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An Existentialist Interpretation of Four Novels by Alberto Moravia:  
*The Time of Indifference, The Woman of Rome, The Conformist and Boredom*

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Senior Thesis  
Dr. Chapman  
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In 1929, Italian writer, Alberto Moravia made history at the young age of twenty-one with his first novel, *The Time of Indifference*, considered to be the first existential novel in Europe. Before Camus, *the Stranger*, before Sartre's, *No Exit*, before there was the term, Existentialism, Moravia was writing about it. He is in many ways the founder of the literary existential movement in Europe. This analysis seeks to explore the existential qualities in four of Moravia's novels, *The Time of Indifference*, *The Woman of Rome*, *The Conformist*, and *Boredom*. First it will be necessary to briefly define Existentialism and explain its major themes that will later be discussed as well as introduce Moravia and the literary world in Italy at the time in which Existentialism first appeared.

### A Brief Introduction to Existentialism

Existentialism is described by Nicola Abbagnano as “a quest for being” (19). It is a search for truth, sincerity and pure existence in a world ridden with illusions and absurdity. In contrast to Christian Existentialists who indeed believe in God and a higher form of spirituality, for the Existentialists that Moravia creates there is no God, no destiny, no human nature, no afterlife, and no inherent order to the universe. Man exists in an absurd world, forced to take responsibility for himself. In his essay, “Existentialism is a Humanism” Sartre says, “Man is free, man is freedom...we are left alone, without excuse” (41). Man must accept this freedom to create his own life without the excuse of destiny or a preconceived human nature. Sartre describes the way this responsibility is portrayed through characters in existential literature: “When the existentialist writes about a coward, he says that his coward is responsible for his cowardice. He's not like

that because he has a cowardly heart, or lung or brain...he's like that because he has made himself a coward through his acts" (49). Man is empowered through existential philosophy and given the chance at any point in time to recreate himself. He is able to start anew at any moment. This is the power and optimism of Existentialism that Sartre tries to relate.

In addition to taking control of one's life, it is important for one to connect to the world around him, thus this "quest for being." The existential hero feels alienated and rejected amidst a world and society he cannot connect with. He therefore struggles with this need for a relationship with others. Abbagnano explains, "Man cannot discover himself and establish himself as a person, nor can he recognize the reality and the order of the world, unless, in the act of being in a relationship with others" (25). The characters in Moravia's novels seek these relationships in the hopes of establishing a firm connection with reality. When they fail to do this, they are plagued with feelings of alienation and isolation for the world around them. Abbagnano continues, "Existentialism tries to salvage man from an anonymous indifferentism, from dissipation and from infidelity to himself and others" (27). The boredom and indifference that many of the characters in these novels face is due to their lack of a relationship with the world around them and their inability to overcome the empty meaninglessness of their lives. Existentialism tells us that in order to navigate successfully through this absurdity one must take action while aware of the falsity that surrounds him if he hopes to achieve a lasting sense of purpose and meaning.

When Moravia published his first novel in 1929, he introduced a new type of fiction to Fascist Italy that while not well received by all, was widely read and discussed

as it introduced themes that would later be referred to as “the absurd” (Cottrell 3). At this time the traditional Italian novel was of a very different sort. DeGo describes:

“For centuries Catholicism and political despotism had neither favored the dignity of the individual nor encouraged independent, critical thought and observation. Italian writing had been largely a game played by the *literati*. Style had become the crux of all literary problems and this emphasis was exaggerated to the point where perfection of style became the supreme achievement” (8).

The themes of Moravia’s novels focus on a much different subject. His works center on the individual and the importance of the struggle between man and reality while “perfection of style” is of lesser importance. Abbagnano explains that Existentialism in Italy “assumed...a reaffirmation of the reality of the human individual in his relations with other individuals and with objects of nature, and hence, also of the reality of society—such as communication between individuals—and the reality of nature” (8).

Unlike the works that precede it, existential works magnify man’s connection with others and the world and his struggle to understand reality.

Existential literature portrays this struggle by describing the anguish and pain that man suffers as he struggles with alienation. Barrett explains, “The themes that obsess both modern art and existential philosophy are the alienation and strangeness of man in his world; the contradictoriness, the feebleness and the contingency of human existence; the central and overwhelming reality of the void for man who has lost his anchorage in the eternal” (56). Man is lost in the existential novel. He does not recognize the physical world as he should. He feels detached and separated from everything and everyone around him. This bewilderment leads to a longing for connection and attachment through

various different means. Sergio J. Pacifici finds that “all of Moravia’s heroes...engage in feeble attempts to change their world and, when they fail, they ‘choose’ to be what they are out of fear, or turpitude, or ‘indifference—and in this sense we may only speak of an Existentialism of an essentially negative kind”(84). And so begins the journey of our existential heroes, searching for understanding in an absurd universe and attempting desperately to connect to it.

Four of Moravia’s novels, *The Time of Indifference*, *The Woman of Rome*, *The Conformist* and *Boredom* all struggle with these issues of existence in a variety of ways. The following analysis will explore the existential struggles present in these novels through four specific lenses: The role of money and social status in one’s life, alienation and the inability to connect with reality, the sexual act as a means of connection and the absurdity of the novel itself. These four themes aim at identifying the very existential qualities present in Moravia’s novels as they express mankind’s struggle to find meaning in the modern world.

### **The Importance of Money and Social Status in Understanding Reality**

In all four of the following novels, Moravia presents the role of money and social status in the lives of the characters within them. These external realities serve as a shell for what life is *supposed* to look like; how people are *supposed* to behave and what they are *supposed* to value. This provides a setting for the underlying realities that many of the characters experience, one of a frightening isolation, separated from the illusionary world of wealth and societal norms.

Moravia introduces in his first novel, *The Time of Indifference*, a bourgeois family in Fascist Italy clinging desperately to their place in society. The threat of losing their home carefully guides the narrative as we discover the emptiness inside of each character as they attempt to find pleasure in their physical reality. Michele, the protagonist, takes comfort in his appearance and the appearance of others who seem to be living genuinely while remaining aware of the absurdity that comes as a result from seeking happiness through material pursuits. It is in this way that Michele experiences the emptiness of the physical and material world, an experience that is found so often in Existentialist literature.

Michele, unable to hate Leo as he feels he should, is also unable to accept his help in finding a suitable job. It is not pride that keeps him from accepting help but a general indifference to the entire notion of work and advancement in society. He tries desperately to take an interest in the world but fails repeatedly, left only with a general disinterest and disgust for everything around him. He takes pleasure in his appearance as means for distracting him from the indifference he suffers continuously:

“He had gotten up late and dressed meticulously: ties, suits, shirts, how much attention he paid to them all in his effort to console himself, in the midst of his misery, by emulating the clear aesthetics of British fashion! He envied and admired those English gentlemen standing casually beside their torpedo-shaped cars, dressed in their full-cut over-coats...He liked the banal and elegant backgrounds in those pictures” (208.)

In some way, this sort of reality, this image, is more real than the life in which Michele leads. These material qualities represent something genuine to Michele, a quality he finds

lacking in his own life. Jane E. Cottrell explains, “Michele, too, has dreams—of riches, women, travel, hotels... These dreams pass before his eyes like a movie on a screen, and he only wishes they were reality. More than anything he wants to escape from boredom” (41). Michele wants to believe that these dreams can save him from boredom and indifference. He sites examples of material objects and possessions believing that, unlike himself, there are those that experience genuine fulfillment from them. While walking down the street one day he sees an ad for a shaving razor in a store-front window. The narrator describes the figure in the ad:

‘Painted in vivid colors, cut out of cardboard, and constructed after a human, rather than a fantastic model, it had a motionless, stupid cheerful face and large brown eyes full of candid, invincible faith... without ever tiring and without ever varying its stupid smile, it was stroking a razor blade on a strip of leather; it was sharpening it. There could be absolutely no connection between the banal action it was performing and the joyful satisfaction on its rosy face, yet the advertisement owed its efficacy to precisely that absurdity. That disproportionate happiness was not meant to point out the man’s imbecility but the quality of the razor; was not meant to demonstrate the advantage of possessing a mediocre intelligence, but that of shaving with a good blade” (246).

Michele sees the absurd message the advertisement tries to sell, that shaving with a good razor will add happiness and resilience and meaning to one’s life. This sort of subtle messaging is something in which one is no doubt accustomed to, yet it feeds the continually growing disappointment in one’s life when one product or another fails to produce happiness and fulfillment. Joan Ross and Donald Freed point out that Michele,



“aware and sensitive, has seen through the frantic clamor after money and possessions but is incapable of acting. This is what makes [his] outsideness all the more acute and tragic” (40). Michele sees the utter absurdity in selling happiness through material possessions when emptiness and dissatisfaction inevitably ensues yet he is unable to act or change this in any real or significant way.

In a similar way, Moravia portrays the importance of material wealth through the optimistic and somewhat naive character of Adriana in his novel, *The Woman of Rome*. Uneducated and poor, Adriana grows up idealizing a life of money and wealth. The first time she sees a rich man’s home with her fiancé Gino, she tiptoes silently throughout, unable to imagine such riches exist. Adriana expresses her feelings upon seeing such a place:

“It was the first time in my life that I had been in a house of this kind, and I could not help fingering things, as if unable to believe my eyes...I told myself my mother was right when she said money was the only thing that mattered in the world. I supposed the people living among all those lovely things could not help being lovely and good themselves...I thought I would never again be able to call myself happy unless I could live in a house like that. I almost felt like crying; and I sat down on the bed in bewilderment” (41, 43).

This experience has a profound effect on Adriana and the way she views her life. Before this moment, she had never understood fully her own poverty. Next to the material wealth she witnesses, her own life seems trivial and small. In her mind, beautiful objects create beautiful people. The objects are reflections of the people who own them. This respect and admiration for wealth helps lead her to her profession as a prostitute and her

belief that anything is worth doing for money. After suffering the deceit of her fiancé, an already married man, Adriana begins to see different possibilities in her future. She explains, “I had known that my beauty was such as to be able to earn me anything I wanted, if I would only make up my mind. That morning was the first time I looked on my body as a very convenient means for achieving the aims which hard world and honesty had not enabled me to attain” (117). Adriana realizes that her beauty can be exchanged for wealth. It can be used to help her achieve any sort of wealth she desires. This idea is alluring to her and helps her to overcome her initial disgust for prostitution. Adriana’s fascination with wealth and material objects makes the decision to choose this profession easier and more attractive. In this way, the allure of money and wealth continues to serve as a backdrop to Moravia’s novels.

Another of Moravia’s novels, *The Conformist*, presents this allure for wealth and impressive social status in a very different manner. Here, Marcello, the novel’s protagonist, seeks wealth and a respectable place in society as a mean of conformity rather than an escape from poverty. Coming from a very wealthy family, Marcello realizes at a young age that he is somehow different from the other children around him. He entertains morbid curiosities and feels disconnected from others around him. For Marcello, one’s social status and material goods are a means of conformity. He excels as an officer for the Fascist regime and convinces himself that he is exactly like those around him through his outward, physical appearance and actions. The narrator describes Marcello buying a pack of cigarettes and realizing that three other men have ordered the same brand:

“Marcello observed that he took his pack, felt it to see that it was soft enough, and then tore open the paper in the same way as the other three. He observed also that two of the three put the pack of cigarettes, just as he did, into a small inside pocket of their jackets. Lastly, one of the three, as soon as he got outside the shop, stopped to light a cigarette with a silver lighter exactly like Marcello’s. These details gave him an almost voluptuous satisfaction. Yes, he was just like other people, just like everyone else” (84.)

These minute details are a great relief to Marcello as they signify that on the outside, he is identical to those around him. He takes comfort in this fact that he does not appear to be any different. These simple material objects are very important to him as a symbol of societal norms. He hides his internal loneliness and isolation within this exterior pretext.

In the same way, he chooses a wife based on her normality and social acceptability. We learn that his fiancé Giulia lives a most ordinary, middle-class life.

Moravia writes:

“It was a real middle-class home...the home of a middle-class family of the most conventional and most modest type, similar in every way to other homes in the same building, in this same quarter, and this was for him its most pleasing aspect—the sensation of finding himself face to face with something absolutely ordinary, almost common, and yet completely reassuring” (105).

Marcello seeks normality in every aspect of his life, even in marriage. The fact that there are hundreds of others with homes exactly like Giulia’s, living lives exactly like hers, is reassuring to Marcello as it convinces himself further that he is exactly like everyone else. He refuses to accept the alternative and refuses to look within himself to discover

the source of his feelings of alienation from society. Instead he masks this hidden anguish with the material illusion of normality and the desire of being “just like everyone else” (84).

The character of Dino in Moravia’s novel *Boredom* has a much different idea of what money and wealth represent. Like Marcello, Dino comes from a wealthy family but considers money and wealth as only a means for boredom. At the start of the novel, he considers the possible causes for his boredom with life in general: “Perhaps I was bored because I was rich and that if I were poor I would not be bored...it was a question, not so much of an idea, as of a kind of haunting suspicion that there was a connection, obscure but indisputable, between boredom and money” (10-11). Dino later discovers that poverty too leads to boredom but this initial aversion to wealth remains in him throughout the novel. According to Dino, money is a mere distraction from boredom and produces no lasting fulfillment of any kind.

Dino feelings towards money contrast with the superficial tendencies of his mother who adorns her home with furniture and objects based on their price instead of their aesthetic qualities. Dino describes his mother’s home:

“You could be sure that in those rooms there was not a single object that was not the most expensive, or anyhow among the most expensive, in the category to which it belonged. My mother had neither taste, nor culture, nor curiosity, nor love of beauty; her one criterion in any sort of acquisition was always its price, and the higher the price the more completely was she persuaded that the object possessed the qualities of beauty and refinement and originality which otherwise she would have been incapable of recognizing” (35).

While Dino finds no value in money or material wealth, his mother sees no value outside of it. In her eyes, money is value. The higher the price of something, the more valuable it is. Dino is unable to understand the material world; for him, it is merely another source of boredom. He recognizes in his mother the opposite reaction, a total and complete dependence upon money and its value in the world.

In each of these cases, money and social status serve as an exterior reality, devoid of meaning and true significance. Each character attributes a superficial importance to its place in their lives, from a means to conformity to a means to boredom. It is an ever present part of Moravia's work, there to represent a superficial reality that is shallow, empty and unfulfilling. Pacifici says, "Moravia's heroes are left with little to guide them in their social actions besides their senses and their instincts: hence the confusion of their world; their alienation and despair" (85). Despite a longing for exterior normality and enjoyment, the hidden anguish in these characters is shown through their internal realities, that is, when they express their feelings of isolation and alienation amidst a world to which they are unable to connect.

### **Alienation and the Inability to Connect with Society**

Surrounding each protagonist in these four novels is a continuing feeling of alienation from society. Despite their efforts, they are unable to connect with others in a true and genuine way and thus feel consistently on the outside of reality and the human experience as though a certain key ingredient of life were missing or non-existent within them. Joan Ross and Donald Freed explain, "An inability to relate themselves to reality

leaves [Moravia's] men and women hollow and empty, struggling with an existence which often reveals itself as shameful, false and pretentious" (36). Unable to achieve a connection with reality naturally, these characters must force emotions that they do not feel and try at any cost to form some sort of understanding of the world around them. They each try to break-down the specifics of daily life in the hopes of achieving some sort of connection with it, and yet fail to do so. This very existential feeling of isolation permeates the lives of all four protagonists as they struggle to discover meaning and significance in their lives.

Michele in *The Time of Indifference* is plagued with indifference. As strongly as he attempts to feign enthusiasm, hatred, love and anger, he is unable and is continually left with a dull apathy to everything around him. He longs for true emotions, to truly connect with the world around him but is entirely unable to do so. He feels he is an anomaly within the society around him and is unable to overcome his severe indifference to it all. Michele describes the anguish that he feels: "All these people...know where they're going and what they want, they have a purpose and so they hurry along, they're tormented, sad, happy, *alive*, while I...I have nothing...no purpose...if I weren't walking I'd be sitting down; it makes no difference" (119). It is this sort of futility that dictates Michele's life. He is quite simply without purpose or desire of any sort that is except the desire to *feel something*.

In order to achieve this, he breaks down each situation in his mind in the hopes of finding their meaning and significance. When Michele and his family discover that Leo will be taking the house from them, Michele struggles to feel the importance of this news. He tells himself, "Let's see...we're talking about our very existence...we could find

ourselves from one minute to the next with barely the means to live'' (24). Yet despite these efforts, he is unable to feel the severity of the situation as "their ruin fail[s] to touch him; it [is] like watching someone drown, watching them and not moving a finger" (24). These situations do not feel real to Michele. They are a dream, another reality where things do not truly exist. Because of this, he is unable to amend the situation or even become angry with it. The scenes unfold as though they were a film or a play, something untrue and detached from his own life and unworthy of emotion. Therefore, despite his best efforts, Michele remains detached and isolated from society and even his own family, unable to feel anything outside of an all encompassing indifference towards the world and others.

Adriana's experience, in *The Woman of Rome*, with those around her is much different from Michele's. Adriana holds a mostly optimistic outlook on her life and accepts her profession with dignity and self-assuredness. She feels love for her mother, falls in love twice and has friendships and compassion for those around her. Yet, despite all of this, in the quiet moments of her life she feels anguish and disconnection with all around her similar to Michele. She describes the conversations she has with herself in these moments:

"I said to myself: 'Here I am and I might be elsewhere—I might exist a thousand years ago or in a thousand years' time—I might be a negress or an old woman, fair and short-----' I thought how I had come out of endless night and would soon go on into another endless night and that my brief passing was marked only by absurd and casual actions. I then understood that my distress was caused not by

what I was doing but more profoundly by the bare fact of being alive which was neither good nor evil but only painful and meaningless.” (166)

Adriana is bewildered with the world around her in these moments when the mere fact of existence seems meaningless and absurd. These existential sentiments express the experience of living in a world that no longer holds meaning or makes any sort of logical sense. Adriana expresses life as if it were a mere chance, marked only by pain and endless, meaningless days and nights. Giuliana Dego writes, “Adriana, the woman of Rome, is also invested with all the qualities characteristic of an existentialist view of the human condition, such as a sense of absurdity and defeat; and yet she reaches a tentative stage where, in spite of everything, she finds the strength to live with some peace of mind in the face of cruel destiny” (72). Adriana is afflicted with the lonely alienation of an existential outlook, yet is able to face her life with hope and optimism. Here we have another form of the role of alienation in one’s life.

In the same way as Michele, Adriana breaks down the life she leads and the situations in which she finds herself in order to discover meaning in them. She says to herself, “I often bring home a man who has been waiting for me in the night, without knowing me. We struggle with one another on this bed, clutching each other like two sworn enemies. Then he gives me a piece of printed, coloured paper. Next day I exchange this piece of paper for food, clothes and other articles” (164). But she describes, “These phrases were only the first step in a process of deeper bewilderment” (164). As with Michele, this step-by-step breakdown of physical reality leads only to deeper confusion and apathy. They accentuate the absurdity of one’s actions and the futility of the very rudimentary aspects of one’s daily life. Unlike Michele, who lives constantly with this



feeling of futility, Adriana experiences at rare moments when alone and aware of life's absurdity. Yet, Moraiva shows us with Adriana another way in which existential tendencies find their ways into even the most optimistic of characters.

*The Conformist's* Marcello classifies his bewilderment and alienation as "abnormality." According to Marcello Clerici there are only two types of people in the world: normal and abnormal. From a young age, Marcello is certain that he is the latter. As a child he finds he has a fascination for killing the lizards in his family's yard, yet despite this fascination, he is aware that it is to some extent socially unacceptable. We learn, "He felt as though he had discovered within himself a characteristic that was completely abnormal, a characteristic that he ought to be ashamed of that he must keep secret so as not to be ashamed of it in front of others as well as in himself, because it might result in cutting him off forever from the society of those his own age" (7). Thus begins Marcello's quest for normality that continues throughout his life and greatly affects the type of individual he becomes. He describes the enthusiasm with which he approaches all aspects of his life as an adolescent with "a desire for normality, a wish to conform to a general, recognized rule; a longing to be like everyone else, inasmuch as to be different meant to be guilty" (33). This desperate fear of abnormality directs Marcello's life as he strives constantly to be the same as everyone around him. He does not allow for the possibility of a unique and genuine life as he is determined to conform to societal norms.

Despite these efforts, Marcello is not able to unconsciously conform to society. Each move he executes is calculated and planned in advance. He is aware of his effort to

appear normal, and yet is not pleased by the individuals that make up this preconceived “normality.” The narrator describes his feelings:

“He observed all these people stealthily, with a strong feeling of repugnance. This was what always happened to him. He thought he was normal and just like everyone else when he pictured the crowd to himself as an abstract whole, as a great, existing army held together by common feelings, common ideals, common aims, an army of which it was comforting to form a part. But as soon as individuals rose to the surface of these crowds, his illusion of normality broke to pieces against their diversity, since he failed completely to recognize himself in them and felt at the same time both repugnance and detachment. (89).

Marcello is repulsed by these individuals he wants so desperately to emulate. In his mind he has a clear image of what “society” is but in reality, when face-to-face with others just like him, he finds no connection. He again feels isolated and alone, unwilling to accept the repulsive qualities of those around him as his own. He is another type of Moravia’s alienated hero, desperate to conform but unable to abandon his feelings of bewilderment and estrangement from society.

If we call Michele indifferent and Marcello, abnormal, then we can say that Dino is bored. The title *Boredom* affirms this key sentiment that characterizes Dino’s life. His particular case of alienation is expressed in this way. Dino describes his long battle with boredom from the very beginning in the prologue stating that “the feeling of boredom originated for me in a sense of the absurdity of a reality which is insufficient, or anyhow unable, to convince me of its own effective existence” (5). Like Adriana, Dino doubts the importance or significance of our very existence. Boredom arises in him because he fails

to see the very purpose or point in living at all. For Dino life is merely a series of events or objects or people, devoid of any true meaning or purpose. In other words, “Dino, afflicted with an excruciating boredom which results in a sense of futility, is simply not committed to the business of living. He is bored because his relationship with the world holds no meaning or value for him” (Freed and Ross, 50). As do Michele and Adriana, Dino breaks reality down to its very basics in order to find some real and coherent value in it. Dino describes his contemplation on something as simple as a tumbler. He finds that:

“As long as I say to myself that this tumbler is a glass or metal vessel made for the purpose of putting liquid into it ...—as long as I am able to represent the tumbler to myself in a convincing manner—so long shall I feel that I have some sort of a relationship with it, a relationship close enough to make me believe in its existence and also, on a subordinate level, in my own. But once the tumbler withers away and loses its vitality in the manner... or... reveals itself to me as something foreign,...once it appears to me as an absurd object—then from that very absurdity springs boredom, which when all is said and done is simple a kind of incommunicability and the incapacity to disengage oneself from it” (6).

These exercises aim to prove the value and worth of existence, the existence of something as simple as a tumbler and of our own. As long as the value we have placed on physical objects is held, there will inevitably form some sort of relationship between person and object, but without the man-made association, the object is meaningless and foreign. Such is the way with everything in the physical world. When one places importance and meaning on an object or person, a relationship inevitably ensues. But

without that association or self-imposed value, it is empty and meaningless. Here is where the source of Dino's boredom lies. He is unable to find these associations or connections with the world and because of this Dino feels nothing but emptiness and boredom.

Each of these four protagonists experience the existential anguish of alienation and separation from the world around them. Their inability to connect with the outside world and others leads them through their lives searching for a way to repair this "defect" in them in some way or another. Whether by conforming, pretending to feel or breaking down in one's mind the basics of the physical world, they try to overcome this sense of emptiness and nothingness in the world around them. In addition to these, the sexual act plays a large role in the struggle to connect with others or as a means to changing one's life. Moravia's believes, as do Existentialists that follow him, that the sexual relationship is the only true relationship possible between two individuals in the modern world.

### **Sex as a Means of Connection**

In each of these novels the sexual relationship plays a significant role in the protagonist's search for meaning and connection. Ross and Freed say, "The sexual encounter is used as a very sharp literary tool to cut to the existential core of characters and their transactions" (53). According to Moravia, the sexual act is the closest connection that can be made between two individuals. The ability for the male protagonists to possess a woman acts as a means of taking action and of forming connections with others in their lives. Adriana's use of sex is a powerful tool that leads

her life and changes her as a person as does it for Michele's sister, Carla, in *The Time of Indifference* who uses sex with her mother's lover as a means of starting a new life. In a world where everything is false, empty, and meaningless, sex is portrayed as the equivalent to love. If, as in Moravia's bleak landscape, true emotions no longer exist then the sexual relationship replaces the romantic relationship and acts as the only means of overcoming the overwhelming alienation that permeated these characters' lives.

Michele tries excessively to conquer his constant indifference towards life through pretending and acting as though he were the protective brother or vengeful son, but above all of this, he believes that in order to overcome indifference, he must begin a relationship with Lisa, his mother's best friend. He believes that becoming her lover will ultimately lead to feeling a connection with the others. He believes that:

“One single sincere action, one act of faith would be enough to sever him from this chaos and put those values back into their habitual perspective, he thought; and In consequence, this visit to Lisa assumed enormous importance for him. If he succeeded in loving her, all the rest would be possible, too, even hating Leo”  
(245.)

This one sincere action is proving to himself he can love Lisa through having sex with her. He believes if he can convince himself to love her, all of the other expected emotions one is supposed to feel will follow. He must force himself to be with her in order to convince himself and the world that he is alive and able to truly feel. Ultimately he is unable to perform this “one sincere action” as it is for him an insincere and forced attempt to rectify his own indifference. He explains to Lisa, “Rather than pretend to fall into your arms, to be swooning with passion for you, rather than making you declarations

of love...given that I can't carry it off...I prefer to do nothing" (252). Michele's response to indifference is precisely this: to do nothing. In order to avoid an insincere action in a world where nothing is sincere, Michele chooses inaction and remains stagnant within his indifferent isolation.

Michele's sister, Carla uses the sexual relationship in a similar way to change her life. She decides the only way to start a new life is to fall to the bottom and perform the lowest act possible which would be a relationship with her mother's lover, Leo. Carla tells herself, "Tomorrow I'll give myself to Leo and so a new life should begin...and tomorrow is the exact day I was born...Create a scandalous, impossible situation, shameful, full of awful scenes...ruin myself utterly..." (42). Carla believes the only way to escape the suffocating dullness that is her life is to commit the most terrible act she can imagine which would be giving herself to her mother's lover. The phrase, "Tomorrow is the day on which I was born" is a powerful statement, "pure existentialism in the diction of an adolescent" (Freed and Ross, 39). For the first time, Carla will take a significant act to change her life. For Carla this act represents an irreconcilable action, something that is bound to change herself and her life. She is so desperate for something to happen that she is anxious for disaster. Beginning a relationship with Leo is something she feels will reinvent her as a person, but is instead a scandalous act that does not change her life at all. Ross and Freed explain, "Though she hopes that this will be a significant step toward changing her life, it is, in reality, no more than a repetition of the falseness which she has always known" (38). When Michele proposes that they start over again and begin a new life Carla questions, "A new life? Then it was true that nothing had changed? And her filthy little affair was really just a filthy little affair and nothing more? She thought she

would suffocate” (289). Just as Michele does, Carla realizes that her plan to create a new life through a sexual affair has failed and her life is not changed at all. Both Michele and Carla experience this disappointment as they are left unable to change themselves or their lives through the relationships they seek.

The role of sex in Adriana’s life is quite obvious as it serves as her profession. She uses sex daily to make a living, but also has a unique relationship with the sexual act itself. Upon her first sexual encounter with her fiancé Gino, she realizes that “I seemed to be doing things I had already done; I did not know where nor when, maybe in another life, just as sometimes certain landscapes seem familiar whereas you are really seeing them for the first time in your life” (45). Soon after this period in her life, Adriana becomes a prostitute and although uses sex to make a living and does not love the men she has sex with, she feels the same naturalness with the act itself. She describes her attitude towards her life:

“I really cannot say I disliked this way of life...I do not know whether this happens to all the women who take up my profession or whether it means that I had a special vocation for it; I only know that each time I felt a thrill of curiosity and expectation which were rarely deceived...The human body, besides, was an inexhaustible source of mysterious, insatiable delights;...I yearned to reach beyond the superficial relationship between us and discover the meaning of their physical beauty and explain to myself why I felt so deeply attracted. (153-154).

Adriana feels this curiosity and interest in the human body as it is the makeup of who we are. She approaches her seemingly unpleasant profession with an excitement to discover a hidden part of someone and reach beyond the physical relationship their bodies share.

Pacifici states, “Moravia makes a successful attempt to render the relationship of Adriana’s carnal love...It is through this love that Adriana finds meaning and hope in an otherwise chaotic world” (“Fiction” 74). In this way, Adriana succeeds in connecting with others through the sexual act and the relationships she shares between the men she encounters.

For Marcello, sex acts as a barrier to the life he envisions for himself and the desires he has. He takes pleasure in the fact that his fiancé Giulia is a virgin before they are married as he feels this is the “normal” order of things. He explains that “he wished his relations with his fiancée to be kept within the bounds of tradition, feeling that a greater intimacy would reintroduce into his life the disorder, the abnormality that he was all the time seeking to banish” (107). Abstaining from sex is another way that Marcello feels his life is orderly and in line with the rest of society. He later finds out, although, that Giulia had not stayed “within the bounds of tradition” before they wed and had a long-time affair with an old family friend. Yet upon receiving this news he is still convinced of Giulia’s normality. He explains that “Normality...did not consist so much in holding aloof from certain experiences as in the standard by which one judged them” (192). In this way, Marcello is determined to map out his life by the standards of normality and Giulia’s affair is but another way to define the meaning of “normality.”

In a more significant manner, sexual attraction plays a role in Marcello’s love interest while in Paris. While laying the groundwork for his old professor Quadri’s murder, Marcello falls in love with Quadri’s wife and begins to fantasize about their life together. Meanwhile Signora Quadri is falling in love with Giulia. When Marcello realizes this startling truth he reflects that “for a few hours during that afternoon, he had believed



in love; now he realized that he was revolving in a topsy-turvy, sterile world in which real love did not occur, but merely sensual relationships, from the most natural and ordinary to the most abnormal and unusual” (279). This is an upsetting revelation for Marcello, to realize that love can be as abnormal as he believes himself to be. Carlo L. Golino notices within the novels of Moravia that “we find ourselves in a world peopled with abnormal and morbid individuals obsessed by sensual and erotic preoccupations varying from natural sex urges to unrestrained lust” (339). Marcello realizes as this point that just as life does not fit into a preconceived mold of normality, neither does love, nor sexual attraction fit such a strict, confining mold. As Marcello navigates through the world he believes to be normal, he soon discovers that abnormalities exist in all aspects of life, especially in regards to sexual relationships.

Nowhere is the role of sex more prevalent in these four novels of Moravia’s than in *Boredom* where Dino attempts fruitlessly to feel a sense of possession through the act of sex. The plot of this novel is driven by Dino’s growing obsession with his lover, Cecilia. A young girl, uninterested and non-descript, slowly becomes a driving passion for Dino as he desperately attempts to possess her in a way he continually feels he is unable to. One afternoon after sleeping with Cecilia, Dino questions his ability to possess Giulia or anything for that matter. He reflects:

“I thought, it might even be that I had really possessed her, possessed her totally, possessed her with no margin of independence or mystery. But I was unable to have full consciousness of it, or, therefore, to enjoy it;...Again, and more strongly than ever, I experienced the feeling that I was incapable of achieving true possession, in spite of the fullness of the physical relation” (155.)

Dino's ability to possess Cecilia is crucial to his feeling able to possess parts of life in general. The physical relationship is a means of engaging fully in a moment in time, without pretext or charade but in what seems to be the only genuine act left in the world portrayed. Yet Dino feels unable to achieve this sort of possession and is left as bored and unfulfilled as before, but driven to pursue a means of possessing Cecilia. Sex works as a means of true connection for Dino. Since he has given up painting, he occupies his time with Cecilia searching in this way to overcome the tremendous boredom that follows him throughout his life.

In Moravia's novels, the sexual relationship acts as a way of attempting to overcome alienation as with the cases of Michele and Carla, and also as a way of revealing the alienation and "abnormalities" of society as in the case of Marcello. For Adriana, it is a tool that she utilizes and enjoys as she feels a sense of connection with others through it, while for Dino it acts as an obsession fueling him towards his struggle for possession of Cecilia. Moravia has said, "In the modern world sex is synonymous with love, and who could deny that love is a very common subject in the literature of all times and places" (Freed and Ross, 70). In all of these ways, sex becomes the modern-day love story, love's equivalent in an absurd and meaningless world.

### **Absurdity and the Structure of the Novel**

Not only does Moravia create this absurd and meaningless world thematically, but also structurally throughout each of these four novels. The existential novel that Moravia is a part of creating does not adhere to the strict "introduction, climax, and conclusion"

formula that is so recognizable in novels written before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Barrett explains the lack of structure in existential literature: “No beginning, middle, end—such is the structureless structure that some modern literary works struggle toward” (47). In this way, Moravia’s novels instead lead us on an absurd journey where questions are left unanswered, conflicts unresolved and loose-ends untied. This is the landscape of the existential novel. The framework of Moravia’s novels can be classified in this way: “The totality of life for Moravia is man himself; it is man who is ridiculous and absurd...Man reveals his absurdity in his relationship to other men” (Freed and Ross, 76). If one hopes to illustrate this absurd existence, the traditional structure of the novel cannot apply. One must create a new structure for a new world. Barrett tells us, “Our existence, as we know it, is no longer transparent and understandable by reason, bound together into a tight, coherent structure. The world that we are shown in the world of modern painters and writers is opaque and dense” (49). Because of this, the structure of these novels follows no recognizable pattern but instead leaves readers with the realization that conclusion does not exist, meaning is not discovered and alienation is not overcome. The structure is as significant as the themes raised as they work together to portray an empty world where beginning, middle, and end do not exist.

As the first existential novel in Europe, *The Time of Indifference* is groundbreaking in terms of structure. We are quickly introduced to five characters within the first few chapters of the books. We understand immediately a disparity between the way they present themselves and how they truly feel. Cottrell states, “Everyone in the novel except Leo suffers from the existential crisis of the consciousness helplessly observing the self, and the painful awareness of the self as an object, a puppet or an automation”

(40). Carla is introduced with Leo, plotting their affair together, while shortly after plays the role of the dutiful daughter with her mother. Michele battles his need to express feigned emotion amidst the ever-present indifference he feels. As these plot lines develop, it seems clear where the novel is headed. Carla begins her affair with Leo while Michele attempts to make love to Lisa and the climax of the novel remains looming in the distance. A small climax only comes after Michele discovers the truth of Carla and Leo's affair and confronts them, but Michele's indifference to all of this fails to produce any serious upset. As conclusion nears it seems clear that things will continue the way they have been. Michele and Carla share a cab home and Carla discusses her plans. She tells her brother, "I'll marry him...What would happen to me if I didn't marry him?...What would I become? Think about it for a second...in these circumstances" (305). It seems clear this is what lies ahead for Carla and the rest of her family, but we are left without knowing for sure. Mariagrazia, Michele and Carla's mother is left oblivious to it all thinking that "her love had told her the truth and was not betraying her" (306). And with this delusion, she and Carla leave for a costume party with Carla feeling "as though she were someone else, someone gayer and lighter" (310). The ending is entirely absurd and unrelated to the plot lines of the novel. Instead of resolving the conflicts, Michele's insufferable indifference, Carla's compromised situation and Mariagrazia's delusions, the two women head off to a costume party for a "night of pleasure" (310). Yet, this is precisely the sort of ending that classifies this novel as an existential narrative. It exists without conclusion, without logical sense. Instead of resolving the complicated situation these women have created, they escape them and amuse themselves with momentary pleasure. This is the world they live in and perpetuate. Moravia does not seek to remedy

it, but only to identify its existence. We can imagine what happens to the characters after this “night of pleasure” but regardless of what happens, it would not change the novel or its themes. The ending tells us that these people do not change. They do not face up to the illusions they live in or escape the indifference that they feel but instead continue to live with it day by day. Douglas Radcliff-Umstead decides that the work “is a novel of defeat. No character completely achieves his aim” (52). It is only this sort of conclusion that one can deduce from this abrupt ending of Moravia’s first existential novel.

Similarly, *The Woman of Rome* leads readers down a path filled with many plot lines without much connection between them. Deگو says, “Expressed in abstract terms of a summary, the story of *The Woman of Rome* may seem absurd” (71). The first part of the novel follows Adriana and her life before she becomes a prostitute. She poses as a model and falls in love with Gino. After her fall from innocence, she becomes a prostitute and the plot focuses mainly on four separate affairs with Gino, Astarita, a man who loves Adriana but one whom she does not love, Sonzogno, a murderer and the father of her child and finally her love, Mino. These four enter Adriana’s life at different times and affect her life in different ways. Astarita is there to help her whenever she needs him; Sonzogno is a fearful figure but one she feels has possessed her more fully than any other man, and Mino is the man she loves spontaneously and entirely. These four relationships guide the book without much plot or connection between the four. We follow Adriana in her encounters with these four men and experience the relationships she has with them. The novel, written in first person, reads almost as a diary of Adriana’s experiences instead of a traditional novel. The story ends with Astarita, Songzogno and Mino being killed and

Adriana awaiting the birth of her child. Adriana expresses her last sentiments regarding her child and the money that Mino has left her:

“I thought about Mino and then I thought about my child. I thought how he would be the child of a murderer and a prostitute; but any man in the world might happen to kill someone and any woman might sell herself for money, and what mattered most of all was that he should have an easy birth and grow up strong and healthy. I decided that if it was a boy I would call him Giacomo in memory of Mino. But if it was a girl, I would call her Letitia, because I wanted her to have what I had not, a gay, happy life, as I was sure that, with the help of Mino’s family, that was just what she would have.” (390)

Despite the life that Adriana has led at this point, it is startling to hear her express such optimism for the future. In conclusion, it seems the events of the novel have all been by chance, since “any man might happen to kill someone” and “any woman might sell herself for money” (390). Adriana’s past is not important as she will raise her child to have a “gay, happy life.” This episode could occur at any point in the novel as it does not serve to conclude any of the issues raised throughout. It is a snap-shot of Adriana, alone, thinking about her life and her future. In this way, there is no official ending to *The Woman of Rome* as there is no official plot or storyline, but instead an inside view of the life of a “woman of Rome” who by chance happened to be a prostitute and is now expecting a child. The ending reinforces the random, absurd nature of the novel and the world it portrays.

Unlike the absurdity of *the Woman of Rome*, *the Conformist* adheres to stricter plot lines and contains a recognizable climax. Marcello’s childhood is introduced at the

start of the novel, including his encounter with Lino, a figure who, although believed to be dead, appears again towards the end of the novel. We follow Marcello through his government job, still searching for news clippings to confirm Lino's death and preparing to marry Giulia. The novel continues as he is assigned to assist in the murder of his former professor and falls in love with the professor's wife only to discover she has fallen in love with his own wife. These details make for an active plot as events happen in succession and all lead to the inevitable death of Quadri, the professor. One could say the climax happens when Marcello discovers that Quadri's wife has been murdered along with Quadri. Years later, Giulia discovers Marcello's involvement in the murder and Marcello meets Lino one night in a garden, discovering that he did not murder him after all. These events tie up nicely and serve to show that things are not how they may seem, as Marcello has based his whole life on the belief that as a boy, he killed a man. Furthermore, thematically, Marcello experiences resolution as he decides that "the deliberate humility of seeking an impossible relationship with a normality which was in any case fallacious was merely a mask for inverted pride and self-esteem" (373). The novel concludes with a surprising ending as Marcello and his family are killed by an air raid, suffering from the same sort of ambush that Marcello helped to plan for Quadri.

While this novel follows more strictly to the traditional novel structure, it also expresses the existential absurdity of the world as Marcello and his family are killed while leaving for vacation. As with *the Woman of Rome*, *the Conformist* expresses the idea that these events could be happening to any man, just as insignificant as the next. All of these events, conflicts and resolutions and in the end all that remains is a "curtain of silence and darkness" (376). While its structure might be more traditional, the conclusion

of this novel and its subsequent themes are in many ways existential and can be attributed to the modern novel.

The structure of *the Conformist* contrasts greatly with that of *Boredom* as there is very little plot found in this novel. The novel opens with a prologue describing Dino's struggle with boredom and its effect on him throughout his life, to the point where he decides to stop painting which is where the book begins. Ross and Freed relate, "The absurd lies behind this boredom; and behind the absurd lies death and nothingness" (52). The place that painting once took in Dino's life is replaced by a sexual relationship with Cecilia, a character who becomes the central focus of the rest of the novel. The remainder of the novel consists of Dino's obsession with Cecilia and his hope of truly possessing her and therefore needing her no longer. We follow Dino as he devises neurotic plans in order to catch Cecilia in the act of cheating. The story continues this way without a clear direction or purpose until the point where Cecilia leaves for Ponza with another lover and Dino suffers a car accident in an attempt to take his own life. The epilogue describes Dino in the hospital with a new found serenity as he remains immobile and fixated on a tree he sees outside his hospital window. Freed and Ross state, "The tree, which earlier would have bored him because it had no immediate relationship to him is now viewed with pleasure and satisfaction. He finds that objects can exist outside of himself and still have meaning of their own; they no longer seem absurd" (148). This is connection on a basic level but his feelings towards Cecilia are confused. He feels Cecilia's existence in a true and genuine manner yet is unsure if he loves her or if he does, what type of love he feels for her. He makes connections between his painting and his relationship with



Cecilia and his suicide attempt, believing that they are all aiming at the same end, a sense of connection with the world. The novel concludes with Dino telling us that:

“In the long run, the only truly certain result was that I had learned to love Cecilia, or rather, to love her without complications. Anyhow I hoped I had learned. For in relation also to this aspect of my life, doubt could not be excluded. And in order to be completely sure, I had to wait until Cecilia came back from her visit to the seaside.” (320)

Here we have the narrator warning us to doubt him and what he is saying at this point. This final statement provides no conclusion but instead confuses the reader even more. We cannot be sure if Dino learned to love Cecilia, or if he learned anything at all, or if we can believe anything he has told us throughout the novel. The ending represents a contrast to the rest of the novel’s self-assured boredom. Here Dino doubts himself and what he believes, because for the first time, he feels something. Freed and Ross explain, “This passage shakes with uncertainty and the faltering unsureness of a man recuperating from a long illness. In this case the illness is a lifetime of alienation and terrible boredom” (139). Here, for the first time we see Dino genuinely care about someone or attempt to. His is a success story as he is “saved through existential commitment” (Freed and Ross 139)! Yet the structure of the novel matches the themes of alienation and boredom within it. The book acts as an episode of one of Dino’s many attempts to escape from boredom. The success is not important, but the struggle itself. Dino might love Cecilia and he might not, but this is not crucial. What’s important is that the life consists of boredom and absurdity and one must overcome these through action and commitment. Ross and Freed state, “For Moravia, alienation exists and encompasses more than just

man's withdrawal or inability to relate to the world at large" (51). Like the others, *Boredom* expresses the absurdity and emptiness of the modern world and the struggles one endures to overcome its suffocation.

These four themes serve to highlight the existential aspects of Moravia's novels and the struggle these four protagonists undergo in the hopes of connecting to the world and the physical reality surrounding them. Moravia does not provide us with a remedy for the existential anguish felt by modern man. Pacifici concludes, "Moravia has yet to dramatize a possible solution to the existential problem of man, who finds himself confronting a world where no rational pattern may be said to exist and who is nevertheless forced by his ontological structure to 'choose' and 'act' even without a strong moral code or universally respected principles" (85). Readers are left only with the realization that the world is absurd, that man is alienated, and that he must struggle to relate and connect to his surroundings.

Moravia entered the literary world at a tumultuous time when the dominance of the Fascist regime sought to suppress the importance of the individual. He introduced the value of man's struggle with existence and in many ways revolutionized the Italian novel as well as laid the groundwork for existential literature in Europe. Through his works, readers experience man's painful battle with alienation and seclusion, while struggling to connect to an absurd and illogical modern world.

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