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Unlikely Heroes in Despair: Existentialist Narrators in the Novels of Albert
Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, and Don DeLillo
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BY

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Introduction

Existentialism is a field of philosophy concerned with questions about existence, death, God, and consciousness. It is “a doctrine that concentrates on the existence of the individual, who, being free and responsible, is held to be what he makes himself by the self-development of his essence through acts of the will” (*OED Online*). Writing by existentialist philosophers “often belongs more to literature than to philosophy” (Bigelow 173). Existentialist characters in literature are autonomous agents who tend to lack religious faith, constantly ask existentialist questions, and struggle with their own existence and relationship to the world around them. Additionally, existentialist characters struggle with the reality of their own mortality.

These struggles are apparent in novels with existentialist protagonists. Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea* (1938) features the lonely introverted narrator Antoine Roquentin. Roquentin is an example of an existentialist character. According to Paul Fortier, “Roquentin’s solitary nature is a formal characteristic” of the existentialist novel (384). Roquentin struggles with his solitude and with what he describes as nausea, which is the result of his existential crisis. His crisis occurs because he feels that his life is superfluous and there is no reason for him to do anything.

Albert Camus’ *The Fall* (1956) and *The Stranger* (1942) both feature narrators like Roquentin. In *The Stranger*, main character Monsieur Meursault is alienated from society and struggles to understand his existence. After the death of his mother, Meursault’s life spirals out of his control. He eventually commits murder to help out a false friend and his society sentences him to death and vilifies him. Analogously, the narrator of *The Fall* Jean-Baptiste Clemence is estranged from society by his narcissism and his descent from success to ruin. His fall is the result of repressed guilt stemming from his failure to intervene when he witnesses a woman’s suicide. Both of Camus’ protagonists demonstrate the difficult existence of the existentialist.

Comparatively, narrator of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) Jack Gladney is estranged by the despair associated with his fear of dying. For Jack, the prospect of his death after being exposed to a toxic substance is unbearable and his fear controls his life. He destroys his relationships and eventually kills a man because of his crippling fear of death. Like other existentialist protagonists, Jack struggles with existentialist despair. In the novels of Sartre, Camus, and DeLillo, autodiegetic main characters serve as the heroes of their own existentialist crises in order to realistically chronicle the plight of the existentialist.

Why Existentialism?

Existentialism flourished as a fad philosophy of the 20th century and continues to be relevant today. Contemporary culture reflects a tradition of existentialism. As a society, we realize that we are "not on the highway of upward Progress toward a radiant Utopia but on the brink of a catastrophic precipice, below which yawns the absolute void, an uncompromised black Nothingness" (Bigelow 176). Dystopian plots rule popular culture because society collectively acknowledges that life is a being toward death and that existentialist despair is the nature of human existence.

Existentialism developed in response to political strife in France and the beginning of World War I, and it maintained its popularity due to the despair of The Great Depression and World War II (175). After the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, "an unbearable terror, a threat of instant annihilation which confronted all men" became an inescapable part of the collective psyche (175). The themes of existentialism still ring true today because society is and will always be post-war. Human beings will forever exist in a world which has seen not only two world wars and the atomic bomb, but also a world which has now seen 9/11 and countless other acts of terrorism. Like the characters is Sartre's, Camus', and

DeLillo's novels, human beings realize the never-ending threat of death and suffer the life of existentialist despair.

The existentialist's struggle is detailed in Gordon E. Bigelow's "A Primer of Existentialism." In this article, Bigelow argues that existentialism is "of major importance to literature and the arts, to philosophy and theology, and of increasing importance to the social sciences" (171). He offers examples of influential existentialists and of existentialism in various works of literature. Bigelow explains what existentialism is and why it is significant to literature by describing six of the movement's major themes.

Existence before Essence

One such theme is "existence before essence." This theme entails that "every man's experience of life is unique" and that human beings can only be understood in terms of individual experience, not by attempting to establish the essence of humanity. The individual alone has the power to determine and interpret his own being (172). This theme is apparent in the second half of *The Stranger*. *The Stranger* is a first-person narrative of the latter portion of Monsieur Meursault's life, which begins with the death of his mother and which ends with Meursault's execution for the murder of another man. In his death-row despair, Meursault values his existence above and before his essence. When he knows he will die, Meursault "would listen to [his] heartbeat. [He] couldn't imagine that this sound which had been with [him] for so long could ever stop" (107). Meursault fixates on the pending cessation of his heartbeat, the most fundamental expression of his physical existence, rather than on his essence. Essence can be defined as personality, impact on the world, consciousness, or any number of other things. The religious might argue that Meursault's essence is his God-given soul, but Meursault does not believe in God, and finds the question of God's existence "unimportant" (111).

Before his trial and final sentence, Meursault is irritated by the examining magistrate, who wants to help him by asking God to help him. The magistrate is unable to cope with or even fathom that Meursault does not believe in God. Meursault states that the magistrate “said it was impossible; all men believed in God, even those who turn their backs on him” (66). Meursault realizes that if the magistrate ever doubted his belief in God, “his life would become meaningless” (66). The magistrate’s life is based on his faith and he does not know how to exist without it. Meursault decides to pretend to agree with the magistrate, but only in order to get rid of him so he can be left alone. After their original conflict, the magistrate “didn’t talk to [Meursault] about God anymore” because he is satisfied with believing Meursault’s lie (68). At no point does Meursault see any reason for believing in God or even for even considering the possibility of a god.

Likewise, the protagonist of *The Fall* is a forthright atheist. Clemence claims to “have invoked the divinity in proportion to [his] ignorance,” implying that having religious faith is unimportant, or at least that he thinks it is foolish (107). He later states that “churches are born under the sun of death” (127). This indicates that he believes more in the cowardice of man than in the soul of man, and that men will flock to religion in fear and desperation. To both Clemence and Meursault, faith is unnecessary and unreasonable. This is in direct opposition to the writing of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who argues that “the human being is spirit” (49). Kierkegaard’s central argument indicates that atheists (like Meursault and Clemence) suffer for thinking religious faith is unimportant and unnecessary.

Reason is Impotent to Death with the Depths of Human Life

Kierkegaard’s theistic claims relate to another of Bigelow’s themes of existentialism: “reason is impotent to deal with the depths of human life” (172). This means that man is too

complex to be understood through the use of reason alone. Man is “fundamentally ambiguous, if not mysterious, full of contradictions and tensions which cannot be dissolved simply by taking thought” (172). However, Meursault is dependent on reason. His lack of interest in religion is because he finds it as unreasonable as well as “unimportant.” Meursault is strictly reasonable in his despair— he faces his impending death with grief and misery, and only hopes for forgiveness and pardon from other men to save him, not divine intervention. He thus does not deal with or accept the prospect of his death. Kierkegaard’s argument seems to indicate that the reason that people like Meursault do not deal with death properly is that they are constrained by reason. Meursault fails to realize that when he loses his physical existence, he will maintain his essence. “Eternity’s claim” on Meursault is that he will not lose his essence when he loses his existence, because his soul will not die (Kierkegaard 51). From Kierkegaard’s and Bigelow’s insights on existence, we can assume that Meursault needs to escape the constraints and limitations of reason to “deal with the depths” of his life and death (Bigelow 172).

The threat of death also plagues Jack Gladney. Jack’s friend Murray advises him to use reason to deal with his impending death. Murray says that Jack “can find a great deal of long-range solace in the idea of an afterlife” and that holding on to such an idea will diminish his despair (286). Jack protests that he does not believe in God or the afterlife, but Murray insists that belief is not necessary. Murray says to Jack: “I’ll tell you what the afterlife is. It’s a sweet and terribly touching idea. You can take it or leave it” (286). Murray explains that human beings are not able to cope with dying, and argues that adopting faith in an afterlife will ease human despair. Unlike Kierkegaard, Murray does not have faith and would not advise a genuine belief in God. Murray simply acknowledges that “helpless and fearful people are drawn to magical

figures, mythic figures” like God and that adopting faith could ease Jack’s anxiety of existence (287)

Alienation or Estrangement

Another of Bigelow’s themes of existentialism is “alienation or estrangement” (173). In existentialist literature, the protagonist realizes that man is alienated “from God, from nature, from other men, [and] from his own true self” (173). The individual lives the life of the outsider. This alienation comes from societal pressure to live a life of abstraction and the existentialist’s resistance to abstraction. Existentialist narrators are outsiders because they have few relationships with other people, and, as a result of their refusal to conform to societal norms and expectations, they are not especially close to the friends and family they have.

The life of the outsider is the life of Meursault. As Meursault prepares to go to the retirement home where his mother lived to keep vigil and attend her funeral, he says that “for now, it’s almost as if Maman weren’t dead. After the funeral, though, the case will be closed, and everything will have a more official feel to it” (3). It is peculiar that Meursault shows no signs of grief, and that his desire for closure is purely pragmatic. He goes on to explain that he did not often visit his mother in the retirement home because he believed that she was happy enough without him, “and also because it took up my Sunday” (5). He prioritizes convenience and trivial desires over seeing his mother. Meursault’s apathy and coldness regarding his mother’s death and his general lack of emotional depth mark him as an existentialist character.

According to Bigelow, “most disturbing of all is the young man’s aloneness, the impermeable membrane of estrangement which surrounds him and prevents anyone else from penetration to his experience of life or sympathizing with it” (175). Meursault is completely alone with the realities of an internal life which is inaccessible to the outside world. The

existentialist narrator exists so that the reader may recognize herself in his isolation and see that all men surrounded by and “impermeable membrane of estrangement” which prevents others from accessing our consciousness.

The closest connection to another person that Meursault has is romantic relationship with a woman named Marie. Marie loves him, and she asks Meursault if he wants to marry her. He “said it didn’t make any difference” to him and that they “could if she wanted to” (40). When Marie asks if he loves her he says “that it didn’t mean anything but that [he] probably didn’t love her” (40). Meursault is indifferent about love and about his relationship with Marie. Meursault also has strange friendships. He develops a friendship with his neighbor, Raymond. Meursault likes Raymond despite Raymond’s obvious character flaws, like that he unapologetically abuses women and deceives the police. Meursault does not care about the quality of his relationships with other people, so it is of no consequence to him that Raymond is a violent liar. Meursault is an outsider because he does not experience the same emotions or desires for genuine friendship and affection that most people experience.

Unlike Meursault, Jack seems to experience emotions similar to those of the average person, but he unintentionally alienates himself through his profound and all-encompassing despair. At night Jack is unable to sleep because his fear controls his thoughts. “In the dark [his] mind runs on like a devouring machine,” and he feels like he’s “the only thing awake in the universe” (224). Jack’s alienation is a part of his individual consciousness. He does not feel connected to others by their mutual fear of dying, but rather feels estranged and isolated by his own personal fear. Jack believes that “the only thing to face is death” (283). Death is all he thinks about and the desire to beat death controls his every action, so he lacks the time and energy to maintain relationships with other people. As the novel progresses, Jack’s marriage is

failing and he barely knows his children because he is too preoccupied with death to be a husband or father.

Clemence also feels alienated from others. Clemence describes how he “needed to feel *above*” other men (23). He is arrogant, admitting that he is “always bursting with vanity. I, I, I is the refrain of my whole life...” (48). Because of his conceit and need for superiority, Clemence alienates himself from other men and is left to recount his life story to a complete stranger in a run-down bar. In this way, Clemence is similar to Roquentin. Roquentin is alienated by his inability to cope with life and accept his existence. He cannot maintain successful relationships with other people because they do not see the world in the same way that he does. For example, an intelligent autodidact, known as the Self-Taught Man, tries to connect with Roquentin. However, Roquentin cannot maintain a friendship with him after they have a philosophical disagreement about humanism. Once he hears that the Self-Taught Man’s ideas contradict his own, he asks himself “What am I doing here?” before succumbing to a fit of rage and nausea, and leaving the Self-Taught man alone (122). Roquentin cannot cope with opposition because of his unshakable confidence that his beliefs and ideas are right and his refusal to conform.

Fear and Trembling

Roquentin’s nausea is an example of Bigelow’s next theme, “fear and trembling,” which alludes to a text of the same name by Kierkegaard (175). This theme is the anxiety of existence which haunts humankind as soon as they realize their state of nothingness and isolation and that “each of us must make moral decisions” in all of our actions (176). Roquentin is struck by the realization that “things are entirely what they appear to be- and behind them... there is nothing” (96). He believes that people are generally unable to conceive of nothingness.

Meursault cannot conceive of nothingness. He says "I would try to picture the exact moment when the beating of my heart would no longer be going on inside my head. But it was no use" (107). Despite his best efforts, Meursault is unable to conceive of what it would be like not to exist. Meursault and Roquentin both fear nothingness because they cannot understand it, and this leads to their struggle with existence.

Clemence also struggles with the necessity and inescapability of his existence. He is afraid of judgment and inferiority, so he isolates himself from others by thinking of himself as a god-like figure, above all others and free to judge them without being scrutinized in return. He is a narcissist, telling his companion that he "enjoyed [his] own nature to the fullest" (20). Clemence believes he is nothing if he is not superior, and he wishes not to exist and to be isolated by death in order to become more dominant over others. He cannot handle existing as a fallible, imperfect being, and he will only be satisfied if he is publicly decapitated, so that the audience "could recognize themselves" in the expression on his severed face "and [he] could again dominate- an exemplar" (146). In the finality of death, Clemence thinks he will have achieved an irrevocable state of superiority.

Just as Clemence wants his life to end, Meursault eventually wishes for death. He says that "for everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate" (117). Meursault desires this kind of closure because it will solidify his separation from the society which has condemned him and convicted him "on wholly irrelevant grounds" (Bigelow 174). Like Clemence, Meursault believes that he will be superior to his society in his execution because he is better than the society that wrongfully kills him. When both characters finally encounter nothingness, they will remain outside of society forever.

Encounter with Nothingness

Bigelow's next theme of existentialism is the "encounter with nothingness" which is the result of existentialist protagonists' alienation from others (176). Existentialist characters see that they are inconsequential and that their existence is a progression toward death. While fighting off nausea, Roquentin sees an aging man and remarks to himself that "The truth stares me in the face: this man is going to die soon... each day he looks a little more like the corpse he will become" (69). Roquentin recognizes that this "truth" applies equally to himself, and that he faces nothingness in every moment of his meaningless existence. In acknowledging that another man is progressing toward his death, Roquentin admits that he is also going to die soon and face nothingness. Roquentin's "nausea creates the condition [he] needs in order to become aware of the absolute meaninglessness of existence" (Pollman 11).

Much like Roquentin, Clemence recognizes that everything is meaningless. He thus largely ignores the world around him, admitting that few things get his attention and even those which he notices do not affect him deeply. He faces nothingness with feigned acceptance, and uses his unfaltering desire for superiority as a way to try and escape nothingness. If the average person is inconsequential, or even if all people are inconsequential, Clemence thinks he can overcome his nothingness by being superior. It is the way he can feel that he exists. Kierkegaard explains that isolating oneself is a common way of coping with despair. He says that man "prefers to rage against everything and be the one whom the whole world, all existence, has wronged" so that he can feel superior (103). According to Kierkegaard's theory, men like Clemence are imprisoned by their despair.

Jack is also imprisoned by his despair. When Jack is told that his exposure to the carcinogenic chemical Nyodene D may kill him, he feels that he has been given a vague,

looming death sentence. Jack thinks his fate is sealed and that “death has entered” and overtaken him when he finds out that Nyodene D will be in his body for the next thirty years (DeLillo 141). Jack fails to see that everyone is given the same death sentence; every middle-aged man could potentially die within the next thirty years. Jack’s despair is the result of his encounter with nothingness. As soon as Jack has heard someone with authority say that he may die, he is overcome with inescapable despair.

Freedom

Bigelow’s final theme of existentialism is “freedom” (177). This theme encompasses all of the others, because the five other themes describe either the loss of human freedom or something which acts as a threat to human freedom. Kierkegaard argues that man cannot be free if he is in despair, and that one reason men despair is because they lack “possibility.” He explains that “To lack possibility means either that everything has become necessary or that everything has become trivial” (70). Roquentin despairs because he struggles with the feeling that everything is both necessary and trivial. He laments that “I have only my body: a man entirely alone, with his lonely body... all I wanted was to be free” (65). Roquentin later finds freedom when he accepts his lack of possibility. However, he finds that “this freedom is rather like death” (157). Roquentin finds no joy in his freedom. He believes that his entire life is behind him. He says “there is little to say about [life]: a lost game, that’s all... I learned that you always lose” (157).

Clemence expresses a similar sentiment, stating that “at the end of all freedom is a court sentence” (133). He thinks that everyone needs a master, whether it is a slave driver, the government, or God, and that a man who is “free” is the most imprisoned because he who is free is subject to an unbearable amount of judgment.

Conversely, Meursault is plagued by his desire for freedom above all else. Before his death sentence, Meursault experiences a great deal of freedom in his role as an outsider. Meursault is "a stranger to the society in which he lives" (Dunwoodie xv). Prior to his imprisonment, Meursault is able to avoid the constraints society places on the average person by being "different, anti-social," and generally unconcerned with society (xv). He only longs for freedom when he is in prison and has lost all hope for survival.

After he is sentenced to death and his appeal is denied, Meursault loses track of time and feels that he starting to lose his mind in prison. He cannot bear that there is "no way out" and he states that "no one can imagine what nights in prison are like" (78). Meursault longs for freedom of both body and mind. He is plagued by his thoughts because he is unable to think about anything but his unbearable captivity and inevitable execution. Clemence would argue, however, that Meursault's imprisonment is a necessary "slave driver" which directs his thoughts away from the difficult questions of existence. Clemence would see Meursault's mental and physical imprisonment as a greater freedom than he possesses in his unrestricted life because he does not have to exist in want of a master.

Much like Meursault's literal imprisonment and death sentence, Jack is imprisoned and sentenced to death by his exposure to Nyodene D. In order to try and find freedom, Jack decides to kill a man. His target is Willie Mink, the man who gave Jack's wife Babette an experimental drug and coerced her to sleep with him. Jack shoots Mink and then he fires "a second shot just to fire it, relive the experience, hear the sonic waves layering through the room," and to relish in the freedom of killing (312). Jack learns from his friend Murray that "men have tried throughout history to cure themselves of death by killing others" because "violence is a form of rebirth"

(290). Jack attempts to kill Mink in order to escape his own death and to be reborn without a fear of dying.

Absurdity and Chaos

With or without freedom, existence itself is absurd because human beings are not directed purposefully by fate, but rather are thrown into an unclear and undetermined life. Roquentin states that things are “only relatively absurd” as compared to other things, and are not absurd in themselves (129). Absurdity mirrors chaos because chaos is relative to the normal state of affairs. Yasser Aman describes chaos as an absence of order in “Chaos Theory and Literature from an Existentialist Perspective.” He states that Sartre’s existentialism is a result of his personal conception of chaos. Roquentin (who may be representative of Sartre himself) struggles with a chaotic and godless world. According to Aman, “Chaos and absurdity characterize his predicament” (6). His existence is not fixed and orderly, but entirely chaotic. This is a kind of freedom because his life is not determined for him, but this freedom is a curse because he cannot escape it. The struggle he faces understanding the chaos of existence and impossibility of genuine freedom causes his nausea.

A similar source of chaos is Jack’s false belief that his fate is sealed and that he will die. In reality he has the same death sentence as everyone else. He might die soon, he might die later, but eventually he will die no matter what he does. Jack feels imprisoned by his despair, but he is just as free as anyone else. Jack’s freedom and his inability to understand and cope with freedom create chaos and act as the root cause of his anxiety. Life is chaos for Jack not because he might die at any moment, but because until his eventual death he has the freedom to live in whatever way he chooses. Jack would prefer a life that follows a plan to a life of choice and freedom unto death.

Despair

Kierkegaard's argument contradicts both Aman's chaos theory and Bigelow's idea of the "encounter with nothingness." Kierkegaard states that man does not struggle with his nothingness, but rather with his inability to become nothing. What he "despairs over is precisely this: that he cannot consume himself, cannot be rid of himself, cannot become nothing. This is the heightened formula for despair, the rising fever in this sickness of the self" (49). This sickness is similar to Sartre's nausea. Roquentin struggles with the fact that if he is to exist, he must exist completely. He thinks that "every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance" (113). However, Roquentin believes that by choosing to do anything, human beings create their existence. He thinks that nothingness is possible, but if one exists at all, "you had to *exist all the way*" (128). Roquentin wants to "be" without existing, in the way that he only thinks music does. He says that music "does not exist because it has nothing superfluous: it is all the rest which in relation to it is superfluous. It *is*" (175). Roquentin is troubled because he must exist excessively. His despair is dramatic and pronounced. His nausea consumes him and revokes his ability to exist in peace. Kierkegaard explains that the intensity of man's despair (or nausea) is the result of his consciousness.

Man's "level of consciousness intensifies despair. The truer a person's conception of despair, while still remaining in despair, and the more clearly conscious he is of being in despair, the more intense the despair" (79). Jack's despair manifests itself in his fear of dying. He states that "fear is self-awareness raised to a higher level" (229). The reader learns that Jack has been harboring a fear of death for a long time, but we see his fear increase as he starts acknowledging it and discussing it with his wife. The more he sees fear in Babette and the more he thinks about

his own fear, the greater and more crippling it becomes. Jack's despair increases as his consciousness of his own despair grows.

Meursault is also conscious of his despair. He becomes conscious of his life and existence through the threat of his impending death. Meursault tries to stay awake and stay focused at night when he thinks his execution may be approaching, because he doesn't want to be surprised. He says "if something is going to happen to me, I want to be there" (107). In this moment, the reader sees Meursault's awareness of existence and desire to be present in his own life. When he knows his appeal has been denied and there is no hope that he will survive, he begins to accept nothingness. He thinks that "everybody knows life isn't worth living. Deep down I knew perfectly well that it doesn't much matter whether you die at thirty or seventy..." (108). Meursault despairs both because his existence is meaningless and because he will soon encounter a never-ending nothingness. He thinks that his death will be as inconsequential as his life.

The Death of the Subject

The encounter with nothingness Meursault faces is similar to the "death of the subject" Frederick Jameson discusses in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." According to Jameson, the death of the subject signifies the "end of individualism" because it means the death of one's autonomy, or the death of one's idea of oneself as an autonomous being (Jameson 3). The death of the subject is effectively the death of one's consciousness, because without consciousness an individual is unable to be an autonomous subject.

The death of Roquentin's liberty as well as the cause of his nausea and despair is his realization that he does not have any sort of genuine autonomy. The identity he has attributed to himself has been no more than a construct forced upon him by a non-essential yet inescapable

existence, and with this realization he ceases to have an identity at all. He asks himself: "And just what is Antoine Roquentin? An abstraction. A pale reflection of myself... the 'I' pales, pales, and fades out" (170). Roquentin acknowledges the death of himself as the subject, and he decides that the identities of all things are superficial, unreal, and completely unnecessary. He thinks that existence "is conscious of being superfluous" (170). The world is too much for Roquentin because he believes his existence is too much for the world. His nausea is the manifestation of his uncommonly intense experience of life and his belief that life is excessive.

Schizophrenia

Another feature of Jameson's article which applies to Roquentin is "schizophrenia." Jameson does not refer literally to schizophrenia but rather suggests that existentialist characters "will clearly have a far more intense experience of any given present of the world than we do," much like a schizophrenic (7). The reader can see that Roquentin experiences life intensely when he describes his concept of adventure. He thinks that adventure is when "you suddenly feel that time is passing, that each instant leads to another, this one to another one, and so on; that each instant is annihilated, and that it isn't worthwhile to hold back, etc., etc." (56). Roquentin experiences adventure as an anxiety; it is an overwhelming reminder that he is burdened with existence and that time will never stop moving whether he likes it or not. Jameson explains that this is because "the experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and 'material': the world comes before the schizophrenic with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious and oppressive charge of affect, glowing with hallucinatory energy" (8). According to Jameson, the experience of the "schizophrenic" character is one which is extremely literal. This insight echoes many of Roquentin's own descriptions of his nausea. He describes that in his nausea, "things are divorced from their names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong gigantic...

defenseless, they surround me..." (125). Roquentin is overwhelmed by his overactive consciousness and unable to cope with the intensity of both the world around him and of his inner life. Roquentin's nausea is a literary manifestation of Jameson's concept of schizophrenia.

Jameson's schizophrenia is the opposite of Monsieur Meursault's sociopathy. Meursault is cold and emotionally unresponsive when his mother dies, when a woman loves him, and when he commits murder. Meursault experiences the world much less intensely than Roquentin because he does not have any feelings at all. The prosecutor does not think Meursault has a soul because he appears to be unfeeling. Meursault experiences Jameson's "death of the subject" in this way in addition to in his loss of freedom and in his literal death, because he cannot be an autonomous subject if he does not have a "soul" or a conscience. Meursault lacks affect and does not have normal driving forces which would lead him to take free actions, so he acts aimlessly and without any genuine autonomy.

Repression and the Uncanny

Much like Jameson's schizophrenia, Freud's "The Uncanny" discusses "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (1-2). In order to produce the uncanny, something must be added to what is already known to differentiate it from the familiar and to create a sense of fear and horror (2).

One example of the uncanny is *deja-vu*. Jack describes the prevalence of *deja-vu* in his community after their exposure to Nyodene D as a sign "of a deep-reaching isolation" (176). Jack and the other members of his family and community feel isolated by *deja-vu* because it can only be experienced by one person in a given way at a given time, so an individual is alone in his or her uncanny experience. Jack hypothesizes that people are creating *deja-vu* themselves, and remarks that he feels "sad for people and the queer part we play in our own disasters" (126). In

the case of *deja-vu*, the uncanny is a confusing, self-inflicted chaotic phenomenon. Nostalgia is another manifestation of the uncanny. Jack's friend and confidant, Murray, explains that "nostalgia is a product of dissatisfaction. It's a settling of grievances between the present and the past" (258). Nostalgia occurs for Jack as well as all other people when they feel tension between what exists now and what once was, and this tension creates the chaotic experience of the uncanny.

The experience of the uncanny is also present and disturbing for Roquentin. Each time he is overcome with nausea, he returns to the same state. He can see it coming, and he fears the experience despite knowing it is inevitable. The familiar nausea engulfs him and weighs on him relentlessly. The nausea makes him feel that "all is full, existence everywhere, dense, heavy, and sweet" (103). He sees the world around him in a way that is tainted and perverse. It is the same world he knows, but it is simultaneously a different world created by his nausea; Roquentin's experience of the world is uncanny.

Clemence also experiences the uncanny in his reaction to the night when he sees a woman commit suicide by jumping off a bridge. He describes that "on the bridge I passed behind a figure leaning over the railing and seeming to stare into the river" (69-70). Clemence hears the woman jump off the bridge and hears her cries of death, but he keeps walking and tells "no one" what happened (70). He feels guilty about his failure to act for the rest of his life. In order to cope, Clemence represses his guilt. Repression is the only option for Clemence because he knows he would not save the woman even if he were to be given a second chance to act.

Freud explains repression in another article, "Creative Writers and Daydreaming." He says that the things men repress "are only allowed to come to expression in a very distorted form" (149). Clemence tells the story of his fall and of the woman in a way that is confusing and

disorganized because “past, present and future are strung together” for the repressed individual (148). Clemence is like a creative writer in that he lies and creates what Freud calls ‘phantasies’ in order to repress his guilt.

Analogously, Murray suggests that Jack repress his fear of death, arguing that everyone engages in this type of repression. Murray explains that “We’re all aware there’s no escape from death. How do we deal with this crushing knowledge? We repress, we disguise, we bury, we exclude” (288). According to Freud, “A happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one. The motive force of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality” (146). Repression is one way for both Jack and Clemence to try to battle despair.

Clemence’s despair is elevated by the uncanny. After the night of the strange woman’s suicide, Clemence feels the uncanny in everything around him. He says that people “were there as before, but they were laughing” (78). Clemence lives in the same world as before he witnessed and ignored a woman’s suicide, but his experience of the world has changed from typical to uncanny, and he feels that he is being judged by everyone around him. The uncanny is a recurring materialization of Clemence’s guilty conscience.

The uncanny is a form of chaos. Each individual being, object, and experience is singular and unique, so it is shocking and disturbing for a character to encounter the uncanny. The life of an individual becomes more chaotic if he experiences the uncanny. Roquentin’s nausea is recognizable because it is the same time and time again, and despite each of its individual causes it always throws him into the overwhelming whirlwind of despair that he knows so well. His life is made more chaotic by the experience of nausea. Each time he is plagued by nausea, he must deal with both the difficulty of the experience itself and the difficulty of its redundancy.

Roquentin tries to exist as normally as possible, “and suddenly, there it is: the Nausea” (122).

The uncanny episode is “a fine climax: it shakes [him] from top to bottom. [He] saw it coming” but could not control it (122). He “makes it clear that chaos springs from his inability to understand his absurd situation,” and his lack of understanding is in part due to the elusive and nonsensical nature of the uncanny (Aman 3). The uncanny is an absurd chaos that mentally and physically wreaks havoc on Roquentin.

Dishonesty and Unreliability

Chaos comes not only from Clemence’s uncanny experience of life, but also from the unclear border between truth and falsehood. Clemence himself admits “it is very difficult to disentangle the true from the false in what I’m saying” (119). The story is as chaotic for the reader as life is for Clemence because he is an unreliable narrator. The lies Clemence tells to himself, to the reader, and to everyone he encounters work to create the chaos of his flexible persona and profound solitude. He justifies his dishonesty, asking “Don’t lies eventually lead to the truth? And don’t all my stories, true or false, tend toward the same conclusion?” Clemence believes that it makes no difference whether his stories are true or false, “if, in both cases, they are significant of what [he has] been and of what [he is]” (119).

Rather than lying, Meursault omits parts of the truth. As the story progresses, “the reader gradually becomes aware that what he has chosen to omit is not facts or events, but explanations” (Dunwoodie xiv). Meursault is not omitting explanations to create a slanted picture of the truth—Camus omits these explanations in order to create a slanted protagonist. This is a clear indication that Meursault is largely indifferent and is thereby unreliable. Camus writes an unreliable Meursault in order to emphasize the character’s detached, unfeeling, and uniquely existentialist personality.

Unlike Meursault and Clemence, Roquentin is not intentionally unreliable. Roquentin fails to tell the truth because his existential crisis leads him to lose parts of his memory. When recounting tales of his life before the nausea first struck him, he says that “nothing is left but words: I could still tell stories... but these are only the skeletons” (33). Roquentin acknowledges that he has become completely disconnected from the stories of his life. From his stories, “new images are born” and he recreates his memories as fictions (33). Roquentin realizes that his stories are less valuable than authentic accounts of past experience.

Clemence’s opposing belief in the equal values of truth and falsehood fits well within the framework of existentialism because it can be likened to Bigelow’s theme of the “encounter with nothingness.” Existentialist characters believe themselves to be of no consequence, so the truth is also inconsequential. Meursault always tells the truth. His behavior is the opposite of Clemence’s, but it stems from the same ideology. Because Meursault believes the truth is inconsequential, he has no reason to lie. He admits to committing murder and makes no effort to frame himself in a positive light when he is on trial because he does not think that it matters. Both Meursault and Clemence stare nothingness in the face and realize the futility of truth.

Clemence’s dishonesty is a small manifestation of his general delusion. In addition to his sincere belief that he is better than everyone else, Clemence is also convinced that he is happy. He tells his captive audience “I am happy unto death!” (144). Kierkegaard would disagree with the assertion that anyone could be happy unto death without accepting and acknowledging God. Clemence states that he is prepared to die and will die happy, but Kierkegaard would argue that atheists possess a “sickness unto death” (39). He says that “Despair is the hopelessness of not even being able to die” (48). Therefore, men like Clemence will always despair because they cannot die.

Coping and the Narrators' Role as Hero

Despite the hopelessness of existence, Roquentin finds a way to cope with his inescapable immortality. Roquentin overcomes his nausea and learns to accept the trivial nature of life and existence when he resigns himself to writing a novel. He acknowledges that writing a novel will not “stop [him] from existing,” or from being conscious of his existence, but in writing the novel he begins to accept his fate (178). Roquentin overcomes the despair of mortality which Kierkegaard describes by actively choosing immortality; he immortalizes himself by writing down the story of his experience. Clemence would argue that Roquentin must occupy himself in this way because, like all of humanity, he is bored. Clemence claims that “Something must happen— and that explains most human commitments” (37). He believes that humans create society and “a life full of complications and drama” because they have nothing else to do with themselves (37).

Clemence's claims about human pursuits are true for Jack. In order to try and occupy his time and distract himself from fear, Jack devotes himself to studying the life of Adolf Hitler and to learning German. Jack tells Murray that he'd “like to lose interest” in himself and his despair. “I wish there was something I could do,” he states. “I wish I could out-think the problem.” Murray tells Jack to “work harder on your Hitler,” indicating that he knows the futility of Jack's life's work (152). Like Clemence, Jack and Murray recognize that the efforts of their lives are an attempt to help them forget the reality of death.

On the contrary, Roquentin states that “time is too large, it can't be filled up. Everything you plunge into it stretches and disintegrates” (21). Roquentin chooses to use his writing to try and occupy his time even though he admits that no matter what he does, he cannot fill up his time entirely. His writing is inspired by his own experience, allowing him to take control of his

narrative and become the hero of his own story. The novel is a diary, detailing Roquentin's experience from the beginning of his nausea to the point in which he overcomes it.

Roquentin's account is similar to *The Stranger*, which "reads like the hero's diary" (Dunwoodie xiv). Because Meursault is a sociopath who commits murder, it is strange to consider him the "hero." However, he is heroic in his role as the protagonist and in his rebellion against the moral and legal system of his society. Meursault is judged not for his crime, but for his lack of feeling, his intelligence, and his lack of faith. In a fit of rage, Meursault asks "What would it matter if he were accused of murder and then executed because he didn't cry at his mother's funeral?" acknowledging that he has been wronged and that it would not matter to society if the same thing had happened to someone else (115). The society decides that someone who did not mourn his own mother's death is "a person who is not worthy of being a member of civilized society and must be executed" (van den Hoven 212). Meursault states that he "couldn't quite understand how an ordinary man's good qualities," namely his intelligence, "could become crushing accusations against a guilty man" (96). Meursault becomes the hero by maintaining his integrity when the people around him try to turn him into a villain. He does not adopt faith in order to seem more virtuous, nor does he play dumb or feign sadness. Meursault is a hero because at his execution he becomes a martyr for outsiders and outcasts with integrity.

Meursault shows the reader the dangers of societal judgment and he dies a hero and champion of the rights of the outsider. His martyrdom shows that the society is wrong to judge him for his personality and past actions rather than for his crime. According to Adrian van den Hoven, "It is as if through him Camus wishes to proclaim that however limited a person's explanation of his past behavior may seem, we must respect it, because his behavior cannot be understood correctly by our retrospective, logical, and probabilistic reconstructions" (213).

Clemence is an even less likely hero than Meursault. The last word of *The Fall* is Clemence's unexpected exclamation: "Fortunately!" (147). Earlier in the novel, the reader learns that Clemence saw a woman commit suicide by jumping off a bridge, and he did nothing to try to save her. He remarks in his final words that it is fortunate that he cannot be given a second chance to try and save her, implying that he knows he would once again fail to act. The reader can see that Clemence's fall from happiness to despair came from the guilt of not saving the woman, and that guilt destroyed his life. Clemence is nonetheless a hero because he cares enough about the woman to be wracked with guilt, despite the fact that he lacks the strength and courage to save her. He feels this unbearable guilt even though he does not believe in a God to punish him for his actions.

Like the other existentialist narrators, Jack is a hero. He is a hero because he wants to help others, to protect innocence at any cost, and to maintain his own integrity. Jack wants for all people to escape their despair, and wishes mankind "could learn not to be afraid" of death (282). He wants to protect his youngest and most innocent child, his son Wilder, from losing his innocence and becoming afraid of his own mortality. Jack agrees with Murray that "the child is everything, the adult nothing" because children have an enviable naivety which adults have lost (289). Murray suggests that the most effective way to preserve innocence and prevent a fear of death is to lead people to have faith in God and in the promise of a blissful afterlife. However, Jack would likely agree with Meursault and Clemence in his belief that faith is "a convenient fantasy" and "the worst kind of self-delusion" (286). Jack refuses to give up his integrity and adopt a false faith in order to repress his fear of death. Jack is a hero in the same way as Meursault is a hero because he maintains his integrity even in crippling fear and overwhelming despair.

Conclusion

Meursault, Roquentin, Clemence, and Jack are unlikely heroes because of their roles as outsiders. In existentialist novels, the heroes are outsiders in order to reflect the problematic society or world in which they live. Each narrator tells his story so that it is as if the reader were accessing his personal diary and each man reveals the uncommon nature of his personality. In all four accounts, the heroes are given the freedom to tell their own stories, despite the fact that they may be dishonest, biased, or forgetful. Each character gets to be the hero because their perspectives are more important than the judgments of their respective societies or of the reader. This emphasizes the importance of the individual in existentialist texts as well as in existentialist philosophy. Meursault, Clemence, Roquentin, and Jack all struggle with common existentialist questions and with the existentialist themes described by Bigelow. Only Roquentin expresses that he is able to find peace in his existence. It is unclear whether or not Jack makes any peace with the realities of human life, but at the end of the novel the possibility of achieving inner peace remains. Clemence and Meursault, on the other hand, truly experience a sickness unto death. These characters showcase the timeless relevance of existentialist philosophy and exemplify the way in which existentialist characters in literature can reveal the trivial nature of existence and humankind's never-ending struggle to find and create meaning in life and death.

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