*, has a purity that it holds in common with almost all other existential literature that came before it or after.

Stylistically, *Nausea* has the elements that most people have in mind, if only subconsciously, when they speak about existential literature. The story steers clear of a linear plot. Instead, its narrator, Antoine Roquentin, organizes it like a series of journal entries. It is a narrative technique that is common to much existential writing, from Kierkegaard to Nietzsche to John Hawkes. Just as the point of Sartre's novel, and the cause of Roquentin's nausea, is the contrast between existence and meaning, so too this character's existence is at odds with the faith that readers can traditionally invest in the hidden stream of meaning that holds a plot together. Lacking the desire to sustain a traditional narrative, existential literature works best in short stories, plays (which always take place in the hereand- now), and fragmented novels like *Nausea*, where scene changes appear as random as the situations in life.

Nausea, in fact, dispenses with its faux-diary style without any hesitation. For example, a section called "Sunday" starts on page 40 and continues on to page 57, which would be an extraordinary amount of writing for a diarist, even one as obsessed with his own ideas as Roquentin, to record in a single day. That particular entry is written in the present tense, and it includes four pages of dialog. Clearly, Sartre was not interested in maintaining the illusion that this was anything like a diary: illusion and Existentialism are

incompatible. Most works recognized as existential are just as jarring and fragmented, with little attempt to establish a fictional "reality."

Roquentin's story follows his search for meaning, which leads him through familiar channels of live and community, God and Humanism, before leaving his life as empty as it was at the novel's start. The conflict between reality and meaning has Roquentin nauseous at the beginning, and in the end he is just a little short of convincing himself that writing a book about his experiences might help him accept his situation. It is no small achievement for an author to have his protagonist change so slightly over the course of a novel: Sartre achieves this by filling Roquentin's days with minutely observed details. He creates a reality for the reader, one that is just a little too real for Roquentin to bear. Such an intricate rendering of detail is just good fiction writing, existential or otherwise.

One final element that makes this novel exemplary existential fiction is its relationship to the author's life. *Nausea* is generally recognized as a thinly-veiled autobiography. It would be almost impossible to conceive of existential literature that does not have the authenticity of its author's own doubts, fears, and misery as a kind of subtext. Not all philosophies require that their fictional versions be bound to the lives of their authors, but not all philosophies are so intricately tied to the author's sense of authenticity, to the importance of her or his own life. Regardless of whether it was written after Sartre or before, existential literature leaves readers with a strong sense of the teller of the tale. This is why, despite its existential elements, *Hamlet* would not qualify as existential literature: Shakespeare is always indistinguishable in his works. On the other hand, Franz Kafka, who is recognized as a leading existential writer, can tell a richly imagined tale, but his presence is still felt. For instance, Kafka never starved in a circus cage for spectators to watch, as the protagonist does in his story *The Hunger Artist*. Still, no one can doubt that the suffering for art that is the story's central metaphor was indeed Kafka's own suffering.

In his introduction to *Nausea* in the current paperback edition, Hayden Carruth examines the ways in which this novel was certainly not the first or finest work of existential literature, and its protagonist was in no way the first "existentialist man." What makes the book so extraordinary, according to Carruth, is that Sartre's Roquentin is "a man living at an extraordinary metaphysical pitch, at least in the pages of the journal he has left us." This, in the end, might be the thing that makes this the *most* existential work of all. Existentialism is not a philosophy given to sustained fiction, and in this one small book Sartre takes it about as far as it can go. Readers who know Existentialism when they see it are advised to stay away from definitions as much as possible. But, when there is any doubt, they can refer back to this novel, where they will see this particular worldview take form in every word.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on Existentialism, in *Literary Movements for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Cooper traces the identification and definition of existentialism and the figures seen as practitioners of the concept.

Critical Essay #3

None of the great existentialist tomes contains the word 'existentialism'. Reports on its origin differ, but it seems to have been coined towards the end of World War II by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel as a label for the currently emerging ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and his close friend Simone de Beauvoir. According to the latter, neither of them initially appreciated this baptism.

> During a discussion organized during the summer [of 1945], Sartre had refused to allow Gabriel Marcel to apply this [word] to him: '. . . I don't even know what existentialism is'. I shared his irritation . . . But our protests were in vain. In the end, we took the epithet . . . and used it for our own purposes.

Sartre, in fact, 'took' it rather quickly, for in the autumn of that year he delivered the lecture which became the most widely read of existentialist writings, *Existentialism and Humanism*.

The label was soon to be stuck on many other writers. To begin with, it was attached to the two German philosophers of *Existenz*, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, whose influence upon Sartre had been considerable. Heidegger bridled at this, quickly disowning the title in a piece published in 1947. Jaspers, while unwilling to be identified too closely with Sartre, was sufficiently enamoured of the term to claim that a book of his own, written back in 1919, was 'the earliest writing in the later so-called existentialism'. Then the label was fixed, unsurprisingly, on a number of Sartre's French contemporaries and friends, notably Albert Camus and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, eventually returning like a boomerang upon the neologizing Marcel. None of these readily welcomed the title, either□not so much, as is sometimes suggested, because they were against systems and '-isms' as because no one other than Sartre, in his lecture, had tried to define the word, and this was not a definition under which they could immediately see their own ideas falling. One could hardly expect the Catholic Marcel, for example, to embrace a term which, as defined by Sartre, made the notion of a religious existentialist a virtual self-contradiction.

The next stage was to rake through the remoter philosophical past in search of thinkers deserving of the label, the prime candidates being he two *enfants terribles* of the nineteenth century, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, both of whom were known to have influenced Heidegger, Jaspers and Sartre. This intellectual archaeology was soon to know no bounds, with Pascal, Montaigne, even St Thomas Aquinas and St Augustine, newly excavated as heralds of existentialism. And this labelling game was not confined to the field of philosophy. Novelists reckoned to have concerned themselves with such typically Sartrean themes as anxiety and conflict with others were soon included□ Franz Kafka, for example. Nor, as Simone de Beauvoir relates, did the label attach only to people and their thoughts.

> The existentialist label had been attached to all our books . . . and to those of our friends . . . and also to a certain style of painting and a certain sort of music. Anne-Marie Cazalis had the idea of profiting from the vogue . . . she baptized the clique of which she was the centre, and the young people who prowled between the *Tabou* and the *Pergola*, as existentialists . . . [They] wore the new 'existentialist' uniform .. . imported from Capri .. . of black sweaters, black shirts, and black pants.

In short, existentialism was not only a philosophy, but as any potted history of our century will point out, it had also become a 'movement' and a 'fashion'.

Although the name 'existentialism' is only of wartime vintage, the special use of the word 'existence' which inspired the name is older. Both Heidegger and Jaspers put it to this use, the latter in fact referring to his writings of the 1920s and 1930s as *Existenzphilosophie*. The two Germans had, in turn, taken up this special use of 'existence' from Kierkegaard who, in Jasper's words, had provided its historically binding meaning'. The story does not end there, since Kierkegaard was apparently only giving a new twist to the word as used by German idealists like Schelling, whom he heard lecturing in the Berlin of 1840□but I shall not pursue the story that far.

What is this special sense of 'existence' from which existentialism derives its name? A full answer would amount to little less than a complete account of existentialism, so for the moment I only indicate an answer. First, 'existence' refers only to the kind of existence enjoyed by human beings. Second, it refers only to those aspects of human being which distinguish it from the being of everything else□'mere' physical objects, for instance. Human beings have digestive systems, but since these are 'merely' physical in nature, they are not a constituent of human *existence*. A cardinal sin, from the existentialist viewpoint, is to conceive of human existence as being akin to the kind of being enjoyed by 'mere' things. The word 'sin' is to be taken with some seriousness here, for it is not just an error to think in this way, but self-deception or 'bad faith'.

Humans differ from non-humans in countless ways, of course. They can laugh, for example. So what are the distinctive traits which the word 'existence' is seeking to highlight? First of all, human existence is said to have a concern for itself. As Kierkegaard puts it, the individual not only exists but is 'infinitely interested in existing'. He is able to reflect on his existence, take a stance towards it, and mould it in accordance with the fruits of his reflection. Or, as Heidegger would say, humans are such that their being is in question for them, an issue for them. Second, to quote Kierkegaard again, 'an existing individual is constantly in the process of becoming.' The same, you might say, is true of objects like acorns or clouds. But the difference is supposed to be this: at any given point in an acorn's career, it is possible to give an exhaustive description of it in terms of the properties□colour, molecular structure, etc.□which belong to it at that moment. But no complete account can be given of a human being without reference to what he is in the process of becoming□without

reference, that is, to the projects and intentions which he is on the way to realizing, and in terms of which sense is made of his present condition. As Heidegger puts it, the human being is always 'ahead of himself', always *unterwegs* ('on the way').

The two features of human existence just mentioned lend one sense to that most famous of existentialist dicta, 'existence precedes essence'. What a person is at any given time, his 'essence', is always a function of what he is on the way to becoming in pursuit of the projects issuing from a reflective concern for his life. Unlike the stone, whose essence or nature is 'given', a person's existence, writes Ortega y Gasset, 'consists not in what it is already, but in what it is not yet . . . Existence . . . is the process of realizing . . . the aspiration we are.'

Such characterizations obviously call for elucidation, and existentialism might be thought of as the sustained attempt to provide this, and to explore the implications for people's relationship to the world, each other, and themselves. As they stand, these characterizations are little more than promissory notes. Nor do we progress much further, at this stage, by trawling in some of the further characterizations which many people associate with the existentialist picture of human being. Existence, they will have heard, is a constant *striving*, a per- petual *choice*, it is marked by a radical *freedom* and *responsibility*; and it is always prey to a sense of *angst* which reveals that, for the most part, it is lived *inauthentically* and in *bad faith*. And because the character of a human life is never *given*, existence is *without foundation*; hence it is *abandoned*, or *absurd* even. The reason why recitation of this existentialist lexicon does not, of itself, advance our understanding is that, without exception, these are terms of art. None of them should be taken at face value, and the thinking of Sartre and others is badly misconstrued if they are.

Why do existentialists employ the word 'existence' to express their conception of human being? Partly because of precedent. Kierkegaard so employed the word, and those who more or less shared his insights followed suit. But there is more to it than that. For one thing, Kierkegaard's adoption of the term was not arbitrary. According to a venerable tradition, to hold that a certain thing exists is to hold that certain essences or 'universals' are instantiated, or that certain concepts or definitions are satisfied, by it. The number 2 exists, while the greatest number does not, because in the one case, but not the other, the appropriate essences□such as being between 1 and 3□are instantiated. It was Kierkegaard's contention that, however matters may stand with numbers, this doctrine was mistaken when applied to individual *persons*. A person has a 'concreteness', 'particularity' and 'uniqueness' which make it impossible to equate him with an aggregate of instantiated universals. Søren cannot be 'reduced' to the entity instantiating the following universals . . ., since there is no way of completing the list. Moreover, even if Søren's friends need to have an essence or concept of Søren in mind in order to recognize him, Søren himself does not. He is aware of his existence directly, 'unmediated' by concepts. To know who he is, he does not have to check through a list of definitions to make sure he fits them all. Kierkegaard's constant references to 'the existing individual', 'the existing thinker' and the like, are intended to remind his readers□versed, presumably, in the traditional doctrine or its more recent Hegelian

variation□that, with human beings, their existence is peculiarly 'particular', and known to themselves 'immediately'.

A more decisive reason, having to do with the etymology of the word 'exist', helps to explain Heidegger's use of it. In some of his writings he spells the word with a hyphen, 'ex-ist', thereby drawing attention to its derivation from the Greek and Latin words meaning 'to stand out from'. This etymology is fairly apparent in related words like 'ecstacy', for the ecstatic mystic is someone whose soul is liberated from, and so stands outside of, his body. When this origin of 'exist' is borne in mind, it is an apt word for expressing the existentialist thought, mentioned above, that in some sense a person is always already 'beyond' or 'ahead' of whatever properties characterize him at a given time. If, as it is sometimes put, the person is 'in' the future towards which he moves, he stands out from his present. He ex-ists.

An annoying complication is that some existentialists use the word in a more restricted way, applying it only to what others would call *authentic* existence. Although human being is radically unlike that of anything else, people may think and behave as if this were not so, like Sartre's man of bad faith who takes his cowardice or homosexuality to be a fixed and inevitable property, and behaves accordingly. Some of our writers prefer to withhold the term 'existence' in the case of lives marked by chronic bad faith. Kierkegaard distinguishes 'existing essentially' from 'loosely called existing', reserving the former for the life of a person who has 'willed . . . ventured . . . with full consciousness of one's eternal responsibility'. Jaspers is equally demanding: 'I *am* only in the earnestness of choice', and '*Existenz* . . . is present when I am authentic.' I shall not follow this practice of loading the term with an evaluation. 'Existence' will refer to the distinctive being of humans which can then be qualified by words like 'authentic' and 'inauthentic'.

The word 'existentialism' has an additional and very important source. For many philosophers, the word 'existential' is most at home in the expression *existential phenomenology*. There is general agreement that the most significant versions of twentieth-century existentialism are developments, welcome or perverse, from phenomenology, the philosophy elaborated by Edmund Husserl in the early years of the century. Heidegger describes *Being and Time* as a work of phenomenology, while Merleau-Ponty and Sartre use the word in the title or subtitle of their main works. For our immediate purposes, the exact character of phenomenology does not matter. (I discuss it, in some detail, in chapter 3.) But its central feature, crudely expressed, is a focus upon the *meanings* (in a rather special sense) and acts of meaning in virtue of which we refer, and otherwise relate, to the world. What does matter here is that, according to Husserl, this examination could only be properly conducted by first suspending our usual assumptions about the actual existence of things in the world. In a procedure akin to Descartes' methodological doubt, the phenomenologist must suspend belief, or 'put in brackets', any reality beyond consciousness and the 'meanings' in which consciousness trades. The scientist studies colour by examining its physical properties, but the philosopher concerned with the 'meaning' of colour must put aside the assumption of real, physical existence made by the scientist. Otherwise, the

phenomenological investigation will be contaminated by irrelevant, contingent data having nothing to do with 'meanings'.

Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre are unanimous that this programme of 'pure' phenomenology is impossible. One can neither doubt, nor seriously pretend to doubt, the reality of the world. Even 'to ask oneself whether the world is real,' writes Merleau-Ponty, 'is to fail to understand what one is asking.' Consciousness cannot imagine itself divested of a world, for 'it always finds itself at work *in* the world.' There is no prospect for examining 'meaning' and the 'meaning'-making activities of conscious beings unless these latter are taken to be practically and bodily engaged in the real world. Human being is, in Heidegger's phrase, Being-in-the-world, so that phenomenological understanding must be 'existential', not 'pure'.

Is the word 'existential' ambiguous, then: expressing, on the one hand, a special conception of human being and, on the other, the insistence that the world cannot be 'bracketed'? This would be to overlook an intimate connection between the themes of human existence and existential phenomenology. For Heidegger and those who follow him, it is precisely because the being of humans takes the form of existence that any account of it must presuppose their engagement in the real world. Only if we were creatures of a quite different sort□immaterial souls, say□could we perform even the thought-experiment of divorcing ourselves from the surrounding world. Conversely, the possibility of an existential phenomenology requires that conscious being takes the form of existence. For the 'meaning'-making activities upon which it focuses could only be those of creatures who exist. Instead of treating 'existential' as ambiguous, then, we should approach existentialist philosophy□ at least in its paradigmatic forms□along two different, but converging routes.

Critical Essay #4

I described the rapid spread of the 'existentialist' label after 1945, but how do we determine when the label is appropriate? Who are to count as existentialists? I shall say a little by way of an answer before suggesting that we should not overtax ourselves in search of a precise one.

It is sometimes said that the reason it is hard to draw up an exact list is that existentialism is a mere 'tendency', rather than a coherent philosophy. Now while I do not want to minimize the differences between individual writers, I do hope to demonstrate that there is a coherent, definable philosophy of existentialism□no less, though perhaps no more, homogeneous than logical positivism, say, or pragmatism. The reason it is hard to place certain thinkers is not that the characterization of existentialism must be vague, but because they fit the characterization in some respects and not others. The taxonomist, then, has a weighting problem on his hands.

Existentialism is what esistentialists embrace, and existentialists are people who embrace existentialism. How do we break into this cycle? It is generally agreed that if Heidegger and Sartre are not existentialists, then no one is. A natural policy, therefore, is to apply the name to these two, and then to others according to their kinship with them. This policy is not, however, without problems. For one thing, the thinking of both men underwent large changes. Heidegger's 'turn' (*Kehre*) in the 1930s was in a direction away from the existentialist position of *Being and Time;* and some people find precious little of Sartre's earlier views in his Marxist writings of the 1960s and thereafter. But this is not a serious problem: we can stipulate that by 'Heidegger' and 'Sartre' we mean the authors of certain works only.

A more serious criticism is that the policy exaggerates the affinity between Heidegger and Sartre. It is ludicrous to hold that 'no kinship ever bound the two philosophers . . . that they are radically opposed in every respect', but the days are gone when Heidegger was treated merely as an impenetrable precursor of Sartre. There is now a tendency to read Sartre as a wayward pupil who produced a bowdlerized version of the master's thoughts. Hubert Dreyfus, for instance, thinks that Sartre's revamping of Heidegger was a 'disaster', and that the latter had some justification for calling *Being and Nothingness 'Dreck'* ('rubbish').

This tendency is as unfortunate, I believe, as the one it succeeded. Rather than devote a separate section to the relation between Heidegger and Sartre, I hope that my discussions of their positions throughout the book will show their affinity. But here are a couple of remarks in advance. First, one should not take Heidegger's own hostile judgement on Sartre too seriously. Only the first few pages of his copy of *Being and Nothingness* were cut open, a little *Dreck* being enough, it seems. By 1946, moreover, when Heidegger wrote his criticism of *Existentialism and Humanism*□not the most dependable expression of Sartre's views, incidentally□ he had moved a long way from the ideas which had inspired Sartre. When, a few years after the war, Sartre visited

Heidegger in his mountain retreat, his disillusioned verdict was that Heidegger had gone mystical.

More important, the new tendency rests on misunderstandings of Sartre. It treats him as a Cartesian, wedded to Descartes' notion of the *cogito* as the substantial subject of consciousness, and to a dualistic division of reality into the Being-for-itself of consciousness and the Being-in-itself of things. Despite some of Sartre's misleading remarks in these connections, it will emerge, I hope, that:

1 He is as opposed as Heidegger to any Cartesian notion of the *cogito*. ('"Cartesianism" is simply used [by Sartre] as the name of the view that consciousness is always aware of itself,' writes Mary Warnock.

2 'Subjectivity', as Sartre explains, is simply a name for something Heidegger himself insists upon: that 'man is . . . something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so.'

3 The For-itself/In-itself distinction is a clumsy reiteration of Heidegger's between the being enjoyed by humans (*Dasein*) and that possessed by things. For neither of them is the distinction, in one crucial sense, dualistic: since they insist that it is impossible to conceive of conscious activity and the world in isolation from one another.

These remarks are contentious and, at this early stage, will not be intelligible to some readers. Their point is to herald the affinity between the two men which warrants the policy of understanding existentialism, initially, by reference to them. But which other philosophers are sufficiently close to these two to belong on the list? There are some whose very style and vocabulary make them prime candidates Jaspers, Merleau-Ponty, Ortega y Gasset and Simone de Beauvoir. The much neglected Ortega, for example, wrote a couple of essays in 1940, three years before the publication of *Being and Nothingness*, which for several pages could be mistaken for elegant summaries of Sartre's book. There are others who would never pass the stylistic and lexical tests, but whose concerns and conclusions are close to those of the people already mentioned. Marcel, for instance, and the author of existentialism's most lyrical work, Martin Buber. *I and Thou*, which appeared in German in 1923, might compete with Jaspers' *Psychology of World-Views* for the description, 'the earliest writing in the later socalled existentialism'.

Each of these writers subscribes to the two main themes (described above, 'The Sources of a Name') of the distinctive character of human existence and existential phenomenology. (This is so even when they do not indulge in the terms of art of phenomenology and *Existenzphilosophie*.) Each of them emphasizes how, in its being an 'issue' for itself and 'ahead' of itself, human existence is to be contrasted with the

being of whatever is 'thinglike'. And each of them insists upon our engagement with a real world as a precondition for understanding those most fundamental of our activities, the making and grasping of 'meanings'. For each of them, the world and human existence are only intelligible in terms of one another. Merleau- Ponty's dictum, 'The world is wholly inside me, and I am wholly outside myself', might have been spoken by any of them.

There is something else these writers share□ something, I shall be arguing, which serves to motivate and guide the whole existentialist enterprise. This is the sense that the most serious question with which philosophy has to deal is that of *alienation* in its various forms□alienation from the world, from one's fellows, from oneself. It is to the alienation threatened by a dualism of mind and body and by the scientific image of an objective reality untainted by human concerns, and not to the spectre of scepticism, which philosophy must, before all else, respond. Existentialism itself is just such a response.

Given all this, there is at least one writer who, although he is often included, does not really belong on the list□Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus* is, to be sure, peppered with some favourite existentialist terms, like 'absurdity', but I have already remarked that, as used by Sartre and others, these are terms of art. What Camus means by 'absurdity' is quite different from Sartre. One reason for excluding Camus is that, unlike the rest of our writers, it is not at all his aim to reduce or overcome a sense of alienation or separateness from the world. In the attitude of Meursault, *The Outsider*, for example, we find a defiant pleasure taken in our alienated condition. Sisyphus, the 'absurd hero', feels a 'silent joy' in living in a world where 'man feels an alien, a stranger . . . his exile . . . without remedy.' Camus wants to invert Merleau-Ponty's dictum into 'The world is wholly outside me, and I am wholly inside myself.' Moreover Camus was, by his own admission or boast, not interested in the weighty philosophical topics which occupied his Parisian friends, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty□the nature of consciousness and perception, the mindbody relation, the problem of 'other minds', and so on. Existentialism, as treated of in this book, is not a mood or a vocabulary, but a relatively systematic philosophy in which topics like these are duly addressed. I shall have rather little to say about those, like Camus, who make a virtue out of being neither a philosopher nor systematic.

A question which has vexed a number of commentators is where to place Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. It was Kierkegaard's use of 'existence' which inspired the very name of existentialism, and his notions of 'dread' and the 'Public' are echoed in Heidegger's discussions of *angst* and the 'they' (*Das Man*) (see chapters 7 and 8). But some of the things said about Camus also apply to Kierkegaard. Despite the endless repetition, he does little to develop his intuitions about existence as 'striving' and 'becoming', and some of those large philosophical topics which failed to disturb Camus scarcely bothered Kierkegaard either. Like Camus, as well, he seems to enjoy the thought that men are aliens in their world. It is only if people do view themselves as 'homeless' that they will then seek that personal relationship with God, which is the pivot of Kierkegaard's concerns.

Nietzsche presents the taxonomist with different problems. Unlike the Dane, he tackles most of the philosophical questions which occupy later existentialist; and in his doctrines of the will to power and perspectivism he is arguing against a dualism of mind and reality. 'We laugh as soon as we encounter the juxtaposition of "man *and* world"'; we are 'sick' of 'the whole pose of "man *against* the world"'. But Nietzsche also makes claims which at least seem to contradict those of later existentialists. For example, he denies that we can act freely. More generally, his *naturalism*, his urge to treat man as *just* one species of 'domestic animal', runs counter, on the surface anyway, to claims about the distinctive character of human existence. But if Nietzsche's name appears less often in this book than it may deserve to, the main reason is that he is too large a figure to be contained within it. If proper attention were given to his views, he would, I fear, take things over. (I speak with some experience, having written a book on Nietzsche that was not originally intended to be that.)

Once reasons for and against including Kierkegaard and Nietzsche on the list are given, it matters little whether they are classified as wayward existentialists or, less anachronistically perhaps, as precursors of existentialism. This might matter more if the book were being done 'by blokes', but as indicated in the preface the aim is, rather, to reconstruct a certain structure of thought. The important thing is not the card-carrying credentials of this or that writer, but his contribution to the development of that structure. It is because I am uncertain or plain ignorant about the contribution of some people often described as existentialism Berdyaev and Bultmann, for example that they do not appear. Some of these exclusions may be unjust, but exclusions anyway have to be imposed if the book is not to degenerate into a mere encyclopaedia of existentialist writings.

The main figure in this book, however, is not Heidegger, Sartre nor any of those mentioned above, but The Existentialist. He is not to be identified with any particular author, but nor is he the 'average' existentialist, stripped of whatever opinions distinguish one author from another. A figure who did not take sides on issues which divide these authors would be a pale one indeed. He is, rather, the 'ideal' existentialist, who embodies the best wisdom, in his creator's view, to be gleaned from actual existentialist writers. Put differently, he represents a 'rational reconstruction' of existentialist thought.

This book could be regarded as a journey of thought undertaken by The Existentialist. Its starting point is the issue which, in his opinion, is the largest one to which philosophy should respond that of *alienation*. As for Hegel and Marx, the issue for him is how alienation is to be 'overcome'. It is in Husserl's phenomenology that he finds the clue to this, though Husserl's 'pure' phenomenology must first be converted into an 'existential' one. The Existentialist is then equipped to provide a systematic account of our Being-in-the-world, which emphasizes both the logical interdependence of mind and world, and the unique character of human existence. This account enables him to 'dissolve' a number of traditional dualisms, like that of mind versus body, which have contributed to people's sense of alienation.

His account, however, throws into relief the depressing possibility of other dimensions of alienation: estrangement from oneself and estrangement from others. He needs, then, to discuss the notion of self, and the relation between this and experi- ence of others. The Existentialist is now able to describe the forms of self-estrangement, such as 'bad faith', which have their basis in relations to others. But to justify his description of our everyday condition as self-estranged, he needs to find evidence that we are capable of a different, 'authentic' existence. He finds this in the experience of *angst*, the 'anticipation' of death, and the sense of absurdity. Whatever else an 'authentic' existence is, it is one of a certain kind of freedom□'existential freedom'. Finally, The Existentialist considers what this authentic life of freedom might imply by way of an ethic to guide our relations with one another.

The Existentialist's journey is one of the most serious a philosopher could make. Not only does it encounter some of the largest and toughest philosophical questions, but it passes through some of the more sombre areas of human enquiry. It is serious, finally, because it is undertaken to 'overcome' threats to human integrity and dignity which all but the self-narcoticized must on occasion experience.

I once heard a distinguished analytic philosopher express the wish that his epitaph should read, 'This man discovered a new sense of the word "If".' (He has since died, but I do not know if his wish was fulfilled.) The Existentialist's ambitions are of a different order, more faithful surely to the original spirit of philosophy.

Critical Essay #5

Existentialism is something everyone has heard of. It belongs among those '-isms', like cubism and surrealism, whose *succès de scandale* make them part of the consciousness of our century. The popular image is, however, full of misconceptions which need to be scotched if understanding of the philosophy examined in this book is not to be prejudiced.

These misconceptions are prevalent among those who have picked up their existentialism from dictionaries, encyclopaedias and popular histories of ideas. Typical is the description of existentialism as 'the metaphysical expression of the spiritual dishevelment of a post-war age'. So, too, is one historian's description of it as 'the assertion that life is more than logic . . . that the subjective and personal must be more highly valued and the objective and intellectualized must be depreciated'. *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* entry is particularly wayward: 'An anti-intellectual philosophy of life, holding that man is free and responsible, based on the assumption that reality as existence can only be lived, but can never become the object of thought'.

The inaccuracy of these descriptions will become plain in the following chapters, but it will be useful here to indicate some reasons for their currency, and to preview some of their deficiencies. Such descriptions encourage a popular view which might be expressed in something like the following words: 'Existentialism was a philosophy born out of the *angst* of postwar Europe, out of a loss of faith in the ideals of progress, reason and science which had led to Dresden and Auschwitz. If not only God, but reason and objective value are dead, then man is abandoned in an absurd and alien world. The philosophy for man in this "age of distress" must be a subjective, personal one. A person's remaining hope is to return to his "inner self", and to live in whatever ways he feels are true to that self. The hero for this age, the existentialist hero, lives totally free from the constraints of discredited traditions, and commits himself unreservedly to the demands of his inner, authentic being.'

One thing which encourages this kind of view is a failure sufficiently to distinguish existentialist philosophy from the existentialist vogue among black-clad youths prowling between the *Tabou* and the *Pergola*, which Simone de Beauvoir described. Film of the young Juliette Greco singing in the late 1940s gives an idea of the chic appeal which feigned *ennui* and despair apparently had for young Parisians of the time. Few of them, presumably, waded through the six hundred pages of *Being and Nothingness*, and their interpretation of existentialist freedom as a licence to act as unconventionally as possible, *pour épater les bourgeois*, was a complete distortion of Sartre's and de Beauvoir's notion. In fact, they had less affinity with these writers than with the 'hippies' of the 1960s or the 'punks' of the 1970s.

A second factor has been over-reliance on existentialist fiction. This is compounded when Camus's novel, *The Outsider*, is taken as paradigmatic of the genre. Many people, I find, discover the quintessential 'existentialist hero' in Meursault: casually smoking on his mother's coffin, indifferent to God and to marriage, unrepentant at killing

an Arab, and unable to find value in anything. In fact, Meursault is no more 'authentic' in Sartre's sense than the bourgeois with his 'respectability' and fake 'sincerity'. Not that the 'message' of Sartre's own novels is always grasped correctly. In *The Age of Reason* the central character, Mathieu, proclaims, 'I recognise no allegiance except to myself . . . All I want is to retain my freedom.' This is his defence of his refusal to marry his pregnant girlfriend. But it is not, as sometimes imagined, Mathieu who is Sartre's mouthpiece, but his 'respectable' brother, Jacques, who says: 'I should myself have thought that freedom consisted in frankly confronting situations into which one has deliberately entered and accepting one's responsibilities. You have reached the age of reason, my poor Mathieu . . . But you try to pretend you are younger than you are'. I shall be discussing various works of existentialist fiction, but this is no substitute for examination of the 'straight' philosophical works.

The most popular of those works is Sartre's lecture *Existentialism and Humanism*, and over-reliance on it is a third source of misconceptions. The lecture was written hurriedly and Sartre soon regretted its publication. For there are passages here which do encourage the view that commitment and moral decision can only be irrational *actes gratuits*, or based upon nothing but inner conviction. It is here, too, that there is much talk of abandonment and despair, but not set in the wider context of Sartre's philosophy which lends proper sense to such notions. Sartre's posthumously published notes, *Cahiers pour une Morale*, give a much more accurate, if far less punchy, expression to his views at the time than the lecture does.

Let us now take some of the misconceptions one by one. It is quite wrong, first, to regard existentialism as the expression of post-war 'dishevelment', despair or malaise. To do so rather obviously confuses existentialism as a philosophy and existentialism as a vogue. All the best-known existentialist works, it should be noted, were written either before the war began or before it ended. To describe existentialism as an expression of an age, moreover, is to suggest that its claims could be only temporarily and locally valid. But if the accounts of the distinctiveness of human existence, of the interdependence of mind and world, of our existential freedom, and so on, are true at all, they are true of human beings at all times and in all places. These accounts, furthermore, stem from reflections on the perennial condition of human beings, and not the particular situation obtaining in post-war Europe. Existentialism, in other words, belongs to philosophy, not to the social sciences.

None of this is to deny that existentialism is historically located. In its mature form, it could not have developed much earlier than it did. The same, though, is true of quantum physics, but it would be absurd to describe that as an 'expression' of a particular age. Existentialism grew, in part, out of Husserl's phenomenology, which in turn was a critical response to nineteenth-century materialism and positivism. So existentialism can certainly be placed in intellectual history: it was not a bolt from the blue. Nor do I want to deny that existentialists have things to say which both help to explain, and are especially pertinent to, modern times. Heidegger, Buber and Marcel all believed that the most salient tendencies of the times, technology and consumerism, are the fall-out from that Cartesian schism between mind and world which turns the latter into a foreign

territory, to be conquered and exploited. Existentialism is, in part, directed to the 'overcoming' of that schism.

One reason existentialism gets described as a 'metaphysical expression' of its age is because it is alleged to give voice to an *angst* and despair which, it is said, are peculiarly symptomatic of the twentieth-century condition. It is true that several existentialist writers speak much of these notions, but it is crucial here to recall my warning about their use of words as terms of art. As used by Kierkegaard, 'despair' refers not to a mood of hopeless gloom, but to the position of someone whose life, a contented one perhaps, 'hinges upon a condition outside of itself'. Sartre uses it to refer to the recognition that 'there is no God and no prevenient design, which can adapt the world . . . to my will.' As for *angst*, existentialists do not have in mind that fear before a dangerous, uncertain world recorded here by Virginia Woolf:

The war . . . has taken away the outer wall of security.
No echo comes back. I have no surroundings . . .
Those familiar circumvolutions . . . which have for
so many years given back an echo . . . are all wide
and wild as the desert now.

Existential *angst* is, rather, a sense of freedom, of a capacity to strike out on one's own in the formation of a scheme of beliefs and values. If *angst* has special significance in modern times, this is not because life has become too 'dishevelled' or 'wide and wild', but because it has become too *comfortable*. Beliefs and values are too easily and readily received from what Kierkegaard called the 'Public', Nietzsche the 'herd', and Heidegger the 'they'. This *angst* is not something to be 'treated'; on the contrary, we need to be called to it, and away from a state of 'tranquillization' induced through bad faith.

The wayward definitions of existentialism quoted [earlier] echo the widespread impression that it is an 'anti-intellectualist' philosophy, which sets itself against reason to the point of preaching irrationalism□or worse: 'Existentialism . . . is nothing other than radical nihilism . . . the absolute negation of everything, which leaves only a chaotic and meaningless activity.' This is nonsense, but more sober versions of the 'anti-intellectualist' interpretation require some comment.

The first thing to say is that The Existentialist is not an irrationalist in the sense of supporting his claims by appeal to mystical insight, 'gut' feeling, or other non-rational founts of knowledge. He argues, typically, by close description of everyday life, by drawing out people's own implicit understanding of themselves, and by exposing the incoherence of rival claims. He proceeds, that is, as a philosopher, not a seer. Even the gnomic-sounding Buber argues for the presence of the divine 'Thou' in human life by interpreting familiar experiences, and not by appeal to esoteric knowledge.

Second, existentialism does not, in the manner of a Rimbaud or a D. H. Lawrence, exhort us to cultivate wild or 'vital' lives in conscious rejection of the exercise of reason. We are not to think with our hearts or our blood. The only possible exception here might

be Kierkegaard. The virtue, it seems, of the 'knight of faith', like Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, is to obey God's will despite its logical absurdity. The absurdity of faith makes it all the greater. But it is not clear that the pseudonymous 'author' of the book represents Kierkegaard's own settled view, and even the 'author' is equivocal: 'While Abraham arouses my admiration, he also appals me.' Moreover, Kierkegaard is contemptuous of those who would make a virtue of 'absurd belief' in everyday life: it is warranted, if at all, only in very special situations where God issues certain calls to us.

There are, it is true, passages in *Existentialism and Humanism* where Sartre may seem to suggest that rational deliberation is impossible in the area of moral choice, so that the choice is a mere 'invention', an *acte gratuit*. I shall show later how this is a misinterpretation of Sartre.

While The Existentialist is not, in any serious sense, an irrationalist, he is certainly not a 'rationalist' in the philosophical sense that contrasts with 'empiricist'. He does not hold, that is, that the mind is innately equipped with, or predisposed towards, knowledge of certain truths about the world. This is not because he is an 'empiricist', holding that all knowledge is the product of experience. The issue between the two camps is one of several which, for The Existentialist, rest on the false premise that mind and world are logically independent of one another, like a spectator and the show before him. The 'rationalist' differs from the 'empiricist' only in holding that the spectator arrives with a rich intellectual apparatus through which the passing scene gets filtered.

When cultural historians refer to Western rationalism, they intend something broader than 'rationalism' as against 'empiricism'. They mean a tradition which culminates in the Enlightenment and in the positivist conviction that the true repositories of knowledge are the sciences. Existentialism shares no such conviction, and in that respect might be labelled 'romantic'. Its hostility to the pretensions of science, however, is not that of the romantic primitivist, for whom Western science has got things wrong, while African magic or Yin□Yang cosmology has got them right. Rather, the claim of science to provide fundamental understanding of the world rests on misconceptions about understanding, the world, and the relation between the two. The vehicles of the fundamental understanding presupposed by all further knowledge are not the theories and products of science or 'cognition', but practical activities and 'moods'. (Heidegger speaks of 'cognition' reaching 'far too short a way compared with the primordial disclosure belonging to moods'). Before we can 'cognize' the world, we must first encounter it, both understandingly and affectively, as a world of things to be embraced, avoided, used, discarded, and the like. The world described by the scientist has no claim, therefore, to be the one real world. On the contrary, it is parasitic upon the *Lebenswelt*, the 'life-world' in which we move and acquire our primary understanding. Physics may, in its own sphere, possess an 'absolute truth', but that 'makes no difference to that other absolute, which is the world of perception and *praxis*'.

Moreover, the scientific pretension requires that it is possible and necessary for the conquest of real knowledge that the world be stripped of everything which human beings have 'projected' upon it□from colours to meanings, from smells to values. But this is to suppose that mind and world, subject and object, can be treated in logical

isolation from one another and separately examined. This dualism, however, is one of those inherited from Descartes which most stand in need of dissolution. For not only is it incoherent, but it is also partly responsible for the sense of the world as alien, as a place of 'unimaginable otherness', accessible if at all only to the man in the laboratory, *au fait* with event-horizons, closed space-times and other postulates of contemporary physics.

One might, I suppose, characterize The Existentialist's insistence on the 'humanness' of the world as a denial of its 'objectivity'. But it would be quite wrong to conclude that existentialism is therefore a 'subjectivist' philosophy, though the term is often applied. For The Existentialist, the question of whether descriptions of the world are objective or subjective is a bad one. They are not objective, if this means being of a kind which a scrupulously detached spectator would provide, for a spectator completely disengaged from the world could have no conception of it at all. But nor are they subjective, if this means that they are glosses smeared over, and therefore occluding, the world as it is in itself. This idea presupposes, no less than the 'objectivist' one does, that there could, at least for God, be a direct, unhindered view of reality 'with its skin off' (as Heidegger puts it).

Nor, of course, is existentialism a form of 'subjective idealism', according to which so-called external things are really contents of the mind or constructs of the imagination. This view contradicts the main tenet of existential phenomenology, that no sense can be made of mind except as engaged, through embodied activity, in a world which cannot, therefore, be contained 'inside' it.

This same point about mind having to be 'out there' in the world as praxis should scotch the strangely entrenched idea that existentialism is 'subjectivist' in being a philosophy primarily concerned with the 'subject', in roughly the Cartesian sense of a mental substance or self underlying consciousness. Robert Solomon, for example, describes existentialism, in France at least, as 'undeniably Cartesian', and the 'culmination' of what he calls 'the transcendental pretence', which includes belief in 'the remarkable inner richness and expanse of the self'. This is the reverse of the truth, for one of the most salient aspects of existentialism, Gallic versions included, is the onslaught on Cartesian notions of self or subject, and on the dualisms which they inspire. For Nietzsche, the self is a 'fiction', invented by people who required something inside others to blame, and inside themselves to go on to an afterlife. Heidegger writes that a person is 'never anything like a substantive inner sphere', while Marcel regards the 'pure subjectivism' of Descartes' *cogito* as among 'the most serious errors of which any metaphysics has been guilty'. Sartre, we saw, refers to the 'subjectivity' which is a 'principle' of existentialism, but makes clear that this is not what belongs to the Cartesian subject: it merely indicates that 'man is a project which possesses a subjective [that is, self-aware] life, instead of being a kind of moss . . . or a cauliflower.' His animosity towards the Cartesian self is plain enough: it is a 'bloodthirsty idol which devours all one's projects', and the 'subjectivity' it possesses is 'magical'. For, just as magical thought invests objects with spirits, like fetishes and jujus, so philosophers like Descartes have 'reified' our mental acts by locating them in a fictitious 'subjectivity-object' that they call 'self' or 'ego'.

I could continue considering further senses in which existentialism is not a subjectivist philosophy, but let me mention only one more. The Existentialist certainly does not embrace a subjectivist theory of truth, if by that is meant the view propounded by Protagoras in Plato's *Theaetetus*, to the effect that each man is the measure of truth, that truth can only be *for me, for you*, or whomever. While he cannot accept a definition of truth as correspondence with a reality independent of all human conceptions of it, The Existentialist is perfectly able to accept that beliefs can be objectively true in the sense of being warranted by criteria on which there is tried and tested public agreement.

People may have been misled here by Kierkegaard's notorious statement that 'truth is subjectivity [and] to seek objectivity is to be in error.' Kierkegaard's meaning, though, cannot be Protagoras', since he immediately adds that 'subjective truth' is 'an objective uncertainty held fast in . . . the most passionate inwardness'□which implies, of course, that there *can* be an objective truth of the matter. He is, in fact, trying to make two points, neither of them Protagorean, in connection with a comparison he makes between a Christian who lends merely intellectual assent to his religion, and a heathen with his passionate, lived faith. The former's belief has greater objective truth, but the latter is more 'in the truth'. This is, first, because the heathen, although his God is not the true one, better appreciates God's essential nature: for God is not a Being to whom, if that nature is grasped, a person can remain emotionally indifferent. Second, the heathen's faith is a truer, more authentic expression of human existence than the cool theology of the Christian. This is because 'essential existing', as against 'loosely-called existing', demands passion and commitment. Whatever one thinks of these points, and Kierkegaard's paradoxical way of making them, they are not subjectivist ones in the sense under discussion.

Finally, it is worth recording one aspect of existentialist thinking which might, at a pinch, be described as subjective. An important existentialist thesis is that 'moods' and emotions can be vehi- cles of understanding. Now there is a tendency among our writers to focus on the more personal and solitary 'moods', those farthest away from the grief or delight which people display in unison at funerals or football matches. I have in mind, for example, the sense of guilt which, for Jaspers, is indicative of the 'unpeaceful', 'antinomial' nature of *Existenz;* or the 'fidelity' a person may feel towards a dead friend which, for Marcel, indicates the presence of a God who is the source of fidelity. These sombre moods might be described as 'subjective' by way of contrast to the 'social' ones we display alongside others. Existentialists concentrate upon these because they are, arguably, the most distinctively human; the ones, therefore, which are liable to be most disclosive of the character of human existence. Those television nature programmes which specialize, in the 'naked ape' tradition, in telling us how we imitate the beasts and they imitate us, would find it hard to discover analogues in the feline or marsupial worlds to Jaspers' guilt or Marcel's fidelity. It is important to note, though, that if we do describe these 'moods' as 'subjective', there are other senses in which they are certainly *not* subjective. They are not, for example, irretrievably 'private' and incommunicable. Nor are they 'merely' subjective, in the sense of having no significant connection with how reality is. On the contrary, they are supposed to be feelings to which, as William James puts it, things are *known*.

This completes my preliminary survey of some misconceptions about existentialism and of some reasons behind them. The book as a whole will, I hope, confirm that these are indeed misconceptions. We are now ready for The Existentialist to begin the journey whose route I outlined earlier.

Source: David E. Cooper, "Preliminaries," in *Existentialism*, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp. 1-19.

Adaptations

Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir are featured in the 1979 documentary film *Sartre by Himself*. Released as a motion picture in America in 1983, it is now available from Citidal Video. Urizen Books published a book of the interviews from the film in 1978.

William Hurt, Raul Julia, and Robert Duvall starred in a 1994 film of *The Plague* by Albert Camus. The cassette is available from LIVE Home Video.

Marcello Mastroianni, Anna Karina, and Georges Wilson starred in the 1968 film version of *The Stranger*, Camus's most famous novel. The film is in French with English subtitles, and is available on cassette from Paramount Pictures.

The life of Jean-Paul Sartre is the subject of *Existence is Absurd*, a video presentation that was part of the Maryland Public Television series *From Socrates to Sartre*, narrated by Thelma Z. Lavine and available from Insight Media.

Kafka's *The Trial* was adapted as a film by playwright Harold Pinter in 1993.

A six-videocassette course teaching the basics of Existentialism, entitled *No Excuses: Existentialism and the Meaning of Life*, is available from The Teaching Company, of Springfield Virginia. Dr. Robert Solomon conducts the twenty-four lectures in this 2000 series.

An audiocassette recording of Sartre's play *No Exit* was released in 1973 by the Edwards/ Everett Company of Deland, Florida.

A British Broadcasting Corporation program, *Daughters of Beauvoir*, is available on a 1989 videocassette from Filmmakers Library of New York.

An audio cassette adaptation of Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* was recorded at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., on May 11, 1973, with Alec McCowan narrating. Featuring music by the National Symphony Orchestra, it was released in 1975 by Decca.

Topics for Further Study

Describe the plot of a movie that you have seen that you would call "Existential," and explain what you think are the existential elements about it.

Writers have noted that the American way of life, with its emphasis on personal freedom, is particularly well-suited to existential thought. Write a dialog between Thomas Jefferson, the main author of the U.S. Constitution, and Jean- Paul Sartre, the key figure in Existentialism, with each character explaining his position to the other.

Research the basic beliefs of Zen Buddhism, and compare them to those of Existentialism, pointing out how they are alike and how they differ.

Some critics have charged that Americans are too commercial to accept an abstract philosophical concept. Design an advertising campaign to "sell" Existentialism to the general public.

Look through newspapers and magazines for examples of what the existentialist writers would call "bad faith," and discuss them in class.

Compare and Contrast

1930s-1940s: The world falls into its second global conflict in thirty years, and it looks like international war will be the nature of the modern world.

Today: Conflicts tend to be small, regional affairs. One side might be able to assemble a coalition or a mission of United Nations forces from around the world, but it has never been met with a similar international force.

1930s-1940s: News about events in other countries travels by radio broadcasts, leaving much about other nations to the imagination. After World War II, broadcasters and consumers begin investing heavily in television: from 1945 to 1948 the number of U.S. homes with TVs rises from 5000 to a million, and by 1950, 8 million sets have been sold.

Today: News about world events travels faster on the Internet than news organizations can prepare it for broadcast.

1940s: World War II ends when America uses atomic bombs, for the first time unleashing a force that could destroy the planet in hours. The postwar years are characterized as "The Atomic Age," as people try to understand this potential for instant destruction.

Today: The potential for nuclear annihilation has existed for three generations. In all of that time, nuclear arms have not been used in battle.

1940s: Soldiers returning from World War II start a population boom, which leads to a new youth culture. Existentialism's emphasis on the "now" appeals to the youth culture's break with the past.

Today: Advertisers have long realized the purchasing power of youths, and much of popular culture is aimed at consumers between ages ten and twenty.

1940s-1950s: Europe is the respected focus of Western culture, the center of progressive thinking. In the 1950s, while most of the European countries are struggling to rebuild after World War II destroyed their manufacturing ability, America rises to be an economic superpower.

Today: America's continuing economic might has given American ideas the kind of worldwide attention that European thinkers once enjoyed.

What Do I Read Next?

American author Walker Percy's 1961 novel *The Moviegoer* tells a poignant and humorous existential story. The plot concerns a young man who tries to find meaning for his life at the movies, with no satisfaction.

Dangling Man (1944) was Nobel laureate Saul Bellow's first novel. It presents a young man in the existential limbo of having been drafted into the army and waiting to be called up.

The Plague, by Albert Camus, examines how people react to an outbreak of bubonic plague in the north African town of Oran, Algeria. The range of human behaviors covered in this novel are as relevant today as they were when it was published in 1947.

Students often find Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical writings dense and unintelligible, but the essays in his book *Existentialism and Human Emotions* are chosen to introduce the philosophy to broad audiences.

Thus Spake Zarathustra is philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's lively, loose-knit allegorical exploration of the relationship between humanity and the world, considered to be the masterpiece of his formidable career. Nietzsche does not directly lecture but instead presents vignettes, mysteries, and riddles, laying the foundation for the existential approach to literature.

By 1961, when Joseph Heller's absurdist war novel *Catch-22* was published, the existential view of life's meaninglessness had prevailed upon a generation. Set in a bombing squadron during World War II, the book uses humor to raise questions about contradictions that come from order and logic.

John Barth's sprawling 1956 novel *The Floating Opera* approaches serious existential themes with humor and fantasy. The book hardly holds to a single plot, but its events center around man so extremely disillusioned with the world that he cannot even find a reason for his own suicide.

One of the central texts of the existential worldview, Søren Kierkegaard's 1843 book *Fear and Trembling* examines the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac to raise questions about man's place in the world and relation to God. This book is one of the best examples of religious Existentialism, as opposed to the French atheistic existentialism.

Famed psychotherapist and theologian Rollo May explained the considerable use of Existentialism in understanding the workings of the mind in *The Discovery of Being: Writings in Existential Psychology*, a collection of explanatory essays that was reprinted in 1983.

Further Study

Baker, Richard E., *The Dynamics of the Absurd in the Existentialist Novel*, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1993.

By its nature, absurdity avoids rational understanding. In this study, Baker uses examples from key existentialist novels to illustrate the philosophical basis for the absurdist attitude.

Beauvoir, Simone de, *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, Pantheon Books, 1984.

Beauvoir gives her impressions of the last ten years of Sartre's life (1970-1980), followed by a lengthy transcript of a conversation that went on between them in 1974.

Bielmeier, Michael G., *Shakespeare, Kierkegaard, and Existential Tragedy*, Edward Mellen Press, 2000.

Starting with the references that Kierkegaard made to Shakespeare's plays, Bielmeier offers a full existential reading of the tragedies.

Borowitz, Eugene, *A Layman's Introduction to Religious Existentialism*, Westminster Press, 1965.

The passionate atheism of the French existentialists is often noted, but there is a powerful school that combines existential thought and religious experience. Borowitz's overview introduces many philosophers and writers who are usually not mentioned in general discussions of the philosophy.

Husserl, Edmund, "The Paris Lectures," in *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, edited by Robert C. Solomon, Littlefield Adams Quality Paperbacks, 1980, pp. 43-57.

Sartre attended these lectures, given at the Sorbonne in 1929, and they greatly influenced his development of a philosophy of Existentialism that was separate from the Phenomenology of Husserl and Husserl's successor, Heidegger.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, "An Explication of *The Stranger*," in *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Germaine Brée, Prentice-Hall, 1962, pp. 108-21.

Originally published in 1955, Sartre's explication has frequent references to Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, finding the novel to be one of the greatest of French literature.

Solomon, Robert C., *Introducing the Existentialists*, Hackett Publishing Company, 1981.

Solomon brings the subject of Existentialism to life for readers by presenting imagined interviews with Sartre, Heidegger, and Camus. The result is more focused and less abstract than actual interviews with these authors, serving well as an introduction to their thoughts.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literary Movements for Students (LMfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LMfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LMfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LMfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LMfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LMfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LMfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literary Movements for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Literary Movements for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LMfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literary Movements for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LMfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literary Movements for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LMfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literary Movements for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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