

THE NATURE OF NOTHINGNESS IN KING LEAR

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by  
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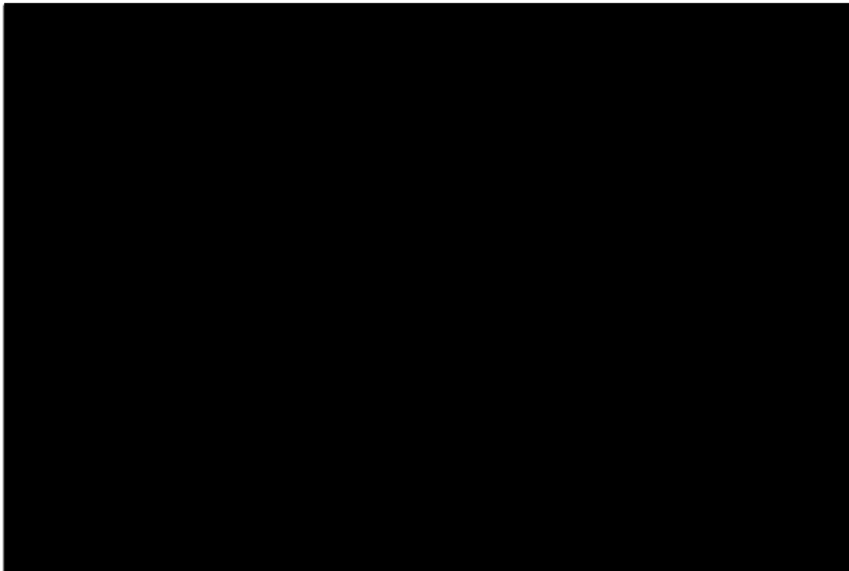
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Chapter I  
The Sixteenth-Century  
Concept of Nothingness

The approach toward life in the sixteenth century was paradoxical. Writers and thinkers struggled with the questions and problems of life; they tried to determine if life had any value, and if it consisted of something. The prospect of nothingness and the void loomed large on the intellectual horizon. Something versus nothing was the dominant intellectual conflict or tension in the sixteenth century. Beneath this dominant tension were more specific tensions. Man was concerned with the issue of belief versus unbelief. The order of man's universe was in danger of being replaced with chaos. Permanence was giving way to flux, and the result was often a loss of certainty with an increase of uncertainty. Consequently, man's feeling of security gave way to insecurity, and his feeling of significance was in danger of being eroded and replaced by a profound feeling of insignificance. In many instances, independence gave way to dependence, and the objective approach to the world was constantly being challenged by a subjective approach. Rationality was perpetually under attack by irrationality, and idealism was continually coming into conflict with realism. Frequently man would shift his emphasis from life to questions about death, and his optimism often dissolved into pessimism.

When the Reformation took place, the solidarity of Christianity in the West which had existed for centuries was

suddenly and dramatically shattered. When Martin Luther drove the nails into the door at Wittenberg, while putting up his Ninety-Five Theses, he destroyed a comfortable and sustaining myth, namely, that Christianity was monolithic. With the emergence of Protestantism, the old religious order disappeared. To make matters worse, the split continued, and the Protestant camp became fragmented into groups rallying behind Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and others. At the same time there was a shift from reliance on authority and the Church for answers to religious questions, to reliance on the individual and individual choice in matters of faith. Thus, each man could read scripture and decide for himself the truth to be found there. As a result, man was faced with important questions of religious theory, and these questions often had profoundly personal implications. In one sense this is positive. It allows for more individual freedom, and there is an inherent stamp of approval placed on man and his ability to respond intelligently to religious matters. In another sense, however, this is negative. The individual is faced with increased responsibility in answering religious questions, and he is denied the comfort and ease of a programmed answer from a Church which drew on centuries of unity.

According to religious theory in the Renaissance, God was the creator and Lord of the universe. Man was created in the image of God, and he was created for the

purpose of knowing, loving, and serving God. Luther stresses these points when he says,

. . . man, who by faith is created in the image of God, is both joyful and happy because of Christ in whom so many benefits are conferred upon him; and therefore it is his one occupation to serve God joyfully and without thought of gain, in love that is not constrained.<sup>1</sup>

All things came from God, and in a temporal sense, man was the being for whom everything was made. Because man was so blessed by God, it was his duty to obey God. Man fell from a state of innocence and grace; when Adam disobeyed God, the theological implications for man were considerable. And perhaps it is true that the problem of the fall took on somewhat greater importance after the split in Christendom, an institutional fall which echoed the disharmony resulting from Adam's actions. Like the Adam and Eve story, Protestants blamed Catholics, and Catholics blamed Protestants for what happened. Theologically, the fall meant that man was no longer pure, and that God had to take drastic measures if man were to be redeemed. God demonstrated his concern for man, in addition to stressing man's importance, by His incarnation and willingness to suffer and die through Jesus Christ. After the fall, then, a Christian was to believe in God, and trust Him to dispense His saving grace. Luther defines a Christian in the following way: "He is the child of grace and remission of sins, which is under no law, sin, death and hell."<sup>2</sup> The key is faith.

While faith is the key to man's situation in his post-lapsarian state, it is easier to talk about faith than to be sure of actually having it. The belief/unbelief problem was a significant one for sixteenth-century man, complicated by the chaotic religious situation. Belief was not facilitated by the gloomy view of man held by some of the reformers. Calvin "pictured man as vitiated in intellect and depraved in morals as a result of Adam's fall."<sup>3</sup> He considered man to be "completely worthless because of sin,"<sup>4</sup> and in need of God's saving grace. Luther emphasized the seriousness of the problem of unbelief when he said,

. . . the Bible penetrates into our hearts, and looks at the root and the very source of all sin, i.e., unbelief in the depth of our heart. Just as faith alone gives us the spirit and the desire for doing works that are plainly good, so unbelief is the sole cause of sin; it exalts the flesh, and gives the desire to do works that are plainly wrong, as happened in the case of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, Genesis 3 [:6].<sup>5</sup>

The Christian sought to believe, and was haunted by the reality of unbelief and its consequences.

For those who called themselves Christians, and professed to have a strong and sincere belief in God, it was natural to expect that this belief should manifest itself in positive ways. Luther points out that, as a Christian, "A man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body to work for it alone, but he lives for all men on earth; rather, he lives only for others and not for himself."<sup>6</sup>

The Christian is not selfish. Montaigne, however, often sees the Christian as being selfish and irreligious.

Montaigne says that man devotes himself to matters which relate to his passions, and he says, that "there is no hostility so admirable as the Christian."<sup>7</sup> He continues his negative remarks when he says,

our zeal performs wonders when it seconds our inclinations to hatred, cruelty, ambition, avarice, detraction, rebellion: but moved against the hair towards goodness, benignity, moderation, unless by miracle some rare and virtuous disposition prompt us to it, we stir neither hand nor foot. Our religion is intended to extirpate vices; whereas it screens, nourishes, incites them.<sup>8</sup>

Montaigne believes that man is motivated by his most basic desires, and that his actions mock his religious posture. Religion becomes an appearance to cover up the ugly reality of human cruelty and insensitivity. Montaigne also has contempt for man's attitude toward death. He thinks that man should welcome death as an opportunity to be united with God, but instead man is afraid of death and figuratively tries to run from it. This leads to Montaigne's conclusion that, "We are Christians by the same title that we are Perigordins or Germans."<sup>9</sup> If Montaigne's observations are correct, for some Christians in the sixteenth century, belief came to nothing. And for others, the struggle for belief continued on and on.

Renaissance theory included an orderly concept of the universe, and man occupied an important place in that

ordered universe. According to E. M. W. Tillyard, the theme of "cosmic order was yet one of the master-themes of Elizabethan poetry."<sup>10</sup> The Elizabethans were worried about the order of the universe being upset, and they "were obsessed by the fear of chaos and the fact of mutability; and the obsession was powerful in proportion as their faith in the cosmic order was strong."<sup>11</sup> The metaphor of the "Great Chain of Being" was a means of expressing "the unimaginable plenitude of God's creation, its unfaltering order, and its ultimate unity. The chain stretched from the foot of God's throne to the meanest of inanimate objects."<sup>12</sup> The hierarchy was arranged in the following ascending order: objects, plants, animals, man, angels, God.<sup>13</sup> It was important for man to understand the universal order that was behind everything because this would help him live a better life, and thus serve God more completely. Man fought against disorder and chaos, products of sin which were "perpetually striving to come again. And if, by tradition, the way to salvation is through God's grace and Christ's atonement, there is also the way, paired with it, through the contemplation of the divine order of the created universe."<sup>14</sup> Man's position in the hierarchy, halfway between inanimate objects and God, was crucial and precarious; he could go either way, becoming more like an animal or an angel. Man possessed a soul as well as a body. The soul was considered to be admirable, and his body was considered to be

"equally magnificent."<sup>15</sup>

In his dedication of The Prince to Lorenzo The Magnificent in 1532, Niccolo Machiavelli says that he has scrutinized and pondered the actions of great men, and that he will offer some ideas and observations resulting from that study in a style that is unadorned "with long phrases or high-sounding words or any of those superficial attractions and ornaments with which many writers seek to embellish their material."<sup>16</sup> In terms of both style and content, Machiavelli is direct and to the point. Nevertheless, there is a paradoxical quality about Machiavelli's ideas in relation to the problem of order versus chaos. In some respects Machiavelli's ideas were considered practical and subversive, and a threat to the existing order of society; they received more attention than the more abstract and speculative ideas advanced by Copernicus and Montaigne.<sup>17</sup> Theodore Spencer compares Machiavelli to Cicero in order to illustrate the change that was taking place in political thinking. Spencer says, "According to Cicero, if a man is to control his fellow men and himself, justice is the essential virtue, and moral right is the basic of action."<sup>18</sup> Cicero thinks that man is "'the only animal that has a feeling for order, for propriety, for moderation in word and deed. And so no other animal has a sense of beauty, loveliness, harmony in the visible world.'"<sup>19</sup> Cicero was stressing the virtuous and



rational capabilities of man, and thus was helping to create an ideal picture of man that the citizen, nobleman, or ruler could look to as a guide for his actions.<sup>20</sup> Machiavelli, however, took the opposite approach. He took a practical and realistic look at man, concentrating on the way man is, and not on the way he ought to be:

how we live is so far removed from how we ought to live, that he who abandons what is done for what ought to be done, will rather learn to bring about his ruin than his preservation. A man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good. Therefore it is necessary for a prince, who wishes to maintain himself, to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge and not use it, according to the necessity of the case.<sup>21</sup>

In a matter-of-fact manner, Machiavelli expresses the truth as he sees it, having studied men and rulers in great detail. His ideas are aimed at real rulers and not passive political theorists. Machiavelli is not concerned here with right or wrong, rather he simply states his ideas on man, and how a prince can best maintain himself. Machiavelli treats the state as "a dynamic, amoral entity, a force"<sup>22</sup> that is approached in a rational and detached manner.

Machiavelli's ideas are paradoxical because, while they may be a threat to the established order of society, and thus threaten chaos, they are directed toward the goal of an ordered society. This is graphically illustrated in his advice about war. Machiavelli says that the primary concern of the prince should be "war and its organization

and discipline."<sup>23</sup> Thoughts of war should dominate the mind of a prince, even if his domain is at peace. Machiavelli says that there are two ways that a prince can approach war during a time of peace. The first is through action, and the second is through study. Action involves keeping his men in good condition through exercise, in addition to maintaining discipline. Study involves learning the "nature of the land, how steep the mountains are, how the valleys debouch, where the plains lie,"<sup>24</sup> and where the swamps and rivers are located. Machiavelli recommends that a prince hunt a great deal, because this will help him to become accustomed to bodily hardships, as well as provide him with an excellent opportunity to learn the terrain of his country in a subtle way. Thus, the prince is able to prepare for potentially dangerous situations which may come up in time of war. The action and study proposed by Machiavelli are highly planned and disciplined, and they reflect the drive for order implicit in Machiavelli's thought and writing. And in a larger sense, Machiavelli mirrors the desire for order inherent in the consciousness of the sixteenth century.

Radical changes were taking place in the Renaissance, and what seemed to be secure and permanent one day was challenged the next. When Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and other reformers attacked popes and councils, and found them to be in error, what reason was there to think that kings and aristocrats were right when they spoke or acted?

Henry VIII is a good example of the changes taking place in an era of reform. He was a powerful and respected leader in the Catholic Church, who in 1520 was labeled the "Defender of the Faith" by Pope Clement VII for writing The Defense of the Seven Sacraments. But by 1533 he was excommunicated and in a state of mortal sin. The ecclesiastical actions and problems of Henry VIII illustrate some of the uncertainty which was sweeping Europe and England in the sixteenth century. Permanence was giving way to flux, and the results had an impact on social, religious, and political matters of the time. It is not difficult to imagine that the theory of divine right was less important after the shattering effects of the Reformation.

Montaigne deals with the idea that everything is in a state of flux, and that there is constant change. What Montaigne says applies to both man and the world:

the flower of youth dies and passes away when age comes on, and youth is terminated in the flower of age of a full-grown man, infancy in youth, and the first age dies in infancy; yesterday died in to-day, and to-day will die in to-morrow, and there is nothing that remains in the same state, or that is always the same thing.  
 . . .25

Montaigne's views yield the following conclusion: "any knowledge of reality is hopeless."<sup>26</sup> If man needs security and certainty for peace of mind, he will not find it in Montaigne's ideas on reality. As Theodore Spencer indicates, the implications of Montaigne's thought are considerable:

Thus Montaigne, by destroying the psychological order, destroys everything else; a human being who is indistinguishable from animals is not a human being who can comprehend the order of the universe or discover any Laws of Nature in society.<sup>27</sup>

If Spencer is right, Montaigne has presented a picture of a world in shambles, a world devoid of unity and coherence. And if Spencer is right about the impact of Montaigne, then the ideas expressed by Montaigne, and the effects of those ideas, are closely related to the existential concepts of flux, uncertainty, and insecurity which have dominated the twentieth century.

Theodore Spencer indicates that the basic conflict between the dignity of man before the fall, and the wretchedness of man after the fall could theoretically be dealt with through the doctrines of grace and redemption. But he goes on to say that another conflict which emerged had intellectual and emotional consequences of even greater proportions:

The conflict was this: belief in each one of the interrelated orders--cosmological, natural, and political--which as we have seen were the frame, the basic pattern of all Elizabethan thinking, was being punctured by a doubt. Copernicus had questioned the cosmological order, Montaigne had questioned the natural order, Machiavelli had questioned the political order. The consequences were enormous.<sup>28</sup>

Spencer cautions against placing too much emphasis on the "popular mind." Douglas Bush agrees when he asserts that "the Copernican doctrine was not nearly so disturbing as modern historians have often said it was."<sup>29</sup> This may be

good advice. After all, it is difficult to determine what the "popular mind" is, let alone determine the effects a scientific theory has on the "popular mind." The concern here, however, is not with the effects of the Copernican theory on common people, rather it is with the apparent effects of the theory on the thinkers and writers of the time. In particular, the concern here is with the possible effects of the overthrow of the Ptolemaic system by Copernicus as evidenced in King Lear. Theodore Spencer indicates that Galileo's discoveries came too late to influence Shakespeare. This, undoubtedly, is true since Galileo's Siderius Nuncius was not published until 1610. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that Galileo was not thinking and working in a vacuum. His discoveries are the logical outgrowth of ideas that had been in the intellectual air since the publication by Copernicus of On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres in 1543.

At the same time that the cosmological hierarchy was being questioned and attacked, the natural hierarchy was being subjected to rigorous scrutiny. This began in earnest when Montaigne published his translation of Raimond De Sebonde's Natural Theology in 1569. Sebonde was extremely optimistic about man, and his capacity for knowledge, both secular and sacred. In acquiring this knowledge, man relied on his unassisted reason. Theodore Spencer says that Sebonde's Natural Theology is "typical of the conventional

picture of man's central place in the universe."<sup>30</sup> In his "Apology for Raimond De Sebonde" Montaigne appears to defend Sebonde's views, but he was actually mounting an "elaborate attack on the arrogance and vanity of man,"<sup>31</sup> as expressed in Sebonde's work. Apparently Montaigne's purpose was to make people "sensible of the inanity, vanity, and nothingness of man; to wrest the wretched arms of their reason out of their hands. . . ." <sup>32</sup> Montaigne was disturbed by man's image of himself, an image which he thought was based on some unsound theories. Montaigne expresses his contempt for such theories when he says,

Let him make me understand by the force of his reason, upon what foundations he has built those great advantages he thinks he has over other creatures: what has made him believe, that this admirable movement of the celestial arch, the eternal light of those planets and stars that roll so proudly over his head, the fearful motions of that infinite ocean, were established, and continue so many ages, for his service and convenience? Can anything be imagined to be so ridiculous that this miserable and wretched creature, who is not so much as master of himself, but subject to the injuries of all things, should call himself master and emperor of the world, of which he has not power to know the least part, much less to command it.<sup>33</sup>

Montaigne's view of man differs significantly from those who call man the "crown of creation," and would place him at the center of the universe, to be served by all of creation. If Montaigne was right, the certainty about man's greatness, if not completely gone, was greatly threatened by doubt and uncertainty.

Montaigne continues his assault on man's presumptions and certainties when he turns to St. Paul in dealing with the

issue of ignorance versus knowledge: "The simple and ignorant, says St. Paul, raise themselves up to heaven, and take possession of it; and we, with all our knowledge, plunge ourselves into the infernal abyss."<sup>34</sup> Montaigne has contempt for what he calls "our knowledge," and he continues to lash out at man and his presumption when he says,

The participation we have in the knowledge of truth such as it is, is not acquired by our own force: God has sufficiently given us to understand that by the testimony He has chosen out of the common people, simple and ignorant men, whom He has been pleased to employ to instruct us in His admirable secrets.<sup>35</sup>

Montaigne goes on to assert that man's faith is a gift from God, so man cannot take pride in that. He says that man does not acquire his religion by meditation or by virtue of his understanding. In fact, Montaigne thinks that "the weakness of our judgment more assists us than force, and our blindness more than our clearness of sight."<sup>36</sup> Thus, man learns about God more through his ignorance than through his knowledge.

After having stressed man's failure in gaining knowledge about God through his own abilities, and once again reduced the certainty of man's importance, Montaigne turns to man's quest for knowledge in a more general sense. Man's success is not greater in this area. Montaigne believes that after ages of seeking truth, man has merely learned to know his own weakness. He thinks, therefore, that,

men having tried and sounded all things, and having found in that accumulation of knowledge and provision of so many various things, nothing massive and firm, nothing but vanity, have quitted their presumption and acknowledged their natural condition.<sup>37</sup>

Montaigne quotes Cicero to support his views on knowledge and nothingness: "'Almost all the ancients have declared, that there is nothing can be known, nothing can be understood: the senses are too weak; men's minds too weak, and the course of life too short.'"<sup>38</sup> These thoughts lead Montaigne to a consideration of the Pyrrhonians and other skeptics. Montaigne respects the Pyrrhonians, and he describes their approach toward knowledge in the following way:

the profession of the Pyrrhonians is to waver, doubt, and inquire, not to make themselves sure of or responsible to themselves for anything. Of the three actions of the soul, the imaginative, the appetitive, and the consenting, they receive the two first; the last they hold ambiguous, without inclination or approbation, one way or the other, however slight.<sup>39</sup>

The Pyrrhonian emphasis on doubt and uncertainty, and their reluctance to consent suggests a rather close connection between the Pyrrhonians and the existentialists who followed centuries later. Montaigne demonstrates an intellectual affinity for ideas associated with both the Pyrrhonians and the existentialists.

Finally, Montaigne ridicules man for turning to science as a means for acquiring answers and certainty. Man has limited perception, and is often deceived by his senses; yet he continues to make judgments about himself and the world. In doing this he often looks to science for



assistance. Montaigne blasts science when he says:

Good God, what blunders, what mistakes should we discover in our poor science! I am mistaken if it apprehend any one thing as it really is: and I shall depart hence more ignorant of all other things than of my own ignorance.<sup>40</sup>

Montaigne tells sixteenth-century man that science, like many other areas of his life, is not to be trusted for answers to the riddles of life. And the difficulty of arriving at truth through the world of science extends to the world of philosophy, which Montaigne says "presents us, not that which really is or what she really believes, but what she has contrived with the most plausible likelihood and the fairest aspect."<sup>41</sup> When man looks for truth, both science and philosophy are deficient, and certainly is upstaged by uncertainty.

With man's certainty often melting into uncertainty, it is not surprising that his security was frequently replaced by insecurity. Montaigne explores the security/insecurity problem when he considers man's approach to God. He reviews some of the concepts of God held by the ancients, and then makes a caustic remark about philosophy: "Trust to your philosophy my masters, and brag that you have found the bean in the cake, with all this rattle from so many philosophical heads!"<sup>42</sup> So many diverse philosophical opinions on a subject teaches Montaigne to be open-minded. He also learns that,

The things that are most unknown are the most proper to be deified; wherefore, to make gods of ourselves, as the ancients did, exceeds the extremest weakness of understanding.<sup>43</sup>

Montaigne goes on to ridicule man's practice of projecting his own image on the gods, attributing to them human imperfections like desire, anger, revenge, marriages, and jealousy. He concludes that such a practice must "proceed from a marvellous intoxication of human understanding."<sup>44</sup> Thus, Montaigne is emphasizing man's inherent insecurity, and the great lengths he will go to in trying to cope with that insecurity.

Machiavelli did not contribute to a feeling of security when he urged the prince always to be on a war footing. The natural thing to think when a country is at peace, or moves from a war situation to peace, is that peace will last, and that the thoughts of most people, including the prince, will be on peace. But Machiavelli is disturbing that comfortable illusion by suggesting that the Renaissance prince be in perpetual preparation for war, and that even in his seemingly harmless pastimes like hunting, he has ulterior motives. Carried to its logical conclusion, when could a man in the sixteenth century trust the words, actions, or practices of his prince? These ideas are important from a psychological point of view, and they did little to provide man with a feeling of security.

There were three kinds of temporal law which applied to man in the sixteenth century: the law of Nature itself;

the law of Nations; and civil law.<sup>45</sup> Based on custom and tradition, kingship was the form of government used in England during the sixteenth century; and in theory, the king was not to be a despot; he represented God on earth, as well as the "universal principle of justice"<sup>46</sup> which comes from God. It was common to compare the universe to man, the macrocosm to the microcosm; and according to Theodore Spencer, this comparison was "the most universal and most revealing symbol for the whole concept of Nature's order and unity, and for the glorification of man's place in the universal scheme."<sup>47</sup> From the ideas just presented, it is evident that man occupied a significant position in the cosmos. Man thought of himself as significant; he was proud of himself, and his important place in the creation.

Naturally, such ideas did not go unchallenged. Montaigne proposed "to crush and spurn under foot pride and human arrogance."<sup>48</sup> If he did this effectively, Montaigne thought that he might be able to make man aware of his insignificance. Montaigne wants to make man "bow down and bite the ground, under the authority and reverence of the divine majesty." Montaigne asserts that it is "to this alone that knowledge and wisdom appertain."<sup>49</sup> One of Montaigne's goals is to see if man is able "to arrive at any certainty by argument and reason."<sup>50</sup> With these ideas in mind, Montaigne says,

Let us then now consider a man alone, without foreign assistance, armed only with his own proper arms, and unfurnished of the divine grace and wisdom, which is all his honour, strength, and the foundation of his being; let us see what certainty he has in this fine equipment.<sup>51</sup>

Shortly after this Montaigne chastizes man for thinking of himself as occupying a privileged position in the universe. Montaigne attacks man's presumption, and calls it man's "natural and original disease."<sup>52</sup> He calls man the "most wretched and frail of all creatures,"<sup>53</sup> and yet man is the creature with the most pride. And if this were not enough, man has the vanity to imagine himself more on a par with God than with the other creatures. Man separates himself from the rest of creation, and attributes divine qualities to himself. This is such an absurd situation, that Montaigne shows his contempt for man's penchant for linking himself with God through his example of the goose who says,

'All parts of the universe have I an interest in; the earth serves me to walk upon, the sun to light me, the stars to spread their influence upon me; I have such an advantage by the winds, such conveniences by the waters: there is nothing that yon heavenly roof looks upon so favourable as me; I am the darling of nature. Is it not man that feeds, lodges, and serves me? 'Tis for me that he sows and grinds; if he eats me, he does the same by his fellow man, and so do I the worms that kill and devour him.'<sup>54</sup>

In these lines Montaigne ridicules man for his arrogance, emphasizes man's mortality, and reveals the absurdity of man's presumption.

Whether man was free and independent, or whether he was bound and dependent was a debatable issue in the

sixteenth century. In a religious sense, Luther and Erasmus debated the issue of free will. Luther stated two theses on the issue which seem to be contradictory: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."<sup>55</sup> But Luther maintains that the apparent contradiction dissolves when these theses are considered in terms of Luther's concepts of faith, and the inner man versus the outer man.

Machiavelli deals with freedom and independence in a secular sense. He believes that princes should place their primary trust in themselves and in their own ability, rather than rely on others. He says that he knows that many people hold the opinion that worldly events are controlled and governed by fortune and God; and "that men cannot by their prudence change them, and that on the contrary there is no remedy whatever, and for this they may judge it to be useless to toil much about them, but let things be ruled by chance."<sup>56</sup> Machiavelli indicates that sometimes he is inclined to share this opinion. Basically, however, he thinks that fortune rules half of man's actions, and man retains his free will for the other half of his actions. To illustrate his views on fortune and free will, Machiavelli compares fortune to an impetuous river that is often turbulent, destructive, and full of fury. Yet he also maintains that,

men can make provisions against it by dykes and banks, so that when it rises it will either go into a canal or its rush will not be so wild and dangerous. So it is with fortune, which shows her power where no measures have been taken to resist her, and directs her fury where she knows that no dykes or barriers have been made to hold her.<sup>57</sup>

Machiavelli goes on to compare fortune to a woman. He argues that it is better to be impetuous than cautious with fortune, because "it is necessary, if you wish to master her, to conquer her by force; and it can be seen that . . . like a woman, she is always a friend to the young, because they are less cautious, fiercer, and master her with greater audacity."<sup>58</sup> Machiavelli directs his advice to Lorenzo The Magnificent, a prince whom he believes will be courageous and daring, and Machiavelli's views leave plenty of room for the Renaissance individualist to play a major role in shaping his own destiny. The wheel of fortune may still be operative, but free will lives, and the Renaissance prince need not be ruled by that wheel; he has an even chance to control his fate, and if he will use his free will in the proper way, the odds improve in his favor.

Another example of the independent Renaissance prince attempting to exercise control over his destiny emerges from Machiavelli's advice to the prince when war becomes imminent. Regarding the problem of troops, Machiavelli asserts that even if a prince's army is not large enough to win the war, he should avoid mercenaries

and auxiliaries. Mercenaries are dangerous because the prince is never sure of what they will do, since "they are disunited, ambitious, without discipline, faithless, bold amongst friends, cowardly amongst enemies, they have no fear of God, and keep no faith with men."<sup>59</sup> Auxiliaries are dangerous because they are brave, and if they are victorious, it is difficult for the prince to get them to leave his country. With these things in mind, "A wise prince, therefore, always avoids these forces and has recourse to his own, and would prefer rather to lose with his own men than conquer with the forces of others, not deeming it a true victory which is gained by foreign arms."<sup>60</sup> Machiavelli's comments on war, peace, and the composition of a prince's troops lead to his belief that a prince should be well prepared, "so that when fortune changes she may find him prepared to resist her blows, and to prevail in adversity."<sup>61</sup> Thus, Machiavelli is contributing to the gradually emerging Renaissance concepts of self-reliance, independence, and individuality, on both an individual and a national level.

The paradoxical sixteenth century was characterized by the conflict between objectivity and subjectivity. Montaigne took an objective approach to reality. He examined man, and he pointed out his foibles and failures. When man was full of pride, Montaigne exposed him. When man was presumptuous, Montaigne exposed him. When man was

irreligious, Montaigne exposed him. Montaigne was detached, analytical, critical, and objective when he explored and discussed man and the world. His aim was to understand man better, and to improve him. In working toward this end, Montaigne was willing to apply a standard of right and wrong to man to see how he would measure up to that standard.

Machiavelli, on the other hand, took a subjective approach to reality. Of course Machiavelli operated behind a veneer of objectivity, but his basic approach toward man is based on subjectivity. This is illustrated in an example where Machiavelli uses scripture to make a political point. In discussing the best way to handle the problem of troops, Machiavelli draws on what he calls "a symbolic tale from the Old Testament" to illustrate his point:

When David offered to Saul to go and fight against the Philistine champion Goliath, Saul, to encourage him, armed him with his own arms, which when David had tried on, he refused saying, that with them he could not fight so well; he preferred, therefore, to face the enemy with his own sling and knife. In short, the arms of others either fail, overburden, or else impede you.<sup>62</sup>

Machiavelli is using scripture in an interesting manner. He draws on the Bible because it is well known, and because it provides an apt illustration; but he departs from the traditional approach toward the Bible by ignoring the religious issues that accompany the David and Goliath story. He is not concerned with such matters. Machiavelli's



approach to scripture is subjective. His method of reading scripture is a logical offspring of Luther's method, but in a completely secular sense.

Both the objective and subjective approaches are present in Samuel Daniel's poem, "Musophilus." Philocosmus has objectively examined the world, and he speaks to Musophilus about art and the world in the following lines:

Fond man, Musophilus, that thus dost spend  
In an ungainful art thy dearest days,  
Tiring thy wits, and toiling to no end  
But to attain that idle smoke of praise,  
Now when this busy world cannot attend  
Th' untimely music of neglected lays;  
Other delights then these, other desires,  
This wiser profit-seeking age requires.<sup>63</sup>

Philocosmus knows that Musophilus is writing poetry which will not bring him gain, or fame. Philocosmus knows that Musophilus is wasting his time and his wits, because the world is either too busy, or too ignorant to appreciate his efforts. It is an age preoccupied with material things.

Musophilus, however, is unswayed by what Philocosmus says, as he indicates when he replies:

Friend Philocosmus, I confess indeed  
I love this sacred art thou sett'st so light,  
And though it never stand my life in steed,  
It is inough it gives myself delight;  
The whiles my unaffected mind doth feel  
On no unholy thoughts for benefit.<sup>64</sup>

It does not matter if Philocosmus ridicules Musophilus and his poetry; it does not matter if the world does not value art. When Musophilus says, "it is inough it gives myself delight," he is expressing a completely subjective

approach to life. What the world thinks is not as important as what Musophilus thinks, which is all important. The individual decides what has value and meaning, not the world, or society, or a friend. These ideas are important, and they dominate the actions of many characters in plays such as Hamlet, Macbeth, and King Lear. By the twentieth century such ideas virtually became a way of life.

The fall of man had profound religious consequences, but it also had significant intellectual implications which were connected to the problem of whether man was essentially a rational or an irrational being. Theodore Spencer asserts that the fall meant that man was left with "only a small glimmer of the reason which had been his original birth-right."<sup>65</sup> The higher powers of the intellect were greatly diminished, and the dominance of the soul was replaced by the dominance of the body. Thus, reason and will became "so feeble that . . . action was dictated by imagination, a power which was lawless, and much lower than reason--one shared, in fact, by the beasts."<sup>66</sup> The miserable picture of man which was often emphasized in medieval literature remained in the consciousness of Renaissance writers.<sup>67</sup> The Renaissance view of man, therefore, involved a basic conflict between the dignity of man which grew out of the Christian concept of man before the fall, and the wretchedness of man which resulted from the fall.

Montaigne discusses man's propensity for the irrational when he talks about war, a uniquely human institution.

As to what concerns war, which is the greatest and most pompous of human actions, I would very fain know, whether we would use that for an argument of some prerogative, or, on the contrary, for a testimony of our weakness and imperfection; for, in truth, the science of undoing and killing one another, and of ruining and destroying our own kind, has nothing in it so tempting<sup>68</sup> as to make it coveted by beasts who have it not. . . .

Even beasts reject war, yet man endorses it as a viable solution to his problems. If this is the "crown of creation," the crown is rather tarnished. For a supposedly rational being, man behaves in a strangely irrational manner. Montaigne points out that even in matters of fidelity, "there is no animal in the world so treacherous as man."<sup>69</sup>

Since the issue of rationality was so important to formulating a viable concept of man, and since many claimed that man was a wonderfully rational creature, Montaigne proposed to find out "what human reason tells us of herself, and of the soul." He reviewed the ideas of various philosophers on the subject, and after moving from Plato to Zeno, he concludes that, "There are infinite like examples, not merely of arguments that are false in themselves, but silly: that do not hold together, and that accuse their authors not so much of ignorance as of imprudence. . . ."<sup>70</sup> Montaigne is appalled that so many "great persons" would indulge themselves in "so many gross

and manifest errors and defects." Perhaps intelligent thinkers do such things because,

Man is excessively solicitous to prolong his being, and has, to the utmost of his power, provided for it; monuments are erected for the conservation of the body, and from glory to transmit the name; impatient of his fortune he has employed all his wit and opinion in the rebuilding of himself, and in the sustenance of himself by his productions.<sup>71</sup>

Montaigne reacts negatively to man's craving for immortality, and his inability to cope with the fact of his mortality. Montaigne believes that this simply is another example of man's presumption and insolence:

Here is enough to evidence that man is no better instructed in the knowledge of himself in his corporeal than in his spiritual part. We have proposed himself to himself, and his reason to his reason, to see what she could say. I think I have sufficiently demonstrated how little she understands herself in herself; and who understands not himself in himself, in what can he possibly understand?<sup>72</sup>

Man's reason does not adequately serve him in understanding his own complexities, and the complexities of the world. Montaigne has exposed man's rational failures, and he has brought him down from his lofty position. Montaigne's attack on man is systematic and far-reaching. If man's presumption is the result of profound insecurities and needs, covered by a cloak of rationality, Montaigne must have added considerably to those insecurities and needs when he attempted to strip man of his rational cloak.

George Gascoigne's poem "The Steel Glass" involves an interesting treatment of the idealism-realism problem,

and it represents one writer's concern for doing something about the problem. "The Steel Glass" serves as the title of Gascoigne's poem, in addition to being the basic metaphor which the poet uses to illustrate the contrast between past and present:

That age is dead, and vanish'd long ago,  
Which thought that steel both trusty was and true,  
And needed not a foil of contraries,  
But shew'd all things even as they were indeed. <sup>73</sup>

The steel glass has two main functions, and these lines demonstrate the first function. The steel glass is "trusty" and "true;" it gives a true picture of reality. But the age of the steel glass is past. Values and attitudes have changed to the extent that the steel glass is ignored by the people.

The second function of the steel glass is to point to an ideal world:

Again I see within my glass of steel  
But four estates to serve each country soil:  
The king, the knight, the peasant, and the priest.  
The king should care for all the subjects still,  
The knight should fight for to defend the same,  
The peasant he should labor for their ease,  
And priests should pray for them and for themselves. <sup>74</sup>

The world that Gascoigne sees when he looks into his steel glass stands in direct contrast to the world in which he lives. There is a great disparity between what the world should be according to the glass of steel, and what it is. Through his use of the steel glass, Gascoigne suggests that the "true" world and the "ideal" world are the same. This

is the world toward which man should be constantly striving.

Instead of using the steel glass, however, man turns to the crystal glass,

. . . which glimseth brave and bright,  
And shews the thing much better than it is,  
Beguil'd with foils of sundry subtile sights,  
So that they seem, and covet not to be.<sup>75</sup>

The crystal glass does not give a "true" picture of reality; rather, it distorts reality and makes it appear to be much better than it actually is. This results in deception which affects all levels of society. The crystal glass is for anyone who wants "to seem but not to be."

Has Gascoigne misused the metaphor by reversing it? A steel glass is hard to polish, and thus is of questionable value as a mirror; it does not show all the details of any particular image. The crystal glass, on the other hand, is much clearer; it needs little polishing to provide an accurate image. The problem, however, as Gascoigne repeatedly emphasizes, is that the crystal glass "glistereth bright and blears their gazing eyes."<sup>76</sup> It is not a matter of seeing clearly in the crystal glass, because the crystal glass blurs eyes, and thus distorts reality. Since the steel glass is not as bright, there is no danger of distorted vision. And the very dullness of the steel glass facilitates a more accurate image because of the need to look more intensely and carefully into it to discern an image.

Gascoigne's metaphor is suggestive, and it is necessary to consider some other qualities connected with steel and crystal to fully appreciate what the poet has said or implied about truth and illusion. Steel is hard; crystal is fragile. The world of the steel glass is "trusty" and "true;" it is the ideal world. The fragile, distorted world of crystal is easily smashed by steel; the world of appearances crumbles before the onslaught of truth. Thus, Gascoigne's metaphor not only provides an interesting way of contrasting past and present, it also embodies a means of perceiving reality. The metaphor has personal, social, political, philosophical, and epistemological implications.

Montaigne also was interested in presenting a realistic concept of man, and to do this he made detailed comparisons between humans and animals. Montaigne believed that man was just another animal, and as such, man could not escape the implications of his place in the animal kingdom.<sup>77</sup> In most cases, Montaigne is more complimentary to the animals than to man. In regard to the problem of communication between animals and humans, Montaigne wonders why the difficulties could not be on man's part as well as on the part of the animals. Montaigne is not willing to concede that man is more intelligent than other animals. To support his point he chooses the bees as an example of organization and discipline. And then he asks, "Can we imagine that such and so regular a distribution of

employments can be carried on without reason and prudence?"<sup>78</sup> Montaigne concludes that man is not above or below the rest of the creatures, and he takes man off his pedestal, and places him on a par with the rest of creation. According to Montaigne, man is part of this world, and not some super being with a special place sanctioned by God. Lest man forget his mortality, Montaigne reminds him that "the heart and life of a great and triumphant emperor is the breakfast of a little worm."<sup>79</sup> According to Theodore Spencer, such ideas mean that Montaigne "knocked man out of his crucial position in the natural hierarchy."<sup>80</sup> Montaigne's concept of man replaces idealism with realism.

In some respects, however, the realism of Montaigne is pale in comparison to Machiavelli's. The concept of man which emerges from The Prince is based totally on a pragmatic and realistic approach; discussing man in idealistic terms simply does not interest Machiavelli. He did not believe in progress, but he did believe in the nation and in the scientific method.<sup>81</sup> In fact his approach to government in The Prince is a good example of the scientific method applied to politics and human nature. Because of his ideas and approaches, Machiavelli is sometimes thought of as the first modern man.<sup>82</sup> Christian Gauss says that, "In regarding the state as a dynamic expansive force, Machiavelli was closer to reality and Realpolitik than much nineteenth and twentieth-century thinking, and in this respect is modern."<sup>83</sup>



Theodore Spencer says that Cicero saw two ways of settling a dispute: the first was by discussion, and the second was by force. Cicero thought that man took the first approach. He believed that "'we must resort to force only in case we may not avail ourselves of discussion.'"<sup>84</sup>

Machiavelli expresses ideas that are much different from Cicero's when he says,

You must know, then, that there are two methods of fighting, the one by law, and the other by force: the first method is that of men, the second of beasts; but as the first method is often insufficient, one must have recourse to the second. It is therefore necessary for a Prince to know well how to use both the beast and the man.<sup>85</sup>

Cicero's ideas are somewhat idealistic; Machiavelli's ideas are entirely practical. Cicero is indulging in semantics which do not interest Machiavelli; rather, he concentrates on the question of fighting. Whether one fights with the law or with force, it comes to the same thing. Machiavelli is talking about different methods of fighting, rather than trying to make a qualitative distinction between man and beast. Moral issues do not concern Machiavelli, he simply assumes that man "is incapable of good action, since he is morally evil."<sup>86</sup> To Machiavelli, concepts of universal justice, or laws of Nature, or laws of Nations simply are not relevant. He starts from the assumption that men are bad, and he has plenty of empirical evidence to support his ideas.

Machiavelli illustrates his cool, detached, and realistic approach to a political question when he discusses the proper way to handle newly acquired territories which have the same language as the prince who acquires the territories:

Whoever obtains possession of such territories and wishes to retain them must bear in mind two things: the one, that the blood of their old rulers be extinct; the other, to make no alteration either in their laws or in their taxes; in this way they will in a very short space of time become united with their old possessions and form one state.<sup>87</sup>

If the old rulers are not extinct, then it is up to the prince to kill them. This is not a moral issue for Machiavelli, it is a practical consideration. Machiavelli is discussing territories that have not been accustomed to freedom, but when he discusses the way to approach newly acquired territories that are accustomed to freedom, his advice is different:

When those states which have been acquired are accustomed to live at liberty under their own laws, there are three ways of holding them. The first is to despoil them; the second is to go and live there in person; the third is to allow them to live under their own laws, taking tribute of them, and creating within the country a government composed of a few who will keep it friendly to you.<sup>88</sup>

Machiavelli is presenting a series of methods of governing new territories. The prince is free to choose the option which suits him best, but Machiavelli has his own views of the most effective option:

in truth there is no sure method of holding them except by despoiling them. And whoever becomes the ruler of a free city and does not destroy it, can expect to be

destroyed by it, for it can always find a motive for rebellion in the name of liberty and of its ancient usages, which are forgotten neither by lapse of time nor by benefits received. . . .<sup>89</sup>

With no apparent hesitation, Machiavelli endorses plunder and ravage as acceptable methods of self-preservation for the prince who acquires a city that was formerly free. No attempt is made to justify such a course of action in moral or legal terms. Idealism is for dreamers and thinkers; it has no place in Machiavelli's real, political world.

This is not to say that Machiavelli ignores such things as integrity and good faith. Machiavelli thinks that it is good for a prince to keep good faith with people and to live with integrity. But he points out that the times show "those princes to have done great things who have had little regard for good faith, and have been able by astuteness to confuse men's brains, and who have ultimately overcome those who have made loyalty their foundation."<sup>90</sup> With this in mind, he says that it is necessary to be like a fox and a lion. A ruler who is like a fox is able to see the pitfalls and traps that are in store for him, and when he is like a lion he is able to frighten away the wolves who will threaten him from time to time. Machiavelli goes on to say that,

a prudent ruler ought not to keep faith when by so doing it would be against his interest, and when the reasons which made him bind himself no longer exist. If men were all good, this precept would not be a good one; but as they are bad, and would not observe their faith with you, so you are not bound to keep faith with them.<sup>91</sup>

With this Machiavelli has arrived at the point where "the end justifies the means." A prince may use anything which will help him to maintain his position. It is an evil world, made up of evil men, and questions of right and wrong are not relevant. The paramount issue is survival, and it is the prince's job to discover the most expedient way to survive. The world consists mainly of the vulgar, and they are easily deceived by appearances; it is up to the wise prince to exploit this situation, and use it to his advantage. It is not hard to understand how Machiavelli contributed significantly to the emerging skepticism and pessimism of the sixteenth century.

In his discussion of the lion and the fox, Machiavelli says that those who have imitated the fox in the most effective manner have been the most successful. He goes on to say that,

it is necessary to be able to disguise this character well, and to be a great feigner and dissembler; and . . . it is well to seem merciful, faithful, humane, sincere, religious, and also to be so; but you must have the mind so disposed that when it is needful to be otherwise you may be able to change to the opposite qualities.<sup>92</sup>

A prince who would succeed must be able to use deception on the people under his control, as well as on the other princes he deals with. A key word in Machiavelli's advice to princes is "seem." With this simple word, Machiavelli places great emphasis on the problem of appearance and reality, and the part it plays in the Renaissance world.

He develops this idea further when he says of the prince, that,

to see and hear him, he should seem to be all mercy, faith, integrity, humanity, and religion. And nothing is more necessary than to seem to have this last quality, for men in general judge more by the eyes than by the hands, for every one can see, but very few have to feel. Everybody sees what you appear to be, few feel what you are. . . .<sup>93</sup>

Religion takes precedence over mercy, faith, integrity, and humanity because religion is more important to the people, and Machiavelli knows that control of the people is the ultimate goal of the prince. Shakespeare takes up this theme in Hamlet when Gertrude is trying to convince her son of the fact that his father's death is part of the natural order. Since man's lot is to be born, to live, and to die, Hamlet should not display excessive grief over his father's death. Hamlet agrees that death is common, and the following exchange takes place:

Queen.	If it be, Why seems it so particular with thee?
Hamlet.	Seems, madam! Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.' 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good Mother, Nor customary suits of solemn black, Nor windy suspiration of forced breath-- No, nor the fruitful river in the eye, Nor the dejected havior of the visage, Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief-- That can denote me truly. These indeed seem, For they are actions that a man might play. But I have that within which passeth show, These but the trappings and suits of woe.
	(I, i, 75-86)

Hamlet makes a clear distinction between the appearance of grief and the reality of grief. At this point in the play,

Hamlet has contempt for the people who "seem" to be what they are not. His position sets him apart from Claudius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Polonius who spend much of their time demonstrating the great disparity between appearance and reality. When Shakespeare's prince appears to be mad, however, he demonstrates that Machiavelli's ideas on "seeming" to be what one is not have moved from political theory to literary practice. Hamlet moves from righteous indignation to cold and calculating endorsement of the world of appearances as a means of achieving his ends, and Machiavelli's views are dramatically acted out on stage. Realism supersedes idealism.

Life after the fall was life lived in a state of sin. For some, life was a "vale of tears" which had to be endured before man was united with God in the life after death. For others, life was more important than death, or focusing on a life after death. Montaigne falls into the latter category, and he is concerned with some important sixteenth-century concepts. Montaigne pays lip service to the standard Christian concepts, but his basic approach to Christianity is liberal and non-restrictive. His approach to religion is rational, and centered on life in this world. These views are expressed when he discusses the Moslem and Christian attitudes toward life after death. Montaigne says,

when Mohammed promises his followers a paradise hung with tapestry, adorned with gold and precious stones, furnished with wenches of excelling beauty, rare wines

and delicate dishes, I easily discern that these are mockers who accommodate their promises to our stupidity, to attract and allure us by hopes and opinions suitable to our mortal appetite. And yet some amongst us are fallen into the like error, promising to themselves, after the resurrection, a terrestrial and temporal life, accompanied with all sorts of worldly conveniences and pleasures.<sup>94</sup>

He ridicules such concepts of life after death which are expressed and explained in completely human and finite terms. Finally Montaigne asserts, in relation to heaven, that "if there be anything of mine there, there is nothing divine."<sup>95</sup> With his discussions of religion and life after death, Montaigne is heading toward some interesting and penetrating questions:

Moreover, upon what foundation of their justice can the gods take notice of or reward man after his death, for his good and virtuous actions, since it was they themselves who put them in the way and mind to do them? And why should they be offended at and punish him for evil actions, since they themselves have created him in so frail a condition, and that, with one glance of their will, they might prevent him from evil doing?<sup>96</sup>

Although Montaigne centers his discussion of immortality on the ancients, he is directing his comments toward his sixteenth-century peers and their religious beliefs. Montaigne's answer to the question of immortality coincides with Plato's view that it is impossible to establish anything certain about the immortal nature of man. Thus, Montaigne believed that man should focus on life, and not life after death. This approach is consistent with the approach of Machiavelli, and in modern times such a view of life becomes dominant.

While Montaigne ridicules man's emphasis on a life after death, and places his emphasis on this life, he introduces some paradoxical ideas concerning this life. At the very beginning, man was seduced by a desire to know. The fall of man occurred when man disobeyed God, and sought knowledge and wisdom. The irony is that man, through his disobedience, did not gain knowledge; rather, he gained only the semblance of knowledge, or the "opinion of wisdom," without gaining any real insight or understanding. To illustrate that man does not seem to understand what the quest for knowledge involves, Montaigne quotes the author of Ecclesiastes who understood that "'In much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.'"<sup>97</sup> In pursuing knowledge, man often turns to philosophy, but Montaigne has some negative comments to make about philosophy. He asks, "Is philosophy, that should arm me to contend with fortune, and steel my courage to trample all human adversities under foot, arrived at this degree of cowardice, to make me hide my head and save myself by these pitiful and ridiculous shifts?"<sup>98</sup> For Montaigne, philosophy clearly is not the answer to man's questions, or the solution for his wretched condition and suffering. One of the alternatives for man is contained in an example Montaigne gives from the ancients. He says that Sextius "ran to find death, since he could not overtake knowledge."<sup>99</sup> Other ancient writers quoted by Montaigne



endorse these views; thus, death and nothingness loom as possibilities for the man who tires of chasing the ever elusive knowledge. With these views, Montaigne is introducing ideas that are as old as the ancients, and as new as the existentialists. He is introducing the void, and the threat of emptiness which gain increasing importance in modern times.

Was the sixteenth century dominated by optimism or pessimism? The religious insecurity which began in the first part of the century was followed by political insecurity in the last part of the century. The glories of Elizabeth's reign and the political stability which she established were called into question in a serious way in the last decade of the sixteenth century. Since Elizabeth never married, the nagging issue of succession emerged once again. These insecurities are reflected in the literature, and there was a movement from romance to realism. The popularity of Edmund Spenser was replaced by the popularity of writers like Robert Greene. Optimism and idealism were giving way to pessimism and cynicism by the end of the century.<sup>100</sup>

Machiavelli contributed to these feelings, probably because his ideas "violated the idealistic order which the men of the sixteenth century had been trained to believe in from childhood."<sup>101</sup> Machiavelli made people aware of the great disparity between theory and practice. Such an

awareness was bound to be disturbing when it was located in the middle of the unsettling ideas which were being expounded in other areas of concern to sixteenth-century man. Spencer points out that,

If Machiavelli was right all the inherited doctrines went for nothing, and man in society could no longer reflect the order of the cosmos or the order of created beings. No wonder he was called an atheist; by abandoning the conventional belief in the law of Nature, and by thinking entirely in terms of immediate practical necessity regardless of universal truth, he denied God's government of the world: once more the destruction of one hierarchy implied the destruction of the others as well.<sup>102</sup>

Man was not ready to admit that Machiavelli was right, even though he was surrounded by the evidence necessary to verify his ideas. Machiavelli could be accepted or rejected, but he could not be ignored; and he contributed greatly to the threats of meaninglessness and nothingness which man in the sixteenth century was facing.

With the emphasis shifting from man's tendency toward good to man's tendency toward evil, man's position became more dramatic. In traditional humanistic terms, "what differentiated man from the other orders was that he could choose: he had free will."<sup>103</sup> Angels were above choice and animals were below choice, "But the glory of man, who was half intellect and half sense, was that he could, through free will, decide to which level he belonged."<sup>104</sup> Pico della Mirandola and other earlier humanists believed that man, through destiny and inclination, belonged with the angels.

Nevertheless, "to Montaigne, and the satiric, melancholy, realistic writers of the 1590's, he belonged with the beasts."<sup>105</sup> With these things in mind, Spencer asserts that, "The age was ripe for tragedy."<sup>106</sup> According to Spencer, "In the periods when great tragedy has been written, two things seem to have been necessary: first, a conventional pattern of belief and behavior, and second, an acute consciousness of how that conventional pattern can be violated."<sup>107</sup> During Shakespeare's day the convention was all-inclusive; it was religious, moral, social, and political, and all of this was minutely ordered. But this intricate order was being attacked from many directions, with the resultant doubts, fears, and insecurities.

Theodore Spencer asserts that,

It was because Shakespeare, as he developed his art, was able to see individual experience in relation to the all-inclusive conflict produced by this violation, that his great tragedies have such wide reverberations and give us so profound a picture of the nature of man.<sup>108</sup>

What is true of the tragedies in general, is true of King Lear in particular.

Life in the sixteenth century was paradoxical. Whether, in the final analysis, it consisted of something or nothing is, perhaps, unanswerable. King Lear is an excellent example of this paradoxical situation. From a negative standpoint, King Lear exemplifies the Renaissance gone wrong. The play painfully displays the negative side of man, of man bereft of hope. Through much of the play

evil seems to triumph, and good appears only to suffer and die. Lear struggles against internal and external forces. He is in a profound state of alienation, as he is alienated from his kingdom, his counsellors, his family, and himself. Yet there is hope in the play; Lear's struggle against himself, society, and the cosmos is noble. Lear's strength and individual integrity remain intact throughout the play. Lear makes incredible mistakes, but such is the nature of the human condition; and the key to Lear is that he does not give up, or compromise himself as a man. When he realizes that his chosen daughters are tigers, he rages against them and refuses to submit to their humiliating demands. Finally, when imprisoned, he fights for his beloved Cordelia, killing her murderer. Even at death's door, the old king is full of greatness and nobility, and it is right that he should die howling against the cruelty and absurdity of the human condition. Such howling only serves to underscore the conflict between something and nothing. If life comes to nothing, then there is no point in howling; yet that is reason enough for howling. It is hard to imagine Lear, or man doing anything else.

## FOOTNOTES

## CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, Selections from His Writings, ed. by John Dillenberger (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1961), p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> Roland H. Bainton, The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), p. 112.

<sup>4</sup> Harold J. Grimm, The Reformation Era 1500-1650 (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965), p. 352.

<sup>5</sup> Luther, Selections from His Writings, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., Great Books of the Western World, 54 vols. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), vol. 25: The Essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, ed. by W. Carew Hazlitt, trans. by Charles Cotton, p. 210.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>10</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (New York: Random House, n.d.), p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> Theodore Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, 2nd ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1949), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, The Prince (New York: New American Library, 1952), p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>20</sup>Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, p. 42.
- <sup>21</sup>Machiavelli, The Prince, p. 84.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 16.
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 81.
- <sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 82.
- <sup>25</sup>Hutchins, The Essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne,  
p. 293.
- <sup>26</sup>Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, p. 40.
- <sup>27</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 29.
- <sup>29</sup>Douglas Bush, Prefaces to Renaissance Literature  
(New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1965), p. 57.
- <sup>30</sup>Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, p. 34.
- <sup>31</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup>Hutchins, The Essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne,  
p. 213.
- <sup>33</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 238.
- <sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 239.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 240.
- <sup>39</sup>Ibid., pp. 240-241.
- <sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 258.
- <sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 260.
- <sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 248.
- <sup>43</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup>Ibid.

- <sup>45</sup>Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, p. 15.
- <sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 16.
- <sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 19.
- <sup>48</sup>Hutchins, The Essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne,  
p. 213.
- <sup>49</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>50</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 215.
- <sup>53</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 256.
- <sup>55</sup>Martin Luther, Three Treatises (Philadelphia:  
Muhlenberg Press, 1960), p. 277.
- <sup>56</sup>Machiavelli, The Prince, p. 120.
- <sup>57</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 123.
- <sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 72.
- <sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 78.
- <sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 83.
- <sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 79.
- <sup>63</sup>Samuel Daniel, The Complete Works in Verse and  
Prose of Samuel Daniel, ed. by Alexander B. Grosart, 4 vols.  
(London: Hazell, Watson, and Viney, 1885), 1: 225.
- <sup>64</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup>Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, p. 23.
- <sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 24.
- <sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 27.
- <sup>68</sup>Hutchins, The Essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne,  
p. 225.

<sup>69</sup>Hutchins, The Essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne,  
p. 227.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>73</sup>George Gascoigne, The Complete Poems of George Gascoigne, ed. by William Crew Hazlitt, 2 vols. (n.p.: Chiswick Press, 1870), 2: 185.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>77</sup>Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, p. 36.

<sup>78</sup>Hutchins, The Essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne,  
p. 216.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>80</sup>Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, p. 38.

<sup>81</sup>Machiavelli, The Prince, p. 24.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>84</sup>Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, p. 42.

<sup>85</sup>Machiavelli, The Prince, p. 92.

<sup>86</sup>Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, p. 43.

<sup>87</sup>Machiavelli, The Prince, p. 36.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., pp. 46-47.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., pp. 92-93.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 93.



<sup>93</sup>Machiavelli, The Prince, p. 94.

<sup>94</sup>Hutchins, The Essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, pp. 248-249.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>100</sup>Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, pp. 47-48.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid.

Chapter II  
The Modern Expansion of  
Renaissance Pessimism

Lily B. Campbell, in Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion, states that "The absorbing problem of the Renaissance, knowledge of one's self, led men into the attempt to know man and to know men."<sup>1</sup> A desire for knowledge of self continued to dominate man's consciousness in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and on into the twentieth century. In searching for his identity man was often faced with the belief/unbelief problem. Most of Western history called man to the idea that he was a child of God and that he occupied an important place in the scheme of things. Even if man had come down somewhat from the pedestal he occupied in Medieval and Renaissance times, modern man clung to the belief that he was special. He believed that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived, and that He loved man. The concept that modern man had of himself was tied closely to belief in God.

Such a belief was shaken, however, by the doubt that accompanied the fragmentation of Christendom, which resulted from the Reformation. William Barrett, in Irrational Man, points out that in the modern period man entered a secular era.<sup>2</sup> He says that "Protestant man is the beginning of the West's fateful encounter with Nothingness,"<sup>3</sup> and that the more man in a secular civilization "struggles to hold on to the primal face-to-

face relation with God, the more tenuous this becomes until in the end the relation to God Himself threatens to become a relation to Nothingness."<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche contributed to man's movement toward nothingness when he strode to the center of the intellectual stage and announced through Zarathustra that "God is dead!"<sup>5</sup> In Beyond Good and Evil Nietzsche says: "To sacrifice God for Nothingness--this is the paradoxical mystery of ultimate cruelty that remained in store for the generation now growing up. All of us know something about it already."<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche is dealing with ideas that eventually push modern man toward the abyss of unbelief.

Walter Kaufmann indicates that "Godless existentialism is pictured as the philosophy of our age . . . ,"<sup>7</sup> and that the modern poet ". . . is confronted . . . by a bleak doctrine that proclaims that man is not at home in the world but thrown into it, that he has no divine father and is abandoned to a life of care, anxiety, and failure that will end in death, with nothing after that."<sup>8</sup> This can be viewed as a negative situation, but there is a positive aspect that must not be overlooked. Sartre says, in reference to living in a world without God, that ". . . all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him."<sup>9</sup> This leads to one of the interesting and exciting aspects of existentialism that Sartre illustrates, beginning with a quotation from

Dostoevsky:

'If God didn't exist, everything would be possible.'  
That is the very starting point of existentialism.  
Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist,  
and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within  
him nor without does he find anything to cling to. He  
can't start making excuses for himself.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in his search for identity, modern man faces a  
paradoxical situation in dealing with the belief/unbelief  
problem.

This paradox is demonstrated by Leo Tolstoy in The  
Death of Ivan Ilych. Tolstoy's hero, a judge and a man of  
law, stood accused by death before the court of life; and  
he realized that ". . . he had to live thus all alone on  
the brink of an abyss, with no one who understood or pitied  
him."<sup>11</sup> In Ivan Ilych, Tolstoy creates an existential anti-  
hero who faces the void, wondering if life has any value, or  
if there is anything to believe in. It is in this context  
that Ivan Ilych seriously begins to ask the following  
existential questions: "When I am not, what will there be?  
There will be nothing. Then where shall I be when I am no  
more? Can this be dying?"<sup>12</sup> For Ivan Ilych, an existential  
everyman, death is important because life is all he has.  
The thought that he might lose his life over the absurd  
situation of slipping while hanging curtains in his house  
torments him. The prospect of nothingness is real for Ivan  
Ilych, and while he would like to deny the validity of it,  
he cannot.

Tolstoy continues to explore the belief/unbelief problem when Ivan Ilych's wife comes to him shortly before he dies, and asks him to take communion. She says, "It can't do any harm and often helps."<sup>13</sup> Ivan responds by opening his eyes wide and saying, "What? Take communion? Why? It's unnecessary!"<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Ivan gives in and takes communion, and he does gain some temporary comfort from the religious rite. But then he is overwhelmed by the feelings of deception and falseness. Ivan rejects the communion and his wife, and shouts at her to leave him alone. Ivan deplures the lies that people subscribe to in an effort to cover up the reality of death and nothingness. Ivan wants only honesty and truth, and that is why he turns away from his family and toward his servant Gerasim for comfort. With death and the abyss looming over him, Ivan Ilych honestly examines his life. He thinks about the best moments of his life, going back to early childhood, and he realizes that what he had thought were pleasant moments and experiences "now melted before his sight and turned into something trivial and often nasty."<sup>15</sup> The questions Nietzsche raised haunt Ivan Ilych, and he learns that it is not easy to believe either in God or life.

In the final analysis, however, Tolstoy endorses the validity of belief. Ivan Ilych endures physical and mental suffering, and he weeps "on account of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of man, the cruelty of God,

and the absence of God."<sup>16</sup> But it is out of profound existential despair that Ivan Ilych learns to believe in the value of life. And after screaming continuously for three days, Ivan Ilych realizes that there no longer is anything to fear. His fear of death and the unknown disappear, and "in place of death there was light."<sup>17</sup> Ivan Ilych realizes that he has triumphed in his honest examination of life, and that "death is finished."<sup>18</sup> Tolstoy's novella ends on an optimistic note, with the Biblical allusions in the last lines pointing toward the reality of God, and the validity of believing in Him.

Albert Camus deals with the belief/unbelief problem in The Stranger through his hero Meursault, an intriguing existential character who attempts to live his life with a minimum of conflict. Meursault learns that such a desire is impossible, and that a man who dares to be different in the modern age must pay a significant price for his individuality. The blinding, penetrating, and revealing sun of the twentieth century exposes man to the reality and brutality of the world. There is no place to hide, and what a man does or does not believe in is of prime importance. Meursault's unbelief is revealed in secular, human, and religious matters.

Meursault demonstrates his uniqueness in the first lines of the novel when he says, "Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the

Home says: YOUR MOTHER PASSED AWAY, FUNERAL TOMORROW. DEEP SYMPATHY. Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday."<sup>19</sup> It is clear that Meursault is not an ordinary character, having such a cavalier attitude toward a serious matter like the death of his mother. It is clear that Meursault does not believe in the time honored concept of the sacredness of the family, and the need at least to show grief when his mother died, even if he does not feel it. This surely is a man to be watched, a man not to be trusted.

The death of Meursault's mother causes him no pain or suffering. He feels compelled to attend her funeral, but he is rather embarrassed by the thought of asking his boss for some time off from work; and he is annoyed by the long, hot bus ride. Meursault, however, does display some "normal" feelings when he is embarrassed because the warden of the Home holds his hand so long. But one of the most important aspects of Meursault's behavior at the old people's home was when he told the doorkeeper that he did not want to see his mother's body, and that he could screw down the lid of the coffin. The doorkeeper's response is significant: "Eh? What's that? . . . You don't want me to . . . ?"<sup>20</sup> Also, during the all night vigil Meursault had a strong desire to smoke: ". . . I wasn't sure if I should smoke, under the circumstances--in Mother's presence. I thought it over; really it didn't seem to matter, so I



offered the keeper a cigarette, and we both smoked."<sup>21</sup>

These things, along with the damaging facts that Meursault did not "shed a single tear," did not linger at his mother's grave, and did not know her age, were used against Meursault at his trial. They were "proof" that Meursault did not believe in the traditional feelings and values of society. For such apostasy, society judges Meursault guilty of great crimes against humanity and decency, and condemns him to die.

In religious terms, Camus deals with the issue of belief in a different way than Tolstoy. Meursault reveals the emptiness of belief in God after he is convicted and sentenced to die. Meursault refuses to see the chaplain numerous times, but the chaplain comes to see him anyway. Meursault quietly and rationally explains to the chaplain that he has little time left, and that he does not want to waste it on God. He announces that he does not believe in God. Finally, after enduring a great deal of clerical condescension and certainty, Meursault explodes:

Then, I don't know how it was, but something seemed to break inside me, and I started yelling at the top of my voice. I hurled insults at him. . . . He seemed so cocksure, you see. . . . I'd been right, I was still right, I was always right. I passed my life in a certain way, and I might have passed it in a different way, if I'd felt like it. . . . And what did that mean? . . . Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well why.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, for Meursault, and for many people in the modern world, Albert Camus provides an accurate description of man's situation when he says: "This absurd, godless world

is, then, peopled with men who think clearly and have ceased to hope."<sup>23</sup> Belief often comes to nothing, and man is pictured as " . . . kneeling before a void . . . [with] arms outstretched toward a heaven without eloquence. . . ."<sup>24</sup> Man emerges from the turmoil of the Renaissance and the Reformation, and ". . . begins that long modern struggle, which reaches its culmination in the twentieth century, to strip man naked."<sup>25</sup> Ivan Ilych and Meursault are examples of such modern nakedness.

Does modern man, haunted by the specter of a godless world, conceived of life in terms of order or chaos? Martin Esslin, in The Theatre of the Absurd, says that,

The number of people for whom God is dead has greatly increased since Nietzsche's day, and mankind has learned the bitter lesson of the falseness and evil nature of some of the cheap and vulgar substitutes that have been set up to take his place. And so, after two terrible wars, there are still many who are trying to come to terms with the implications of Zarathustra's message, a universe deprived of what was once its centre and its living purpose, a world deprived of a generally accepted integrating principle, which has become disjointed purposeless--absurd.<sup>26</sup>

The world Esslin describes is a world dominated by chaos. William Barrett asserts that, "Habit and routine are great veils over our existence. As long as they are securely in place, we need not consider what life means; its meaning seems sufficiently incarnate in the triumph of the daily habit."<sup>27</sup> To question habit and routine, however, or to peer beneath these veils in search of life's meaning, may result in an awareness of "that denseness and that

strangeness of the world"<sup>28</sup> that Camus calls the absurd.

And such an awareness may yield the following proclamation:

". . . nothing is clear, all is chaos, . . . all man has is his lucidity and his definite knowledge of the walls surrounding him."<sup>29</sup> If such a proclamation is valid, modern

man faces an intellectually unsettling situation because, as

Camus indicates, "That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama."<sup>30</sup> And man's essential impulse is being

severely tested in the modern period. As William Butler Yeats indicates,

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned. . . .<sup>31</sup>

In the modern world, order is an elusive phenomenon.

Anton Chekhov in The Cherry Orchard presents an image of the modern world, a world torn between order and chaos--a world permeated by absurdity. In this play Chekhov deals with the order/chaos problem in a comprehensive manner, focusing on the historical, societal, personal, and intellectual implications of the problem.

In historical terms, the order of the aristocratic society of Gayeff and Madame Ranevskaya is being replaced by chaos. The aristocrats are no longer rich, and their precarious position in society is illustrated by their inability to pay the mortgage on the family estate. The

first three acts of the play reflect the chaos of the aristocratic world, as Madame Ranevskaya cries about her problems and her lost innocence, and Gayeff babbles on about the glories of a one hundred year old bookcase, while thinking aloud of banking the yellow ball in the side pocket. The aristocrats ignore Lopahin's continual pleas to do something about their financial problems; thus, they lose the opportunity to restore order to their chaotic world. From an historical standpoint, therefore, The Cherry Orchard reflects the chaotic state of the aristocracy, which makes way for the rising peasant class.

Chekhov presents the societal chaos when Fiers talks about the emancipation of the serfs as a disaster, and when he says, "In the old days there were generals, barons, admirals dancing at our parties, and now we send for the post-office clerk and the stationmaster, and even they are none too anxious to come."<sup>32</sup> In Chekhov's world, people marry outside their social class, and the old order of society begins to fade away.

In personal terms the order/chaos problem is most evident. Madame Ranevskaya is no longer happy, because her personal life is in complete chaos. Her husband and son are dead; her lover is cruel and worthless; her financial sense and control are non-existent; and her youth and beauty are fading rapidly. As a result, Madame Ranevskaya spends much of her time crying, and dreaming of lost youth,

innocence, and happiness. Her personal life is in shambles.

Chekhov continues to stress the breakdown of order, and the emergence of chaos when he deals with intellectual matters. Trofimoff delivers numerous lectures on the state of Russia and the world, but as he prepares to leave, to get out in front of the profound change that is coming, he cannot find his old rubbers. Trofimoff would lead the revolution, but he cannot organize his personal belongings. And Lopahin, prime representative of the rising middle class, reads books and goes to plays, but understands little of what he reads or sees.

By the time The Cherry Orchard ends, Chekhov has dramatically illustrated that order is being replaced by chaos. And through a juxtaposition of serious and comic elements in the play, Chekhov demonstrates the absurd quality of life.

Luigi Pirandello deals with the order/chaos problem in dramatic terms in Six Characters in Search of an Author. From the Manager's point of view, when six characters enter his relatively ordered theatrical world, chaos takes over. The characters do not understand the need to please the theatre public, and they resist making concessions to the audience. Also, the actors do not understand that they cannot do justice to the characters they must portray. And after the actors stress the pretense of the situation, the Manager concludes the play by saying: "Pretense? Reality?"

To hell with it all! Never in my life has such a thing happened to me. I've lost a whole day over these people, a whole day!"<sup>33</sup> And while it is easy to laugh at the Manager, and dismiss him as a rather dull sort, Pirandello has succeeded in interweaving order and chaos in such a manner that it is difficult to arrive at a more satisfactory answer than the one given by the Manager. Truth or illusion, pretense or reality, order or chaos? Pirandello presents disturbing questions, and the answers are not forthcoming. Life in the modern period is dominated by chaos, with order being in short supply.

The following words set the tone for the book of Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity."<sup>34</sup> These words might well serve as a caption for the modern period. In an age of shifting values, in an age of continual war, in an age of nuclear proliferation, man seeks permanence. Yet he is continually encountering flux. Attractive political and social leaders rise to positions of power and influence, only to be struck down by assassins' bullets. Men walk on the moon, and continue to explore the mysteries of outer space, while the Middle East is engulfed by bloodshed and destruction. Political leaders are replaced or toppled with the rapidity of a grotesque game of musical chairs. And in the midst of such turmoil, man is faced with an ever expanding nuclear world as more first and second rate powers

develop their nuclear capability. Permanence is replaced by flux in the modern world, and the fact is carried across the world by satellite. It is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to subscribe even to the illusion of permanence. This is what Joseph Conrad is dealing with in Heart of Darkness when Marlow says, "We live in the flicker-- may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday."<sup>35</sup> Conrad is stressing the transitory nature of existence, and the fact that man lives in the constant shadow of suffocating darkness, with all of the potential for evil that lurks in darkness.

Pirandello presents the problem of permanence versus flux in Henry IV as Henry moves back and forth between sanity and insanity. The audience is never sure whether Henry is talking and acting from a state of sanity or insanity; the only thing the audience can be sure of is that Henry's mind is in a state of flux. Pirandello plays around with these ideas again in Six Characters in Search of an Author when The Father says to the Manager:

Well, sir, if you think of all those illusions that mean nothing to you now, of all those things which don't even seem to you to exist any more, while once they were for you, don't you feel that--I won't say these boards--but the very earth under your feet is sinking away from you when you reflect that in the same way this you as you feel it today--all this present reality of yours--is fated to seem a mere illusion to you tomorrow?<sup>36</sup>

As The Father concludes these lines about the flux of existence, Pirandello further confuses the issue by labeling The Father's argument "specious." And yet the entire play

seems to underscore the idea that the world is in fact dominated by flux, and that if there is any permanence, it is to be found in the world of characters--a non-human world.

The lack of permanence in the world, and the predominance of flux causes man to suffer from doubt and anxiety. Man wonders about who and what he is, and he must face the possibility of never knowing such things. Camus says that, "This very heart which is mine will forever remain indefinable to me. Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled. Forever I shall be a stranger to myself."<sup>37</sup> In the midst of such a void Camus wonders if the world has meaning, and he concludes: "I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it."<sup>38</sup> Thus, in a world dominated by uncertainties, Camus decides that flesh is his only certainty, and that "man is his own end."<sup>39</sup> Camus emphasizes these ideas through Meursault, when Meursault becomes involved with Marie, and when he asserts that none of the chaplain's "certainties was worth one strand of a woman's hair."<sup>40</sup>

Nietzsche expresses a similar view of the world when he says, "But I shall repeat a hundred times that 'immediate certainty' as well as 'absolute knowledge' and 'thing in



itself' are all contradictions in terms. Let us finally free ourselves of the seduction inherent in our vocabulary!"<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche's position is unsettling, and it becomes more so when he says, "Perhaps some day the solemn concepts about which we struggled and suffered most, the concepts 'God' and 'sin,' will appear no more important to us than a child's toy or a child's grief appears to an old man."<sup>42</sup> For many in the modern world, the day Nietzsche talks about has arrived. Church attendance drops and God is dead theology is taught in many seminaries. The religious world of the Renaissance gives way to the secular world of modern times, and man is left without certainties in a religious, as well as a philosophical sense.

It is in such a context that the Theatre of the Absurd makes a positive contribution to understanding man's position in the modern world, because besides exposing ". . . the absurdity of inauthentic ways of life, the Theatre of the Absurd is facing up to a deeper layer of absurdity--the absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certainties."<sup>43</sup> Vladimir says, in Waiting for Godot, "Nothing is certain when you're about."<sup>44</sup> The line has a far-reaching ring to it. In fact, being certain on one's existence in the modern world is an issue to be faced, as Estragon and Vladimir indicate in the following exchange:

Estragon: We don't manage too badly, eh Didi, between the two of us?  
 Vladimir: Yes yes. Come on, we'll try the left first.  
 Estragon: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?<sup>45</sup>

Estragon and Vladimir gain the "impression" that they exist through the ridiculous and humorous situation of trying on a pair of boots. And if such an image of man is accurate at all, the uncertainty that man faced in the Renaissance has been expanded until it has become an all pervasive force in the life of modern man.

Yet, the Theatre of the Absurd is not life, and Estragon is not everyman. And the Theatre of the Absurd fulfills a paradoxical function:

Concerned as it is with the ultimate realities of the human condition, the relatively few fundamental problems of life and death, isolation and communication, the Theatre of the Absurd, however grotesque, frivolous, and irreverent it may appear, represents a return to the original, religious function of the theatre--the confrontation of man with the spheres of myth and religious reality. Like ancient Greek tragedy and the medieval mystery plays and baroque allegories, the Theatre of the Absurd is intent on making its audience aware of man's precarious and mysterious position in the universe.<sup>46</sup>

The key, of course, is that man's position is incredibly precarious, and it is devoid of certainties--except the certainty of uncertainty.

The fact that the modern world is marked by flux and uncertainty contributes to man's feeling of insecurity. According to William Barrett,

August 1914 is the axial date in modern Western history, and once past it we are directly confronted with the present-day world. The sense of power over the material

universe with which modern man emerged . . . from the Middle Ages, changed on that date into its opposite: a sense of weakness and dereliction before the whirlwind that man is able to unleash but not to control.<sup>47</sup>

Barrett continues to discuss the significance of August 1914 for modern man when he says that, "It revealed that the apparent stability, security, and material progress of society had rested, like everything human, upon the void. European man came face to face with himself as a stranger."<sup>48</sup> It is no wonder, therefore, that man frequently turns to existentialism as a means of understanding and coping with life in the modern world. Existentialism deals with, "Alienation and estrangement; a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat."<sup>49</sup>

Faced with flux, irrationality, nothingness, and absurdity, modern man exists in a world of insecurity. And since problems constitute the human condition, they cannot be eliminated. Decisions cannot be made and absolutized; they constantly must be considered and reconsidered. For the existentialist, turning away from problems and decisions is turning away from himself.<sup>50</sup> The ironic thing about existentialism, is that the strength of the philosophy is found in the midst of instability and insecurity. The existentialist, like Santiago in

Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea, must constantly prove himself. The battle with the fish yesterday has nothing to do with the battle today. The existentialist is immersed in, and gets life from, the present moment. H. J. Blackham gives this description of the existentialist's position:

I am never relieved of responsibility; I cannot rest on my laurels; if I was a hero yesterday, that is in question again today; there is no decision once for all; I cannot take refuge in what 'is done,' nor in what is required, nor in thought-out principles: insecurity, care is our lot. Thinking which brings this home to me is valid; thought taught as 'results' gives out a security which can never be ours. This insecurity, however, is the condition of spontaneity, vitality, passion, creativity, the condition of human life and living; whereas all our securities are states of death.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, Blackham is stressing the paradoxical quality of existentialism. While it is a philosophy of insecurity, it derives its life from that insecurity. And in the final analysis, existentialism is a philosophy of life.

Modern man's insecurity is demonstrated poignantly by Ivan Ilych as he fights for life in his world of sickness. Meursault demonstrates the same thing as he eagerly anticipates the success of his appeal. And the Underground Man, in Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground, represents insecurity personified as he waits for Liza's inevitable visit to his hovel. These characters, and countless others, confirm the idea that, "The only reality is 'anxiety' in the whole chain of beings."<sup>52</sup> It is not difficult to understand, therefore, why ". . . the themes

that obsess both modern art and existential philosophy are the alienation and strangeness of man in his world; the contradictoriness, feebleness, and contingency of human existence; the central and overwhelming reality of time for man who has lost his anchorage in the eternal."<sup>53</sup> Yet, the irony is that modern man continues to thrive in such a situation.

In modern times, the issue of whether man is significant or insignificant is a dominant concern. This concern is reflected in modern literary works, which "are increasingly concerned with the figure of the faceless and anonymous hero, who is at once everyman and nobody."<sup>54</sup> Ivan Ilych is such a hero, and Tolstoy indicates that Ivan Ilych's life "had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible."<sup>55</sup> Nothing particularly distinguishes Ivan Ilych; he is like any other man. He marries, much like Meursault is inclined to do, for convenience, and life proceeds at quite a pleasant pace. Ivan's need to prove that he is a person of significance is reflected in his social behavior, and in his climb up the judicial ladder. His home becomes a symbol of Ivan's inner feelings of worth and significance. Tolstoy, however, reveals the blunt truth when he says of Ivan's house,

In reality it was just what is usually seen in the houses of people of moderate means who want to appear rich, and therefore succeed only in resembling others like themselves. . . . His house was so like the others that it would never have been noticed, but to him it all seemed to be quite exceptional.<sup>56</sup>

Ivan Ilych, a character marked by insignificance, sought to demonstrate his significance in every aspect of his life. And in a rather muted way, Ivan Ilych resembles the "Person of Consequence" in Nikolay Gogol's novella, The Overcoat. Gogol points out that the "Person of Consequence had only lately become a person of consequence, and until recently had been a person of no consequence."<sup>57</sup> In one sense, however, no one in The Overcoat is significant, or of any consequence.

Samuel Beckett illustrates the profound insignificance of modern man in Waiting for Godot when Vladimir says they should have jumped, "Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were respectable in those days. Now it's too late. They wouldn't even let us up."<sup>58</sup> And in reference to Pozzo's treatment of Lucky, Vladimir responds by saying, "To treat a man . . . like that . . . I think that . . . No . . . a human being . . . No . . . it's a scandal!"<sup>59</sup> Throughout the play, Beckett demonstrates the insignificance of man.

T. S. Eliot emphasizes man's insignificance in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" when he says,

And indeed there will be time  
 To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'  
 Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
 With a bald spot in the middle of my hair--  
 (They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!')  
 . . . . .  
 (They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!')<sup>60</sup>

Eliot creates the image of a frightened little person who is ridiculously concerned about society's judgments, and who is incapable of greatness in any sense. J. Alfred Prufrock personifies insignificance.

Yet, in the "wasteland" called the modern age man does have dignity and significance. This is illustrated by Sartre when he links truth and consciousness in a manner reminiscent of Dostoevsky in Notes from Underground. Sartre says, "There can be no other truth to take off from than this: 'I think; therefore, I exist.' There we have the absolute truth of consciousness becoming aware of itself."<sup>61</sup> Truth is of the utmost importance, and since there is no a priori truth, truth is "on everyone's doorstep; it's a matter of grasping it directly."<sup>62</sup> Thus, each man is responsible for truth, and this greatly enhances the dignity and significance of man. Sartre stresses this when he says that "this theory is the only one which gives man dignity, the only one which does not reduce him to an object."<sup>63</sup>

The theoretical dignity that Sartre discusses becomes actual in some of Ernest Hemingway's characters. In "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," the old man who wants the bar to remain open so he can continue to drink tried to commit suicide the previous week. Such an attempt suggests a feeling of insignificance. But Hemingway is careful to point out that when the bar closes, and the old man leaves, "The waiter watched him go down the street, a very old man walking

unsteadily but with dignity."<sup>64</sup> Loneliness, a death wish, and a feeling of meaninglessness are not enough to rob the old man of a feeling of personal value and significance. Santiago, in The Old Man and the Sea, displays these same feelings when he is engaged in a solitary struggle with the great fish over a period of days. He goes out beyond reasonable limits, and his epic battle results in spiritual as well as physical exhaustion. Santiago's fight is a lonely one, but even though the sharks may have destroyed his fish, Santiago is not defeated. He proves once again that he is up to the test. He proves that he can and will endure pain, hunger, thirst, and despair. Hemingway's hero proves that by the way he endures, he prevails. In the midst of absurdity, Santiago demonstrates modern man's compelling need to assert his dignity. In effect, Santiago reflects a paradox, because through his actions, an insignificant man demonstrates his significance.

The "decline of religion," which William Barrett says has been the "central fact of modern history in the West," has profound implications for modern man because,

In losing religion, man lost the concrete connection with a transcendent realm of being; he was set free to deal with this world in all its brute objectivity. But he was bound to feel homeless in such a world, which no longer answered the needs of his spirit.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, modern man's paradoxical situation continues. Man gains independence as he is freed from reliance on "a transcendent realm of being," but the price for such



independence is a feeling of homelessness and spiritual loss.

Albert Camus deals with the issue of freedom in the modern, secular, absurd age when he says,

The problem of 'freedom as such' has no meaning. For it is linked in quite a different way with the problem of God. Knowing whether or not a man is free involves knowing whether he can have a master. The absurdity peculiar to this problem comes from the fact that the very notion that makes the problem of freedom possible also takes away all its meaning. For in the presence of God there is less a problem of freedom than a problem of evil. You know the alternative: either we are not free and God the all-powerful is responsible for evil. Or we are free and responsible but God is not all-powerful. All the scholastic subtleties have neither added anything to nor subtracted anything from the acuteness of this paradox.<sup>66</sup>

Camus also says, "Knowing whether or not man is free doesn't interest me. I can experience only my own freedom."<sup>67</sup>

Camus goes on to say that, "if the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of action."<sup>68</sup> Sartre expresses similar ideas when he says, "there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom."<sup>69</sup> Thus, life in the absurd, modern world consists of freedom and independence for the individual. Modern man is free to act in any way that pleases him, and he is not dependent on some outside or higher authority. Man is in control of his life, and he is responsible for creating value and meaning in his life. Man is his own higher authority in the modern world, and this is a significant change from the situation facing man in the Renaissance.

Being independent is one thing, but coping with that independence is another. Nietzsche believes that, "Very few people are capable of being independent; it is a privilege of the strong."<sup>70</sup> Nietzsche talks about the dangers facing the independent man when he says,

. . . he walks into a labyrinth; he increases a thousandfold the dangers which are inherent in life anyway. And not the smallest of his dangers is that no one can witness how and where he loses his way, falls into solitude, or is torn to pieces by some troglodytic minotaur of conscience. When such a man perishes, it happens so far from human understanding that other men have no feeling for it, no fellow feeling. But there is no return for him--not even a return to human compassion!--<sup>71</sup>

The image of the independent man that Nietzsche presents is of a stranger, an alien, an isolated individual--a being cut off from human sympathy. Meursault is, perhaps, the archetypal example of Nietzsche's independent man. From the beginning of Camus' novel, Meursault is in a state of isolation, and by the end of the novel, he is in a state of extreme alienation. From a societal standpoint, what comes between these two points is the gradual transition from grudgingly acceptable isolation to totally unacceptable alienation. But at no time does society, through any of its representatives, demonstrate any concern, understanding, or sympathy for Meursault or his predicament. Meursault pays a high price for his independence, and it is a price demanded of many in the modern world. Rebels, whether passive or aggressive, must pay for their independence.

Independence and subjectivity are closely related, and modern man has the religious, moral, and psychological freedom to live a life based on subjectivity. Nietzsche anticipates this when he says, "'My judgment is my judgment, to which hardly anyone else has a right,' is what the philosopher of the future will say. One must get rid of the bad taste of wishing to agree with many others. 'Good' is no longer good in the mouth of my neighbor."<sup>72</sup> Albert Camus is a philosopher of the future that Nietzsche is referring to, and he says that, "Knowing whether or not one can live without appeal is all that interests me."<sup>73</sup> To live without appeal is to live a life of subjectivity. Camus recognizes Nietzsche's philosophical contributions when he indicates that Nietzsche ". . . elucidates the rule of a really distinguished code of ethics . . . [and] he also points the way of the absurd man."<sup>74</sup> Camus also stresses the subjectivity of life in modern times when he says that the absurd man, "assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his mortal consciousness, . . . lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime. That is his field, that is his action, which he shields from any judgment but his own."<sup>75</sup> This presumably is what Nietzsche means when he says, "Every select man seeks instinctively to find his castle, his secret place, where he is absolved of the mass, the many, the majority--where he may forget the human rule,

being himself the exception."<sup>76</sup> Both Nietzsche and Camus are talking about a philosophy of subjectivity. The so-called objective standards or values that played a predominant role in the sixteenth century are replaced by a subjective approach to existence in modern times.

How does such a subjective approach to life manifest itself in actual situations? Two examples from The Stranger should suffice. First, in the eyes of the prosecution, Meursault's affair with Marie, which began the day after his mother's funeral, was a damaging piece of "evidence." To the prosecution, only an "inhuman monster" would insult his dead mother by going to a comic movie, and having sexual relations with someone on the day after such a solemn occasion. From Meursault's existential point of view, however, his actions lead to a much different conclusion. Meursault's actions before, during, and after his mother's funeral indicate that he is not going to be ruled by practices and conventions established by society, or anyone other than himself. He will go along with those rules and regulations that he does not feel like violating, but any others that he does not like, he simply disregards. In short, Meursault's approach is subjective; he decides what is right and wrong.

The second example of Meursault's subjective approach, and his disdain for superimposed standards and values, is when he kills the Arab. The shooting is not

premeditated, and yet there is that disturbing pause between the first shot, and the four that follow. To the prosecution, that pause makes all the difference. But to Meursault, the pause and the Arab come to the same thing--both are meaningless. In fact, the situation on the blinding beach, and life in general are absurd and meaningless to Meursault. This is evident when Meursault thinks: "And just then it crossed my mind that one might fire, or not fire--and it would come to absolutely the same thing."<sup>77</sup> Nothing.

If Camus is right, and The Stranger is "the story of a man who, without any heroics, agrees to die for the truth,"<sup>78</sup> then the truth involved is highly subjective and existential. Of course, charges are often brought against existentialism. It is called a negative doctrine that stresses the "dark side of human life."<sup>79</sup> In answer to such charges, Sartre says "that . . . existentialism . . . [is] a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity."<sup>80</sup> Camus surely agrees with Sartre when he says,

At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling.<sup>81</sup>

The key here is that Sisyphus and man have a fate created

by them, and that, while that fate is sealed by death, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."<sup>82</sup>

William Barrett says that the rational/irrational problem has been evident in the West since the time of Plato. He points out that, "In Plato's myth first appears that cleavage between reason and the irrational that it has been the long burden of the West to carry, until the dualism makes itself felt in most violent form within modern culture."<sup>83</sup> Between Plato and modern times the rational/irrational dualism is evident in the sixteenth century, as Martin Esslin indicates: "There is also in Shakespeare the personification of the subconscious part of man in great archetypal characters like Falstaff or Caliban, and the exalted madness of Ophelia, Richard II, and Lear--real descents into the realms of the irrational."<sup>84</sup> Sixteenth-century excursions into "the realms of the irrational are continued and expanded in modern times, as the forces of irrationality seem to dominate the modern period. In the midst of global brutality and irrationality, Martin Esslin remarks,

It is certainly significant that today, when the need to be rational in 'serious, adult life' has become greater than ever, literature and the theatre are in increasing measure giving room to that liberation through nonsense which the stiff bourgeois world of Vienna before the First World War would not admit in any guise.<sup>85</sup>

After reading a daily newspaper, or watching a daily newscast, it is easy to understand why modern artists seek

"liberation through nonsense."

Albert Camus makes some pertinent comments about the world and rationality when he says,

I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.<sup>86</sup>

Man's "longing for clarity" is not easily satisfied because,

"At the limits of reason one comes face to face with the meaningless. . . ." <sup>87</sup> And it is in such a situation that modern man, facing the irrational, begins to experience the absurd, which results from the "confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."<sup>88</sup>

If Camus is right, modern man faces an incredible situation, because Camus asserts that, "To an absurd mind reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason."<sup>89</sup>

Fyodor Dostoevsky deals with the rational/irrational duality in man's nature through the main character in his novel Notes from Underground when the Underground Man says, "You see, gentlemen, reason is an excellent thing, there's no disputing that, but reason is nothing but reason and satisfies only the rational side of man's nature, while will is a manifestation of the whole human life including reason and all the impulses."<sup>90</sup> The Underground Man stresses the limitations of reason, and the fact that man often ignores reason and acts on the basis of caprice. Finally, the Underground Man asserts

that "one may say anything about the history of the world-- anything that might enter the most disordered imagination. The only thing one can't say is that it's rational. The very word sticks in one's throat."<sup>91</sup> Thus, the Underground Man reflects what William Barrett says that Dostoevsky finally concluded about man, when he came "to see at the center of man's nature: contradiction, ambivalence, irrationality."<sup>92</sup> Even a cursory examination of the modern age supports Camus' contention that, "never perhaps at any time has the attack on reason been more violent than in ours."<sup>93</sup> And with this in mind, it is small wonder that "the artist today shows us the absurd, the inexplicable, the meaningless in our daily life."<sup>94</sup> In modern times, man has unleashed the dogs of irrationality, and too often they predominate.

As long as man has been conscious, he has faced the idealism/realism problem. Shakespeare dealt with this problem numerous times, and Walter Kaufmann indicates the approach that he took:

Shakespeare, like the Greeks before him and Nietzsche after him, believed neither in progress nor in original sin; he believed that most men merited contempt and that a very few were head and shoulders above the rest of mankind and that these few, more often than not, meet 'with base infection' and do not herald progress.<sup>95</sup>

Such a view of man has a modern ring to it, because the modern age is short on idealism and long on realism.



The modern age is not devoid of idealism; it is clearly in evidence in Santiago as he struggles against the forces of nature in The Old Man and the Sea. Santiago's courage, will, and spirit reflect a view of man that is idealistic. Similar feelings are expressed by Paul Zindel in The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds when Tillie concludes the play by saying, "But most important, I suppose, my experiment has made me feel important--every atom in me, in everybody, has come from the sun--from places beyond our dreams. The atoms of our hands, the atoms of our hearts . . . Atom. Atom. What a beautiful word."<sup>96</sup>

Although idealism remains in the modern consciousness, it is more often superseded by realism, and that realism frequently has an absurd bent to it. Albert Camus' view of the absurd is expressed, in part, when he says,

A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive. This discomfort in the face of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this 'nausea,' as a writer of today calls it, is also the absurd.<sup>97</sup>

Camus' concept of modern man, as just expressed, is based on realism, and not idealism. Camus continues along the same path when he says, "Death is there as the only reality. After death the chips are down."<sup>98</sup> The stark realism of Camus' analysis of man's situation continues when he says,

"The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness."<sup>99</sup> It is difficult to detect idealism in such lines, and these lines are symptomatic of the modern age.

Nietzsche deals with the idealism/realism problem in the following pithy lines: "A great man, did you say? All I ever see is the actor creating his own ideal image."<sup>100</sup> Nietzsche continues to strip away the idealistic view of man when he says, in lines reminiscent of Montaigne,

Man, a complex, lying, artificial, and inscrutable animal, weird-looking to the other animals not so much because of his power but rather because of his guile and shrewdness, has invented the clear conscience, so that he might have the sensation, for once, that his psyche is a simple thing. All of morality is a continuous courageous forgery, without which an enjoyment of the sight of man's soul would be impossible.<sup>101</sup>

Nietzsche's bleak view of man is presented in another form by George Bernard Shaw in Major Barbara when Andrew Undershaft completely dominates society, and is able to convince and convert virtually all opposition to his religion of destruction. It is small wonder, then, that in such a world man is afflicted with an acute case of stasis. The lines of Pozzo and Estragon in Waiting for Godot are highly symbolic of modern man's predicament:

Pozzo: I don't seem to be able . . . to depart.  
Estragon: Such is life.<sup>102</sup>

Godot will not come to save them, and that fact emphasizes the pervading realism of the modern age.

Existentialism is concerned with "anxiety, death, the conflict between the bogus and the genuine self, the faceless man of the masses, the experience of the death of God,"<sup>103</sup> and other ideas which constitute life. Tolstoy deals with these concerns in The Death of Ivan Ilych. The opening scene is dominated by the "faint odour of a decomposing body,"<sup>104</sup> an apt beginning for a novel that is concerned with life. As usual, the dead man's "face was handsomer and above all more dignified than when he was alive,"<sup>105</sup> but the narrator also acknowledges that the expression on the dead man's face contained "a reproach and a warning to the living."<sup>106</sup> Tolstoy is presenting the truth that "anyone who would stand face to face with life itself must also stand face to face with death, for death is an inescapable part of life."<sup>107</sup> And one of Tolstoy's major concerns is to tell the story of Ivan Ilych in such a way that the emptiness, meaninglessness, and absurdity of life are apparent. In short, Tolstoy reveals that to be alive, to be conscious, is to live, suffer, and die. And all of this takes place for no apparent purpose.

Modern man lives in a world in which "it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning."<sup>108</sup> Albert Camus ponders this question, and in The Myth of Sisyphus he asserts that his philosophical essay is "a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert."<sup>109</sup> The starting point of Camus'

essay, however, is the absurd, and Camus begins the first section of his essay by stating the following:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest--whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories--comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.<sup>110</sup>

In answering the "fundamental question of philosophy" man can rely only on himself. He must look at life, and ponder the enigma of existence. In short, he must think, and this is dangerous because "beginning to think is beginning to be undermined."<sup>111</sup>

Camus is interested in the "relationship between the absurd and suicide," and "the exact degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd."<sup>112</sup> Camus is dealing with a world that is devoid of illusion, where man is an alien and a stranger. He asserts that man's "exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity."<sup>113</sup> And if man is to cope with life in the modern world, he must cope with this absurdity. Camus believes that man "has forgotten how to hope." This hell of the present is his Kingdom at last. All problems recover their sharp edge."<sup>114</sup> And the problem with the sharpest edge is choosing whether to live or die.

Ivan Ilych chooses to live. From the moment he realizes that he is being stalked by death, Ivan fights to recover his health, and remain alive. Meursault also faces the life/death problem. He tries to remind himself that,

'it's common knowledge that life isn't worth living, anyhow.' And, on a wide view, I could see that it makes little difference whether one dies at the age of thirty or threescore and ten--since, in either case, other men and women will continue living, the world will go on as before. Also, whether I died now or forty years hence, this business of dying had to be got through, inevitably.<sup>115</sup>

But this line of reasoning did not solve Meursault's problem, and it did not console him. In fact, when he thought of his appeal, and the chance of avoiding the guillotine, he had trouble trying "to calm down that sudden rush of joy"<sup>116</sup> that surged through his body, bringing tears to his eyes. Meursault desperately wanted to live; thus, he is consistent with Camus' views on the life/death problem. Camus believes that, "Suicide is a repudiation."<sup>117</sup> He thinks that the absurd man, through his day-to-day revolt, "gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance."<sup>118</sup> Thus, for modern man, Camus believes that "the point is to live."<sup>119</sup>

While some face the life/death problem and endorse life, others opt for death, or look to death as a release from life's torments. August Strindberg presents this option in *Miss Julie* when Jean puts a razor in Julie's hand and sends her out to the barn to commit suicide. Julie

answers Camus' "fundamental question" by saying, "I am going now--to rest."<sup>120</sup> In Hedda Gabler, Hedda endorses death even more decisively as she plays a "frenzied dance tune on the piano,"<sup>121</sup> and then shoots herself in the temple.

Larry, in The Iceman Cometh, expresses the futility of life in the modern world as he says, "What's before me is the comforting fact that death is a fine long sleep, and I'm damned tired, and it can't come too soon for me."<sup>122</sup> And if death comes too slowly, modern man has the Willy Loman option. Whether man has the right dreams or the wrong dreams, as Charley says, "It's a rough world."<sup>123</sup> Thus, whether by razor, gun, rubber pipe, or car, death is an option for modern man.

Man in the Renaissance faced a paradoxical situation because he experienced the beginning of the decline of religion, and yet he was "enthralled by a new and powerful vision of mastery over the whole earth."<sup>124</sup> In modern times, however, the situation is much different. William Barrett asserts that the atomic era has changed man's feelings of power and possibility, and "the limitless horizons into which man looked at the time of the Renaissance have at last contracted."<sup>125</sup>

The atomic problem is simply the most serious problem in a series of modern events and problems that have plagued man in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. War has been a recurring problem, and it continues to pervade the world's

consciousness. World War I was fought to "make the world safe for democracy," and World War II was the "war to end all wars." Between the World Wars, the Great Depression ravaged much of the world. And it is apparent that the noble goals behind the slogans for the two World Wars are empty and false. Instead of democracy, peace, and brotherhood, there is repression, fighting, and hatred. Killing and suffering continue, and meaninglessness is ever present. The large wars have been replaced by smaller wars, and there seems to be no end in sight. Planes get bigger and fly faster, and rockets carry men to the moon. But poverty abounds in the richest of nations, and racism raises its ugly head, often in the name of God, mother, and country. And modern man frequently bows down to the wonderful goddess Science, at the same time that pollution threatens to destroy the fragile balance of life necessary for survival on this planet.<sup>126</sup>

In view of this situation, then, it is no wonder that the modern age is marked by pessimism. For many people, those taught to believe in a just and loving God, a God active in history, the historical realities of modern times serve to underscore Nietzsche's cry that "God is dead." Events and circumstances often point to the fact that man faces absurdity and the void alone, and this fact is reflected in modern literature. The pessimism that has been developing through the centuries becomes virtually

all encompassing in much of the life, thought, and literature of the modern era.

The mood that Conrad establishes at the beginning of Heart of Darkness reflects this type of pessimism. The narrator says that, "The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth."<sup>127</sup> The narrator continues to create a melancholy mood when he muses about the river and the sea, stressing the mysterious quality of both. The foreboding quality initiated by the narrator is developed further when Marlow assumes the narration. In his first speech Marlow says, "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth."<sup>128</sup> It is clear from the opening lines of the novel that Conrad's tale will not be light and happy; rather, it will be serious, with important implications for the individual who dares to enter the enchanting and potentially destructive "heart of darkness." And instead of getting brighter, the mood becomes darker and gloomier as the novel progresses.

Finally, after dealing with individual, corporate, and national cruelty and savagery, Marlow is forced into the depressing situation of having to choose between Kurtz and the company that employs them. This is "a choice of nightmares"<sup>129</sup> for Marlow, but he chooses Kurtz by saying, "I think Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man."<sup>130</sup>



Marlow explains his choice by indicating that in Kurtz he "saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself."<sup>131</sup> Marlow does not endorse what Kurtz has done, or his views. But Marlow does admire the courage of Kurtz, and the fact that Kurtz does not live a life of hypocrisy, and that he is willing to abandon self-delusion. Marlow realizes that he and Kurtz share the same thing, namely, "oblivion which is . . . our common fate."<sup>132</sup> And in the face of that oblivion Kurtz is able to subject himself to painful self-scrutiny; in an existential manner, Kurtz makes the final judgment on his life when he says: "'The horror! The horror!'"<sup>133</sup> Although Kurtz makes an honest judgment, and that is admirable, the quality of his decisions and actions while living and working in the "heart of darkness" make him, at best, an existential grotesque. And yet he remains a better nightmare to choose than the manager, or the company, or the rest of civilization. It is such a situation that generates an all pervasive pessimism.

Samuel Beckett presents such pessimism in Waiting for Godot, and makes depressing comments on life in the following lines:

Vladimir: Nothing you can do about it.  
 Estragon: No use struggling.  
 Vladimir: One is what one is.  
 Estragon: No use wriggling.  
 Vladimir: The essential doesn't change.  
 Estragon: Nothing to be done.<sup>134</sup>

This view of life is completely consistent with the view expressed by Eugene O'Neill in The Iceman Cometh, when Larry describes Harry Hope's saloon:

What is it? It's the No Chance Saloon. It's Bedrock Bar, The End of the Line Café, The Bottom of the Sea Rathskeller! Don't you notice the beautiful calm in the atmosphere? That's because it's the last harbor. No one here has to worry about where they're going next, because there is no farther they can go.<sup>135</sup>

Larry goes on to say, however, that even at Harry Hope's the people try to keep up some appearances, and cling to some "harmless pipe dreams." In many respects, Harry Hope's place is a microcosm of the world in the modern period.

Everything that has been said so far about the problem of pessimism in the modern period applies to The Stranger. Camus' novel represents the twentieth-century expansion of sixteenth-century pessimism and nothingness. The pessimism of the Renaissance is translated into the apathy and indifference of Meursault as he attempts to live his life with as much ease and as little conflict as possible. Unfortunately for him, there seems to be too little ease, and too much conflict. And Meursault understands that modern man's life is a mirror image for Sisyphus and his situation. He understands the gods who "condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight."<sup>136</sup> Meursault understands the gods who

"thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor."<sup>137</sup>

Yet, there is optimism. In reference to Sisyphus Camus says that, "The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn."<sup>138</sup> This applies to Meursault as he is about to face his execution. Facing death, Meursault realized that he had been happy, and that he was still happy. And he displays his scorn and defiance when he says,

For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained to hope was that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration.<sup>139</sup>

This is what Camus means when he says that "Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well."<sup>140</sup> And this is what Nietzsche means when he talks of living in "an immense and proud serenity: always 'beyond'. . . ." <sup>141</sup> For modern man, this is the "peace which passeth all understanding."<sup>142</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

## CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>Lily B. Campbell, Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1930), p. 103.

<sup>2</sup>William Barrett, Irrational Man (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1958), p. 35.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 28-29.

<sup>5</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 41.

<sup>6</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, trans. by Marianne Cowan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1955), p. 62.

<sup>7</sup>Walter Kaufmann, From Shakespeare to Existentialism (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1960), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), p. 22.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Leo Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," in Ten Modern Short Novels, ed. by Leo Hamalian and Edmond L. Volpe (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), p. 30.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Albert Camus, "The Stranger," in Ten Modern Short Novels, ed. by Leo Hamalian and Edmond L. Volpe (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), p. 563.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 565.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 567.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 639.

<sup>23</sup>Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. by Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 68.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>25</sup>Barrett, Irrational Man, p. 27.

<sup>26</sup>Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1969), p. 350.

<sup>27</sup>Barrett, Irrational Man, p. 135.

<sup>28</sup>Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>31</sup>William Butler Yeats, Selected Poems and Two Plays of William Butler Yeats, ed. by M. L. Rosenthal (n.p.: Macmillan Co., 1962), p. 91.

<sup>32</sup>Anton Chekhov, "The Cherry Orchard," in Drama, alt ed., ed. by Otto Reinert (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1964), p. 628.

<sup>33</sup>Luigi Pirandello, "Six Characters in Search of an Author," in Drama, alt. ed., ed. by Otto Reinert (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1964), p. 749.

<sup>34</sup>Eccles, 1:2 (RSV).

<sup>35</sup>Joseph Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," in Ten Modern Short Novels, ed. by Leo Hamalian and Edmond L. Volpe (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), p. 114.

<sup>36</sup>Pirandello, "Six Characters in Search of an Author," p. 741.

<sup>37</sup>Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, pp. 14-15.

- <sup>38</sup> Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 38.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 65.
- <sup>40</sup> Camus, "The Stranger," p. 639.
- <sup>41</sup> Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, p. 17.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 63.
- <sup>43</sup> Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 352.
- <sup>44</sup> Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 10.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 14.
- <sup>46</sup> Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 353.
- <sup>47</sup> Barrett, Irrational Man, p. 32.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 34.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 36.
- <sup>50</sup> Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions, pp. 15-32. For a discussion of these and other existential ideas, consult Sartre's discussion in the section cited.
- <sup>51</sup> H. J. Blackham, ed., Reality, Man and Existence: Essential Works of Existentialism (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1965), p. 6.
- <sup>52</sup> Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 18.
- <sup>53</sup> Barrett, Irrational Man, p. 64.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 61.
- <sup>55</sup> Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," p. 10.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.
- <sup>57</sup> Nikolay Gogol, "The Overcoat," in Six Great Modern Short Novels (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1954), p. 239.
- <sup>58</sup> Beckett, Waiting for Godot, p. 71.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>60</sup>John H. Nelson, M. L. Rosenthal, and Gerald Sanders, eds., Chief Modern Poets of England and America, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1962), p. 11-267.

<sup>61</sup>Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions, p. 36.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," in The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 381.

<sup>65</sup>Barrett, Irrational Man, p. 25.

<sup>66</sup>Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, pp. 41-42.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>69</sup>Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions, p. 22.

<sup>70</sup>Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, p. 35.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>73</sup>Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 45.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>76</sup>Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, pp. 30-31.

<sup>77</sup>Camus, "The Stranger," p. 599.

<sup>78</sup>Albert Camus, "Preface to The Stranger," in Lyrical and Critical Essays, ed. by Philip Thody, trans. by Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 337.

<sup>79</sup>Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions, p. 10.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

<sup>81</sup>Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 91.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

- <sup>83</sup>Barrett, Irrational Man, p. 83.
- <sup>84</sup>Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 286.
- <sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 293.
- <sup>86</sup>Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 16.
- <sup>87</sup>Barrett, Irrational Man, p. 64.
- <sup>88</sup>Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 21.
- <sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 27.
- <sup>90</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Notes from Underground," in Classics of Modern Fiction, ed. by Irving Howe (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 32.
- <sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 34.
- <sup>92</sup>Barrett, Irrational Man, p. 136.
- <sup>93</sup>Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 17.
- <sup>94</sup>Barrett, Irrational Man, p. 64.
- <sup>95</sup>Kaufmann, From Shakespeare to Existentialism, p. 14.
- <sup>96</sup>Paul Zindel, "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds," in Types of Drama: Plays and Essays, ed. by Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1972), p. 633.
- <sup>97</sup>Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 11.
- <sup>98</sup>Ibid., p. 42.
- <sup>99</sup>Ibid., p. 44.
- <sup>100</sup>Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, p. 77.
- <sup>101</sup>Ibid., p. 230.
- <sup>102</sup>Beckett, Waiting for Godot, p. 31.
- <sup>103</sup>Barrett, Irrational Man, p. 9.
- <sup>104</sup>Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," p. 5.
- <sup>105</sup>Ibid., p. 6.



- 106 Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," p. 6.
- 107 Barrett, Irrational Man, p. 143.
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- 109 Ibid.
- 110 Ibid., p. 3.
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- 112 Ibid., p. 5.
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- 122 Eugene O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh (New York: Random House, 1946), p. 10.
- 123 Arthur Miller, "Death of a Salesman," in Types of Drama: Plays and Essays, ed. by Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1972), p. 229.
- 124 Barrett, Irrational Man, p. 25.
- 125 Ibid., p. 36.
- 126 Ibid., pp. 29-41.
- 127 Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," p. 111.

- 128 Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," p. 113.
- 129 Ibid., p. 174.
- 130 Ibid.
- 131 Ibid., p. 178.
- 132 Ibid., p. 185.
- 133 Ibid., p. 181.
- 134 Beckett, Waiting for Godot, p. 14.
- 135 O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh, p. 25.
- 136 Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 88.
- 137 Ibid.
- 138 Ibid., p. 90.
- 139 Camus, "The Stranger," p. 640.
- 140 Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 91.
- 141 Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, p. 227.
- 142 Phil. 4:7 (RSV).

## Chapter III

### Characters in a Vacuum

In King Lear, Shakespeare develops his characters in vacuums. To exist in a vacuum is to exist in a void; it is to live in a state or a feeling of emptiness, where the individual is sealed off from external or environmental influences as he goes through the routines of living and dying. This is a lonely and solitary situation, with profound implications for the person or character in a turbulent world. To exist in a vacuum is important from a dramatic point of view because it helps to develop characters effectively. It is important from a human point of view because much of man's time is spent in a vacuum of some kind, and it is important existentially because the existentialist exists in various vacuums.

William Barrett in Irrational Man says that the modern age, an existential age, is dominated by a secular approach to life, rather than a religious approach. This idea is accurately reflected in King Lear. The gods are addressed throughout the play by many characters, but the gods are deaf and have no bearing on the action of the play. Shakespeare emphasizes this in the first scene of the play, when the following exchange takes place:

Lear. Now, by Apollo--  
Kent. Now, by Apollo, King.  
Thou swear'st thy gods in vain.  
(I, i, 162-163)

It becomes apparent that to call on the gods is an empty exercise. The gods do not exist in King Lear. A religious vacuum pervades the play, and religious values are of no consequence. As a result, man is left to fend for himself in a secular world that is dominated by individual, social, and political values; and it soon becomes clear, through the actions of Lear, Cordelia, Kent, Gloucester, Edmund, Goneril, and Regan that in this triad of values, individual values obscure others. Thus, in a secular world that is devoid of external values, the characters' actions are based primarily on the internal values of the individual. Such a world is existential, and when Gloucester says, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,/They kill us for their sport" (IV, i, 38-39), the statement is important for what it says of man's plight in a cruel world, and not for its religious connotations, which are ironic.

Walter Kaufmann says that Shakespeare's ". . . work stands as a monument of a tradition that is frequently forgotten today, and it celebrates the riches of a world without God."<sup>2</sup> These lines are relevant to King Lear, and they underscore one of the modern aspects of the play. In King Lear Shakespeare creates a situation where religious belief is not an issue. In fact, as Jan Kott says, "In King Lear the stage is empty throughout: there is nothing, except the cruel earth, where man goes on his journey from the cradle to the grave. The theme of King Lear is an

enquiry into the meaning of this journey, into the existence or non-existence of Heaven and Hell."<sup>3</sup> In the course of the play, it becomes clear from watching Lear that if the concepts Heaven and Hell are valid, they are valid only within the boundaries of birth and death. Hell is a reality for Lear because that is what his life consists of from the time he decides to divide his kingdom until he dies.

Some of Albert Camus' ideas in The Myth of Sisyphus are helpful in analyzing and understanding King Lear. Camus says that "the absurd is sin without God."<sup>4</sup> This concept helps to explain Lear's remark when he says, "I am a man more sinned against than sinning" (III, ii, 59). Lear is profoundly sinned against, but in a secular and absurd context--not a religious context. Camus asserts that, "Not to believe in the profound meaning of things belongs to the absurd man."<sup>5</sup> Gloucester is the absurd man as he kneels near Dover and renounces the world. Life has lost all meaning for Gloucester, and he seeks to escape from the suffering and affliction that he is enduring.

The religious vacuum that exists in King Lear makes numerous lines in the play incredibly ironic. But the most ironic line occurs just moments before Lear enters carrying the dead Cordelia in his arms, when Albany says, "The gods defend her!" (V, iii, 256). Lear's response is also ironic when he says,

Howl, howl, howl, howl! Oh you are men of stones.  
 Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so  
 That heaven's vault should crack.

(V, iii, 257-259)

Lear could possess the power of a hundred, and he could howl and rage to the ultimate degree, but it would do no good. Like many in the modern age, Lear lives in a religious vacuum. For him, just as for Nietzsche, "God is dead," and it does no good to call on the divine. To invoke the names of the gods only makes the characters in King Lear look more helpless, ridiculous, and grotesque. Lear and Gloucester cannot blame their downfall on the gods. As Jan Kott indicates, "In the world of the grotesque, downfall cannot be justified by, or blamed on, the absolute."<sup>6</sup> What Kott says applies to King Lear, and the religious vacuum in the play supports the conclusion that for Lear and the others, "The absolute is absurd."<sup>7</sup>

The modern world is a world of chaos, and order seems to be fleeting, if not absent. Walter Kaufmann says that Shakespeare is modern in that,

He marks the end of a world in the same sense as Michelangelo: a unified world on the verge of disintegration; the exaltation of the individual to a plane that is somehow higher than that reached by all subsequent individualism.<sup>8</sup>

King Lear begins with "a unified world," but by the end of the play the unity is shattered. As Jan Kott indicates, "In King Lear both the medieval and Renaissance orders of established values disintegrate. All that remains at the

end of this gigantic pantomime, is the earth--empty and bleeding."<sup>9</sup> The loss of order and the predominance of chaos are caused, in part, by the social vacuum in the play.

The social vacuum in King Lear is important to the developing action of the play, and to the development of character. The term "social vacuum" refers to the disruption of the family unit, and the resultant familial isolation. In a direct sense this begins with the rejection and banishment of Cordelia. Indirectly, the familial isolation begins earlier for Cordelia, as she indicates when she stresses the differences between herself and her sisters, just before she leaves for France. While the banishment of Cordelia and the breakup of the family unit are important for Cordelia, in terms of results, they are much more significant for Lear. He is left to the evil designs of Goneril and Regan, and he has established a precedent of rejection in the family that is easy for the sisters to continue. Therefore, Goneril can echo the feelings of Lear toward Cordelia when Lear goes out into the storm, and Goneril says,

'Tis his own blame. Hath put himself from rest,  
And must needs taste his folly.

(II, iv, 293-294)

Except for the temporary respite when Lear is reunited with Cordelia, when he goes from the castle to the storm, the social vacuum that Lear has created is complete. The final result of the social vacuum occurs with the death of the



three daughters.

There is a social vacuum in the parallel plot as well. Early in the play it becomes clear that Edmund exists in a social vacuum because he is illegitimate, and because he has been away for nine years. This, of course, helps to explain the lack of insight into Edmund's character by Edgar and Gloucester, if any explanation is necessary. Edmund demonstrates that he considers himself outside the social structures when he says in his first soliloquy,

Thou, Nature, art my goddess, to thy law  
My services are bound. Wherefore should I  
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit  
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,  
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines  
Lag of a brother?

(I, ii, 1-6)

Edmund is literally and figuratively outside the family; he is loyal only to himself. He is an alien and an outsider, and in these respects he resembles Meursault.

Because of his own naivete, and Edmund's evil designs, Edgar is in a social vacuum for most of the play. He is forced to flee for his life, and Shakespeare demonstrates his familial isolation when Edgar becomes Poor Tom and says, "Edgar I nothing am" (II, iii, 21). While Cordelia is able to live as a family exile and retain her own identity, Edgar must give up privilege, position, and identity. Even when Edgar is reunited with Gloucester after Gloucester is blinded, the social vacuum continues, and in a

more painful and poignant way.

As in Lear's case, the Gloucester family is disrupted and destroyed because of the actions of the head of the family. In both cases the demise of the family begins with the seemingly innocent word "nothing," and Edmund's "nothing" is translated into the nothingness of the Gloucester family. When Gloucester is misled by Edmund, he seals the fate of the family and himself. Shakespeare demonstrates this when Gloucester enters the hovel on the heath in search of Lear. In the course of the discussion between Edgar, Kent, Lear, and Gloucester, Edgar repeats the sentence, "Poor Tom's a-cold" (III, iv, 152). What Edgar says is true on both the literal and figurative levels; and unfortunately for Edgar and Gloucester, they only momentarily experience warmth through the rest of the play.

When Gloucester is blinded, his social isolation is complete. He exists in a dark vacuum of pain, suffering, and pity. Gloucester acquires some knowledge at a high price, and renounces the world because of that knowledge. His death wish is painfully revealed on the way to Dover. But Dover also becomes the focal point for the positive effects of the social vacuum that Gloucester has created. Gloucester shows some insight when he says, "I stumbled when I saw" (IV, ii, 21). He indicates that he understands the world better when he says, "'Tis the times' plague when

madmen lead the blind" (IV, ii, 48). Such perceptions were not possible when Gloucester had eyes. So after being world weary, the "miracle" at Dover teaches Gloucester the following truth:

Henceforth I'll bear  
 Affliction till it do cry out itself  
 'Enough, enough,' and die.  
 (IV, vi, 75-77)

Gloucester's social exile has not been in vain; he dies with insight into himself and the world. But the price for such knowledge is pain, agony, and death. With the deaths of Gloucester and Edmund, the social vacuum in the parallel plot is complete.

By definition the Court Fool in the Renaissance exists in a social vacuum. He is outside the normal social structure, with no references made to who he is or where he comes from. Nevertheless, Lear's Fool seems to be a definite part of the family; this is emphasized by the loss the Fool feels when Cordelia is exiled. The Fool pines for her. With Cordelia gone, the Fool is left with only Lear and his wit, and the Fool moves from a theoretical social vacuum to an actual or personal social vacuum, where the effects of Lear's decision are personally experienced. It is out of this social vacuum that the Fool begins the important re-education process of Lear. The Fool is able repeatedly to tell Lear the painful truth, without being abused or exiled. As such, the Fool plays an extremely

important role in the play, and this role is facilitated by the social vacuum in which the Fool exists.

A political vacuum is created by Lear's decision to divide the kingdom among his daughters. By abdicating his kingly responsibilities, Lear deprives the realm of a single, strong leader. In its place he puts two untested rulers who have uncurbed ambition, and it is into such a power vacuum that the Cornwalls and the Edmunds of this world move. Without the opportunity given to them by Lear, their ambitions could hardly be fulfilled. In moving from one tested ruler to two untested rulers, the kingdom moves from order to chaos; and such a move has definite implications for Cordelia, Goneril, Regan, Gloucester, Edgar, and Edmund. Some of these people use the political vacuum to advance their own ends, but others are simply innocent victims of that vacuum. As a result of the power vacuum, Cordelia is forced to return from life in France, and to fight to re-establish the power that Lear should never have relinquished. Lear's decision provokes Kent into speaking against Lear, and this in turn means exile. Gloucester gets caught in the impending civil war, and loses his power, wealth, and sight. Edgar must fight for what is rightfully his, because Lear's decision has not only "loosed the dogs of war," it has also loosed the dogs of passion and political ambition. It becomes clear, then, that Lear's division of the kingdom has profound effects for the entire

kingdom. Creating a political vacuum has far-reaching and disasterous effects.

When Lear destroys any semblance of social and political order by his actions in the opening scene of the play, the natural order that exists in a well run monarchy disappears, and each individual is on his own. Lear unleashes the furies of uncertainty, frustration, futility, and nothingness that plague him, and other characters in the play. Lear creates a world without the restraining factors of society, and as such, man has unlimited freedom of thought and action. The result is a world gone mad, a world of chaos where good and evil wage an epic struggle; and Edgar is a casualty of this world of madness. Edgar does not receive the luxury of exile; he must rely on himself and on his wits to survive in a world where rightness, goodness, and honesty seem to be ignored if not scorned. Edgar says,

My face I'll grime with filth,  
Blanket my loins, elf all my hair in knots,  
And with presented nakedness outface  
The winds and persecutions of the sky.  
(II, iv, 9-12)

Edgar is tangible proof of the chaos that has replaced order in Lear's kingdom; and the pain, suffering, and madness that dominate Edgar's life as he lives a life of Poor Tom foreshadow what will happen to Lear. The isolation of Edgar and his consequent development presages Lear's isolation and development.

Thus, in a real and poignant way, Lear is "condemned to be free,"<sup>10</sup> with all of the awesome implications of such freedom. It is ironic that Lear's freedom results from his own actions. By creating such a world in King Lear, Shakespeare arrives at a vision of reality that is modern and existential. It is a vision that resembles Camus' in The Stranger and The Myth of Sisyphus; it resembles the world Martin Esslin describes as post-Nietzschean; and it resembles the world of chaos that Anton Chekhov presents in The Cherry Orchard. Robert Brustein asserts that, "Shakespeare developed, slowly and painfully, a negative view of life, but this is the initial assumption of the modern dramatist. . . ." <sup>11</sup> Brustein is probably right, but in terms of King Lear, Shakespeare begins with the same "initial assumption" as the modern dramatist; and for this reason it is helpful to compare certain aspects of the play with some of the moderns. Finally, it must be noted that, while negative elements dominate much of the action of King Lear, positive elements are evident in the development of Lear's character.

The modern world is in a constant state of flux; in fact, flux seems to permeate most aspects of life. This situation applies to King Lear, and from the moment Lear makes his fateful decision of division, his world is in perpetual flux. Finally, feelings of despair and futility

almost overwhelm Lear. He is impressed by the vanity of existence, and he reacts to the artificiality of society by tearing off his clothes in frustration and rejection. Lear hovers between sanity and insanity as he attempts to come to grips with himself, and his situation. It is clear that life is a "great stage of fools" (IV, vi, 87), and in a poignant scene Lear asks the most penetrating existential questions in the play:

Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight?  
 I am mightily abused. I should e'en die with pity  
 To see another thus. I know not what to say.  
 I will not swear these are my hands. Let's see,  
 I feel this pin prick. Would I were assured  
 Of my condition!

(IV, vii, 52-56)

This is the king who would divide up his kingdom because he knows what is right and good for himself and his kingdom. This is the father who knows that it is right to reject his daughter. This is the king who knows that a ruler does not go back on his commands, and who banishes a faithful counsellor who dares to question his judgment. The king of answers has become a quivering man of questions. Out of despair, frustration, and uncertainty Lear is crying for certainty. In a world of flux, he wants something to grasp. In a world of constant change, Lear seeks permanence. The dilemma could not have been posed better by Beckett, Pirandello, Ionesco, Sartre, or Camus.

Cordelia represents a chance for permanence, and when Lear is reunited with Cordelia he is still foolish

enough to think that he can escape from all that is troubling him. He says to Cordelia:

No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison.  
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage.  
(V, iii, 8-9)

Lear still does not realize that escape is impossible from the hell that he has created, and that there is "no exit." He still does not fully realize that all of life is a figurative prison, and that life in a literal prison will not consist of songs and joy, particularly Edmund's prison. His perception remains clouded.

Shakespeare's world in King Lear is modern, and marked by flux. Lear's search for permanence, and his inability to escape flux are partially the result of the religious, social, and political vacuums that exist in the play. Within this world of flux, which has a quality of madness about it, Lear's personal madness, both literal and figurative, adds a degree of complexity and ambiguity to the play that is reminiscent of Pirandello in Henry IV. With both Henry and Lear, there is "reason in madness;" and at times it is not clear whether they are speaking and acting from a state of sanity or insanity. In both plays, the literal madness of a character serves to highlight the larger more all-encompassing madness of the world at large. Shakespeare's conception of the world in King Lear is as modern and depressing as Pirandello's.



To live in a perpetual state of uncertainty is a disturbing situation. In the Renaissance, part of man's uncertainty was caused by his pursuit of knowledge. Montaigne indicates that, "men having tried and sounded all things, and having found in that accumulation of knowledge and provision of so many various things, nothing massive and firm, nothing but vanity, have quitted their presumption and acknowledged their natural condition."<sup>12</sup> One aspect of man's natural condition is a lack of certainty. Albert Camus talks about these same ideas when he says,

A stranger to myself and to the world, armed solely with a thought that negates itself as soon as it asserts, what is this condition in which I can have peace only by refusing to know and to live, in which the appetite for conquest bumps into walls that defy its assaults? To will is to stir up paradoxes.<sup>13</sup>

While in a state of isolation Lear discovers that he is a stranger to himself and to the world; and in trying to solve the mystery of his strangeness, Lear also discovers in dealing with his daughters that the thoughts he has toward them are almost immediately negated. As Lear struggles to maintain his sanity, he learns that "to will is to stir up paradoxes." Nietzsche asks, "Whatever forces us, furthermore, to assume at all that there is an essential difference between 'true' and 'false'?"<sup>14</sup> This is a question that Lear can fully appreciate after dealing with Goneril and Regan; they add immeasurably to Lear's feeling of uncertainty.

When the play begins Lear is absolutely certain about who he is and how he should act. Lear may be accused of various things when he banishes Cordelia and Kent, but uncertainty is not one of them. Before long, however, Lear is expressing uncertainty when he asks,

Doth any here know me? This is not Lear.  
 Doth Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?  
 . . . . .  
 Who is it that can tell me who I am?  
 (I, iv, 246-247, 250)

At this point in the play Lear is still in control of his faculties enough to be posing questions in a rhetorical fashion, but this does not diminish the seriousness of Lear's questions. Certainty is quickly and relentlessly ebbing away from Lear.

Finally, the king who once ruled with absolute power, the king of absolute certainty seeks an answer to a basic, recurring question:

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life  
 And thou no breath at all?  
 (V, iii, 306-307)

Lear seeks an answer to a question that people have asked numerous times in the twentieth century--Why do the good die young? But the answer is no more forthcoming for Lear than for anyone else, and he dies in a state of uncertainty. For most of the play, like his modern counterparts, Lear seeks certainty about life, but life remains a massive enigma. In King Lear, nothingness and meaninglessness combine to reveal "the absurdity of the human condition."

As William Barrett indicates, "Nothingness has, in fact, become one of the chief themes in modern art and literature, whether it is directly named as such or merely drifts through the work as the ambiance in which the human figures live, move, and have their being."<sup>15</sup> The theme of nothingness is one of the chief themes in King Lear, and this is caused, in part, by the religious vacuum that pervades the play. The comments that Barrett makes on the decline of religion in the modern period apply equally well to King Lear. Barrett says that,

In losing religion, man lost the concrete connection with a transcendent realm of being; he was set free to deal with this world in all its brute objectivity. But he was bound to feel homeless in such a world, which no longer answered the needs of his spirit.<sup>16</sup>

Operating in a religious vacuum, Lear and Gloucester repeatedly demonstrate that their needs of the spirit are not met. One result of this situation is a feeling of insecurity.

The nothingness in King Lear also stems from the social vacuum that persists in the play. When Cordelia fails to express her love for her father, Lear's pride is hurt. But Lear's question also reflects a basic insecurity in Lear's character. When Cordelia is unable to meet Lear's needs, the insecurity undoubtedly increases; and the situation rapidly becomes more acute after Cordelia leaves and Lear is left to his other daughters. Gloucester also exists in a social vacuum, and his insecurity steadily

increases as he blunders toward his death. Gloucester longs for the security of a loving son, and yet he wrongs Edgar and is left without literal as well as figurative security after he is blinded.

According to Martin Esslin, part of the philosophy of the Theatre of the Absurd holds that, "the world is seen as a hall of reflecting mirrors, and reality merges imperceptibly into fantasy."<sup>17</sup> If this is correct, then man faces the perplexing problem of trying to sort out truth. As Lear discovers, this is a difficult task. His three daughters stand before him, and as "reflecting mirrors" they cause reality to "merge imperceptibly into fantasy." As Lear begins to realize that he cannot escape from problems, and that he cannot "unburdened crawl toward death," he faces truth in all of its complexity. Edward Albee deals with the elusive quality of truth in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? when Martha says, "Truth or illusion, George; you don't know the difference."<sup>18</sup> George's reply is significant: "No; but we must carry on as though we did."<sup>19</sup> Throughout most of the play Lear carries on as though he knows the difference between truth and illusion. Finally, when reality and fantasy begin to merge before Lear's eyes at an ever increasing rate, and life becomes a blinding tilt-a-whirl, Lear loses his grip on sanity and slips into the world of madness. Lear seeks the security of certainty, but he discovers the validity of Camus' statement that, "The only

reality is 'anxiety' in the whole chain of beings." This idea is relevant to the play as a whole--not just to Lear; Camus' statement is verified by Lear, Gloucester, Edgar, Cordelia, the Fool, Goneril, Regan, and Kent. William Barrett, Martin Esslin, and Albert Camus express ideas about drama and reality that help to explain and interpret King Lear; they help to explicate the contemporary aspect of Shakespeare's world in King Lear.

The religious and social vacuums in King Lear have a definite impact on the significance/insignificance problem in the play. Jan Kott says that, "When established values have been overthrown, and there is no appeal, to God, Nature, or History, from the tortures inflicted by the cruel world, the clown becomes the central figure in the theatre."<sup>20</sup> To a certain degree, Kott has accurately described the situation that exists in King Lear. The Fool, Edgar, Gloucester, and Lear all dress, act, and behave like clowns at various points in the play. The Fool adds caustic humor to the play, and in the process he succeeds in stressing the stupidity of Lear's actions in such a way that he emphasizes Lear's mortality and insignificance. The Fool frequently expresses wisdom, and Lear appears to be the clown. When Edgar assumes the role of Poor Tom, and Gloucester is blinded, they wander as a grotesque pair toward Dover. Although they are tragic figures, there is also a comic quality about them in a grotesque sense. This is

particularly true as they walk up the supposed hill to the cliffs of Dover. Finally, Lear takes on a pathetic, but comic appearance when he is mad. With all of these characters, the fact that they sometimes appear to be clowns stresses the insignificance of the character in particular, and of man in general.

Man's insignificance, however, is only one side of the issue. Shakespeare also places great emphasis on man's significance. When Regan supports Goneril in the numbers game involving Lear's knights, and in humiliating Lear, the moment of crisis has arrived for Lear. He is faced with choosing between a loss of personal integrity and individuality, or isolation and exile. It is ironic that these were precisely the choices inherent in the dilemmas facing Cordelia and Kent earlier. In a moving and powerful existential speech, Lear makes his choice:

Return to her, and fifty men dismissed?  
 No, rather I abjure all roofs, and choose  
 To wage against the enmity o' the air,  
 To be a comrade with the wolf and wol--.  
 (II, iv, 210-213)

Shakespeare's use of animal imagery here has the same effect as his earlier use of the dragon image. Lear is linked to the animal world, a non-rational world. Here, of course, are the added elements of having to wander, homeless and unprotected in the natural world. Nevertheless, at the moment of personal crisis Lear reacts in a magnificent manner. Rather than submit, Lear chooses to become an

outcast. He will not compromise his integrity, and he will not become a whimpering, dependent wretch. He takes the final step in his alienation, and goes out into the stormy night. Lear is alone, and his alienation is complete; but through his actions, Lear stresses his significance.

Further evidence of Lear's significance occurs as his personal crisis continues. Lear underscores his growing awareness and self-enlightenment when he talks to Kent about the inner and outer storms.

Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm  
 Invades us to the skin. So 'tis to thee,  
 But where the greater malady is fixed  
 The lesser is scarce felt. Thou'dst shun a bear  
 But if thy flight lay toward the raging sea  
 Thou'dst meet the bear i' the mouth. When the mind's free  
 The body's delicate. The tempest in my mind  
 Doth from my senses take all feeling else  
 Save what beats there.

(III, iv, 6-14)

Lear is going through inner struggles and pain which far exceed the problems created by the outer storm. He is experiencing an existential crisis. Lear realizes that he has created the problems he is encountering, and he knows that solutions must be found within himself. But solutions are difficult, and it takes a man of courage and strength to find those solutions. It is in demonstrating his courage and strength that Lear demonstrates his significance.

There are various similarities between Lear and Meursault. It does not matter that one is a king and the other a common man. When Lear and Meursault are pushed too

far, they show that their individual integrity and ascendancy will remain intact. Both Lear and Meursault remain independent, and ultimately defiant. Lear is willing to compromise to some extent with his daughters, but then he asserts his own authority, even if his royal authority is gone. Lear is willing to face madness rather than succumb to his evil daughters. Likewise, Meursault is willing to be accommodating for a time with the chaplain, but then he flies into an uncharacteristic rage. With powerful emotion, Meursault asserts his individual rights, and the validity of his personal views. In these respects, Lear and Meursault demonstrate existential kinship.

The "decline of religion" in the West has profound implications for modern man because he is "free to deal with this world in all its brute objectivity," and the absence of religion in King Lear has profound implications for the characters in the play. It is within a religious vacuum, using the characters as building blocks, that Shakespeare constructs a modern conception of the world. Various characters in the play exhibit existential traits, with Lear exhibiting the most. But other characters display pervasive existential aspects that mirror, to a lesser extent, the struggles and attitudes of Lear. Cordelia is such a character, and when she is asked to speak so that she may receive a more opulent third of the kingdom, she can only say "Nothing." This is the beginning of the conflict



that develops rapidly, with awesome implications, and Cordelia is the first character who acts in such a way as to retain independence and individual integrity; like others in the play, Cordelia will not bow to standards, practices, and demands that family, society, or country would place on her. Cordelia is completely honest, and she will not compromise herself to compete with her sisters, or to please the foolish and egocentric desires of her father. The results are tragic for Cordelia, and she accepts those results.

Goneril, Regan, and Edmund also display existential characteristics. Whether these characters are ultimately "good" or "evil" according to some arbitrary standard is not relevant; rather, the important issues from an existential standpoint are how they think and act. It might be helpful to make a distinction among the characters, calling Lear an existentialist, and Goneril, Regan, and Edmund existential grotesques, in the same way that Macbeth is an existential grotesque. But in the final analysis, they all have existential characteristics, and "grotesque" is used here in a non-pejorative way.

What is true of Goneril and Regan is even more true of Edmund. He will lie, use deception, and fight for what he wants out of life, and he will not delude himself by blaming people, planets, or events for his place in the cosmos. If he does not like the position he occupies,

Edmund will do something to change that position. This is vividly stated when he says:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune--often the surfeit of our own behavior--we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars, as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and traitors by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence. . . . My father compounded with my mother under the dragon's tail, and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows I am rough and lecherous. Tut, I should have been that I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing.  
(I, ii, 128-135, 139-144)

Edmund is not plagued by moral issues; for him the "end justifies the means," and he says as much when he remarks, "Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit. All with me's meet that I can fashion fit" (I, ii, 199-200). These views are selfish, expedient, individualistic, and Machiavellian. But from a philosophical standpoint, they are existential as well. They reflect a strong, "devious" man; a man whose opportunities were greatly increased when Lear turned the kingdom toward chaos and anarchy. A villain? Yes, in traditional dramatic terms, but strong, not weak and cowardly. In dramatic and existential terms, Edmund and Iago are brothers. They function in religious and social vacuums, and they owe allegiance only to themselves. With respect to their fierce independence, the characters in King Lear have a great deal of kinship with modern, existential characters. They are cut out of similar cloth, and this cloth is woven in one vacuum after another.

The strong independence of Goneril and Regan is closely related to their subjective approach to reality. Goneril and Regan are ruled by self-interest, lust, and a love for power. They adhere to no social or political values except expediency. They will make or break bargains at will. They will marry, murder, and marry with no qualms of conscience, and if things do not work out for them, they will not have second thoughts or be concerned with their approaching fate. In short, they are guided and governed by themselves and their own values. They are in complete control of themselves; they do not submit to outside authority, especially when they can control that authority as they can with Lear, Albany, and Gloucester. To use terms that have meaning for society, but not for them, they are existentialists who choose to live and act in a "cruel," "evil," and "destructive" manner. They are existentialists, and like Meursault, they have chosen to live their lives in one way, while others might choose another; and any judgment on them comes from non-existential judges.

Lear also approaches reality in a subjective manner, and while he is not cruel, evil, and destructive in the same manner as Goneril and Regan, nevertheless, he is cruel, evil, and destructive in his own fashion. Ultimately, Goneril, Regan, and Lear all act from a subjective point of view. With Lear, the thinking and

self-evaluation that leads to his isolation and alienation continue as he wanders in the storm. Lear concludes that he is "a man more sinned against than sinning" (III, ii, 59). His judgment is probably correct, but he does not realize that his basic problems are connected with his self-centered ignorance, his lack of concern for others, and his refusal to view himself and the world more objectively.

When Nietzsche remarks that the philosopher of the future will say, "'My judgment is my judgment, to which hardly anyone else has a right,'" he could just as well be describing Lear. This is precisely the way Lear thinks and acts, from his rejection of Cordelia to his banishment of Kent to his rejection of Goneril and Regan. Lear takes a subjective approach toward life, and in his contempt for values other than his own he acquires the aura of a modern. In fact, the world of King Lear is a world of subjectivity, and in that sense the play has an affinity with modern times and literature.

Albert Camus suggests that, "never perhaps at any time has the attack on reason been more violent than in ours." Camus may be right, but the "attack on reason" is significant in King Lear. Of the various vacuums that are evident in the play, the rational vacuum is dominant, and this fact has a profound impact on the play.

Through much of the play Lear is developed in a series of vacuums; this situation, if not one of his own

choosing, is one that he contributed to in a significant manner. Lear moves toward catharsis, and this is facilitated and intensified by his isolation and alienation. At the beginning of the play, Lear is an unknown quantity. This changes rather rapidly, however, as Lear announces his decision to divide his kingdom among his daughters. Lear explains his decision by saying:

And 'tis our fast intent  
 To shake all cares and business from our age,  
 Conferring them on younger strengths while we  
 Unburdened crawl toward death.

(I, i, 39-42)

Through this decision Lear reveals a fatal flaw in his character: he is given to rash and terribly wrong judgments. The people he should know best, he knows least; he has completely misjudged his daughters, and he will have to pay dearly for such a miscalculation. In addition, Lear demonstrates his incredible naivete by thinking that he can escape from the burdens of living, and approach death in a quiet and serene way. His attitude toward his decision resembles Meursault's when he told the Magistrate that he did not need an attorney because his case was so simple. Lear's division of his kingdom is a tragic step toward alienation, and it reveals that he is living much of the time in a rational vacuum.

Lear's banishment of Cordelia is an irrational act, and he compounds his irrational behavior when he says, "Peace, Kent! Come not between the dragon and his wrath"

(I, i, 123-124). The dragon image is interesting and accurate. Lear is acting like a dragon, and dragons do not reason. When Lear flies into a rage and orders Kent out of the kingdom, Lear demonstrates amazingly poor judgment. With the banishment of Kent, Lear moves closer to a state of isolation because he cuts himself off from his most loyal and intelligent advisor, and even though Kent returns in disguise to serve Lear, he does virtually no advising. To banish Cordelia and Kent is irrational--it is figurative madness. Lear's movement toward literal madness begins when he starts to realize what Goneril is really like, and he says,

O Lear, Lear, Lear!  
 Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in  
 And thy dear judgment out!  
 (I, iv, 292-294)

Cordelia and Kent are the first casualties of an irrational king, of a king gone "mad." With Cordelia going into literal exile, and Kent going into figurative exile, the madness shifts from the king to the world at large.

From this point on Lear moves steadily toward madness, and numerous times he expresses fears of going mad. He says, "Oh, let me not be mad, sweet Heaven! Keep me in temper. I would not be mad!" (I, v, 50-51). Finally toward the end of Act II Lear makes a prophetic statement when he says, "O fool, I shall go mad!" (II, iv, 289). When Lear actually enters the realm of madness in Act III, he

moves further into a rational vacuum. It is in such a state that Lear conducts his trial scene with Poor Tom his philosopher/judge, and his wise Fool. It is in a context of madness that the Fool says to Lear, "Prithee, Nuncle, tell me whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman" (III, vi, 10-11). Lear's reply is devastating and accurate: "A king, a king!" (III, vi, 12).

It becomes apparent by Lear's second mad scene that Shakespeare is using Lear's madness as a means of commenting on more than the aged king. In Lear's mad flower scene there is some reason, as Edgar says, "Reason in madness" (IV, vi, 179). In reference to Goneril and Regan, Lear says, "They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie, I am not agueproof" (IV, vi, 106-107). This is a comment on the flattery of Lear's ungrateful daughters, but it is also a profound comment on the human condition. Man is not agueproof, whether he be king, peasant, or salesman; and this is a truth that Lear was not capable of perceiving when he was "sane." Lear continues to exhibit "reason in madness" when he sees Gloucester after he is blinded:

Glo. Oh, let me kiss that hand!  
 Lear. Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality.  
 Glo. O ruined piece of nature! This great world  
 Shall so wear out to naught.  
 (IV, vi, 135-138)

While in a state of madness Lear expresses a universal truth. The anger, grandeur, and power of the great king in the opening scene yields the quiet realization of the

importance of time and mortality, but Gloucester's words are somewhat paradoxical. In a literal sense Lear is a "ruined piece of nature," but in a figurative sense this is not true. For it is in madness that Lear gains knowledge of himself, his family, and the world. Lear's madness is a vital part of his development from darkness to light. How far Lear has moved toward this light is emphasized when he says to Gloucester:

What art mad? A man may see how this world goes with  
no eyes. Look with thine ears. See how yond Justice  
rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear.

(IV, vi, 153-155)

Although still in a state of literal madness, Lear knows that perception is not limited to use of the senses.

Lear makes some devastating social and political comments that apply to himself as he formerly was, and to the power structure that replaced him, when he says,

Through tattered clothes small vices do appear,  
Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold  
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks.  
Arm it in rags, a pign's straw does pierce it.  
None does offend, none, I say, none, I'll able 'em.  
Take that of me, my friend, who have the power  
To seal the accuser's lips. Get thee glass eyes  
And, like a scurvy politician, seem  
To see the things thou dost not.

(IV, vi, 168-176)

These are the observations of an astute observer of the human condition; Lear sees the difference between appearance and reality. He understands that there is sin in high places, and that gowns and gold will not hide such things from him. He realizes that the political world is often



corrupt and deceptive. Lear sees that there is no justice in the world, and that man is no better than brute beasts. He also is approaching a nihilistic view of the world. This is indicated when Lear tells Gloucester,

If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.  
I know thee well enough. Thy name is Gloucester.  
Thou must be patient, we came crying hither.  
Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air,  
We wawl and cry. . . . When we are born, we cry that  
we are come  
To this great stage of fools.

(IV, vi, 180-184, 186-187)

While in a state of madness, a rational vacuum, Lear is able to penetrate the surface of reality, and view life in some depth. Like Meursault, Lear is able to see that while he mainly is responsible for his predicament, man also is at the mercy of an irrational and capricious universe. Thus, man must bear his fate with patience; for in the final analysis, life is a great stage where fools play their parts. Such perceptions were not apparent when Lear was "sane."

Gloucester also exists in a rational vacuum during much of the play. Gloucester's reaction to the letter supposedly written by Edgar is not the reaction of a reasonable man. Gloucester immediately becomes a raging maniac at the thought of his son plotting against him. He does not concern himself with facts, but like Othello, he is content to operate on the basis of opinion and suggestion. In an attempt to explain such "brutish" and "unnatural"

actions on the part of his son, Gloucester turns to, "These late eclipses in the sun and moon . . ." (I, ii, 112). Gloucester is convinced, with no evidence, that "This villain of mine comes under the prediction, there's son against father" (I, ii, 118-119). Gloucester is right, of course, but for the wrong reasons, and regarding the wrong son.

It is clear that Gloucester's violent rejection of Edgar is figurative madness, and Gloucester indicates that he is close to literal madness when he says,

Thou say'st the King grows mad. I'll tell thee friend,  
I am almost mad myself. I had a son,  
Now outlawed from my blood. He sought my life  
But lately, very late. I loved him, friend,  
No father his son dearer. Truth to tell thee,  
The grief hath crazed my wits.  
(III, iv, 170-175)

Gloucester behaves in a strangely irrational manner toward a son for whom he has so much love and feeling.

Even when Gloucester finds out that Edgar did not betray him, and that Edmund is the real villain, he does not act in a rational manner. He renounces the world and is determined to go to Dover and throw himself off the cliffs, and thus end his misery. Gloucester compounds his irrational thoughts of suicide by believing the "miracle" that Edgar says has occurred. Through much of the play Shakespeare develops the character of Gloucester in a rational vacuum that reveals the following things: the true character of Gloucester; the knowledge necessary for

Gloucester to progress from darkness to light by having him pass from literal light to literal darkness; the terribly cruel nature of the universe, where man and not the stars guide human destiny.

Kent does not escape the rational vacuum, although his first irrational act takes place in an aura of rationality. When he tries to change Lear's mind about banishing Cordelia, he is appealing to Lear for the use of reason. But he is not using reason himself by opposing the enraged king. Kent should have known Lear better than anyone else, and therefore should have realized that it is not possible to reason with an irrational king at the high point of that king's fury. Kent opposes Lear's act of banishment with words, but in the parallel plot Cornwall's servant opposes the violence against Gloucester with action by mortally wounding Cornwall. In both cases, the irrational dominates the rational.

Since Kent is banished for coming "between the dragon and his wrath," his second irrational act occurs with his decision to risk death and come back in disguise to serve his king. The Fool emphasizes the ridiculous quality of Kent's decision in the following exchange:

Fool. Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb.

Kent. Why, fool?

Fool. Why, for taking one's part that's out of favor. Nay, an thou canst not smile as the wind sits, thou'lt catch cold shortly. There, take my coxcomb. Why, this fellow hath banished

on's daughters, and done the third a blessing  
against his will. If thou follow him, thou must  
needs wear my coxcomb.

(I, iv, 109-116)

In one double-edged speech the Fool is able to point up the folly in the actions of both Lear and Kent. Kent's third irrational act follows on the heels of his second. When he is delivering Lear's message to Regan, and flies into a rage on meeting Oswald, Kent again demonstrates that he is rash and impetuous, that the passionate side of his personality rules too often over the rational side. Kent can be praised for his proud and brave nature, but once again he should have known that he was dealing with vicious animals in Regan and Cornwall; and he should have known that his actions would not be overlooked by them. King and counsellor are alike in letting passion rule reason, and the irrational vacuum of King Lear has a claim on Kent, as well as many others.

Using arbitrary societal standards of judgment, Goneril and Regan spend virtually the entire play in a rational vacuum. Passing over their absurd displays of false love, the first irrational act committed by the sisters occurs when Goneril attacks Lear for the behavior of his knights, and tries to reduce his entourage. All of her wealth and power came from Lear, and yet Goneril is not satisfied or willing to put up with the demands made by her father. Regan joins Goneril's cruel attack on

Lear's entourage, and they alternate in cutting down the size of Lear's troupe. Finally, when their actions have driven Lear out of the castle and into the storm, Goneril indicates that Lear is to blame for his predicament, and that he must pay for his folly. To this Regan adds:

Oh, sir, to willful men  
The injuries that they themselves procure  
Must be their schoolmasters.

(II, iv, 305-307)

Regan agrees with Goneril, and she thinks that man must learn from experience. It is ironic, however, that Goneril and Regan do not learn anything from their experiences. These ideas are interesting when considered in a rational/irrational context. On the one hand it is true that Lear is responsible for his predicament, and he must pay for his foolish decisions and actions. On the other hand, at least in an immediate context, Goneril and Regan are responsible for Lear's predicament. Their irrational lust for power is what makes Lear's decisions explode in his face. Goneril and Regan behave like animals who have no sympathy when they drive Lear out into the storm, and help create the inner storm that costs Lear his sanity. The sisters compound their irrational acts in the episodes involving the contest for Edmund. Goneril demonstrates that she is completely ruled by passion when she rejects the noble Albany, and embraces the ignoble Edmund. The final scene of poisoning and stabbing is the

culmination of lives of madness for Lear's "unnatural" daughters.

Cornwall spends most of his time in a rational vacuum. References are made to the fact that he is given to wild and angry behavior, where his passion predominates over his reason. If there is any doubt, Cornwall dispels it with his reaction to Kent's altercation with Oswald. The most prominent example of Cornwall's insanity, of course, is in his blinding of Gloucester. If he is capable of reason, he does not show it as he rages on the stage and plucks Gloucester's eyes out. It is fitting that he should be killed by an irrational act while in the midst of irrationality.

Through much of the play Edmund also exists in a rational vacuum. His plot against Edgar, while it is cleverly conceived, is not the plan of a sane and rational man; the plot is madness. His first soliloquy reveals the devious quality of Edmund's mind. He is willing to deceive, lie, and murder to achieve land, titles, and power. While such desires have a decidedly modern ring, they are no more rational for Edmund than they are today. Edmund feeds on the naive, trusting, and rash. He is so cold and calculating, that he is willing to betray his father to achieve his ends. Another example of Edmund's insane desires involves his promises to the two sisters. Edmund's final irrational and insane act is arranging for the

murders of Cordelia and Lear; these are not the actions of a rational man.

The rational vacuum that dominates King Lear links Shakespeare to Montaigne and to the modern period. Montaigne had a low opinion of man's reason. He says,

. . . forasmuch as reason goes always lame and halting, and that as well with falsehood as with truth; and therefore 'tis hard to discover her deviations and mistakes. I always call that appearance of meditation which everyone forges in himself, reason: this reason . . . is an instrument of lead and wax, ductile, pliable, and accommodable to all sorts of biasses and to all measures, so that nothing remains but the knowledge how to turn and mould it.<sup>21</sup>

Shakespeare seems to agree with Montaigne, as evidenced by the paucity of reason in King Lear. In theory man has the capacity to reason, but for much of the play it is valid to ask if that is anything more than another sustaining myth or "saving lie." The forces of reason have fled, and that is true not only for the "villains" in the play, it is also true for Lear, Gloucester, and Kent. In King Lear, to contemplate reason is to contemplate nothing. It may be that in such a world, man's only alternative is flight from sanity and self-delusion. If that is the case, then Shakespeare's view of the world in King Lear resembles Pirandello's in Henry IV, or Miller's in Death of a Salesman. In King Lear Shakespeare demonstrates that life consists of "a delicate balance," and that frequently man loses his balance.

In addition to the rational vacuum, there is an idealistic vacuum in King Lear. As Walter Kaufmann points out, Shakespeare "knew the view that man is thrown into the world, abandoned to a life that ends in death, with nothing after that; but he also knew self-sufficiency."<sup>22</sup> Shakespeare not only "knew" such a world, he explored it in King Lear, and in the process he stressed realism and not idealism. Shakespeare demonstrates in King Lear that, "He had the strength to face reality without excuses and illusions and did not even seek comfort in the faith of immortality."<sup>23</sup> Shakespeare created a world in which man was on his own, and had to face life and its problems without divine assistance. By the time all the dead bodies are carried on stage, it is clear that the reality of the situation has destroyed any idealistic hopes that one might have.

Another aspect of Shakespeare's realism centers on his use of language; he uses language in a manner akin to the modern age. Martin Esslin points out that,

. . . euphemisms and circumlocutions fill the press or resound from the pulpits. And advertising, by its constant use of superlatives, has succeeded in devaluing language to a point where it is a generally accepted axiom that most of the work one sees displayed on billboards or in the coloured pages of magazine advertising are as meaningless as the jingles of television commercials. A yawning gulf has opened between language and reality.<sup>24</sup>

Goneril and Regan use superlatives, and succeed in "devaluing language." Along with Edmund, they contribute to, and expose



"yawning gulf . . . between language and reality." When Edgar is forced to adopt the role of Poor Tom, Shakespeare gives him some nonsense speeches that would fit well into a Theatre of the Absurd context. The same thing is true of some of Lear's mad speeches. Yet there is an irony here, because these nonsense speeches make as much sense as many of the speeches by Goneril, Regan, and Edmund. Jan Kott says that, "A striking feature of the new theatre is its grotesque quality."<sup>25</sup> In both a literal and a figurative sense, King Lear demonstrates a grotesque quality, which is partly connected to language. Within this context of realism, an idealistic vacuum exists, and this reveals a philosophical link between King Lear and the modern period.

Jan Kott points out that producers have had trouble with King Lear because, "When realistically treated, Lear and Gloucester were too ridiculous to appear tragic heroes. If the exposition was treated as a fairy tale or legend, the cruelty of Shakespeare's world, too, became unreal. Yet the cruelty of Lear was to the Elizabethans a contemporary reality, and has remained real since."<sup>26</sup> Whether the play is realistically treated or not, the predominance of realism in the play keeps reminding the audience that the world Lear faces is devoid of idealism, and that Albany's sobering comments are accurate:

Humanity must perforce prey on itself,  
Like monsters of the deep.

(IV, ii, 48-49)

Albany might well be describing the modern age.

Shakespeare celebrates life, but to do so involves celebrating death as well; and in King Lear a great deal of emphasis is placed on death. In fact, death looms on or near the surface throughout most of the play. Lear's rapid and relentless movement toward death takes place within the context of his increasing isolation and alienation. When Lear has banished his loving daughter and his wise advisor, he is left to the mercy of his other daughters, and this foreshadows the impending ultimate step in his alienation. After Goneril has reduced Lear's company of knights to fifty, Lear makes an important speech that reveals his state of mind:

Life and death! I am ashamed  
 That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,  
 That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,  
 Should make thee worth them. Blasts and fogs upon thee!  
 The untented woundings of a father's curse  
 Pierce every sense about thee! Old fond eyes,  
 Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out  
 And cast you with the waters that you lose  
 To temper clay.

(I, iv, 318-326)

Lear's closed eyes are slowly opening, and he is finally realizing that he made a mistake when he divided his kingdom. Lear feels his power decreasing, which really involves a figurative death, and more importantly, he realizes that his dignity and individuality are being questioned. While this is only the beginning of Lear's perception, the stage is set for Lear's crisis of manhood-- a crisis that shakes him to the very depths of his being.

The tragic end, toward which Lear has been marching relentlessly, suddenly comes upon him when Cordelia is hanged. Lear is surrounded by death, and his own death is imminent. But this is also a painful opportunity for Lear to demonstrate what kind of man he is after all of his madness and suffering. Lear rises to the challenge and demonstrates his strength of character by killing her murderer. And out of deep existential writhings he cries:

Howl, howl, howl, howl! Oh, you are men of stones.  
 Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so  
 That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone forever!  
 I know when one is dead and when one lives.  
 She's dead as earth.

(V, iii, 257-261)

Lear is on the verge of what Kierkegaard called "the sickness unto death." It is within this context that Camus' lines help to explain how Lear must have felt as he faced death: ". . . completely turned toward death . . . the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him."<sup>27</sup> Camus expresses one of the points that Shakespeare is making when he says, "Yes, man is his own end. And he is his only end. If he aims to be something, it is in this life."<sup>28</sup> Whatever Lear aimed to be, it is accomplished. It is ironic, of course, that Lear's steady and tortured movement toward death should result from his desire to "crawl toward death" unburdened.

Shakespeare also stresses the looming reality of death through Gloucester after he is blinded. There is an

irony connected with Gloucester's situation as well. It is ironic that his suffering, and his desire for death result from what he thought would be an attempt on his life by Edgar. There are significant differences, however, between Lear and Gloucester on the issue of death. Lear does not seek death, but that is exactly what Gloucester does from the moment he loses his sight. Whereas Lear endorses life, Gloucester endorses death. Lear answers Camus' "fundamental question of philosophy" in an affirmative way, and Gloucester answers the question in a negative way. When Lear is suffering and in a state of isolation, he still believes that life has some meaning. But Gloucester fails to see the point of life, and he votes for the meaninglessness of existence. Gloucester becomes obsessed with Dover, which is merely a euphemism for death. Through these two characters, Shakespeare has dramatically presented the two possible answers to Camus' question.

So far the discussion of the life/death problem in King Lear has focused on death in a literal sense as it relates to Lear and Gloucester. But Shakespeare also stresses the importance of death in a figurative way through Kent, Edgar, and Lear. Both Kent and Edgar experience a figurative death when they are forced to leave. Kent and Edgar figuratively die when they give up their identity and adopt a disguise and a new identity. Lear also experiences a figurative death when he goes mad, and then returns to sanity

through the healing powers of Cordelia and her doctor. Shakespeare stresses this point when Lear says, "You do me wrong to take me out o' the grave" (IV, vii, 45). By treating death on both a literal and a figurative level, Shakespeare emphasizes the importance of that last event in life that all men must experience. With his extensive treatment of death, Shakespeare joins hands with many philosophers and dramatists in the modern period who are obsessed with death. As such, Shakespeare endorses the truth that "anyone who would stand face to face with life itself must also stand face to face with death. . . ."

The modern age is a pessimistic age, with optimism difficult to find and sustain. Heroes also are hard to find, and anti-heroes tend to dominate the literature of the period. Perhaps this is the result of man's contempt for his fellow man. Contempt is an understandable reaction, and Walter Kaufmann asserts that, "Shakespeare's acid contempt for men and women is one of the central motifs of his tragedies."<sup>29</sup> In his contempt and in his pessimism, Shakespeare has an affinity with the modern period.

Lear, like his modern existential counterparts, goes through a period of uncertainty, frustration, futility, and nothingness. His situation is more ironic than most of his modern counterparts because he is a king and not a common man. But in terms of what he goes through, Lear and the modern existential anti-hero experience the same things. Though centuries separate them, Lear and Meursault suffer

from the traumas of life in a meaningless and cruel world. For Lear the pain is perhaps more intense because he contributed greatly to the shape of the world he must live in, whereas Meursault had no control over the social and political forces that demand his death. King Lear supports Martin Esslin's statement about Shakespeare when he says, "But above all, there is in Shakespeare a very strong sense of the futility and absurdity of the human condition."<sup>30</sup> At no point is this more true than at the end of the play. Lear's story ends in futility, vanity, and nihilism. Before he takes his last breath, Lear can only say:

And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no life!  
 Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life  
 And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,  
 Never, never, never, never, never!  
 (V, iii, 305-308)

His story ends as it began, on a negative.

And yet, just as there is reason for optimism in the modern age, there is also some reason for optimism in King Lear. What Camus says about Sisyphus has some bearing on Lear's predicament: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart."<sup>31</sup> Lear's struggle throughout the play "is enough to fill a man's heart." The Myth of Sisyphus, The Stranger, and King Lear celebrate the courage, strength, and greatness of an individual fighting against impossible odds in a hostile environment; and in all three instances, while the hero loses, he also wins.

While there is reason for pessimism, there is also reason for optimism. In Lear's case, isolation, alienation,

and suffering have taught him that he cannot escape from life, and that he is responsible for meaning in his existence. The Lear who tried to escape the difficult questions of life at the beginning of the drama has been transformed into the Lear who meets death asking existential questions. Lear learns from his alienation; and in spite of the forces that claim his life, Lear is able not only to endure, but also to prevail. It does not matter that a cruel and hostile world destroy Lear and all that he loves. Shakespeare, like Camus, Faulkner, and Hemingway, presents a superb image of the courage and nobility of the human condition. By developing a series of vacuums, Shakespeare is able to present a depressing and yet exhilarating picture of what it means to be human.

## FOOTNOTES

## CHAPTER III

- <sup>1</sup>William Shakespeare, Shakespeare: The Complete Works, ed. by G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952). All citations from Shakespeare in this study are taken from Harrison's text.
- <sup>2</sup>Walter Kaufmann, From Shakespeare to Existentialism (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1960), p. 22.
- <sup>3</sup>Jan Kott, Shakespeare Our Contemporary (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966), pp. 146-147.
- <sup>4</sup>Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. by Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 30.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 54.
- <sup>6</sup>Kott, Shakespeare Our Contemporary, p. 133.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup>Kaufmann, From Shakespeare to Existentialism, p. 44.
- <sup>9</sup>Kott, Shakespeare Our Contemporary, p. 147.
- <sup>10</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), p. 23.
- <sup>11</sup>Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1964), p. 6.
- <sup>12</sup>Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., Great Books of the Western World, 54 vols. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), vol 25: The Essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, ed. by W. Carew Hazlitt, trans. by Charles Cotton, p. 239.
- <sup>13</sup>Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, pp. 15-16.
- <sup>14</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, trans. by Marianne Cowan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1955), p. 41.
- <sup>15</sup>William Barrett, Irrational Man (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1958), p. 62.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 25.



- <sup>17</sup> Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1969), p. 348.
- <sup>18</sup> Edward Albee, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (New York: Pocket Books, 1962), p. 202.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Kott, Shakespeare Our Contemporary, p. 141.
- <sup>21</sup> Hutchins, The Essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, p. 274.
- <sup>22</sup> Kaufmann, From Shakespeare to Existentialism, p. 3.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 359.
- <sup>25</sup> Kott, Shakespeare Our Contemporary, p. 131.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 130.
- <sup>27</sup> Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, pp. 43-44.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 65.
- <sup>29</sup> Kaufmann, From Shakespeare to Existentialism, p. 11.
- <sup>30</sup> Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 286.
- <sup>31</sup> Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 91.

## Chapter IV

The Limits of Drama:

The Real World of Nothing

Some of the conflicts and tensions discussed in the previous chapter are underscored and reinforced by setting in King Lear. Setting has a definite bearing on the conflict between order and chaos. In Act I, Scene i, Lear is in control of his kingdom. He has both literal and figurative power, and it is apparent that the other characters in the scene are aware of his power and authority. Lear commands respect, and he gives orders that are carried out. It does not matter what kind of orders Lear gives; the important thing is that Lear is in control. Shakespeare stresses these ideas by the setting of Scene i, which takes place in Lear's palace. That is the proper place for King Lear to issue important commands and decrees, and to implement major decisions. At the beginning of the play, Lear's palace symbolizes power, authority, and order. It is significant that throughout the rest of the play none of the scenes are set at Lear's palace. For dramatic purposes, after Act I, Scene i Lear's palace ceases to exist, and this emphasizes the movement away from order.

The setting for Act I, scene iv, is a hall in the Duke of Albany's palace. Here Lear receives Kent, who comes in disguise, and accepts him into service. If Kent is telling the truth, Lear still retains some of the authority that he had in the first scene because Kent says to Lear,

". . . you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master" (I, iv, 29-30). Nevertheless, Lear's situation is drastically changed, and he is not accorded the respect due a king, as one of his knights and Oswald indicate. Finally, when Goneril enters and starts the process of reducing Lear's train of knights, she hastens the emergence of the chaos that replaces the order of Scene i. It is ironic but apropos that the setting for Scene iv is a hall in Albany's palace. The first affront to Lear's manhood takes place in a hall, and not at court. Through setting Shakespeare is stressing the movement toward chaos, as well as indicating that Lear's fall has begun.

Act II, Scene iii is set in a wood where Edgar reveals that he must give up his identity and become a poor, mad beggar. For the first time in the play, Shakespeare moves the setting completely away from castles or palaces, and speeds up the movement toward the wilder and more chaotic outdoor settings that will follow.

The second affront to Lear's manhood takes place in Act II, Scene iv. In this scene Lear discovers his servant Kent in stocks, and he finds it difficult to believe that his daughter and son-in-law could do such a terrible thing. Yet, in a painful way, Lear is forced to accept the cruel truth. The numbers game that Goneril started in Act I, Scene iv, continues in this scene until Regan asks why Lear needs even one knight. Through words and actions,

Goneril and Regan stress Lear's fallen and powerless state, and through the setting Shakespeare reinforces this state. Lear is stripped of the most important tangible symbol of his dignity as he stands before Gloucester's castle like a common man. The royal commands of King Lear, issued from the heart of the court, have yielded to the devious maneuvers of petty rulers in the castle yards.

The first two scenes of Act III are set on a heath with a storm raging. In these heath scenes Shakespeare is stressing Lear's condition through setting. The proud and powerful Lear of Act I, Scene i, is forced to howl and rage in the wilds of nature, where there is no relief, either literally or figuratively, for his suffering. Through setting Shakespeare helps to emphasize in Act III, Scene ii, that the order of Lear's palace has turned into the chaos of the fierce storm. In the fourth scene of Act III the setting is still the heath, but this time before a hovel. In a poignant way Shakespeare shows how far the king has come, from palace and castle to hovel. It is no wonder that Lear asks, "Is man no more than this?" (III, iv, 106). Lear's literal progression toward chaos, which is stressed through the heath scenes, is continued in Act III, Scene vi, where Gloucester offers the four outcasts a respite from the storm. Yet the farmhouse adjoining the castle is not enough to save Lear's mind, as it snaps and he loses his sanity. Chaos usurps Lear's mind in the stark setting of

a farmhouse.

The outdoor scenes stress the steady movement toward chaos, but this movement continues indoors as well. In Act III, Scene vii, Gloucester is delivered into the hands of Cornwall and Regan. After Regan plucks Gloucester's beard, Cornwall puts out his eyes. These would be despicable and reprehensible acts in any setting, but to take place in Gloucester's own castle only heightens the state of chaos that reigns in the kingdom. As Gloucester indicated earlier, ". . . they took from me the use of mine own house . . ." (III, iii, 3-4). The figurative acts of violence that took place in Lear's palace are replaced by literal acts of violence in Gloucester's requisitioned castle. It is fitting that the most brutal act of the play takes place indoors, in the presence of other people, people who supposedly represent law, order, and justice. Through setting Shakespeare mocks both the people and the concepts.

By Act IV, Scene vi, the play is in the midst of chaos, with Dover and death looming near for Gloucester. Lear enters "fantastically dressed with wild flowers." Lear verbally attacks Goneril; he says that he is not agueproof, and praises copulation. Finally, after offering Gloucester advice on the proper way to perceive reality, Lear makes a nihilistic speech about the state of the world, and Edgar responds with "Oh, matter and impertinency

mixed" (IV, vi, 178). Then Oswald enters, tries to kill Gloucester, and is killed by Edgar. This is a scene dominated by chaos, with death on or near the surface. It is a wild scene, and Shakespeare stresses this fact by placing it in a natural setting--the fields near Dover. The order of palaces and castles, the civilized world, gives way to the uncivilized world of nature, where only the strong survive. The irony, of course, is that the same law of nature applies in the so-called civilized world of King Lear.

In Act IV, Scene vii, Shakespeare makes a tentative move to re-establish order, as Lear is in the care of Cordelia, and as he gradually emerges from his madness. Lear admits that he is ". . . a very foolish fond old man" (IV, vii, 60), and he asks for Cordelia's forgiveness. There are significant differences between Scenes vi and vii, and these differences are reflected in setting. In Scene vii, for a moment order replaces chaos, and sanity replaces insanity. Scene vii takes place in a tent in the French camp, and to move from the fields of Scene vi to the tent of Scene vii helps to emphasize the changed situation. Lear is asleep on a bed as Scene vii begins, and the wild flowers of the previous scene are replaced by soft music and new clothes. In this instance, an indoor setting has the positive connotations of civilization and order.

The momentary order of Act IV, Scene vii dissolves into the overwhelming chaos of Act V, where all three scenes are set outside. In Act V, Scene ii, Edgar tells Gloucester that the battle is lost for Lear and Cordelia, and that they have been taken prisoner. When Edgar indicates that they must flee, Gloucester responds with, "No farther, sir. A man may rot even here" (V, ii, 8). Yet, when Edgar rebukes his father and tells him that, "Men must endure/ Their going hence, even as their coming hither." (V, ii, 9-10), Gloucester responds by saying, "And that's true too" (V, ii, 12). At this point, Gloucester is so worn out and confused that he is willing to agree with virtually anything. His mind is in a state of chaos, and that chaos is caused by, and reflects the chaos of the world at large. The setting of Act V, Scene ii, mirrors this chaos; the scene takes place in a field between the two camps, and there is "alarum within." In both literal and figurative terms, Gloucester is neither here nor there. Like Lear, Gloucester is caught in the middle and death is the only hope for release from that predicament.

The chaos of Act V, Scene iii, reaches a frightening crescendo as acts of violence and death abound both on and off stage. The order of Lear's palace has become the chaos of the British camp near Dover, as Shakespeare uses setting to help stress the results of Lear's fatal decision. The roll call of the dead in the British camp underscores the



chaos of Lear's world.

Setting helps to develop the certainty/uncertainty problem in King Lear. Act IV, Scene vi, takes place in fields near Dover. Shakespeare indicates that Dover is near, but the scene is not set at Dover. Also, Shakespeare mentions fields, but he does not mention hills, or fields and hills. When Gloucester asks how long it will be before they reach the top of the hill, i.e., the top of the cliffs of Dover, Edgar responds by saying, "You do climb up it now. Look how we labor" (IV, vi, 2). Gloucester's response is significant: "Methinks the ground is even" (IV, vi, 3). There is nothing in the setting that supports Edgar's position; rather, the setting supports Gloucester's perception of reality. When Edgar asks if Gloucester hears the sea, Gloucester responds by saying, "No, truly" (IV, vi, 4). Once again the setting reinforces Gloucester's view. Thus, through Edgar's speeches, and the actual setting, Shakespeare sets up a contradictory situation that is confusing and deceptive. Gloucester comes to believe Edgar's version of the setting, even though it runs counter to the senses.

Shakespeare has set up an intriguing dramatic situation, and Jan Kott makes some interesting observations on this situation. Kott asserts that the text provides stage directions for the scene:

Edgar is supporting Gloucester; he lifts his feet high pretending to walk uphill. Gloucester, too, lifts his feet, as if expecting the ground to rise, but underneath his foot there is only air. This entire scene is written for a very definite type of theatre, namely pantomime.<sup>1</sup>

Kott goes on to point out that, "This pantomime only makes sense if enacted on a flat and level stage."<sup>2</sup> This is important thematically, and for the development of Gloucester's character. Yet, if this scene is played on a flat stage, it becomes humorous in a rather ludicrous and grotesque way. Whether or not the scene should be played on a flat stage is a debatable issue, but Kott makes a convincing case for the flat stage, and the text seems to support his interpretation.

Adhering, then, to Kott's interpretation, "The stage must be empty. On it a suicide, or rather its symbol, has been performed."<sup>3</sup> This symbolic suicide is enacted by two clowns who speak and act in a deadly serious manner. Shakespeare deals with death, the most serious event in a person's life, in an absurd fashion. But the implications of such a situation are important because,

Gloucester, falling over on flat, even boards, plays a scene from a great morality play. He is no longer a court dignitary whose eyes have been gouged out because he showed mercy to the banished king. The action is no longer confined to Elizabethan or Celtic England. Gloucester is Everyman, and the stage becomes the medieval *Theatrum Mundi*. A Biblical parable is now enacted; the one about the rich man who became a beggar, and the blind man who recovered his inner sight when he lost his eyes. Everyman begins his wanderings through the world.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Gloucester becomes everyman, a ". . . faceless hero [who] is everywhere exposed to Nothingness."<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare takes a dramatic situation and infuses into it a much broader philosophical meaning, so that, "The Shakespearean precipice at Dover exists and does not exist. It is the abyss, waiting all the time. The abyss, into which one can jump is everywhere."<sup>6</sup> Every man meets this abyss many times, and in many ways. Act IV, Scene vi is set up in such a way that it underscores the Shakespearean abyss.

By contrasting the dialogue and setting, Shakespeare undermines Gloucester's certainty of who he is, and where he is. Gloucester is certain that the ground is level, but he is told that it is steep. Gloucester is certain that he is at Dover, but Shakespeare makes it clear that he is not at Dover. Gloucester is certain that suicide is a possibility, but he is led to believe that a miracle occurs to keep him from suicide. Gloucester is certain that life is not worth living, but Edgar assures him that it is worth living. Thus, many of Gloucester's certainties turn into uncertainties. Gloucester emerges from Act IV, Scene vi and those flat boards as a man who has experienced the reality of uncertainty in a powerful and personal manner. It is understandable that Gloucester asks, "Is wretchedness deprived that benefit,/To end itself by death?" (IV, vi, 61-62). After his attempted suicide, Gloucester undoubtedly appreciates the certainty of uncertainty, and Shakespeare

uses setting to help guide him to the realization.

The aura of irrationality that is dominant in King Lear, and emphasized through the irrational acts of many characters in the play, is evident and re-emphasized through setting. Lear's palace in Act I, Scene i, should be the place where reason prevails, and common sense abounds. Yet, it is in his own palace that Lear repeatedly violates reason. In Act I, Scene ii, the same situation occurs. Gloucester is in the comfort and security of his own castle, where he should be in control of himself and his rational faculties, and yet he is unable to control his rising impulses of irrationality. In these two scenes, Shakespeare seems to be saying that it is very difficult to remain rational in the face of heavy pressure and deception; and if this is true when people like Lear and Gloucester are at home, it is valid to ask, "What is it like when they are no longer at home and in control?" The answer, of course, is that the situation gets much worse, and that the forces of irrationality are virtually unrestrained.

In Act I, Scene iv, Lear appears on stage for the second time in the play. He is no longer in control of his kingdom, and he no longer has the comfort and power that goes with being king. The setting of Scene iv, a hall in Albany's palace, underlines Lear's lost power, and it is there that Lear really begins to experience the dictates of the forces of irrationality, as Oswald shows his

disrespect for Lear, and Goneril begins reducing Lear's knights. In Lear's palace Goneril is "reasonable," but when she is out of it, she is not; and there is very little that Lear can do about it. Through a change in setting, which reflects a change in situation, Shakespeare illustrates the predominance of different territorial imperatives.

The forces of irrationality, which were set in motion by Lear's fateful decision in the first scene of the play, continue to assert themselves in Act II, Scene ii. Kent's altercation with Oswald leads to Kent being placed in stocks. Thus, the disrespect for Lear, which up to this time had been verbal rather than actual, takes overt, physical form. The scene is set outside, before Gloucester's castle, and the setting helps to stress how far Lear and his entourage have come from Lear's palace.

This situation persists in Act II, Scene iv, where the setting is the same, and where Lear arrives to find Kent in stocks. In Scene iv, the irrationality of Cornwall and Regan is continued and compounded as Goneril arrives. Lear tries to be reasonable, and he tries to compromise; but a rational vacuum exists, and Lear's older daughters will not be rational. The contrast in setting between Act I, Scene i, and Act II, Scenes ii and iv, is symbolic of Lear's changed situation; reason is not to be found before Gloucester's castle.

In the storm scenes of Act III, setting continues to reinforce theme. Irrational forces have driven Lear out into the tempestuous night, and Lear behaves in a progressively more irrational manner while on the heath. Finally, in Act III, Scene iv, Lear's mind snaps, and he lapses into insanity. Thus, the irrational forces of nature, which are exemplified by the storm, serve as a backdrop for the irrationality of Lear and his world. When Lear is wandering on the barren heath, partially clothed in a raging storm and with a deeply disturbed mind, Shakespeare is showing Lear at an extreme--the opposite extreme of his palace. Irrationality exacts a heavy price, and the setting in the heath scenes stresses this fact.

In attempting to see how setting and theme are related in King Lear, it is helpful to examine setting in broader terms. Of the first nine scenes in the play, eight are set in or around palaces or castles. Of the last seventeen scenes in the play, eleven are set away from castles and palaces. While the play is dominated by irrationality, in relative terms, the irrationality of the first nine scenes is not as drastic and severe as in the last seventeen. The palaces and castles are representative of culture, civilization, and reason; thus, the setting in the first nine scenes supports the theme. In the last seventeen scenes, most of the scenes are set in a more natural and untamed context, or a war context. In these

scenes the irrationality is more direct, cruel, and severe, and the setting emphasizes the movement away from culture, civilization, and reason.

What applies to the play in broader terms applies to Lear in narrower terms. Lear appears in ten of the twenty-six scenes in the play. After Act I, Lear appears in only one scene where the setting is inside a building, and that is in a farmhouse. Most of the time in the last four acts, Lear is outside--on the heath, in fields, or in a military camp. As Lear moves further away from even the semblance of rationality and a rational world, toward irrationality and an irrational world, the setting reflects the change that is taking place--both in Lear and in the world.

Along with setting, structure in King Lear has a significant impact on the concept of nothingness that Shakespeare develops in the play. King Lear is a highly structured play, with a subplot that runs parallel to the main plot. Through the elaborate and extended juxtaposition of the plot and the subplot, Shakespeare is able to develop his major interests and concerns through the conflicts and tensions in the play with a mirror effect. Sometimes this mirror effect is apparent, and sometimes it is not. When the effect is apparent, the depth and richness of the play increase, and a structural analysis helps to reveal this mirror effect.

The rising action begins in the first scene of the play. The conversation that takes place between Kent and Gloucester, as the play begins, accomplishes two things: it deals with antecedent action, both in terms of Lear's division of the kingdom, and Gloucester's fathering of the illegitimate Edmund; and it presents a dramatic situation, namely, the impending abdication of Lear. The abdication is a logical and dramatic place to begin. But the few lines that occur before Lear comes on stage are important because Shakespeare is providing exposition that is important to the rising action, and to the subplot that begins to develop more rapidly in the second scene of the play. In terms of character development, it is important to know that Edmund has been away for nine years, and to consider the impact of Gloucester's account of Edmund's conception on Edmund as he listens from his illegitimate social position.

When Lear comes on stage the rising action continues with the ridiculous game of love display that Lear forces his daughters to play. Lear's treatment of Cordelia and Kent creates a situation where Shakespeare can quickly develop various characters, as well as advance the plot. Exposition continues to take place as the audience learns that Lear loved Cordelia most, and as Cordelia reveals that her sisters are not what they seem to be. In the first scene of the play, Shakespeare carefully prepares for



the future conflicts that will occur in the plot and subplot.

Edmund's first speech in Scene ii harks back to Gloucester's remarks about his illegitimacy, and Edmund reveals that he has suffered for not being legitimate. Scene ii is important structurally because it initiates the parallel development of the subplot. Once again a father rejects a child, and once again it results from "nothing." Gloucester asks Edmund what paper he is reading, and Edmund replies, "Nothing, my lord" (I, ii, 31). In Scene ii the action in the subplot begins to rise rapidly as Edmund poisons the mind of Gloucester against Edgar, and as Gloucester becomes enraged. Shakespeare even foreshadows the eventual emergence of Poor Tom, as Edmund makes the following remarks as Edgar enters: "My cue is villanous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o' Bedlam. Oh, these eclipses do portend these divisions! Fa, sol, la, mi" (I, ii, 46-49).

The third scene in Act I is short but important. Talking about Lear, Goneril says, "By day and night he wrongs me. Every hour/He flashes into one gross crime or other/That sets us all at odds" (I, iii, 3-5). Goneril tells Oswald to slack his services to Lear, and to put on a "weary negligence" toward Lear. This scene has structural importance because for the first time the audience gets a direct glimpse into the true character of Goneril, and the

audience is aware of what Goneril is like before Lear learns. The location of Scene iii is significant because it prepares the audience for Goneril's abuse of Lear in Scene iv, which she initiates through Oswald. Thus, in Scene iii the process of complication begins as Shakespeare introduces the first of Lear's longstanding antagonists.

The action in Act I, Scene iv, is important because Kent returns in disguise to serve Lear, and Kent's treatment of Oswald in Scene iv sets up Kent's actions and the treatment he will receive in Act II, Scene ii. The action continues to rise as Lear is made more aware of the lack of respect that is shown to him, which culminates in Goneril's trying to strip him of his remaining power by reducing his knights. Also, in this scene the Fool appears for the first time, and he begins the re-education process of Lear, which is important to Lear's tragic development. The Fool hammers away at the theme of nothingness in Scene iv, and he helps to emphasize the true character of Goneril. Finally, Scene iv introduces the theme of madness, and Shakespeare foreshadows what will happen to Lear later in the play.

The final scene in Act I is primarily a transitional scene that gets Kent on his way to Regan with letters from Lear. The scene also continues the Fool's instruction of Lear, and it continues to develop Lear's fears of madness, as well as stress the inevitability of Lear going mad. Scene v does have some structural significance, however,

because the audience learns from the Fool that Regan and Goneril will behave in the same way. Thus, the audience is made aware of Lear's lack of perception toward his daughters. The scene underscores Lear's foolishness, and his need to learn.

In Act II, Scene i, Shakespeare sets up the future trouble between Goneril and Regan when Curan reports the rumors of war between Albany and Cornwall. The scene is important to the subplot because Edgar is driven from the castle by Edmund's treachery, and with this the subplot runs parallel to the main plot, with the true and loyal children exiled. In turning Gloucester against Edgar, Edmund makes a shrewd speech that reveals his cunning nature. With Edgar fleeing, and with the arrival of Cornwall and Regan, Shakespeare is bringing the plot and the subplot closer together.

The second scene of Act II is structurally important because of the exposition that takes place, and because of what the scene foreshadows. Through Scene ii Shakespeare reveals a great deal about Oswald; and the fact that such a fop is supported and defended by the power structure says something about that power structure. Also, Cornwall's treatment of Kent illustrates Cornwall's temper, and his use of power. This helps to prepare the audience for Cornwall's brutal treatment of Gloucester later, in Act III, Scene vii. In contrast to Cornwall's power, Shakespeare

reveals Gloucester's lack of power. Structurally, perhaps the most important aspect of Scene ii is that it foreshadows Lear's treatment at the hands of Regan in Act II, Scene iv. The fact that Lear's messenger is so roughly treated by Regan and Cornwall bodes ill for Lear when he arrives seeking a loving and understanding daughter. Scene ii provides excellent preparation for the deplorable treatment that Lear is about to receive.

Act II, Scene iii, is brief but noteworthy. The scene takes place in a wood, and Edgar is the only character present. This is the first scene in the play that is completely divorced from castles and palaces. As such, the scene foreshadows what happens to good people who must try to survive in an irrational world--they are driven to the fringe of society. In specific terms, the scene reveals the strength of Edmund's drive for power, and Gloucester's incredible naivete in the face of the forces of evil. Finally, Shakespeare continues to develop the theme of nothingness. As Edgar becomes nothing, Edmund becomes something.

Scene iv, the last scene in Act II, is a fairly long scene that occupies a crucial structural position. In Scene iv Lear finally learns the truth about Goneril and Regan, and after this scene his illusions toward his elder daughters are gone. Shakespeare exposes Lear's naivete as he seeks comfort and approval from Regan. Lear projects a

pathetic image when he reacts in disbelief to the news that Regan and Cornwall put Kent in the stocks, and when he kneels before Regan.

Scene iv is important to Lear's tragic development because in this scene he is completely stripped of his power and dignity, which he had tried to maintain when he abdicated his kingly responsibilities in Act I, Scene i. Thus, in fighting to retain his knights Lear pleads with his daughters to ". . . reason not the need" (II, iv, 267). The action is rising through a complication when Shakespeare makes it clear that Lear's older daughters are antagonists, and it becomes apparent that the drama is quickly advancing toward a climax. The scene also helps to prepare for Lear's madness, as he expresses fears of going mad on two different occasions during the scene. Figuratively, Scene iv is a tornado that batters and buffets Lear until there is not much left of him, and this is excellent preparation for the actual storm that begins as the scene ends. As Act II concludes, Lear is isolated from his family, the society, and the power structure. Shakespeare has made structural preparations for the crisis of mind and spirit that occurs on the heath in Act III. Thus, by the end of Act II it is evident that Lear is figuratively naked, and it only remains for him to make his nakedness literal.'

Act III, Scene i, is a transitional scene that prepares for Lear's dramatic entrance in the next scene, where he rages against heaven and earth. A Gentleman informs

Kent of the intensity of the storm, saying that it is a night that is not fit for a bear, lion, or wolf. Yet Lear is out in such a night, "Contending with the fretful elements" (III, i, 4). The scene also helps to advance the plot by re-emphasizing the division between Albany and Cornwall, and by indicating that Cordelia has returned from France. Thus, Kent moves to re-establish contact between Cordelia and Lear, and this lays necessary groundwork for the future reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia.

The second scene of Act III is structurally important because it provides necessary insight into the fragile and tortured quality of Lear's mind. The audience must have such insight if Lear's madness is going to be convincing and effective. In Scene ii the psychological and emotional pressures that Lear has been experiencing are intensified by the physical storm that is occurring. Shakespeare is setting up a plausible milieu for madness, a milieu in which there is no relief for Lear. Shakespeare makes this point when Lear says, "My wits begin to turn" (III, ii, 67). The structural importance of Scene ii is also emphasized when Lear expresses concern for the Fool: "Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart/That's sorry yet for thee" (III, ii, 72-73). Shakespeare is demonstrating that Lear is learning; and he is foreshadowing Lear's radical transformation, and his movement away from ignorance and selfishness.

In Act III, Scene iii, Shakespeare advances both the plot and the subplot. The division between the Dukes is mentioned again, and Gloucester alludes to the fact that Cordelia will revenge her father. Scene iii sets up Edmund's betrayal of Gloucester, and gives credence to Edmund's charges against him by giving Edmund knowledge of the letter in Gloucester's closet. Thus, Scene iii prepares for Gloucester's fall from power, and his isolation.

Structurally, from the moment the play began, there has been a gradual but steady movement toward Act III, Scene iv. In this scene Shakespeare reveals how far the king has fallen. Virtually abandoned, and driven to the edge of society and sanity, Lear strips himself of his clothes as a cruel world strips him of his sanity. This is a crucial point in the play, because once Lear enters the realm of madness he has fallen as far as one can fall. From this point on, Lear is on the hard climb back. In Scene iv Lear becomes a king once again, only this time he is the king of madness. This is where Shakespeare demonstrates that in Lear's world the wages of sin are not simply death, but death preceded by madness. Scene iv is important to Lear's learning process as he continues to show feeling and concern for the Fool and for the common man. Thus, Lear's predicament is not entirely negative, as there is a redemptive quality in the fact that he learns from his suffering. With Scene iv, Shakespeare has Lear at a low point, and Lear remains for a time in a holding

pattern of madness.

The primary function of Act III, Scene v, is to advance the subplot, and to set up Gloucester's downfall. The scene reveals that Edmund is on the threshold of the power that he has sought since the second scene of the play, and it re-emphasizes the devious nature of Edmund as he moves to acquire power and influence at any cost. Scene v also develops the revenge theme that is evident in both the plot and subplot.

Lear's madness continues throughout Act III, Scene vi, and as such, the scene is structurally a continuation of Act III, Scene iv. It is important that Shakespeare stresses the seriousness of Lear's madness, and Scene vi fulfills this function. Scene vi reiterates that things are upside down, and that the tentacles of evil reach a long way and touch many people. In the absurd world of King Lear, it makes as much sense for the mad Lear to conduct a trial for Goneril and Regan, with Poor Tom sitting as judge, as it does for Goneril, Regan, and Edmund to sit at the pinnacle of power. In the trial scene Shakespeare has created a metaphor for the larger world--the world of "sanity." In terms of the subplot, there is one line in Scene vi that is structurally significant. Considering the religious vacuum in the play, and the fact that references to the gods are usually ironic, the line that Kent speaks to Gloucester is instructive: "The gods



reward your kindness!" (III, vi, 6). Such a statement can only foreshadow negative things, and in the next scene Gloucester is rewarded with blindness.

Lear's mistakes in Act I, Scene i, cost him his kingdom and his sanity, and Gloucester's mistakes in Act I, Scene ii, cost him his lands and his sight. Lear's mistakes lead to eventual isolation, and the same is true of Gloucester. In Act III, Scene vii, Gloucester's isolation is complete. Thus, Shakespeare continues to develop the subplot in a manner that is parallel to the main plot. Specifically, this parallel development is illustrated in Scene vii by the servant who opposes Gloucester's blinding. When Cornwall's servant opposes Cornwall, he parallels Kent's opposition to Lear's acts in Act I, Scene i. Like Lear, Gloucester learns too late that he has been brutally betrayed by a child in whom he has put his faith and trust. In both cases the truth is painful and shattering. Thus, by the end of Act III Shakespeare has brought his parallel plots closer together.

Act IV, Scene i, is structurally important to the subplot, and it parallels the main plot in one significant respect. Like Lear, when Gloucester goes through his shattering and grotesque epiphany concerning his children and himself, he moves from a world of illusion to a world of stark reality, and this stark world of reality is symbolized by the immediate movement to the heath. In

Lear's case the heath equals madness, and in Gloucester's case the heath equals despair and a death wish. But structurally, Gloucester's heath scene parallels Lear's heath scenes, and in both cases the heath leads to a kind of regeneration.

Scene ii of Act IV is related structurally to the falling action of the play. In Scene ii Oswald reports that Albany is greatly "changed." This information is relevant to the reversal that takes place in Act V, when Albany deserts the camp of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, and supports Lear, Edgar, and Kent. Scene ii foreshadows the conflict between the sisters for Edmund, and Edmund utters a line that foreshadows part of the resolution in Act V, Scene iii, when he says to Goneril: "Yours in the ranks of death" (IV, ii, 24). Thus, throughout the scene Shakespeare is preparing his audience for the resolution that occurs in the last act.

The primary function of Act IV, Scene iii, is to prepare for the reunion of Lear and Cordelia, and to underscore the warm, human, and queen-like qualities of Cordelia, which are in contrast to the qualities possessed by her sisters. Scene iii also stresses that Lear's madness does not preclude moments of lucidity, and the scene indicates that Lear is mentally tormented by the wrongs he has committed against Cordelia. These revelations help prepare for the dramatic changes in Lear's character,

which are revealed when he is reunited with Cordelia in the world of sanity. Scene iii, therefore, contributes to the smooth and gradual development of both Lear's character and the plot.

Act IV, Scene iv, is a brief transitional scene that helps to prepare for Lear's entrance in Act IV, Scene vi, when Lear enters "dressed with wild flowers." Scene iv also foreshadows Lear's return to sanity, as the doctor assures Cordelia that Lear's madness can be cured. Finally, Scene iv points toward the upcoming battle between the British and French forces, as a messenger announces: "The British forces are marching hitherward" (IV, iv, 21). Thus, through this scene, Shakespeare is contributing to the excitement that is building toward a climax.

In Act IV, Scene v, Shakespeare continues to develop the impending conflict between the sisters over Edmund's affections, and this conflict will be the means for Shakespeare to dispose of the sisters in the last act. Regan says of Gloucester, "Preferment falls on him that cuts him off" (IV, v, 38). Through this line, as well as Oswald's response, Shakespeare foreshadows Oswald's attempt on Gloucester's life, which in turns leads to Oswald's death. These are important events, and they have a definite bearing on the outcome of the play. Shakespeare is carefully preparing for Oswald's murder attempt, as well as providing motivation for his actions.

Structurally, Act IV, Scene vi, is crucial to the plot and the subplot. Robert Heilman, in This Great Stage, asserts that Scene vi is ". . . the climax of the Gloucester plot and the climax of the Lear plot; Gloucester, won from despair by Edgar, reaches his philosophic heights, and Lear comes to his most penetrating vision. Not only are their experiences parallel, but the men are then brought together physically--a dramatic indication of the unifying function of the scene."<sup>7</sup> A good case can be made for Heilman's position. In Scene vi Lear demonstrates that he has learned a great deal about himself and the world, and even though he is still mad, there is "reason in madness." Also, for all practical purposes, this scene represents the reunion of Cordelia and Lear, and this reunion represents a turning point in Lear's predicament. For Gloucester as well, a turning point occurs as he accepts the Dover miracle and chooses to live rather than die. Finally, when Edgar kills Oswald and discovers Goneril's letter to Edmund, which reveals a plot on Albany's life, a turning point occurs for the forces of evil in the play, and Edgar acquires the evidence necessary to expose Goneril and Edmund.

Scene vii, the last scene in Act IV, is significant because it represents the actual, physical reunion of Lear and Cordelia. They have not been together since the first scene in the play, and now their roles are reversed. The

scene is important because Lear regains his sanity, which he symbolically lost when he banished Cordelia, and Lear demonstrates that his madness has been a profound and lasting educational experience. The scene demonstrates that Lear is transformed. Thus, in Scene vii the Fool's educational efforts come to fruition, as Lear proves that he is both old and wise.

Shakespeare, in Act V, Scene i, continues to develop the conflict between the sisters, and the scene foreshadows a violent resolution to that conflict. When Edgar enters and gives Albany a letter, Shakespeare is preparing for the imminent demise of Edmund. Finally, through Edmund's concluding speech, Shakespeare foreshadows the brutal treatment that Lear and Cordelia will receive when they are captured. Shakespeare is carefully laying the groundwork for the catastrophe and the resolution that will occur posthaste.

In the second scene of Act V Shakespeare is informing the audience that the British forces have prevailed, and that Lear and Cordelia are prisoners. The scene allows Shakespeare to avoid a clumsy battle scene on stage, and yet he can quickly advance the plot. Although the scene is brief, there is some irony in it. Edgar says, "Pray that the right may thrive" (V, ii, 2). Yet, seconds later Edgar returns to announce that the opposite has occurred. Prayers are meaningless in King Lear.

With Act V, Scene iii, the falling action is complete. Scene iii abounds with reversals and catastrophes. Lear is condemned, and yet saved. But it comes too late to do him any good. Goneril and Edmund are exposed, with the result that Edmund falls, and Edgar rises. Goneril and Regan move from the top to the bottom, and from life to death. Edgar tells of Gloucester's death, and Kent is going to die shortly. With the deaths of Cordelia and Lear, the resolution is complete. Shakespeare has brought his plot and his subplot together in a way that leaves no loose ends.

Doing a structural analysis of King Lear is helpful in various ways. A structural analysis helps to show that Shakespeare uses an intricate pattern of organization in the play, and it helps to demonstrate the interrelationship that exists between various scenes and acts. It is true that certain scenes are not crucial to the play; but it is necessary to indicate that other scenes are indispensable to the drama, and that their location in the play at a particular time and place is paramount. In fact, it is through a structural consideration of the play that it becomes acutely apparent that there is a causal relationship between various characters and events. Through the structure of the play, Shakespeare frequently demonstrates how and why characters act or behave in a particular way. Finally, the structure of King Lear, particularly with the extensive use of a subplot, contributes to the aura of

inevitability that is inherent in the play.

A structural analysis of King Lear also helps to demonstrate one of the central paradoxes in the play. In the first scene of the play Lear asks his daughters to tell him how much they love him, and when Lear hears Cordelia's answer he says that, "Nothing will come of nothing (I, i, 92). Lear's statement is meaningful and ironic. Lear has no idea of how wrong he is. Shakespeare develops and explores the theme of nothingness through Lear, Cordelia, Edgar, Gloucester, and the Fool, and Lear spends the rest of the play discovering the irony of his statement. Twenty-five scenes after that first scene, it is clear that something does indeed come from nothing. In fact, everything comes from nothing. This is true in both the plot and the subplot. It is true for Gloucester as well as Lear. It is true for Edmund as well as Edgar. And it is true for Goneril and Regan as well as Cordelia.

By doing a structural analysis of the play it is easier to appreciate the slow pace of the painful learning process that Lear actually goes through as he experiences the ever present reality of nothingness. For a time, Shakespeare uses the Fool as a guide for Lear on his journey through nothingness. The Fool relies on ridicule as a primary educational tool, and after ridiculing Kent for wanting to serve Lear, the Fool recites a poem. When he is finished, the following exchange occurs:

Kent. This is nothing, fool  
 Fool. Then 'tis like the breath of an unfeed lawyer.  
 You gave me nothing for 't. Can you make use  
 of nothing, Nuncle?  
 Lear. Why, no boy, nothing can be made out of nothing.  
 Fool. [To Kent] Prithee tell him so much the rent of  
 his land comes to. He will not believe a fool.  
 Lear. A bitter fool!  
 Fool. Dost thou know the difference, my boy, between  
 a bitter fool and a sweet fool?  
 (I, iv, 141-152)

Shakespeare is continuing to develop the theme of nothingness, and it is clear that Lear still does not know that something will come of nothing. Lear is immersed in nothingness, and he does not know it or feel it. But the Fool does, and he teaches Lear.

Part of the something that results from nothing is connected with the reversed roles that Lear and his daughters play, and this leads to identity problems. The Fool introduces this problem when he says, ". . . I would not be thee, Nuncle. Thou hast pared thy wit o' both sides and lift nothing i' the middle" (I, iv, 203-205). At this point Goneril enters, and Lear asks her why she has been frowning so much of late. The Fool reacts to Lear's question by saying, "Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning. Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now. I am a fool, thou art nothing" (I, iv, 210-213). The Fool makes devastating comments as he points to Lear's lost identity. Lear is nothing, and Goneril is something. Lear is reduced to worrying about whether one of the wretches he calls



daughter is frowning or not. The Fool verbalizes the painful truth for Lear. While the Fool may be a fool, even he is something; he has an identity. Lear has lost his, and he spends the rest of the play in a traumatic search for his identity. The Fool is right when he indicates that Lear is a mere shadow of his former self. But Lear's shadow begins to take on more substance when he rejects Goneril and Regan, and a structural analysis helps to put this rejection into the total perspective of Lear's tragic development.

In addition to affecting various characters in the play, the something/nothing paradox applies to the philosophical, religious, social, rational, and political aspects of King Lear. Through the structure of the play Shakespeare emphasizes the broader application of the something/nothing paradox. Yet, there is an irony here. An elaborate structure that asserts that nothing is something is itself open to the charge that, from a philosophical, or existential, or absurd point of view, such a dramatic structure comes to nothing.

The same thing is true in a larger context--drama as a whole. When Shakespeare set out to explore the concept of nothingness in King Lear, he chose a dramatic context. From a philosophical point of view, he chose an excellent genre because when a play is performed some people adopt the role of actor, and as actors they play the roles of characters--

people who are not actually people. Other people adopt the role of audience, and for a time they agree to accept what is happening on stage as real--something is taking place there. But the whole thing is a game. Lear is not Lear; Gloucester is not Gloucester; and the Fool is not the Fool. What is happening on stage is not life itself, but rather the shadow of life. Thus, through the limits of drama, Shakespeare is demonstrating the real world of nothing.

## FOOTNOTES

## CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup>Jan Kott, Shakespeare Our Contemporary (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966), p. 142.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>5</sup>William Barrett, Irrational Man (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1958), p. 62.

<sup>6</sup>Kott, Shakespeare Our Contemporary, p. 146.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Heilman, This Great Stage: Image and Structure in "King Lear" (n.p.: University of Washington Press, 1948), pp. 197-198.

## CONCLUSION

Writing about "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," William Barrett says that Ernest Hemingway's story ". . . presents in its six or seven pages a vision of Nothing that is perhaps as powerful as any in modern art. . . ." <sup>1</sup> By the time King Lear ends, and Lear's search for identity and meaning is completed, it is difficult to imagine a more powerful or moving investigation of nothingness. In King Lear, Shakespeare's conception of man perpetually facing the void is both real and modern, with the theme of nothingness manifesting itself in many different ways.

John Killinger in World in Collapse: The Vision of Absurd Drama says that, "The death of God, the disappearance of the sacral from man's midst, is the begetter and truest mark of the dimension of absurdity in all his affairs." <sup>2</sup> Killinger is describing a situation that applies to King Lear. By the end of the play Shakespeare has demonstrated that Lear's world is an existential world; it is a world where the gods have no bearing on man and his predicament. As G. Wilson Knight indicates in The Wheel of Fire, the gods in King Lear ". . . are, in fact, man-made. They are natural figments of the human mind, not in any other sense transcendent. . . ." <sup>3</sup> Thus, to believe in the gods, or to call on them for assistance is absurd. In King Lear, the gods come to nothing.

One of the by-products of a world that is devoid of the divine is chaos. In such a world, "When the transcendent has collapsed, there is nothing to keep order anymore. Values, beliefs, relationships inevitably fall into chaos."<sup>4</sup> This is true of King Lear, and the chaos that exists in Lear's world is emphasized by the social, religious, and political vacuums in the play. Through these vacuums Shakespeare stresses the fact that Lear's world is a world of chaos, and that order comes to nothing.

Shakespeare demonstrates throughout King Lear that the world is in a state of flux, and that permanence is hard to find. The play emphasizes that there is nothing permanent about the roles that people play--king, counsellor, daughter, or son. As Edmund indicates just before he dies, nothing is permanent. This is symbolized by the wheel of fortune that continues to turn, and man appears to be cast up or down by that capricious wheel. Most of the characters in the play discover that permanence comes to nothing in King Lear.

In discussing Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Dejection: An Ode," William Barrett says that Coleridge ". . . was himself one of the wretched--cut off, forlorn, miserable, derelict. . . . Here Coleridge encounters, in thoroughly existential fashion, anxiety itself. He cannot pin down this anxiety, cannot attach it to any definite object, event, or person; it is the revelation of void or non-being."<sup>5</sup> More than other characters in the play, Lear

and Gloucester are among the wretched, and they know about anxiety. From their own experiences, they know the reality of the "void or non-being." Lear and Gloucester discover that, in such a milieu, uncertainty prevails, and that a search for certainty will produce nothing.

In discussing Pascal and his views on nothingness, William Barrett says that Pascal ". . . saw Nothingness as a possibility that lurked, so to speak, beneath our feet, a gulf and an abyss into which we might tumble at any moment."<sup>6</sup> Goneril, Regan, and Edmund push Lear and Gloucester toward that lurking abyss with a force and a persistence that robs them of any feeling of security. Lear and Gloucester are painfully aware of the fact that security is not to be found.

Shakespeare stresses in King Lear that man is both significant and insignificant. In the overall scheme of things, a man is not very significant, even if that man is Lear. Gloucester learns the same lesson. But that is only one side of the issue, and what Albert Camus says of Sisyphus, as he is engaged in his task of rolling the stone for eternity, is metaphorically true of Lear: "At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lair of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock."<sup>7</sup> Lear proves that he is stronger than his rock and his fate, and in doing so he shows that there is something to significance.

When the world is pervaded by a religious vacuum, there is a negative side to that situation. But there is a positive side as well. The older waiter in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" says, "Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee."<sup>8</sup> When this is actually the case, when the transcendent being comes to nothing, then man is faced with a situation where independence is equal to something. The religious vacuum in King Lear liberates the characters in the play, and allows them to act in an independent fashion. They are not dependent on the gods; they are free, and as such, they are responsible for their individual predicaments.

In King Lear Shakespeare has created a world where independence is a reality; he has created a world that is marked by social, religious, and political vacuums. In such a world it is not difficult to understand why the subjective approach to reality is predominant, and this is true for the "good" characters as well as the "bad" characters. The value system in King Lear is primarily personal and individual, and thus subjective. All of this makes for a modern, intriguing, and brutal world.

In discussing Lear, G. Wilson Knight says that, "When he finds Edgar, not only are Tom's mumbling irrelevances correctly focused for his cracking reason, but Tom himself, naked, savage, bestial, symbolizes that revulsion from hamity and the deceptions of human love and

human reason which has driven him into the wild night-storm. . . ."9 There is an irony here, however, because Lear himself contributed to the "deceptions of human love and human reason" that return to haunt him. Lear is a major contributor to the rational vacuum that dominates the play. And while sometimes there is "reason in madness," both in Lear and in the world at large, and while the forces of rationality exercise intermittent control over the affairs of people and the state, the play continually makes the point that rationality comes to very little in King Lear.

There are many factors that contribute to the overwhelming feeling of realism in the play. One factor is the realization that, "Man's morality, his idealism, his justice--all are false and rotten to the core."<sup>10</sup> Other factors are the widespread chaos, and the prevailing rational vacuum. William Barrett says that, ". . . to reject Hemingway's vision of the Nothing, of Nothingness, might well be to close our eyes to our own experience."<sup>11</sup> What Barrett says about Hemingway is true of Shakespeare and King Lear. In this play Shakespeare deals with reality in a painfully realistic manner. There is little, if any, idealism to be found in King Lear.

Does Lear's world consist of life or death? It consists of both. Lear endorses life, and Gloucester endorses death. But the larger world of King Lear is marked by death--



as the last scene of the play indicates. Samuel Beckett, in Endgame, has two lines that accurately summarize the end of King Lear. Hamm says, "The whole place stinks of corpses."<sup>12</sup> And Clov responds with, "The whole universe."<sup>13</sup>

In such a world it is easy to see the prevailing and abundant feeling of pessimism. But, as Lear discovers, ". . . even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism."<sup>14</sup> It is in the context of Lear's struggle against the nothingness of existence that optimism is found. Lear in his figurative blindness, and Gloucester in his literal blindness can identify with Hamm when he says to Clov, "One day you'll be blind, like me. You'll be sitting there a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me."<sup>15</sup> Shakespeare makes the truth of these lines resound from King Lear. Nevertheless, in this context of pain and suffering, where man is a mere "speck in the void," Shakespeare is able to ". . . shed light upon the step taken by the mind when starting from a philosophy of the world's lack of meaning, it ends up by finding a meaning and depth in it."<sup>16</sup> This is why optimism amounts to something in King Lear.

Albert Camus talks about the act of creation in a way that applies to Shakespeare, and to what he has created in King Lear. Camus says that,

To work and create 'for nothing,' to sculpture in clay, to know that one's creation has no future, to see one's work destroyed in a day while being aware that

fundamentally this has no more importance than building for centuries--this is the difficult wisdom that absurd thought sanctions. Performing these two tasks simultaneously, negating on the one hand and magnifying on the other, is the way open to the absurd creator. He must give the void its colors.<sup>17</sup>

In King Lear, Shakespeare is an "absurd creator," and he gives the void vivid colors. In Endgame Hamm asks, "We're not beginning . . . to . . . mean something?"<sup>18</sup> Clov responds with, "Mean something! You and I, mean something! Ah that's a good one!"<sup>19</sup> By his actions throughout the play, Lear asks Hamm's question. Sometimes it may appear that Shakespeare is answering that question in the same way that Clov does. But by the quality and magnitude of Lear's struggle, in a world characterized by nothingness, Shakespeare demonstrates that man does indeed "mean something."

## FOOTNOTES

## CONCLUSION

<sup>1</sup>William Barrett, Irrational Man (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1958), p. 62.

<sup>2</sup>John Killinger, World in Collapse: The Vision of Absurd Drama (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1971), p. 39.

<sup>3</sup>G. Wilson Knight, The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy (London: Methuen & Co., 1949), p. 188.

<sup>4</sup>Killinger, World in Collapse: The Vision of Absurd Drama, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup>Barrett, Irrational Man, p. 127.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>7</sup>Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. by Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 89.

<sup>8</sup>Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," in The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 383.

<sup>9</sup>Knight, The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy, pp. 183-184.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>11</sup>Barrett, Irrational Man, pp. 62-63.

<sup>12</sup>Samuel Beckett, Endgame (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 46.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. v.

<sup>15</sup>Beckett, Endgame, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup>Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>18</sup>Beckett, Endgame, p. 32.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

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