

IDEAS IN THE RAW: AMERICAN MODERNIST FICTION
AS A SOURCE OF FRENCH EXISTENTIALISM

by

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctorate of Philosophy in English

Middle Tennessee State University
August 2013

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank:

My chair, Dr. Will Brantley, for his ample help not only on this dissertation but on numerous projects during my time at MTSU. He has encouraged my ideas in a way that made them seem feasible for such an extensive project and helped convince me that I am indeed a scholar.

My readers, Dr. Allen Hibbard and Dr. David Lavery, for being patient and providing very insightful feedback on my work. I feel more confident about the future of my research because of their valuable responses to my ideas.

My fiancé, Kayla McNabb, for her unwavering belief in my abilities. She stayed up many late nights (as late as she could) watching me write, waiting until I had produced enough that I would allow myself to go to bed.

My family for being with me when this was still a very distant dream. They listened to me talk about my research even if they did not understand (or care about) it.

The friends I made during my time in college (whether faculty, staff, or fellow students) for making the experience, particularly the very difficult times, so very worth it.

ABSTRACT

Despite the compartmentalization of academic fields, philosophy and literature enjoy an impressive amount of cross-fertilization. This interplay was especially notable during the early 1900s, when American modernism developed a conversation that carried over into French existentialism at mid century. This conversation, while not diminishing the creativity and thought of later French philosophers, reveals how ideas come into existence, develop into themes, and eventually become nameable as an established system of thought.

The American modernist themes that crossed the Atlantic did not appear spontaneously. They existed in rudimentary forms at earlier points in American literary history, manifesting to varying degrees in both major and minor works. Beginning with Ralph Waldo Emerson, a survey of American writing that prefigures existentialism provides the foundation for an intertextual consideration of three major pairings: F. Scott Fitzgerald and Jean-Paul Sartre; Carson McCullers and Simone de Beauvoir; William Faulkner and Albert Camus.

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Sartre's *Nausea* (1938) examine paradigmatic questions of authenticity in terms of an individual's relationship to the past. McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and De Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal* (1946) present the development of female self-conception, including the use of "phallus substitutes" to gain sovereignty in a patriarchal society. Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) and Camus's *The Stranger* (1942) advance an absurdist worldview where

innocents are punished not for their actions but for the social impressions of who they are.

These readings, while thorough, invite other pairings and provide space for further research, which should continue to highlight the many threads of this transatlantic conversation.

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INTRODUCTION

Philosophy and literature seem at times like bastard siblings. Although both possess a distant heritage, a common blood pours through their veins and impresses itself upon the surface of their character. However, only those willing to forgo ideas of territory and tradition while lauding the intermixing that breeds new possibilities acknowledge their relation to one another. It is becoming more and more acceptable to take an interdisciplinary approach to a respective field, and many clever and thorough scholars across fields challenge the old demarcations. And they should. When we teach students in our undergraduate courses, we encourage them to apply what they take away from our composition and literature courses to their chosen fields, and we often push students to synthesize information in order to discover how the various academic worlds converse with each other. If our goal is to push our students toward interdisciplinary learning, we should strive toward it as well, if for no other reason than to better serve our students.

Luckily, though, interdisciplinary readings offer another noticeable advantage. Throughout history, philosophy and literature have been in constant conversation, influencing one another in a give-and-take fashion that has produced an impressive body of knowledge that scholars currently appropriate. As much as we might act as though our chosen field exists in a vacuum, that is not the case, and what better way to understand where we are than to study and analyze the conversation that led us here.

The particular conversation studied here is the relationship between American modernism and French existentialist philosophy. On the surface, it may seem like a groundless conversation to research, and, in fact, during my preliminary research, I encountered scholars who suggested that it would be a difficult connection to make.

Others, however, found it to be a natural extension of what they knew about American modernism and existentialism. Much of the difficulty in reconciling the two movements stems from what existentialism has become in popular culture today—that is, an amalgamated, simplistic form of nihilism instead of a multi-vocal, multi-faceted statement about what individuals are capable of if they understand the world and how they interact with it. Due to this watered-down existentialism that is so widely available today, the goals of the American modernists and existentialists can seem rather far apart at times. However, at the heart of existentialism is a philosophy that values many of the same themes prevalent in modernist literature. And these overlapping values are not a coincidence but instead a reflection of the age and the natural development that is going on across the world and across disciplines, making this approach an important method for understanding the current state of literature in America.

If the overlapping themes were the only aspect of this connection, then the argument would be more difficult and would rely much more heavily on prevalent ideas as a reflection of the state of society. But the conversation existing between American modernist literature and French existentialism displays a literal manifestation as well. Much scholarship has been produced about how the French read American novels, and Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir acted as prominent critics during their respective careers. In a famous review of *The U.S.A. Trilogy* (1938), Sartre called John Dos Passos the greatest writer of the period, primarily because of Dos Passos's ability to accurately present the individual experience of a moment in time. In "Existentialism and the American Novel," Jean Bruneau states that "Sartre is convinced that the only way to write a true novel is to leave the characters as mysterious and

obscure as they really are” (68), which is what he believed the American modernists were accomplishing. Camus regularly included Faulkner and Melville among his favorite authors to read,¹ and the praise the French writers directed toward the Americans is an important factor in considering their own literary and philosophical development.

As our study of the creative process becomes more and more sophisticated, it becomes clear that creation always happens with provocation—a synthesis of experience—and this synthesis often does not occur in a conscious way. Some writers are willing to acknowledge this synthesis. Sartre, in fact, argued that the French writers would take the raw ideas of the Americans and create something new from them:

These American novelists, without such traditions, without help, have forged, with barbaric brutality, tools of inestimable value. We collected these tools but we lack the naiveté of their creators. We thought about them, we took them apart and put them together again, we theorized about them, and we attempted to absorb them into our great traditions of the novel. We have treated consciously and intellectually what was the fruit of a talented and unconscious spontaneity. When Hemingway writes his short, disjointed sentences, he is only obeying his temperament. He writes what he sees. But when Camus uses Hemingway’s technique, he is conscious and deliberate, because it seems to him upon reflection the best way to express his philosophical experience of the absurdity of the world. If Faulkner breaks the chronological order of his story, it is because he

¹ Camus’s fondness for these two writers is documented in numerous sources, among them James Jones’s “Camus on Kafka and Melville: An Unpublished Letter” and John Couch’s “Camus and Faulkner: The Search for the Language of Modern Tragedy.”

cannot do otherwise. He sees time jumping about in disordered leaps. But when Simone de Beauvoir borrows his methods of mixing periods of time, she does so deliberately, and because she sees a possibility of placing her characters and action in better relief. In this way your American novelists have enriched French writers with new techniques, and French writers have absorbed these and have used them in a different manner. [. . .] We shall give back to you these techniques which you have lent us. We shall return them digested, intellectualized, less effective, and less brutal—consciously adapted to French taste. Because of this incessant exchange which makes nations rediscover in other nations what they have invented first and then rejected, perhaps you will rediscover in these foreign books the eternal youth of that “old” Faulkner. (118)

I have quoted this passage at length for a number of reasons. It accurately acknowledges not only the fact that American writers inspired the French from arguably the most notable figure of French existentialism, but it briefly outlines some of the ways in which they were inspired. The passage also adeptly explains the “conversation” in the form of ideas crossing the seas and then returning that this study will explicate. This migration allows that such ideas are adapted and forged into new and yet similar forms in the process. But while the passage is very insightful, it also reveals the frankly rather pompous bias Sartre had in favor of his national literature and his poor understanding of the craftsmanship of American authors. For decades now, scholarship on the American modernists has presented convincing evidence that these writers were indeed thinking about and actively crafting their texts, not mindlessly working on instinct. Despite these

shortcomings, the article still offers a thorough argument about the interdisciplinary and cross-cultural influence of ideas. Sartre helps us to understand more clearly that no individual is the sole producer of his or her ideas, and the nature of these subconscious influences that birth new work merits a reexamination.

With the French existentialists voicing such important commentary concerning American authors, it is only natural that scholars have looked into the connection between the two movements. One of the earliest and most substantive studies on the subject is Marjorie McCorquodale's dissertation, "William Faulkner and Existentialism." Completed in 1956,² the study appeared right on the cusp of existentialism's rise, though it would be considered out of date in our day and age. However, McCorquodale's main assertion remains valid: "An examination of these [Faulkner's] views based on an analysis of his novels reveals, it is believed, a distinct resemblance to the description of man and of the world as formulated in the important contemporary philosophical movement known as existentialism" (1). Even from the early days of existentialism, some scholars noticed a viable connection between it and modernist fiction, and from this initial assertion, McCorquodale proceeds to a systematic analysis of most of Faulkner's novels through an existential lens.

McCorquodale's reading of Faulkner's works is astute, and she identifies many of the overlapping ideas present in the two movements. Ultimately she provides a fairly solid reading of the texts, concluding that Faulkner "is saying, as do the existentialists, life itself is a value, if it is really lived, [. . .]. Like Camus, Faulkner is saying Yes!—to

² While McCorquodale's dissertation is the first extended American study of Faulkner and existentialism, Percy Adams explains in "Faulkner, French Literature, and 'Eternal Verities'" that French scholars such as Albert Guerard had noticed the connection as early as 1947.

life” (160). Her final conclusion is one that resonates with a portion of this study, but although her work is a foundational text, it is not without flaws, such as her proposal about the possible origin of these overlapping themes in Faulkner and existentialism. McCorquodale asserts that Faulkner was surely exposed to the early mumblings of undeveloped existential thought in the Paris cafés during his visit to Europe in 1925 (154). She makes this same argument again in her article “Alienation in Yoknapatawpha County,” though this time with less uncertainty (yet still producing no evidence to support the claim). This interpretation makes a number of shaky, if not erroneous, assumptions: existentialism would have been developed enough by that time to be articulated, Faulkner would have been in the right cafés to be exposed to it, and he would have to have understood enough of the abstract ideas being passed around in French to take anything of value away from the experience. This interpretation ignores the fact that many of the concepts that Faulkner encountered in Paris had been present in America for a couple of decades. “Disillusionment with the credos of the past” was certainly an American idea leading up to the modernist period, though not necessarily uniquely American. It is just as likely if not more so that Faulkner did not bring existentialism back to America from Paris but instead found in Paris corroboration of perspectives and ideologies present in his home country—boiling with life but never spilling over into some sort of formalized convention.

McCorquodale’s reading differs from the one present here in that during her reading of *Light in August* (1932), she relies more heavily on Sartre than Camus for her philosophical grounding, whereas the assertion here is that Camus is a more appropriate

analog to Faulkner's particular take on the universe. While this reliance is not a weakness on McCorquodale's part, it is, however, a point of contention that this study will revise.

The final and most obvious drawback to McCorquodale's work is its age. Written early in existentialism's development, it cannot take into account many of the changes that happened to the philosophy after its initial rise. Many of the complexities of existentialism had yet to be fully understood, such as how deeply Sartre's particular version of existentialism differed from Camus's and the extent to which the French existentialists were indebted to the previous existentialists such as Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. At this point in time, one can fairly say that the existentialist movement has settled, and while no body of thought is ever static, a much more complete picture of existentialism is available now than was during McCorquodale's time. And perhaps one of the most important complications resulting from the dated nature of McCorquodale's study is the fact Simone de Beauvoir had yet to take her place as a prominent figure in the existentialist movement. McCorquodale's study reads a masculine text through a masculine lens, leaving no place for a female perspective.

The other major book (and the most important) on the topic of American modernism and French existentialism is Richard Lehan's *A Dangerous Crossing: French Literary Existentialism and the Modern American Novel*. Published in 1973, Lehan's book comes during a time when existentialism was more established as a movement, and his work reflects the complications that eventually arose as existentialism came into its own: "Sartre and Camus have been unjustly linked by the blurred term *existentialism*" (xiii). Lehan understands in a way that McCorquodale did not that existentialism can never really be conceived of as a grouping and that the individuals associated with it all

provide unique interpretations of basic ideas. Lehan provides a more nuanced understanding of his subject as his later publication date might suggest, and this new viewpoint shows through in his thesis, which, although growing more complex and organic as the text progresses, can be boiled down thusly: “Man attempts to create himself in the face of his absurd limits, an idea which brings all of these writers together and gives a collective meaning to the term existentialism” (xiv). This broader understanding of existentialism allows Lehan the flexibility to use the philosophy as it is deemed appropriate for analysis. He also responds to McCorquodale’s attempt to argue that Faulkner was exposed to early existential ideas during his time in Paris not by directly addressing this possibility or presenting an opposing view, but by altering the purpose of his study: “I should also like to make clear that this is not a source study. I am concerned with an affinity of mind, a sense of shared consciousness, that can be found in the literature of the nineteenth century as well as today” (xix). Lehan’s decision to not argue for source inspiration is a strength, especially considering that many of his chosen authors, which go back and forth from America to France, would not have been exposed to each other, making establishing source much more difficult. Despite his claim of not searching for source, Lehan is at least willing to acknowledge that “Sartre and Camus did draw consciously on the American novel” (xix), showing that he does not ignore the conversation taking place, which will take central focus in this particular study.

Lehan excels in a number of ways over McCorquodale. He brings in philosophers other than the French existentialists in order to give a broader picture of what existentialism is and how it developed over the years. His view of the literature is broader, and while McCorquodale confines herself to Faulkner’s works in order to give

them the attention she believed (and they rightly do) deserve, Lehan's work provides greater context to the circumstances in which Faulkner worked. Lehan looks at works outside the modern period for a sense of shared values, though he does not do so in a comprehensive way; rather, he simply acknowledges the themes explored by other writers. Yet the overall effect is that of a historically-grounded thinker. He discusses the modernist novelists' most notable works and also their less studied works (at the time), such as Hemingway's *Islands in the Stream* (1970). The effect of this comprehensiveness is that it reveals the depth to which existential themes were crucial to the modernist writers.

But while Lehan's work excels in a number of ways, it also has drawbacks that prevent it from being the quintessential work on the subject. The first problem is his desire to avoid discussing possible influences because as far as the study forwards the subject of American modernism and French existentialism, it never addresses why this connection exists and ultimately what it means for our understanding of the relationship between literature and philosophy. Lehan's work also struggles a bit from his approach, in which he rarely offers a close reading, instead presenting a surface comparison of his texts through summary. His comparisons are insightful, but the work could benefit from an exploration of the specific forms that the authors used to achieve the effects he mentions throughout his analysis.

Another major difficulty that plagues Lehan's work is his desire for comprehensiveness. In his attempt to include most all of the major and minor works from numerous different American authors, he ends up devoting little time to any individual work, which accounts for his lack of detailed readings. In this way, Lehan's work offers a

useful survey of the scholarship and the issues surrounding it, but as a work of thorough analysis, it ultimately falls short, though this may not (and likely was not, judging by some of his statements in the introduction) his goal. And this problem of trying to do too much in a limited amount of space is made exponentially worse by the fact that Lehan's book not only studies American literature before the rise of existentialism but also looks at how existentialism returned to America and found its way into early postmodern works. While this back-and-forth is his stated goal and is a valuable contribution to the understanding of how philosophy and literature speak to one another, the result is that Lehan devotes only half of his book to the modernists, meaning his survey has even less chance to fully develop.

The last drawback to Lehan's study is one of the same found in McCorquodale, though it is heightened a bit in Lehan: the work lacks a feminist perspective. Despite the fact that de Beauvoir was, at this point, an established figure in the movement, Lehan excludes her from his study. And additionally problematic is the fact that while McCorquodale was restricted to Faulkner, Lehan is not, yet he rarely mentions women writers in his text, and when he does, he does so in a cursory way. He fails to bring in any of the women novelists of the modern period for extended analysis, even though many of them were beginning to gain more attention in literary studies. The result is a masculinist study that fails to acknowledge female contributions to either existentialism or American literature. However, this does not mean that we should dismiss his work. His research remains fundamental, and his annotated bibliography on the topic, though now dated, should remain the jumping off point for anyone interested in researching this topic in the future.

Recent studies analyzing the connection between American literature and existential philosophy are more difficult to come upon. For a period, existentialism went out of style, partially because of its depiction in popular culture, which caused many people to view it as less complex than it is and, by extension, less useful for analysis.³ Another main reason for its decline is the rise of deconstructionism, and although some scholars assert that existentialism influenced later French philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault, a point came when scholars were more interested in the later French philosophers than those who influenced them. Finally, its decline was probably furthered by the fact that people grew tired of it. Modes of thought go in and out of style, and the primary way that a new mode of thought rises to prominence is by rejecting the previous mode of thought and its values. Existentialism rose to prominence this way, so it is no surprise that it suffered the same fate. But even though existentialism passed out of critical favor for a number of years, some critics still saw value in it as a form of literary analysis.

Of the more recent studies, one in particular stands out: Ellen Matlok-Ziemann's *Tomboys, Belles, and Other Ladies: The Female Body-Subject in Selected Works by Katherine Anne Porter and Carson McCullers* (2005). While not explicitly a comparison between existential philosophy and American literature, de Beauvoir's philosophy plays a critical role in her analysis. Matlok-Ziemann's stated purpose, to "argue that Porter and McCullers question and challenge the concept of a stable and fixed identity, as they are both concerned with how Southern gender norms distinctly determine the way one

³ David Pickus discusses this process in "Paperback Authenticity: Walter Kaufmann and Existentialism," in which he identifies what Kaufman referred to as the "hardening" of existentialism through years of exposure to the masses.

‘becomes a woman’ (14), heavily relies on existential concepts to create salient analysis. Throughout her book, Matlok-Ziemann performs a thorough and insightful examination of Porter’s and McCullers’s stories, and her study stands as a valuable contribution to the scholarship. Her stated purpose is a gender reading of the two authors in which she scrutinizes the treatment of the female-body by McCullers and Porter, specifically looking at the ways in which they challenge the ideals of sacred womanhood present in the South before and after the Civil War. Ultimately searching for and drawing very different conclusions, her book provides a significant amount of overlap to this study and stands as a testament to the ways that basic existential ideas can be made relevant today through their application to modern literary theory.

Aside from book-length studies⁴, a number of articles utilize an existential reading of texts. While extensive studies of existentialism and literature have gone in and out of vogue in the literary community, shorter studies have maintained a fairly consistent place in the body of criticism. A collection of essays on the topic titled *Existentialism in American Literature* (1983) appeared under the editorial supervision of Ruby Chatterji, and although many of the collected articles appear throughout this study, most of the collection concerns postmodern writers. Aside from this collection, a number of scholars are completing these shorter studies, and among the most noteworthy are Celia Esplugas’s “*Winesburg, Ohio: An Existential Microcosm*,” William Bysshe Stein’s “Stephen Crane’s *Homo Absurdus*,” William Sowder’s “Faulkner and Existentialism: A Note on the Generalissimo,” Peter Buitenhuis’s “The Essentials of Life: ‘The Open Boat’

⁴ One more book length study has been produced: Sidney Finkelstein’s *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature*. However, because Finkelstein chooses to discuss the philosophy and literature separately, without intertextual analysis, his book is not discussed at length here.

as Existentialist Fiction,” Ben Stoltzfus’s “Hemingway’s Iceberg; Camus’ *L’Etranger* and *The Sun Also Rises*,” and Leon Roudiez’s “Strangers in Melville and Camus.” These readings display benefits and drawbacks that affect their usefulness. As shorter works, they usually focus on a single philosopher and a single writer, and while they do not have the freedom to be as comprehensive as a longer work, the tighter focus allows for a much closer reading. The readings performed in these articles tend to be more detailed than those of longer studies. However, because they are so focused, they tend to appear like isolated incidences of crossover and rarely provide broader statements about the nature of the relationship between literature and philosophy. However, despite the smaller scope of these studies, they remain an important part of the conversation, and it is the responsibility of longer studies to make connections between them in order to create a greater understanding of the voices speaking to this topic.

Taking this review under consideration, it is clear that the study of existentialism and American literature is well-established if a little disjointed, yet it offers a great deal of room for expansion. Looking at the scholarship as a whole, a number of common problems arise, the most predominant of which is the author’s understanding or representation of existentialism as a philosophy. As mentioned earlier, pop culture tends to simplify existentialism, and this tendency has leaked into the literary criticism on the topic, with some scholars failing to quote from the philosophy entirely (or very sparingly) and relying almost completely on a “general” understanding of the philosophy’s tenets. The related issue comes up when scholars lump existentialism together under a single philosopher, treating the movement as though it is generally agreed upon. This tendency can lead to a misunderstanding of the philosophy by readers and hurts the scholarship

because not all philosophers under the umbrella of existentialism present the philosophy in a way that will be palpable to a particular reader, who may not be aware that the other possibilities exist. This mistake is one this reading will attempt to avoid by providing a firm but brief grounding in the various philosophical tenets before moving into the literary analysis.

The issue is also complicated by the fact that the label of “existentialist” has not been one that most people have taken with much pride. Most of the pre-French philosophers were never called existentialists because the label did not exist yet (exempting Heidegger, who denied the label) and have only come to be known as existentialists after the fact by scholars. Even those generally considered existentialists had complicated relationships with the term. Camus denied being an existentialist outright and claimed that neither he nor Sartre understood why he was considered as such (“Three Interviews” 345), despite the fact that Sartre did an existentialist reading of *The Stranger*. De Beauvoir wore the moniker without shame, but she also identified as a feminist, and at times critics have found reconciling the two ideologies difficult. Sartre also wore the label for much of his life, though as Wilfrid Desan recounts in *The Marxism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (1965), as Sartre got older he began to identify more strongly with Marxism than his own philosophy, first attempting to merge the two and arguably failing to do so. From a critical standpoint, though, we understand that writers do not always understand or want to admit the extent that their work meshes with a particular contemporary philosophical movement, and time and scholarly debate often make the decision who is associated with which mode of thought. Generally it is best to work under the established framework, which labels all of the listed writers as

existentialist philosophers, and understand that their inclusion in existentialism does not exclude them from being associated with any other philosophical movement.

This study will show how American literature was an influence in the development of French existentialism, but this premise is not to suggest that it is the only influence, and I will actually argue the opposite. Much goes into the development of a mode of thought, and literature is only one aspect of that web of influence. Among these other influences is philosophy itself, and a number of philosophers, such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger, helped establish what the French came to understand as existentialism. In order to understand what French existentialism is, how it came to be, and the extent of influence American modernist literature had on its development, one must begin with these earlier philosophers.

Often called the father of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard was one of the earliest thinkers systematically and explicitly expressing ideas that are now commonly associated with existentialism. However, his philosophy differs greatly from what is now understood as existentialism, to the point that some modern critics, such as J'aime Sanders, contest whether he should be considered an existentialist at all.⁵ Working from a Christian perspective, Kierkegaard's thought would be in stark disagreement with the later existentialist idea championed by Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, and de Beauvoir that

⁵ In "Discovering the Source of Gatsby's Greatness: Nick's Eulogy for a 'Great' Kierkegaardian Knight," Sanders has this to say on the subject of Kierkegaard as an existentialist: "Yet, because Kierkegaard has become so identified in literary studies with expressions of angst, misperceptions about the nature of his philosophy prevail—misperceptions further perpetuated by his reputation as the 'father of existentialism.' Although his writings inspired much of the dialogue of the existentialists, Kierkegaard was far more optimistic than this quintessentially twentieth-century school of philosophy, which in its most memorable literary incarnations still tends toward stoicism while often degenerating into glib nihilism in its avant-garde and popular-culture manifestations" (110). Sanders's interpretation is fair, in that most pop-culture representations of existentialism do not fit well with Kierkegaard's philosophy, but more detailed readings of existentialism make the connection clearer, which is the topic still under debate today.

the world is without objective meaning or morals because God does not exist to sustain such a system. Kierkegaard believed that in true faith, which he defined in detail, one could achieve a meaningful existence. So with such a major conflict it may seem strange that Kierkegaard is considered an existentialist and even lauded by the later writers, such as Sartre and de Beauvoir. Kierkegaard went to great length to explore the mind of the individual in society and how that individual makes meaning. Among his ideas regularly discussed by existentialists is the concept that in order to truly know oneself, one must be alone. Kierkegaard argued that individuals lose their true identity when in society, “forgets his name divinely understood,” and becomes a shallow person that can succeed in social situations. And he deemed this state “despair” (*The Sickness Unto Death* 33-34), an idea adopted and adapted by later existentialists. According to Kierkegaard, only after studying one’s volition in isolation for an extended period could one step into the public world and remain, as it would later be called, an authentic existence.

In contrast to Kierkegaard’s Christian form of existentialism, Nietzsche proposed the opposite, famously declaring that “God is dead” (*The Gay Science* 125). Nietzsche provided some foundational ideas that elicited responses from all the later existentialists. The most relevant of his ideas to make its way into the realm of existentialism is the suggestion that the world is devoid of objective meaning and that all meaning attributed to facets of this life are subjective in origin. The later existentialists almost universally adopted this standpoint in their philosophy and generally cite Nietzsche as their inspiration. The second major concept that the existentialists adopted from Nietzsche was his focus on the individual in the individual vs. society dichotomy. Nietzsche believed that an individual had the ability to become something truly great in the world, that he or

she could “surpass” the common morality. At the same time, he was suspicious of large groups of people, believing that existing according to societal norms led people toward like-minded and simplistic reasoning—far inferior to what the lone subject was likely to experience. His focus on and celebration of the individual’s possibilities and experience in the world became the basis of most of the later existentialist philosophies, many of which argued that mankind will need to acknowledge that meaning must be found through subjective experience if it is to be authentic.

Following Nietzsche, the next major existentialist figure is Martin Heidegger, whose opus *Being and Time* (1927), arguably went further in defining individual experience than any that had come before it. In his book, which would become the foundational text for Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Heidegger argued that the two titular elements compose all of experience. And while one of his major ideas, that existence is a spatial field that radiates from *Dasein*, his term for human consciousness, instead of being confined to the body, has found its way into some studies of existentialism, the main hypotheses taken from his work is his definition of the different forms of Being, such as Being-for-itself or Being-as-Object, which the French existentialists, mainly Sartre and de Beauvoir, would utilize extensively in their works. Other than these concepts, Heidegger’s other major contribution to existentialism was phenomenology, and while he did not create this particular approach to studying truth (he relies on Edmund Husserl for his foundation), it was his particular use of it that inspired the existentialists. But while Heidegger’s philosophy was firmly within the realm of existential thought, his contributions substantial, and his name cited regularly in existential surveys, his relationship to the movement wavered. He explicitly rejected

being considered an existentialist and especially in recent years he has fallen out of favor with scholars due to his association with the Nazi party. Yet despite these complications, it is difficult if not impossible to understand how existentialism developed without first turning to Heidegger.

Ultimately, the French philosophers took over the movement and became the first to refer to themselves as existentialists. Although the French writers often get grouped together under a single banner, their respective philosophies differed in a number of important ways. Of the three, Albert Camus's philosophical texts varied from other major philosophical texts more so than either those of Sartre or de Beauvoir, who worked together closely in the development of their ideas. Camus maintained some of the standard French existentialist ideas, such as the meaninglessness of the world and mankind's alienation from it, but his ultimate goal was different from Sartre's, though more similar to de Beauvoir's. Camus's philosophy relies upon the absurd—the idea that men and women persist in doing meaningless tasks. However, Camus believed that a person who understands and acknowledges the absurdity of existence, but persists anyway, is someone worth admiring. But this aspect of his philosophy reflects only the beginning of his career. The issue that concerned Camus during his later career and to which he devoted *The Rebel* (1951) is the search for a way to objectively value a human life and create a system of morality in a meaningless world. His ultimate conclusion is that a person who is willing to rebel against the way he or she is treated, to stop and say, "I have put up with this much, but I would rather die than to suffer anymore," is making a powerful statement that his or her life has intrinsic value. In the extended exploration of this idea, Camus's philosophy portrays the subjects of suicide and capital punishment as

the major questions human beings should be contemplating. Among the French existentialists, Camus's philosophy is arguably the most unique and at the same time the most overlooked by scholars.

Like Camus, de Beauvoir was often overlooked when it comes to existentialism, mainly because she was better known as a feminist scholar than an existentialist. But existentialism was an important factor in her scholarship, and it served as a base upon which she built her gender studies. And outside the realm of feminism, she, like Camus, also attempted to define a set of ethics that would be compatible with the meaningless world defined by existentialists. In terms of her philosophy, for the most part, she was in agreement with Sartre on the nature of the world and how the individual encounters it, and recently some scholars have provided evidence that suggests de Beauvoir might have had a more vital role in the development of Sartre's particular version of existentialism than previously thought, arguing that Sartre's ideas were inspired by de Beauvoir. However, de Beauvoir's unique philosophical take on existentialism relies on ideas explored in *The Second Sex* (1949). More than just a feminist study, *The Second Sex* attempts to express existential thinking through a phenomenological reading of the history of gender relations, and the result reveals how, even though human beings find themselves in a meaningless world with no objective force to draw upon to create a sense of purpose, this assertion implies that powerful social forces are at work on individuals from the moment they achieve consciousness. De Beauvoir's work illustrates how difficult it can be for an individual to create an authentic conception of who he or she wishes to be because society has placed identifiers and pre-conceived and forced identity construction so deeply in the human psyche that most cannot even recognize them for

what they are. So while Sartre constructed the outlines of the philosophical movement, de Beauvoir complicated the issue and brought to the forefront the difficulties present in the fundamental aspects of human experience.

The most notable figure of existentialism is Jean-Paul Sartre, whose *Being and Nothingness* is considered by many as the quintessential existential text. In his extensive book, Sartre argues, much like Heidegger before him, that all of existence is made of two things, though in Sartre's case these two things are not Being and time but Being and nothingness. Essentially, humans understand the world in terms of what exists, Being, and what does not exist, nothingness. The idea relies a great deal on the psychological concept of negation, though this particular interpretation of the world is not the one for which Sartre is most known. In the course of establishing these two principles, Sartre details a number of other ideas that are more widely known today. He, like Nietzsche, argued that the world is meaningless without objective value, though Sartre goes on to argue that people are "abandoned" in this world, leaving mankind with a deep desire to grasp for meaning where none exists. He also details the concept of absolute freedom, arguing that every individual must choose the content of his or her character every single moment of life because a person can always make the choice to change—nothing about a person's future or present self is fixed. However, people are terrified of this freedom and the implied responsibility for one's actions, and many are in constant search of a way to escape this freedom and responsibility, usually through concessions to destiny or fate. The final idea that Sartre is particularly known for and helps define his particular brand of existentialism is bad faith. A person who accepts absolute freedom and lives accordingly, taking up an essential project that may provide meaning to existence, is said

to be living in good faith; while a person who tries to escape from his or her freedom and not live a life true to who he or she is, is said to be in bad faith. Scholars often rely on these terms when speaking of “existentialism,” though this practice is not unfounded as they are very important concepts in the scholarship. For the purposes of this study, it is necessary that their origin be understood before proceeding.

In addition to the specific philosophers addressed here, this study will rely on a philosophical concept, or more accurately, a philosophical approach, that should be briefly detailed as well. Existentialist literary theory does not yet exist, though Henry Nordmeyer does discuss its possibility and give a broad understanding of what it might look like in “An Existentialist Approach to Literature,” and Colin Wilson attempts the same in “Existential Criticism.” But because of this lack, we must turn to a connected theoretical approach in order to conduct an existentialist reading. Although utilized by many of the existentialists, phenomenology is not actually a product of any one of them, and the goal of the approach is outlined by Sara Heinamaa: “The phenomenologist takes a *step back* from the world; he suspends his belief in the reality of the world and its beings. The aim, however, is not to examine oneself, but to become aware of one’s involvement in the reality of the world” (115). Established as a philosophical movement by Edmund Husserl, this way of analyzing the world was popular with existentialists because of its focus on individual experience. In recent years, while existentialism has faded from the mainstream of literary criticism, phenomenology remains prominent, perhaps even gaining strength as a method for explicating a literary text. Maurice Natanson has even gone as far as to state that any study that attempts to look at the connection between philosophy and literature will ultimately end up arriving at

phenomenology. In *Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature* (1998), Natanson argues that “the search here is not for philosophy but for what I take to be its poetic essence: phenomenology. Philosophy in literature will prove to be, at least in my interpretation, phenomenology in literature. Thus, our task is not to define philosophy once more but to clarify the particular manner in which phenomenology may be said to be ‘in’ literature” (8). Natanson’s suggestion that phenomenology is the philosophical perspective most in tune with the values of literature is an intriguing one, but even if someone is not willing to go that far, it is hard to deny the power of a subjective search for truth through literature as a valid approach. In fact, the rejection of formalist values suggests that modern literary theory is becoming more receptive to phenomenology as a whole.

Besides not differentiating between existentialist philosophies, another common mistake scholars make during existential readings concerns the use of fiction. While just as common as lumping philosophers together under a single banner, failing to bring in French existentialist fiction is not as problematic though it does produce ramifications for a piece of scholarship. The French existentialists wrote a great deal of fiction in addition to philosophy (Camus, for example, being known more for his fiction than his philosophy), making them a fairly unique movement in philosophy. However, instead of appreciating the significance of this choice to express themselves through fiction as well as philosophy, many scholars continue to compartmentalize their work, either utilizing their philosophy while ignoring their fiction completely, such as in Tom Grimwood’s “Re-Reading *The Second Sex*’s ‘Simone De Beauvoir’,” or studying their fiction while ignoring their philosophical writings, such as Terry Otten in “‘Mamam’ in Camus’ *The Stranger*.” Some even argue today that although exploring fiction through philosophy

was popular during existentialism's prime, such readings are overdone and too singular to adequately account for a text. One can certainly read the fiction of the existentialists without the philosophy and come away with a rich interpretation full of ambiguity and social commentary, but it is important to remember that the existentialists often explicitly stated that their fiction existed to express philosophical ideas (in Sartre's case) or act as a companion to their philosophy (as in Camus's case). If a scholar wishes to approach existentialist fiction through the philosophy, it seems pertinent, particularly for a reading such as this, to understand how the French writers went about expressing ideas in their fiction to better know how they extrapolate ideas from the fiction they themselves valued.

Considering that the existentialists seemed to find such a strong connection between literature and philosophy, it is relevant to take a brief look at what they had to say about this connection. Gabriel Marcel, a lesser-known Christian existentialist, discussed the connection extensively, and summarizing Marcel's work in "Marcel and Phenomenology: Can Literature Help Philosophy?" Brendan Sweetman states that Marcel "argues explicitly for the general inadequacy of philosophy to capture the full truths about reality. He further suggests that art, literature and music can help us to further explicate these truths" (179). Helen Tattam adds that Marcel believed expressing ideas through literature was "more evocative than they were demonstrative" (226), ultimately lending them more power for a reader. This belief in literature as the supplement capable of saying what philosophy alone cannot is shared by Camus and Sartre, and Sweetman continues his assertion: "They agree with Marcel that art, literature and music complement philosophy, but do not replace it." This distinction is important because it reveals that the existentialists saw neither literature nor philosophy as greater

than the other, nor did they want to accept them as distinctly separate entities. Yet the French were not the only existentialists who seemed to take this approach to their work. Both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, while following very different premises and conclusions, ultimately approached their work in a similar fashion. Both writers valued story-telling as a method of expressing philosophical ideas. Many of Kierkegaard's works are written by unique fictional personas and often involve elaborate metaphors, such as his famous "knight of faith" concept, that contain the hidden kernels of his ideology. Likewise, Nietzsche was known for his imaginative prose; one of his most famous works, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883), is a narrative in which his philosophical ideas are professed by the titular character. Heidegger stands as the lone traditional existentialist figure who did not embrace fiction as a philosophical form.

Sartre also analyzes this relationship and gives his insights into literature's important connection to philosophy. In *What Is Literature?* (1947), Sartre outlines the value of literature as he understands it and attempts to explain its social impact on the world. He ultimately finds that literature shares much of the same task we traditionally assign to philosophy: "The writer can guide you and, if he describes a hovel, make it seem the symbol of social injustice and provoke your indignation. The painter is mute. He presents you with a hovel, that's all. You are free to see in it what you like" (10). In Sartre's opinion, painting or sculpture act as blank canvases to project thoughts upon and in themselves do not contain philosophical ideas. Literature, on the other hand, inspires philosophical thoughts by the challenges it provides the reader. Sartre suggests that literature instigates complex, abstract thought, and by extension, philosophy is what refines it. Sartre's claims are particularly relevant to this study because this process—

from instigation to refinement—is what I contend happened between American modernist literature and French existentialism.

I have attempted to avoid many of the weaknesses that can be found in other studies of existentialism and modernism through a survey of existentialism and discussion of the relationship between the two fields. With these issues addressed, this study will move forward, beginning with an existential survey of American literature leading up to the modern period. While the previous sections have attempted to reveal the other influences that went into creating the complex mode of thought that is existentialism, this survey will attempt to do the same for American modernism. Among the scholars who acknowledge the connection between modernism and existentialism, many still treat the underlying existential concepts as though they were formed from the air, or, more commonly, as a product of the modern age. It is true that in any time period the society and culture exert a significant impact on the prevalence of ideas; but this treatment ignores the fact that, while a conversation occurs between literature and philosophy, a conversation takes place between literatures from different time periods as well. The existential themes found in modernist literature developed gradually over a long period of time. By studying this progress of thought, we can see just how small kernels of ideas like these move through an age, and it becomes clearer just how they made their way across the seas to France.

After analyzing the history of existential thought in earlier American literature, this study will focus on three major modernist texts: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), and William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), and three texts from the French philosophers: Jean-

Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938), Simone de Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal* (1946), and Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1942). The three American texts will each be paired with a work of French fiction, and the philosophy of the chosen French writer will supplement the pairing. The philosophy will be used as a foundation for the analysis, and the two pieces of fiction will be read intertextually, subjecting them to a thorough comparison and contrast to illustrate where the texts overlap in ideology and where they differ. The goal of this process is not only to make clear the "conversation" between the two texts and show how the earlier modernist texts manifest in the later existential works but also to reveal how the texts differ. The major argument of this study maintains that the modernist fiction helped inspire existential ideas in the French writers, but the French writers also manipulated what they found in American literature in order to build upon and enhance what they found there, ultimately creating something that better suited their needs.

These intertextual readings will be preceded by shorter studies examining other possible connections between the two authors. This exercise reveals that the connection between two major works is not a coincidence of theme, but that this overlap is rather common, even within a couple authors' careers. The shorter studies are examples of less applicable pairings between the two authors than the major couplings, yet they are intended to offer a perspective that the main intertextual reading is incapable of producing. Even beyond commonality of theme, the existentialists and American writers are paired based on the unique connection between the philosophy and the message of the modernist's fiction. Sartre and Fitzgerald are paired for their focus on inauthentic existence and the desire to create meaning for one's life; de Beauvoir and McCullers both

express a woman's search for authentic experience in a world dictated by powerful gender identifiers; and Camus and Faulkner express the consequences of absurd punishment and the possibility of becoming a Sisyphean hero. Through this particular analytical approach, I intend to reveal the natural blending of fiction by separate authors, melded together through a uniquely identifiable philosophy.

After the intertextual readings, I will conclude with a short survey of other modernist texts and their respective relationships with existentialism. The goal here is to further the conversation and seed ideas for future scholarship. This connection is widespread, and expressing the extent of this overlap is one of the explicit goals of this work. By the end, readers will see the value of understanding this conversation in detail and ways in which it might yet move forward.

CHAPTER I: EXISTENTIALISM BEFORE THE MODERNISTS

It may seem strange in a study of existentialism and American modernists to devote a chapter to American writers working well before and leading up to modernism's defining writers, but the premise of this work, that many scholars ignore the conversation that ultimately produced French existentialism in favor of viewing literature and philosophy with more definitive boundaries, means it is imprudent to ignore the conversation that produced American modernism. Scholars have currently taken up this task, some in longer works, some through a series of shorter works, and overall the body of knowledge produced acts as a fine foundation for this conversation. Since this study could never discuss all of the elements that produced American modernism (a nearly impossible task), this survey confines itself to only those elements that produced the existential themes that the modernists began exploring and which eventually made their way across the seas.

The purpose of this activity, though, is not to show that French existentialism was the culminating product of American thought leading up to the 1930s and 1940s. This proposition is not accurate nor does it provide a balanced historical perspective. This section will also mention, when appropriate, the ways in which American ideas crossed into other cultures before the modernists and how ideas entered (or returned to) America from elsewhere.

Another important aspect to consider about this survey is that the conversation is not linear or even unbroken. One cannot simply point to a writer and say, this writer influenced this writer, who influenced this writer, etc., until we reach the French existentialists. Although these chains of influence did happen on a number of occasions,

often the influence passed more subtly from person to person. Most of these writers are very important figures in American literature, and even though their popularity with their contemporaries varies, many were widely read, making influence easier to trace. In “French Reactions to American Writers,” Reino Virtranen shows that the French praised American authors well before the modern period, such as Emerson and Whitman, meaning these kernels of thought outlined in this chapter were already crossing the Atlantic even before they developed into the modernist movement years later. Aside from the major writers, however, some authors, particularly women and minority writers, were not as widely acknowledged by their peers or, in some cases, even recognized for their talents until much later. Despite their marginalized status, these writers were still taking part in the development of American literature and responding to the major modes of thought moving through time periods, and often these marginalized writers are able to speak to these major themes and even alter them for different purposes in ways that more traditionally canonical writers cannot. Additionally, their inclusion in this survey is an attempt to secure them a place in the scholarship on this subject that many previous researchers have not afforded them, thus providing a more comprehensive understanding of American literature.

The American Renaissance

The presence of existential ideas in American literature did not necessarily begin with Emerson, though that is where this study will begin. A case can be made that many authors before Emerson were expressing these themes, and, indeed, some may assert that they have been present since the beginning of what we understand as American literature. From John Smith’s fantasized tale of his dealings with Native Americans to Benjamin

Franklin's autobiography, a pervasive focus on individualism and personal projects as a means for making a name for oneself in the world, and arguably by extension giving meaning to one's existence, has been present in American literature in one form or another. Emerson is chosen as the beginning because he is the first American author to coalesce loose existential ideas into a recognizable form. This assertion, coupled with the fact that nearly all of the later writers in this study respond to Emerson in some manner, makes him the natural jumping off point.

At first glance, Emerson's ideas may seem incongruent with French existentialism. Much of Emerson's writing concerned divinity, and although he did not hold with the church and instead attempted to center divine experience in the individual, he does not accept an objectively meaningless universe as the French do. However, Kierkegaard's philosophy reveals that religion and existentialist thought can coexist, and Emerson's thought expresses the existentialist theme of subjectivity in a complicated, nuanced manner.

Existentialist ideas can be found in many of Emerson's works, but his essay "Self-Reliance" is particularly fruitful for a brief look at their manifestation. In the essay, Emerson argues, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men,—that is genius" (121). This remark suggests a phenomenological view of the world; the idea that "what is true for you" is "true for all men" parallels the phenomenological premise that one should turn to subjective experience of the world to understand greater truths. Furthermore, Emerson asserts that this is "genius," meaning that people capable of accepting his approach to the world will learn and know more about human existence. He argues that "A man should learn to

detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages.” Emerson posits that men and women are better off ignoring what has been given to them from the outside world as meaningful, and deciding instead what is meaningful for themselves. Otherwise, “we shall be forced to take with shame our opinion from another.” The fear of being the extension of someone else’s opinions, of not being true to oneself, is particularly strong in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre, and it is clear that this same concept is present early in American literature.

Emerson’s discussion of the individual’s experience and its relationship to truth is astute and very much in accordance with existentialist thought, but his connection to the movement stretches to the individual’s role in society as well. He writes, “These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. [. . .] The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs” (122). Emerson’s argument is very similar to Kierkegaard’s explanation of society’s creation of “mass men” in *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849). Both writers argue that society does not care for the individuality or “manhood” of its members and instead requests conformity. They both assert that above all society requires conformity, which the two dismiss as damaging to human existence and which Kierkegaard famously designates (among other states) as living in “despair” (13-14). The final assertion that society cares only for a public persona will factor heavily into Sartre’s conception of authentic existence and provide the basis for the reading later in this work of *Nausea* and *The Great Gatsby*. Emerson follows up

his previous statement by claiming, “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. [. . .] Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself” (122). This focus on the importance of “nonconformity” and its relationship to a fulfilled self meshes particularly well with Camus’s argument in *The Rebel* that rebellion is the action that most justifies and gives value to life, and Emerson’s instructions for “absolving” suggest that he also views this action as providing meaning to an individual’s existence in the same manner as is traditionally afforded to God.

Emerson’s view of time will also play an important role in my chapter on Sartre and Fitzgerald. According to Emerson, “man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time” (128-129). Such a conception of mankind’s relationship with the past and the particularly problematic nature of the attempt to “not live in the present” mirror Sartre’s philosophy and becomes the primary concern of later American modernist texts, namely *The Great Gatsby*. In this way, Emerson begins in earnest a conversation that will take place among writers in America and eventually France.

Another and perhaps the most important reason to look at Emerson in a study of existential influence is the impact that he, by extension, had on the movement. While Nietzsche acknowledged Emerson as an important influence, only recently have scholars begun to understand the depth of that influence. According to Hermann Hummel’s translation of Nietzsche’s letters, the philosopher referred to Emerson as both “a brother soul” and possessing “the richest in ideas of this century” (66). Because of this

admiration for Emerson, Hummel correctly maintains, one can hear the echo of Emerson in Nietzsche's philosophy. Particularly in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche takes on a tone of proselytizing that sounds similar to the voice of Emerson's earlier transcendentalist ideas. However, some may protest that Nietzsche's famous "godless" world does not fit well with Emerson, thus proving that he moved beyond what he saw in the American. As William Barrett points out, however, Nietzsche, like Emerson, struggled with the church and his own spiritual existence for much of his life (183), so it would make sense that the two writers, though coming to different conclusions, might find a similar path to arrive there.

Walden (1885), the major work of Henry David Thoreau, the figure arguably closest to Emerson in ideology, enters a dialogue with ideas laid down by the older transcendentalist, ideas that eventually molded existential philosophy. Thoreau's project, from its very beginning, is an existential statement. Sartre defines the essential projects that lend meaning to the life of an individual, and *Walden*, when viewed in this vein, is the essential project Thoreau undertook in his search for meaning. Thoreau makes this goal explicit in his famous statement, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation" (65). Thoreau's conceptions of the "deliberate life" and that one could physically be alive but not really "living" are mirrored by many of Sartre's statements about authentic existence and the differences between bad faith and good faith. Thoreau's further assertions, that he wishes to "reduce it [life] to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get

the whole genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion” (65) is a question about whether or not life is meaningless. Although Thoreau’s conclusions are perhaps more optimistic about life than Sartre’s, he does, like Sartre, express skepticism that man draws his purpose on Earth from God: “For most men, [. . .] have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to ‘glorify God and enjoy him forever.’” Therefore, it is not a stretch to read *Walden* as a predecessor to existentialism.

Thoreau’s work expresses more than just Sartrean existential ideas though; Camus’s conception of the absurd universe and the toil that the average man bears under its weight also points to another of Thoreau’s most famous passages: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. [. . .] A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work” (8-9). Camus’s philosophy posits that the majority of men live in an absurd universe without understanding the meaninglessness of their day-to-day lives. In light of his philosophy, it is easy to see Thoreau’s claim that most people live “lives of quiet desperation” as a confirmation of this worldview, and the idea that these lives are “quiet” fits with Camus in that most are not aware of the absurdity of the universe. This idea reflects as well Thoreau’s comment about games containing “unconscious despair” because most people are unable to recognize the futility of their actions, even those diversions meant to protect them from facing the true nature of existence.

The most notable piece of scholarship on this topic is Rupin Desai's essay, "Thoreau's *Walden* as a Phenomenological Manifesto and Precursor of Husserl's Ideas," which, while not strictly an existentialist comparison, argues that *Walden* is a phenomenological text. The article focuses on Husserl's philosophy, which differs significantly from the version of phenomenology that Heidegger and the later existentialists embraced; yet the argument of the work falls into a vein similar to this one in that it suggests that philosophical ideas can be expressed in literature before they take on that more refined form.

Like Thoreau, Walt Whitman was also hugely influenced by the thought of Emerson, though his connection with existentialism is not as solid as Thoreau's or Emerson's. For the most part, Whitman's poetry is too positive about the possibilities of mankind and the universe to mesh well with existentialist thought, though they do overlap in some areas. In "One's-Self I Sing," Whitman writes, "One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person, / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse" (165). Throughout his career and his many revisions of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Whitman continuously praised the individual, the "single separate person," and subjective experience. The importance he places on the individual is in keeping with existentialist thought, though even here we see some of the complications that make Whitman less susceptible to an existentialist reading. In addition to the individual, Whitman continuously praises groups of men, the "En-Masse." Existentialist thought is generally very skeptical of the role that society or groups of people exert on the individual, with writers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche portraying them as damaging to authentic existence, and Sartre and de Beauvoir expressing wariness of their effect on people,

ultimately leaning toward a negative view. For Whitman, however, the individual experience was not enough, and he reveled in large crowds of people. While this element of his poetry complicates the issue, it does not completely exempt Whitman from such a comparison, as even Sartre began to lean more toward a social view of the world later in life, eventually understanding Whitman's foundational premise: that society dictates so much it is hard to conceive of someone as an individual.

In addition to his portrayal of individual experience, Whitman's conception of the body also prefigures modern existentialism. In "Song of Myself," Whitman writes, "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos, / Disorderly fleshy and sensual . . . eating drinking and breeding, / No sentimentalist . . . no stander above men and women or apart from them . . . no more modest than immodest" (50). He calls himself "fleshy and sensual" in order to emphasize that he is not "modest" about the body and its functions, and for the time period, Whitman was considered vulgar in his willingness to discuss the human body in positive and frank terms. This tendency to acknowledge the body and its functions appears in both Camus and Sartre, whose main characters often interact with the world more through physical than emotional experience. However, here there is an issue with Whitman as well. He also claims a spiritual experience of the world, though not necessarily a Christian one. Still, his conception of divinity in mankind might better connect him with Kierkegaard than the later French existentialists.

Whitman famously asked, "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . I contradict myself; / I am large . . . I contain multitudes" (87); while these multitudes and contradictions are responsible for making Whitman the all-accepting, democratic poet of America, they do complicate an existential analysis of his work. This complication can be

seen in the scholarship, as no one has yet extensively explored the link between Whitman and the philosophy, and perhaps for justifiable reasons. However, even though Whitman is not the best example to hold up in connection to French existentialism, his connections with earlier existentialists, particularly Kierkegaard, offer valuable avenues for exploration.

Perhaps more than Whitman's, Emily Dickinson's poetry reveals a strong relationship to existentialism. While Whitman was very conscious of constructing himself as a national poet and attempted to control how his work would be received by the masses, Dickinson's work is intensely personal, therefore making it perhaps a better representation of subjective experience in the world. Her verse seems more geared toward a phenomenological reading, as her personal experience of topics such as death contains a great deal of truth about human apprehensions and peculiarities. For example, in "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain," Dickinson attempts to provide the reader with an objectively accessible experience of death:

And when they all were seated, /
 A Service like a Drum /
 Kept beating — beating — till I thought /
 My mind was going numb — /
 And then I heard them lift a Box, /
 And creak across my Soul (128)

In these lines, Dickinson metaphorically depicts a person at her own funeral, though still alive and capable of "experiencing death." The French existentialists critiqued death, making statements about its effects on human experience, but arguably none explored it

as thoroughly as Heidegger in *Being and Time*. Heidegger suggests that because *Dasein* (human consciousness) can never experience its own death, one can understand death only through the experience of the deaths of others. Therefore, another's death is all the more important because it provides knowledge that is inaccessible otherwise. However, Dickinson's poetry displays an affinity with Heidegger's philosophy in that she provides another avenue of experiencing death: through poetry. While some would likely argue that Dickinson's poetry is incapable of giving an authentic experience of death, her work invokes the similar emotional experience of living through another's death, and a more in-depth reading of Heidegger and Dickinson could produce some very salient analysis.

Unlike some of the other writers of the time period, Dickinson's relationship to existentialism has not gone unnoticed or underrepresented by scholars. William Mulder's "Alone and Hard Beset: Existential Glimpses of American Women Poets" discusses Dickinson at length, along with a number of later women poets. Fred White's chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson* (2002), entitled "Emily Dickinson's Existential Dramas," provides a strong reading of her poetry, and although he takes issue with some major conceptions of Dickinson—even the "personal" purpose of her poems—his discussion of personas and her critique of transcendence is a valuable contribution to the scholarship. Toni Ann Culjak also contributes to the conversation with "Dickinson and Kierkegaard: Arrival at Despair," and although I suggest that Dickinson's work might best be read alongside Heidegger's, Culjak makes a strong case that Kierkegaard's subjective experience of the spiritual existence is the more appropriate lens for analysis.

Of the prose writers of the American Renaissance, Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of the most difficult to place in conjunction with existentialism. That's not to say, however,

that he does not fit. His work spans enough varying topics that he can fit in different spaces. Therefore it is pertinent to look at his major goals. Hawthorne consistently exposes the inner, and mostly dark, lives of individuals. His work challenges common ideas about the righteousness of mankind through its connection with God. For example, in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hawthorne reveals how, despite Dimmesdale's proximity to God and social-pressure toward righteousness through his knowledge of Christianity, he is perfectly capable of succumbing to sin and causing suffering for another, in this case Hester Prynne. Likewise, in "Young Goodman Brown," the titular character discovers, whether through actual experience or hallucination, that his town is composed of, from the lowliest to the very top of the clergy, sinners at the behest of the devil. Through these representations of those people generally expected to be righteous, Hawthorne challenges the fundamental assumptions of society and implies a world absent of God's grace or influence on human lives. In this way, Hawthorne's work can be seen as speaking directly to assertions by Nietzsche and the French that this world lacks an objective "good" that can push us to act in a certain way, thus granting individuals absolute freedom, which often leads to less than admirable behavior. However, although Hawthorne was certainly critical of Puritan value systems, his work is not dismissive of religion or spirituality, and often characters such as Prynne herself possess values that suggest such grace and influence can and do exist in the world. This contradiction, as is true for Whitman, complicates a reading of Hawthorne's relationship to existentialism, though a case can and has been made on the subject.

Like Dickinson, Hawthorne's work has been examined through an existential lens. Jamie Goldenberg and Tomi-Ann Roberts undertake such a reading in "The

Birthmark: An Existential Account of the Objectification of Women,” though this work relies more heavily on feminist theory and psychology than it does existentialist philosophy. One of the more notable examples is G. A. Santangelo’s “The Absurdity of ‘The Minister’s Black Veil,’” which suggests that Pastor Hooper’s symbolic gesture of wearing the veil is really a statement about his understanding and acknowledgement of the absurdity of the world. Although the author regularly turns to Kierkegaard for analysis of the literature, the premise seems to rely more heavily on Camus’s “The Myth of Sisyphus.” Yet despite this small qualm with approach, the essay remains a fascinating and important contribution to the scholarship.

The American Renaissance author most in tune with existential philosophy is, of course, Herman Melville, who, well ahead of his time, cultivated an existentialist vision in his work. His extensive work of poetry, *Clarel* (1876), has been studied by multiple scholars as an account of existential experience (Brodwin; Chamberlain). His lesser-known works, such as *The Confidence Man* (1857), manage to strip humanity of any romanticized notions and present it raw—selfish, petty, deceitful, and quick to anger. His insight into the human condition allows Melville to create texts partaking in nuanced conversation with a system of ideas that later became existentialism.

Melville’s most famous work, *Moby-Dick* (1851), is an apt text to explicate this conversation and reveal the complexity of his argument. Although strong arguments could be made that Ishmael’s account of the *Pequod*’s journey, which often includes information Ishmael could not have had access to—suggesting that he provides the details himself—and his common and sometimes laborious asides are indicative of a phenomenological experience presented through prose, arguably the character most

appropriate for an existential study is Ahab. In the famous “lower layer” speech, Ahab describes an existential universe:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond. But ‘tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. (140)

Ahab argues that beyond this world of physical objects is a “thing,” initially described as reasoning, suggesting a deity, though later he recants and allows that maybe there is “naught beyond,” which reveals a mind moving toward the godless universe conceived of by Nietzsche and the French writers. Ahab continues, stating that this naught contains “inscrutable malice,” and considering he is responding to the loss of his leg, the product of a careless universe, his conception of the world meshes well with Sartre’s claim that we are abandoned in a world that does not care for us. However, Ahab has chosen to rebel against the meaninglessness of the universe, turning the white whale into a symbol that he can strike against. He then proceeds to dedicate himself in the form of an essential project to his chosen form of rebellion, the destruction of the uncaring universe’s representation on Earth. In this way, Ahab can be read as an existential hero in the vein of

Camus's Sisyphus; he has acknowledged the absurdity of the universe, but instead of returning to the day-to-day toil (simply hunting whales) and ignoring it, Ahab rebels. His rebellion ultimately leads to his and the ship's downfall, and although one could read his death as a clear statement against challenging a meaningless universe, Camus's philosophy would assert that by rebelling Ahab explicitly makes an argument that his life has objective value—that he will not tolerate the treatment he has been dealt. And Ahab, unlike many other rebellious figures in literature, is willing to die to make his statement heard.

But even more than *Moby-Dick*, the work that most embodies an existential worldview is “Bartleby the Scrivener,” a strange tale that in many ways was ahead of its time. Though at first Bartleby is a good worker and seems to be a normal, perhaps odd, person, his demeanor changes. When Bartleby begins staring out the window at the brick wall on the other side, it becomes clear that he perceives something about the universe that the other characters do not, and from our perspective, that element he sees is the absurdity of the universe. As he slowly begins failing at his day-to-day duties, it becomes clear that he no longer sees value in performing the toil, as he is one of Camus's Sisyphean characters who recognize the absurdity of everyday life in the world. The defining line of the story, “I would prefer not to,” becomes a mantra for Bartleby, who slowly rebels from performing his basic duties while attempting to just survive—sleeping in the office and eating when he can. Camus said that his character Meursault is condemned to die because “he does not play the game” (*Lyrical and Critical Essays* 335), and if this is true for Meursault, it seems true for Bartleby as well. He fully understands the social conduct asked of him, but without some sort of objective meaning to life, he

begins to drift. But in the same way that Meursault is an absurd hero, rebelling against what is expected in an attempt to make his own meaning out of life, so is Bartleby.

Although the events that led Meursault to be an existential hero are not completely clear, we are given at least a possibility about how Bartleby ended up in the state he is in at the beginning of the story. After Bartleby's death, the narrator says that he

—had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration. When I think over this rumor, I cannot adequately express the emotions which seize me. Dead Letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters and assorting them for the flames. [. . .] Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring:—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity:—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. (34)

This passage could have easily come out of one of the later French texts, and it describes with startling familiarity the world as the existentialists understood it. Working in the Dead Letter Office, Bartleby came face to face with the meaninglessness of the world. All of the concerns of life that individuals hold so dear and believe give value to their existences, such as a loving marriage or providing charity to another, Bartleby is forced

to face the truth that all of these things are immaterial, and sooner or later they will pass into the “furnace” of time to be burned away from this Earth, leaving no trace, no memories to justify the meaning that those individuals once staked so much on. From this experience, *Bartleby* withdraws from “the game” that the rest of society feels the need to play. And the accuracy with which Melville crafts a plot that emphasizes the meaninglessness of existence and the effect that it often exerts on individuals when they recognize it makes it difficult not to see him as a strong precursor to the existentialist movement.

The scholarship on Melville as an influence on existentialism is fairly well-developed too. It is understood that Camus valued Melville’s work considerably and wrote multiple pieces and letters about the American author, often in praise, stating that Melville’s “genius” reveal “spiritual experience of unequaled intensity” (“Melville” 288), but also as critical analysis of Melville’s technique and themes. In addition to the direct connection with Camus, though, other scholars have compared his works with the philosophy. In addition to the criticism surrounding *Clarel* mentioned earlier, Lalita Subbu, Gudrun Grabher, Roger Shattuck, Ma Felisa López Liqueste, and Harry Tucker Jr. all conduct existential studies of Melville’s various stories. In relation to “Bartleby the Scrivener,” many articles, such as AA Ikoku’s “Refusal in ‘Bartleby the Scrivener’: Narrative Ethics and Conscientious Objection” and Catherine Chauche’s “Bartleby, the Caller of Conscience. Melancholy in Melville’s ‘Bartleby,’ a Phenomenological Approach,” recognize the existential aspects of the text and comment on them, to varying degrees of thoroughness. The scholarship connecting Melville to existentialism is the most developed of any author of the American Renaissance.

Naturalism

Perhaps more so than any of the other movements before the modern period, naturalism seems most in-line with existential values. However, its relevance depends on how naturalism is defined. In *Realism and Naturalism: The Problem of Definition* (2006), Donald Pizer suggests that the defining characteristic of naturalism is that characters do not progress due to the worlds they inhabit. The same kind of critique has also been waged against French existentialist fiction, namely Sartre's *Nausea*, yet naturalism does pose complications for existential interpretation, the biggest being its treatment of freedom. As the summary above suggests, many works of naturalism rely on a view of social forces taking on a deterministic nature, as most characters, no matter how they try, cannot overcome the difficulties placed before them. This characteristic of naturalism contradicts existentialism in that the idea of absolute freedom would provide more agency to individuals than afforded in the naturalist novels. However, naturalist fiction is as varied as individual writers' approaches, and despite this complication, many writers of the movement shared values with the existentialists.

Frank Norris arguably worked harder than any other single figure to bring naturalism to America and make a place for it. In *McTeague* (1899), Norris strips humanity of romanticized notions, instead showing human beings in their raw, animalistic forms. While the titular character is from the very beginning of the novel what June Howard refers to as "the brute," kissing the unconscious Trina as she sits in his operating chair, the other characters in the novel devolve as the story progresses, going from seemingly normal people to half-humans reveling in physical contact. Trina, for example, lays her closely-guarded fortune out on the bed and rolls around on it naked,

taking great pleasure in the tactile sensation. In a sense Norris's characters become closer to Roquentin (*Nausea*) and Meursault (*The Stranger*) from later existential works, though they lack the redeeming qualities of their French counterparts.

The final scene of the novel, which finds the two warring characters, McTeague and Marcus, in the middle of Death Valley, still fighting over Trina's \$5,000 after having lost everything else in their lives, reveals the pettiness that humans can sink to. And when Marcus cuffs himself to McTeague in his final act, ensuring McTeague's death as well, we are confronted with the absurdity of the world in a keen, precise manner. Most of the supporting characters are dead. Marcus is dead. Trina is dead. McTeague will die soon. And they collectively accomplish nothing during their time here. They fight over money that will now likely never be spent and let the superficial value society places on paper and coin destroy them. Yet while this ending is a clear expression of the meaninglessness of the universe, Norris's work has gone almost completely ignored by the scholarship surrounding existentialism and literature.

Mark Twain's novels seem at first to make a poor fit both as a precursor to existentialism and as a naturalist, though much of this impression is dependent upon the works the reader knows him by. Judging Twain by his most famous works, such as *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Huck Finn* (1885), he indeed has no place here. Even though one might argue that some of Huck's side adventures off the river, such as his experiences with the Shepherdsons and Grangerfords and Colonel Sherburn, work to the same effect as Norris's novel—to expose the true nature of man not in the image of God but as a brute animal, killing and harming for selfish reasons—the book as a whole does not develop an existentialist point-of-view. This reasoning alone, however, does not make

Twain either an existentialist or a naturalist. With *Letters from the Earth* (1906) and *What Is Man?* (1906), Twain becomes a better representation of both movements.

In *Letters from the Earth*, Twain makes one of the most venomous critiques of Christianity in American literature. Making logical arguments about the impossibilities of aspects of Biblical stories while using the same stories to turn around and prove that if God did exist, he would be quite cruel, the work echoes in its own way Nietzsche's dismissal of God and an objectively meaningful world. Specifically, in "The Lowest Animal," Twain attempts to shift the perception of humans as rational and highly developed creatures, instead placing them at the bottom of the animal pyramid as the most morally void creatures on the planet. These essays, while not the sophisticated narratives that are expected in existentialist fiction and its American precursors, do a great deal to advance the perception of the meaningless universe that the existentialists would take up in earnest years later.

In a similar vein, Twain's *What Is Man?* continues even more vehemently to deny that man is anything more than a physical creature, even going so far to argue that "man is a machine, both his mind and his body" (364). Twain insists that man has no "free will" because of this, which stands in contrast to the idea of absolute freedom accepted by the existentialists. Ultimately, this text, like all of Twain's works, fails to accommodate a full existential reading. It wavers back and forth between ideas the existentialists would likely agree with to those they definitely would not, and Twain's philosophy responds as much to Darwinism as to any other major movement of the time or future.

It is possible to argue that even though Twain's fiction does not mesh well with existentialism, much of his writing during his later years does reveal rather obvious ties

to the movement, and he has not been completely ignored by the scholarship. In “Pudd’nhead Wilson and the Roots of Existential Heroism,” Andrew Hoffman argues that the kernel of the later existential idea is evident in Twain’s work, though he rarely draws upon an existentialist philosophy to back up his claims.

Theodore Dreiser is much more accepted as a naturalist and indeed is considered by some to be the defining figure of the movement. Although it was published later in his career during the early to middle modern period, *An American Tragedy* (1925) is still very much entrenched in the social conversation that Dreiser began much earlier in his career with *Sister Carrie* (1900). An extensive account of the life of Clyde Griffiths, much could be made of the connection between existentialism and his treatment of (nearly) an entire human life and the world that shaped him, but the aspect of the text that is particularly important for this study is Griffiths’s trial. In many very important ways, it resembles Meursault’s in Camus’s novel years later. Both diverge into character assassination, and both characters are arguably sentenced for superficial reasons as opposed to the actual facts of the trial. Also, the crimes that both characters commit are left vague enough that a solid conclusion about their guilt, even by the reader who possesses much more information than the jury or attorneys do, is a difficult task. Clyde is, by the narrator’s assertion, startled by Roberta’s approach and accidentally knocks her out and topples the boat, but then he proceeds to let her drown when he likely could have saved her, though he does some mental gymnastics during the event to convince himself he could not have behaved differently. In the same way, we are told by Meursault that he shot the Arab because of the flash of his blade, though whether or not Meursault was in real danger is not clear. But aside from the surface similarities of the two stories, there is

an underlying common purpose behind the way the trials are set up. In Camus's work, we see the elements that he would later define in his philosophy as absurd punishment; his idea was that in life we can be punished not because we are truly deserving, but instead because the absurd nature of the universe will work out in such a way that punishment becomes likely. This type of punishment is often rendered to people who are not necessarily deserving (Camus argued that Jesus was one such person), which is the kind of situation that takes place in *An American Tragedy*. In the moments leading up to the accident that topples the boat causing Roberta's death, Clyde resolves not to kill her out of lack of capability. But then the accident happens, and his original plan to kill her ensures that he will be deemed guilty for the crime. These similarities make it easy to see the possible influence of Dreiser's novel on the way Camus chose to depict his philosophical ideas in fiction.

Like many of the other naturalists, Dreiser has not gone completely unnoticed by those using existentialism as a lens, though he has not been studied as much one might expect. Amy St. Jean's article "'Blind Strivings of the Human Heart': Existential Feminism in *Sister Carrie*" is a notable example of scholarship, and although it leans more toward feminism than existentialism (which is understandable, given its goal), it does a better job of incorporating existential thought into the reading than some of the other scholarship listed in this chapter. Additionally, Richard Lehan, John Clellon Holmes, and Strother B. Purdy all compare *An American Tragedy* to *The Stranger* in varying degrees of depth. These articles serve as a useful base for understanding how existential concepts vary and developed over Dreiser's career, suggesting he is a valuable figure to turn to for future studies.

Charles Chesnutt, an African American writer now recognized as a figure of merit, is another figure of the movement whose work invokes strong existential ties. Though often known for his short stories, his novel *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) stands as a strong example of existentialist thinking applied through fiction. Chesnutt's exploration of these themes seems to prefigure Camus's idea of absurd punishment, which Chesnutt puts to new purpose: to express the injustices perpetrated against blacks. Of his main characters, Rena and Warwick, both of whom are black but appear white, Chesnutt writes, "The taint of black blood was the unpardonable sin, from the unmerited penalty of which there was no escape except by concealment" (86). It is important that Chesnutt refers to society penalizing them without just cause, acting as an explicit acknowledgement of absurd punishment, and he adds that there is "no escape," revealing the absurdity of the universe in that, if it were logical and just, one would not be forced to live under these circumstances.

Absurd punishment shows up in many of the naturalist works and is definitely present in Chesnutt's fiction; he also explores an idea that is less common: that of self-creation. Although the story follows Rena and her disastrous relationships with men, her brother Warwick offers very interesting existential commentary. He is a man who has decided what he will be in life. He has changed his name and crafted a life for himself, but unlike other characters in literature discussed in this work, Warwick does not change his name to avoid who he really is—he changes his name to reflect his actual self. As he tells the judge when still a child, he is white, and he will be a lawyer (113). He later lives as a white man, and as far as the book tells us, he is a capable lawyer. The life he is "escaping" is the one that society is trying to impose on him, the life that the law dictates.

“Sinking his past into oblivion” actually frees him to live a more authentic existence, one which the judge characterizes when he asks, “Why, indeed, should he not be a lawyer, or anything else that a man might be, if it be in him?” (112). Unlike most works of naturalism, Chesnutt’s novel seems to reaffirm the idea of absolute freedom in life, though he definitely acknowledges the complications in this idea and refines them to a sharp focus. This difference in approach could be attributed to his race and desire to speak against a social system that maintained for decades that blacks were inherently inferior to whites and “fated” to remain submissive to them. Through Chesnutt, we can see the ways in which non-white male authors might utilize raw existentialist themes in order to better express their struggle to the rest of the world, which makes the fact that scholars have failed to make any prior connections to his work and existentialism rather surprising.

But even more so than Chesnutt or any of the other naturalists, the writer of the movement most typifying existentialist thought is Stephan Crane, whose fiction and poetry clearly articulate many of the ideas only hinted at by other American writers. Out of Crane’s fiction, the work that has received the most attention is “The Open Boat.” In “The Essentials of Life: ‘The Open Boat’ as Existentialist Fiction,” Peter Buitenhuis argues that the story is more existentialist than naturalistic, and his intention is “to show how Crane brings his protagonist to the realization of the absurdity of the experience and thence to his realization of the human condition” (245). He proceeds through the story providing astute analysis, before pointing out the absurdity of the ending, namely that the oiler, “whose quiet competence has been insisted upon throughout the tale, dies,” which he blames on “unlucky chance” (250). Buitenhuis is not the only scholar looking at Crane

through an existential lens. In “Stephen Crane’s *Homo Absurdus*,” William Bysshe Stein explores most of Crane’s major work, though he focuses on “The Monster,” arguing, like Buitenhuis, that Crane is unequivocally writing absurdist fiction before the terminology for it existed. On the matter of “The Open Boat,” Stein states, “man cannot construct a rational picture of the world out of his own experience. He knows only that he is the victim of forces beyond his control, that he suffers without apparent justification, that he confronts the reality of nothingness” (170). For the most part, both Buitenhuis’s and Stein’s articles are very good existential analyses of the story, yet there is one important illustration of existential concepts in the story that both authors seem to overlook.

During the scene in which the narrator comments on the gulls that have begun hanging around the boat, we get the following:

One came, and evidently decided to alight on the top of the captain’s head. [. . .] His black eyes were wistfully fixed upon the captain’s head. ‘Ugly brute,’ said the oiler to the bird. ‘You look as if you were made with a jack-knife.’ The cook and the correspondent swore darkly at the creature. The captain naturally wished to knock it away with the end of the heavy painter, but he did not dare to do it, because anything resembling an emphatic gesture would have capsized this freighted boat, and so with his open hand, the captain gently and carefully waved the gull away. After it had been discouraged from the pursuit, the captain breathed easier on account of his hair, and others breathed easier because the bird struck their minds at this time as being somehow grewsome and ominous. (888)

Though this scene is often read as showing the poise of the captain, the deeper meaning here is important for an existential reading. The gull, which in this story is associated with the sea, and, by extension, the universe, is ignorant of the plight of the men in the boat. It lights upon the captain's head, placing all of the men in mortal danger, as "anything resembling an emphatic gesture would have capsized this freighted boat." The wording here emphasizes the volatile nature of the absurd universe, in that it can, at any moment and despite its indifference, bring about the destruction of human life. The oiler's accusation that the bird looks crafted by a "jack knife" portrays the universe not as a beautifully wrought masterpiece straight from the hand of God, but instead an "ugly brute" produced in a more haphazard manner. The captain's gentle ushering away of the bird suggests that man can only avoid the indifferent danger of the universe through careful dealings and a bit of luck, which are the only factors that prevent the boat from turning. Finally, the fact that the other men see the bird as "grewsome and ominous" reveals Crane's perception of the universe and its true relationship to human beings.

While Crane's fiction is fertile ground for existential analysis, his often ignored poetry offers an even better place to see how he developed some of the concepts seen in his prose. Crane's poetry is strongly narrative and metaphorical in nature, and many of the poems contain some element of existential thought, beginning with "XXVII" from *The Black Riders and Other Lines* (1895). This poem expresses the experience of truth, and, when presented with two options for what is "truth," the narrator chooses the second, because "For truth was to me, / a breath, a wind / A shadow, a phantom" (1308). The narrator chooses the truth that most matches his or her own experience, suggesting that truth is not some objectively observable aspect of the world but instead something

filtered through individual experience. The poem also emphasizes the idea that a person is free to choose what to believe in, to choose his own personal truth from the myriad of perspectives out there, thus validating many existential themes concerning the subjective nature of existence.

The second poem of particular interest is “LXVI,” also from *The Black Riders*, in which Crane presents a Nietzschean conception of the world:

If I should cast off this tattered coat, /
 And go free into the mighty sky; /
 If I should find nothing there /
 But a vast blue, /
 Echoless, ignorant,— /
 What then? (1323)

In this poem, Crane constructs a conception of an afterlife, though in his reading the “mighty sky” is empty, just “echoless, ignorant.” It is important that Crane uses ignorant, as it both ties back to his treatment of natural elements in his fiction and acts as an argument about the meaninglessness of the world. The final question of the poem, “What then?” acts as a catalyst for existentialist thought, essentially posing the question that the French existentialists built their careers attempting to answer: if the world is meaningless, what actions can a person take that make living valuable once again?

“God lay dead in Heaven” develops the ideas from the previous poem, following it immediately in the sequence, and beginning with the line, “God lay dead in Heaven” (1323). This line, strongly reflective of Nietzsche’s famous claim that “God is dead,” (*The Gay Science* 125), shows how the ideas of an objectively “abandoned” world were

not just developing in philosophy but in literature as well. Blood dripping down from heaven makes the Earth into a “groaning thing,” which, “Turned black and sank.” This line serves the double purpose of revealing how life in a meaningless world can at times be dark, especially when one is left with no other choice but to confront the animalistic tendencies of mankind, and also suggesting that religious moralizing has tainted the Earth for the worst, an idea that further links Crane’s thinking to Nietzsche’s and places him in a more direct conversation with the French existentialists.

Much has been made of the final poem to be discussed here, and it is widely accepted as an existential work, even by those scholars skeptical of the kind of argument being made in this work. The poem consists of five lines drawn from the *War Is Kind* (1899) collection:

A man said to the universe: /
 “Sir, I exist!” /
 “However,” replied the universe, /
 “The fact has not created in me /
 “A sense of obligation.” (1335)

The poem, very clear and powerful, puts the existential argument succinctly into a few lines: we exist in this universe, yet it is not obligated to care about us in anyway. With this kind of explicit and pervasive treatment of existentialist themes present in his work, it is hard to imagine Crane as anything else other than a proto-existentialist.¹ And the idea

¹ In addition to the analysis of the poetry provided here, Edwin Paschke-Johannes provides a more thorough exploration of Crane’s body of poetry from an existentialist perspective in “Existential Moments in Stephen Crane’s Poems.” While a number of studies look at Crane’s fiction from this perspective, Paschke-Johannes’s work is the only one I have found that focuses on his poetry. Paschke-Johannes deals

that these concepts were not making their way overseas to France and influencing the writers there seems short-sighted and an attempt to deliberately and falsely demarcate territorial boundaries.

Women Writers of the American South

Among the writers of the Southern Renaissance, the women writers are arguably those doing more to exhibit existential themes than their male counterparts. However, many of these women writers have only recently been acknowledged by scholars for their merit and studied in a systematic way. From this group of writers, the one given the most prestige is Kate Chopin. *The Awakening* (1899) is the story of Edna Pontellier's search for authentic selfhood. Edna begins the novel in the throes of an inauthentic existence, in which she is beginning to understand herself: "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (6). The "oppression" she feels is the need to conform to what Mr. Pontellier later refers to as "*les convenances*"; because those conventions do not reflect who she desires to be, they seem "unfamiliar" to her (51). Edna notes that she "was not a mother-woman" nor one of the women "who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals" (8). By describing herself as such, Edna reveals that she wishes to escape her inauthentic life dominated by social norms for what a woman should be and pursue a more fulfilling existence, one in which she would not have to "efface" her individuality.

with the topic judiciously and with some genuine insight, but the area is still in need of more scholarship to help develop the conversation.

Existentially speaking, one of the most important events in Edna's story happens when she and Robert are sitting alone together. Robert "seated himself again and rolled a cigarette, which he smoked in silence. Neither did Mrs. Pontellier speak. No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire" (30). The scene is seemingly unremarkable, and although the French existentialists did not write as much about silence as earlier philosophers, the passage takes on greater meaning when viewed through Heidegger's lens. To keep silent Robert and Edna "must have something to say;" they must each be prepared to offer "an authentic and rich disclosedness of" themselves (208). Through their silent moment together, Edna and Robert express more than they could have through conversation, a fact the narrator acknowledges. With this in mind, Edna's passion for Robert later in the book makes sense since he is the first person to honestly communicate with her, the first to experience the "authentic" and "rich disclosedness" of her selfhood instead of stifling it with meaningless small talk.

Midway through the novel, while Edna is "casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (57), she seeks out solitude, which may not seem that important until viewed existentially. Edna "found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested" (58). She searches for solitude to escape objectification because, as Sartre states, "by the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other" (*Being and Nothingness* 198). Likewise, de Beauvoir goes a step further than Sartre, arguing that this objectification is even more of a concern for women because it ultimately leads them to view themselves as having no agency in the world.

Consequently, when Edna moves out of her husband's house and into her own, she attempts to escape all the people "passing judgment" on her, forming her into an object and ultimately making her consider herself an object as well. In her solitude void of distracting "Others," she is able to focus on her autonomous self. This same pattern of characters searching for solitude is common in French existential literature, and considering that the French characters do it for the same reason as Edna, it becomes clear how Chopin's work is mirrored later on.

Edna's implied suicide at the end of the novel is the product of her realization that she does not have a satisfactory way of escaping her current circumstances and remaining in this new authentic life she has created for herself. The triggering event for the suicide is Ratignolle's plea after giving birth: "Think of the children, Edna. Oh, think of the children! Remember them!" (111). Ratignolle's words help Edna understand that her actions—particularly those she plans to pursue in her new life—have an effect on others, namely her children. In the next scene, Edna tells Doctor Mandelet, "But I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others—but no matter—still, I should not want to trample upon the little lives" (112). While Edna has no qualms causing problems for her husband, she does not feel comfortable letting her children see the negative effects that will likely come of her authentic life of freedom, including an affair with Robert. This desire not to "trample" the lives of her children is especially relevant in contrast with Edna's statements about motherhood earlier in the novel: "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (47). In this exchange, Edna claims that she is willing to give her

“life,” the physical act of being alive, for her children but not her “self,” which translates to that autonomy she desires. This decree poses a serious dilemma for Edna at the end of the novel: She does not want to give up her authentic life but at the same time cannot negotiate keeping it without having a negative backlash that will affect her children. The only other option for Edna is to give up the “unessential”—her physical life—in order to maintain autonomy and not trample her children’s lives.

This dilemma is one that de Beauvoir would assert as uniquely feminine, in that men are allowed to conceive of themselves, but women, in the most basic manner, carry baggage attached to their body and society’s control of it, and that baggage just adds to a woman’s struggle for an authentic existence. So while we have seen a number of stories concerning the way men search for existential meaning, women writers, in a very real way, present an argument that includes details that do not apply to men, meaning they complete an unfinished picture. And the fact that Chopin does it so clearly and with a great deal of grace and craftsmanship only solidifies her importance to studies such as this, nor has she gone ignored by scholars, including Heidi Padlasli’s dissertation, “Freedom and Existentialist Choice in the Fiction of Kate Chopin” (1991).

Ellen Glasgow’s *The Sheltered Life* (1938) depicts a young woman’s struggle for authentic selfhood and anticipates many themes present in the French existentialists. Although Glasgow’s Jenny Blair experiences life differently than Edna, her actions are still marked by existentialist themes. From the beginning of the novel, the central concern is identified as Jenny Blair’s “discovering her hidden self,” which she articulates, “I am this and not that” (3). Even as a child, Jenny Blair starts to comprehend the difference between herself and the “Other”: that she is a separate, sole entity. As a result, from a

young age Jenny Blair feels the need to reaffirm her identity, which she does by repeating a mantra throughout the novel: “I’m alive, alive, alive, and I’m Jenny Blair Archbald”

(3). This technique works for Jenny Blair while she is still a child, but as she starts to get older and begins to understand more about the lives of the people around her, she realizes that, as a Southern woman, maintaining her selfhood requires more than a few words spoken in times of self-doubt.

Jenny Blair comes across a more powerful image of the devastating effect of social norms on women in the form of Mrs. Birdsong, who toward the latter half of the novel is dying of “the long pretense of her life” (153). In the hospital, Mrs. Birdsong tells her that “you do take trouble if you have a reputation to keep up, and no fame on earth is so exacting as a reputation for beauty. [. . .] I sometimes think there is nothing so terrible for a woman [. . .] as to be loved for her beauty” (209). Mrs. Birdsong’s admission is an early expression of Sartre’s later claim that sexual attraction is one of the ways humans go about constructing someone as “Other”: “I desire a human being, not an insect or a mollusk, and I desire him (or her) as he is and as I am in situations in the world and as he is an Other for me and as I am an Other for him” (*Being and Nothingness* 360). Mrs. Birdsong is subtly pointing out that valuing a woman for her beauty only sets her up to be further distanced from herself by the society that upholds those values. After internalizing these values of beauty and submissiveness, these women find authentic selfhood not only difficult but also seemingly impossible.

About midway in the novel, Jenny Blair says, “I don’t care about men. All I want to do is to live my own life” (133), which reveals that she is more focused on her selfhood than falling into a patriarchal structure that dictates that she find a man and

marry. Her decision to leave home and move to New York, however, changes as her obsession with Mr. Birdsong grows stronger, so she essentially abandons the autonomy she felt she needed. Even Jenny Blair's desire to leave Queensborough would not have necessarily provided what she needs, as John explains:

“The trouble is we imagine we can change ourselves by changing our scenery. [. . .] It is the same everywhere. People who have tradition are oppressed by tradition, and people who are without it are oppressed by the lack of it—or by whatever else they have put in its place. You want to go to New York and pretend to be unconventional, but nothing is more cramping than the effort to be unconventional when you weren't born so. It is as hard on the nerves as pretending, like Cousin Eva, to be an ideal.”

(217)

John tells her that simply leaving will not be enough and that even without Southern tradition bearing down on her, she still might find something else to oppress her. He also warns that even in New York, she might find herself pretending to be someone else, the same way Mrs. Birdsong pretends. John outlines the dual struggle that women face from an existentialist perspective: they must first escape social norms, but even after accomplishing that, they must not submit themselves to all the other oppressive forces in the world. He also comprehends and tells Jenny Blair that if she does escape the social norms of the South, it should not be by taking on some other false self since that type of pretending is just as destructive for an individual.

Throughout Glasgow's novel, we see the characters expressing complex and nuanced conceptions of existentialist themes, and even more than that, we see them

applying conceptions of selfhood to situations that, excepting de Beauvoir, the French existentialists did not necessarily think to apply. Therefore, we can see the way in which many American writers not only influenced later existentialist thought but actually took the ideas in directions that they would never have gone otherwise. Considering how clearly Glasgow handles these ideas, it is a bit surprising that the scholarship on this subject has overlooked her completely.

While Jenny Blair's story is cut too short to see how her selfhood ultimately develops or fails to develop, Zora Neale Hurston's Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) finds autonomy, though she also learns of the absurdity of the world. Hurston, writing as both a woman and an African American, utilizes proto-existentialist (and to an extent, proto-feminist) ideas to illustrate the numerous ways in which social conditions must be overcome before authentic existence is possible. For instance, Janie's second husband, Jody, wishes to have "a big voice" in his community (28)—a problem for existentialists. According to Kierkegaard, the desire to become an important figure in the community has a tendency to lead to an inauthentic existence:

Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world—such a person forgets himself, forgets his name divinely understood, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man. [. . .] Just by losing himself this way, such a man has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world. (33-34)

Jody Starks is a “mass man,” one who wishes to become integrated in society; his success in “business and social life” is a strong indicator of his standing. In order for Jody to secure his place among the masses, he must have a wife who fulfills the role as well. As de Beauvoir states, “man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being” (5). Hurston prefigures de Beauvoir by presenting Jody as a man who can only understand Janie as an extension of himself, as wanting the same life of social conformity that he wants, and it is not long before Jody starts making demands of Janie as well, telling “her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening. Everybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn’t mean for nobody else’s wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang” (41). Jody objectifies her, turning her into the “bell-cow,” a commodity that could be traded off just as any other property if need be, and Hurston’s treatment of the topic reveals a complex understanding of philosophical structures that de Beauvoir would explicate in detail years later.

Janie’s fight against her husband’s attempts to objectify and control her begins in small ways. The battle eventually escalates, however, and she ends up emasculating Jody in front of the town, which for a mass man is the greatest transgression she could perform. After Jody’s death, a change takes place in Janie. One of the first things she does is “let down her plentiful hair,” which, as a part of a woman’s body, had to be carefully restrained and monitored by Jody. Yet the scene reveals the different way in which Janie has started to view her own body. And it is not surprising that Jody’s death changes Janie’s outlook; aside from freeing her from his control, his death also carries

existential significance. According to William Barrett's *Irrational Man* (1958), Death brings one closer to an authentic existence because

Only by taking my death into myself [. . .] does an authentic existence become possible for me. [. . .] It frees us from servitude to the petty cares that threaten to engulf our daily life and thereby opens us to the essential *projects* by which we can make our lives personally and significantly our own. (225-226)

After Jody's death, Janie feels "free" to pursue the project that is her life, and while Janie is negotiating her new freedom and possibilities for selfhood, she meets Tea Cake, who offers her a perspective that reinforces what she is just beginning to understand.

As Janie eventually comes to understand, Tea Cake is the antithesis of Jody. Where Jody wished to give Janie a set of instructions to follow, Tea Cake is interested in freedom. Janie was unable to learn checkers under Jody, but Tea Cake tells her, "You gointuh be uh good player too, after while" (96). He also challenges the tenet that women should be weak, insisting that Janie could walk the seven miles he walks: "But Ah'm seen women walk further'n dat. You could too, if yuh had it tuh do" (97). Unlike Jody who attempted to make Janie passive, Tea Cake pushes her to be active and break free of stereotypes. Janie could have come to these realizations on her own, but through exposure to her husbands and grandmother, she has come to internalize what women "are" in the process as outlined by de Beauvoir. Tea Cake not only offers the idea that it is possible for a woman to do all these things, he also encourages Janie to do them, which, if nothing else, helps her resist some of the hegemony inflicted upon her. As their relationship develops, Janie begins to comprehend the difference between Jody and Tea

Cake: “Tea Cake ain’t no Jody Starks, and if he tried tuh be, it would be uh complete flommuck. [. . .] Dis ain’t no business proposition, and no race after property and titles” (114). Janie differentiates between Jody’s social life, in the form of “business propositions,” and what she sees in Tea Cake, whose attraction is that he does not attempt to force anything on her.

At the same time, however, not all is perfect between the two. Tea Cake becomes jealous of another man and the possibility, though unfounded, that Janie may run away with him. In response he “whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession” (147). Tea Cake experiences a frustration that is common to existentialists; Sartre points out that one cannot force the “Other” to be or act a certain way, though the desire to do so still exists (*Being and Nothingness* 385). At times, this frustration comes out in the form of violence, which is what happens to Tea Cake. He wants to force Janie not to leave him for another man, but since that is impossible, he lashes out in violence. If he could succeed in removing Janie’s freedom, she would become an object, which is why Tea Cake feels reassured in his possession. Tea Cake dies not that long after the beating, though, so the reader is left to wonder if the relationship was starting a downward spiral as it might appear. And although the novel’s climax is tragic (and absurd), Janie is ultimately a richer person for the experiences.

Hurston’s work is a strong example of how women writers of the Southern Renaissance were articulating complex philosophies in order to find new ways of exposing social injustices. Because Hurston seems so adept at this practice, she has found a place in the scholarship. In “Janie as Sisyphus: Existential Heroism in *Their Eyes Were*

Watching God,” Geta LeSeur makes the astute and well-supported argument that Janie is an absurd hero in the vein of Camus, one who faces the absurd, meaningless universe in the form of her social oppression followed by her meaningful relationship cut short by a random and strange accident. Yet despite her harrowing experience with this absurdity, she continues on, returning at the end of the novel like Sisyphus walking to the bottom of the hill to begin all over. LeSeur’s argument is a much needed addition to the scholarship, and hopefully we will see more readings of Hurston’s work in a philosophical context in the future.

The Early Modern Period

Of the writing taking place during the early modern period, poetry dominated, and though most of the writers discussed in this chapter have been fiction writers, it is appropriate to take a look at how some poets were dealing with existential themes leading up to the fiction that would exert such a powerful impact on French culture. During these early days, two poets in particular were working in a new style that would influence the works that came after: Edwin Arlington Robinson and Edgar Lee Masters. In Robinson’s various collections of poetry and Masters’s famous *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), both writers take on the expression of individual experience within a larger cultural context. This idea may seem old news to many, but it is the approach that makes them relevant. Both Robinson and Masters attempt to tell the stories of average individuals through their poetry, but they do so within a larger context. Many of Robinson’s poems reference the same characters and places, such as Tilbury Town, mentioned in other poems, and Masters’s *Anthology* is the collective stories of all of the members who have lived in the town, told in past tense after their deaths. All of the poems are subjective, most being told

through the first person perspective in order to emphasize the secret knowledge being passed along to the reader. Murder and adultery are common topics, but even more common are less “grand” confessions, such as the fact a wife hated her husband for her entire life, that lend a greater sense of realism.

And beyond the form of the poetry, which in itself is a very fitting way to express the existential experience (both Sartre and Camus use first-person storytelling as their chosen form of expression for what it offers to their respective messages), the stories contained in the collections tap into many existential themes. In Robinson’s “Mr. Flood’s Party,” for example, we are presented with a man “abandoned” by his town, and through this analogy, we see how this abandonment extends to the universe as well: “Alone, as if enduring to the end / A valiant armor of scarred hopes outworn, / He stood there in the middle of the road / Like Roland’s ghost winding a silent horn” (219). Mr. Flood finds himself “alone” with his “hopes outworn,” which is an apt description of how existentialists argue that we enter the world. At the same time, though, he acts as “Roland’s ghost winding a silent horn”; the horn and his blowing is an attempt to signal his existence to the universe, to make some kind of claim of value, yet the horn is silent, suggesting that no matter what Mr. Flood attempts, he will never be acknowledged in the same way that Crane’s narrator cannot get satisfaction from an uncaring universe.

We also see existential themes in Masters. In the connected series of poems tied to “Minerva Jones,” we are told the story of “Doctor Meyers,” who suffers a fate that fits well in Camus’s definition of absurd punishment:

And then one night, Minerva, the poetess, /
Came to me in her trouble, crying. /

I tried to help her out—she died— /
 They indicted me, the newspapers disgraced me, /
 My wife perished of a broken heart. /
 And pneumonia finished me. (34)

The Doctor, who attempts to help Minerva in the wake of “Butch” Weldy’s “brutal hunt” (32) that ultimately results in her death, is turned away by the town for his good deed for being involved in the conflict. He is innocent and not deserving of punishment, but he receives it as part of the absurdity of the world and dies as a result. And the fact that he can tell his story even though he is dead, an opportunity that he shares with all of the other individuals in the collection, also acts as an existential statement. Masters attempts to provide a perspective of death not possible in reality in order to effect change and give those who read it a greater conception of their own *Dasein*. Yet despite the numerous ways in which their poetry ties in with existentialism, these two writers have been ignored by the scholarship.

Masters and Robinson, while contributing a great deal in terms of form and subject matter to the modern period, are not nearly as well-known or studied as other modernist poets, namely T.S. Eliot. Much of Eliot’s work echoes existentialist thinking, but particularly his most widely-read poem, *The Waste Land* (1922). Eliot’s poem presents an existential world, one seemingly devoid of objective meaning, filled with absurd references that are intelligible to the average person and haunted by a lack of any solid reference points to rely on. But beyond these aspects of the poem, the work itself becomes an existential experience. The poem challenges readers while simultaneously asking them to experience the text from a phenomenological perspective. In this way, the

reader's difficulty finding objective meaning in the often intentionally obscure poem translates into an analogy for the same lack of meaning in the universe. So when Eliot writes, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (20), he points to the human tendency to grasp for meaning among the random chaos, often trying to piece together anything that will fit. And it is through these expressions that Eliot is at his finest as a precursor to existentialism.

However, many scholars would likely make the argument that Eliot's world-view is not really compatible with existentialism, and this claim would have some validity. Over the course of his life, Eliot's beliefs and politics shifted a good deal, and the Eliot who wrote *Four Quartets* (1943) would be hard pressed to fit in with the later French writers. But his earlier work fits this mold rather well, nor does a difference in belief systems make them incompatible. Peter Schilling draws a parallel between Eliot and Kierkegaard in "'Endeavouring to Grasp Its Entelechy': T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Søren Kierkegaard," and the spiritually-based approach shared by the two writers meshes well and shows that even after Eliot's conversion to the Church of England, his work was still strongly in the existential mindset. Schilling is not the only writer who analyzes Eliot from this angle. Richard Palmer connects Eliot to existentialism, but the most important work is William Irwin's "Prufrock's Question and Roquentin's Answer," which, as the title suggests, places Eliot's poem and Sartre's novel in direct conversation with each other, revealing that both protagonists share a compatible world-view, one in which the French author seems to reveal a familiarity with the modernist poet. In addition to the conversations taking place between the texts, numerous pieces on Eliot and existentialism

reveal a tendency in the scholarship: as we move closer to the French existentialists, the conversation becomes more and more explicit for readers of American literature.

Moving away from poetry, Sherwood Anderson had a powerful though often underappreciated influence on the modernist writers, Faulkner and Hemingway in particular, and Michael Merva traces his influence on Carson McCullers. His most famous work, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), depicts the individual search for subjective meaning, examples of absurd punishment, and a form that reflects a perspective similar to Robinson's and Masters's poetry (due to the fact that he was, despite his hesitancy to admit it, influenced by the poets, particularly Masters). With all of these major existentialist themes packed into a small book, it is no surprise that a number of scholars have explored existentialist aspects of his work. Celia Esplugas provides an insightful analysis of Anderson's work in "*Winesburg, Ohio: An Existential Microcosm*." Kristen Moreno has also written on the topic, though her work struggles and ultimately fails to offer a consistent reading of the book. Additionally, my unpublished Master's thesis concerns Anderson and existentialism, and the presence of multiple studies suggests that *Winesburg* is well-represented already.

A lesser-known work of Anderson's drives home just how important he is for establishing how writers like Faulkner carried a torch from the earlier generation, speaking it with a new, modern tongue.

Marching Men (1917), one of Anderson's pre-*Winesburg* novels, tells the story of Beaut McGregor, who much like *Winesburg*'s George Willard, moves from a small town to the city to see what he can make of life. McGregor reveals later in the novel that his purpose for coming to Chicago is that he is "trying to discover why men are of so little

importance” (90). And what McGregor finds in the city is problematic: “There the disorder and aimlessness of our American lives becomes a crime for which men pay heavily. Losing step with one another, men lose also a sense of their own individuality so that a thousand of them may be driven in a disorderly mass in at the door of a Chicago factory morning after morning, and year after year, with never an epigram from the lips of one of them” (11). What McGregor comes to realize through his experience is the meaninglessness of existence and, more specifically, the meaninglessness of the day-to-day drudgery that most human beings experience. He notices that none of the people working day in and day out in the factories ever complains, which reflects Camus’s description of men living in the absurd world. Only the existential hero in the mold of Sisyphus understands this absurdity, and McGregor quickly sets himself up to take on this role.

Residing in the city, where he studies law, and noticing the masses of men going about their absurd existences, McGregor begins to view his role in everything very differently: “Already he had begun to sense out the fact that for him the study of law was but an incident in some vast design which he meant to try to understand and he was altogether untouched by the desire for getting on in the world, by the greedy little snatching at trifles, that was the whole purpose of the lives of so many of the people about him” (60). In this passage, we see McGregor casting off the everyday existence, the “snatching at trifles” that consumes other men, deciding instead to pursue an essential project with his life in accordance with Sartre’s philosophy. This essential project is the organization of “marching men,” and although it seems like a strange goal to devote one’s life to, McGregor explains his reasoning behind pursuing it: “Words mean nothing

but when a man marches with a thousand other men and is not doing it for the glory of some king then it will mean something. He will know then that he is a part of something real. He will catch the rhythm of the mass and glory in the fact that he is a part of the mass and that the mass has meaning” (107). McGregor believes that if he can get men to march together it will provide a meaning to their lives that they are lacking otherwise, and it will occur through a sense of camaraderie in a greater purpose. McGregor’s plan reveals good intentions, as he “wanted to begin forcing men to do the simple thing full of meaning rather than the disorganized, ineffective things” (118), and it is clear that McGregor wants others to find meaning in their lives as he believes he has. Yet the manner by which he executes this goal presents many issues for an existentialist.

Of the numerous problems presented by McGregor’s marching plan, one of the most important is his desire to “force” them to be free, which, as Sartre argues, cannot be done (*Being and Nothingness* 385-386). The second major problem begins to become clear as the book progresses: “men will cease to be individuals. They will become a mass, a moving all-powerful mass” (183). The loss of individuality is a grave problem for existentialists, from Kierkegaard to Nietzsche all the way to the French writers. All of these writers argue that one must understand oneself as an individual first, and then as part of society, in order to live an authentic existence, so, ironically, by trying to create meaning in the lives of the marching men, he strips them of the ability to create meaningful lives for themselves. The full extent of this irony can be seen in McGregor’s earlier statements about his own desires in life:

He wanted his true note as an individual to ring out above the hubbub of voice and then he wanted to use the strength and virility within himself to

carry his word far. What he did not want was that his mouth become foul and his brain become numb with the saying of the words and the thinking of the thoughts of other men and that he in his turn become the mere toiling, food-consuming, chattering puppet to the gods. (87-88)

Like Zarathustra crying out on the mountain, McGregor accomplishes his goal of having “his true note as an individual ring out,” yet his fear that he would become a “puppet to the gods,” while not coming to pass for McGregor, is exactly what he becomes for the marching men. With a word, he commands thousands of men to march for purposes none of them understand (and to a certain degree, neither does McGregor). Only McGregor’s individuality has a place in this scheme, and although it is stated multiple times in the book that it is not his intention, he ends up becoming the “god” to the mass of puppets he controls. The narrator recounts that “I myself saw something of the birth of such a god. For he was near to being a god then—our McGregor. The thing he did rumbles in the minds of men yet. His long shadow will fall across men’s thoughts for ages” (198-199). So in an attempt to help the people, McGregor ends up pushing them toward an inauthentic existence. Although his plans for the marching men ultimately fail, that is not to say his undertaking is necessarily a bad one.

At the end of the novel, Margaret, the spurned possible love interest of McGregor, and her father, the aristocratic antagonist to McGregor’s rallying call of the workers, discusses his failure, and we see that even the man opposed to McGregor must acknowledge his accomplishment:

Perhaps McGregor knew he would fail and yet had the courage of failure.

I wonder if both Margaret and myself lack the greater courage, [. . .]?

What if after all this McGregor and his woman knew both roads? What if they, after looking deliberately along the road toward beauty and success in life, went, without regret, along the road to failure? What if McGregor and not myself knew the road to beauty? (225)

David's idea that McGregor knew "both roads," that he knew how to be successful, which is akin to becoming a mass man concerned with the "greedy trifles" McGregor abhors, but instead chose failure is a powerful statement about absurdity. McGregor knew how to live life in ignorance of absurdity, but instead chose to face it, and though it leads to failure in the same manner that Sisyphus's eternal task is never a success, McGregor chose to live life that way, making him a strong example of an existential hero. And David confirms this with the last line of the book, painting McGregor's path as the "beautiful" one, that acknowledging absurdity but proceeding anyway is the most noble act—an idea that Camus would echo years later.

Anderson's work, more than that of many other American writers, seems keenly conscious of the movement toward existentialist ideas, and although he does not attach the same name nor present a sophisticated explication of such ideas, these themes take on an important role in his fiction, often providing the lynch pin that drives the plot and pushes characters toward some dynamic change. But it would not be fair to suggest that Anderson developed these ideas without influence. He was very aware of the American tradition that came before him, and he had a particular affinity for Emerson, Whitman, and Crane. Perhaps more importantly, though, he was familiar with the philosophy of Nietzsche, and in his unpublished novel, *Talbot Whittingham*, creates a character called "The Disciple of Nietzsche," whose pastime is challenging Christians to heated

discussions about the value of life. So even though Anderson has solicited more scholarship concerning his connections to existentialism than many of the other authors represented here, his less-popular works, as seen in *Marching Men*, also offer other avenues for discussion and provide spaces for the expansion of the critical commentary on the matter.

American literature has a long history of existential themes in various stages of development. They appear rather consistently, though not always developed thoroughly. The presence of these themes suggests the depth to which American authors were considering ideas about the purpose of the universe and individual truth. The range of works discussed here is meant to reveal that while these ideas are present in many of the major canonical authors, they are also present in those lesser-known or newly rediscovered writers gaining a presence in the scholarship. At the same time, the survey is meant to show that while many authors mesh well with existential thought processes, others, though connected in some way, also present complications with classification, because this reading does not intend to suggest that all American writers after a certain date were expressing existential themes with particular grace or fervor. And it is possible that some scholars might see this position and argue that the connections are either a stretch or a coincidence, which is why the survey attempts to be comprehensive. The fact that so many authors in America had some kind of connection to these ideas suggests not coincidence but a response to a powerful train of thought progressing through the country, its history and literature, that they felt compelled to speak to or against.

With this survey in mind, the extended arguments made in the following three chapters should be more reconcilable with previous conceptions of existentialism. The

following chapters will offer much greater detail than the survey, yet a detailed reading is possible with many of the previously discussed works. The survey reveals that while scholars have found existential themes in many works of American literature across multiple time periods and have detailed them in articles and books, they have done so in a mostly disconnected way. Yes, many of these articles have loose ties to each other through occasional citations, but this work attempts to connect them all to show that scholars, though perhaps unbeknownst to them at the time, have for decades been making the argument presented here.

The works chosen for analysis in the following chapters—*The Great Gatsby*, *The Member of the Wedding*, and *Light in August*—were picked because they are capable of sustaining an extended conversation with the existentialist works, exemplify different styles of modernist texts, and complement the philosophy of a particular French existentialist in a clear and executable manner. Other choices were considered and are possible,² and some readers will likely decide other pairings are better suited and will undertake future scholarship. The French novels chosen here—*Nausea*, *All Men Are Mortal*, and *The Stranger*—were those that best corresponded with the American fiction, as they are intended to be an illustration of further development of the conversation between literature and philosophy. Likewise, readers will prefer different pairings and are free to respond to these choices; many of these alternate pairings will be put forth in the final chapter so as to address these concerns. However, the interplay between the three

² Not only are other approaches possible, but some have been done. For example, Laura Doyle argues in “The Body Against Itself in Faulkner’s Phenomenology of Race” that *Light in August* is an attempt to present a phenomenological experience of racial conflict in the South, thus offering empathy to readers. While not the reading chosen for this study, Doyle’s article does show the versatility that existentialism offers.

varieties of texts—American fiction, French philosophy, and French fiction—should provide a strong enough case to support the original claim that the raw core of ideas that became existentialism was part of a national literary discussion in America leading up to and reaching a pinnacle during the modernist period.

CHAPTER II: FITZGERALD AND SARTRE

Among the existentialists, Jean-Paul Sartre arguably contributed more to the movement than any other individual. His massive *Being and Nothingness* defines in great detail the complete tenets of his particular version of the philosophy, and along with his other shorter philosophical works, his conception of the existential universe and personal struggle within it came to identify how popular culture conceived of existentialism for decades. The godless world Sartre describes and the ennui associated with it have become a trope in modern literature, film, and television, though this saturation has led to a rampant misunderstanding of existentialism, usually likening it to simple nihilism as opposed to the substantive mode of thought that it actually is. Sartre's fiction often pursued the same goals of critical thought and analysis of his other work, making him the predominant figure in the movement today. With that in consideration, it seems fitting that his work can be read alongside that of F. Scott Fitzgerald, as *The Great Gatsby* is a monument to early twentieth-century America. By pairing these two writers, it is possible to trace the similar roots and goals of both modern American literature and existentialism, and it becomes clear that many of the defining characteristics of Sartre's philosophy mirror the life and eventual downfall of Jay Gatsby years earlier.

Nausea is not the only fictional work by Sartre to share a connection with Fitzgerald's novel, and a brief comparison of *No Exit* (1944) to *The Great Gatsby* could go a long way in establishing that the intertextual reading in this chapter is not a coincidence or isolated incidence. A piece of drama, *No Exit* presents a number of issues that make it less suitable for an extended comparison with Fitzgerald's novel, but at the

heart of the play is a statement about human relationships that is present in *Gatsby* as well.

In *No Exit*, we find the crux of why it is so difficult to live in modern society (or possibly, live at all). The three characters, who have all found themselves in hell, are obsessed with one another. Garcin, who fears condemnation for his cowardly life, needs the approval of Inez, who refuses to give it to him. Inez, a lesbian, desires the affection of Estelle, who refuses because she desires men and desperately wants Garcin's love. Through these characters, Sartre constructs a triangle of obsession while simultaneously creating a reverse triangle of disdain. As a result, the characters all become stagnant, unable even to leave when the door is opened, prompting Garcin to make the play's famous declaration, "Hell is—other people!" (45). The sense that human beings are responsible for much of the suffering that others experience in their personal lives is present in *The Great Gatsby*, and a similar relationship exists between Gatsby, Daisy, and Tom.

In Fitzgerald's novel, Gatsby is obsessed with Daisy to the point that he buys a house near hers in order to stare at the light on her dock. And although, once reunited, Daisy tells Gatsby that she is in love with him and wishes to run away, in the end she falters. Despite how Tom has treated her, she is unable to completely turn from him, crying out when pushed that "Even alone I can't say I never loved Tom [. . .]. It wouldn't be true" (133). Tom and Daisy's past keeps her loyal to him. At the same time, Tom is obsessed with Gatsby—who he is and how he came to West Egg. He does research on Gatsby and finds out everything he can about his past. Gatsby's presence in West Egg, which affronts Tom because of how he made his money, is a driving force for Tom's

bigotry. At the point when Gatsby and Daisy reveal their plans to him, Tom has become more concerned with tearing down Gatsby than keeping his wife, though he seems to believe that doing the former will accomplish the latter. In this way, a triangle of obsession similar to *No Exit* exists in *The Great Gatsby*, in which the three characters depend on one another while simultaneously making life difficult and causing pain for each other. In this way, the kind of hell depicted by Sartre in *No Exit* can just as easily be hell on earth, as Gatsby, Daisy, and Tom find out. However, in Fitzgerald's work, Gatsby dies, ultimately breaking the triangle, which allows Tom and Daisy to go back to their former lives, much to Nick's disgust. But beyond this connection, the different form and subject of *No Exit* and *The Great Gatsby* make it less suitable for comparison than *Nausea*.

In Sartre's philosophy, two main ideas are particularly relevant to an intertextual reading of *Gatsby* and *Nausea*. The first is Sartre's idea from *Being and Nothingness* that "the past is without force to constitute the present and to sketch out the future" (472). Sartre's belief is that the past cannot affect what a person will become, giving the example that if a gambler makes a vow to never gamble again, that vow in itself immediately becomes part of the past and cannot in any real way prevent the gambler from gambling in the future. Therefore, the gambler must, at every moment, reaffirm that vow to never gamble again because human beings are always living in the present moment, driven toward the future. However, although our past cannot dictate our present or future, it still haunts us, according to Sartre, and this conundrum is exactly the problem facing Gatsby throughout the novel. He cannot base his future on the past, but it haunts

him so vividly that he attempts to do so anyway, which becomes the tragic flaw of his character.

The second particularly important philosophical idea gleaned from Sartre comes from *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946), in which he argues that “Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life” (37). The creation of a project for one’s life lends meaning that is difficult to find otherwise. Sartre elaborates, stating that many people think, “Circumstances have been against me, I deserve a much better life than the one I have. [. . .] I have within me a host of untried but perfectly viable abilities, inclinations, and possibilities that endow me with worthiness not evident from any examination of my past actions.” But according to existentialism, this perception is not valid. If you have not done something, your possible potential to do that thing adds no value to your existence, or, as Sartre claims, “In life, a man commits himself and draws his own portrait, outside of which there is nothing.” In Fitzgerald’s novel, Gatsby attempts to create from his life a project instead of letting his life stagnate, and he seems to accomplish this goal. But a closer examination reveals that his bad faith existence, one in which he denies who he really is (James Gatz, a poor boy who never went to Oxford) in order to believe he is someone else, prevents this project from ever culminating.

An initial comparison between Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Sartre’s *Nausea* reveals what appear to be stark differences between the two novels. The grandiose life of Jay Gatsby and the inward and intensely analytical life of Antoine Roquentin seem incompatible with each other, though a closer inspection reveals the

same conflict with the “false” life of the two main characters and others as well. The two novels also share an important statement about love and obsession, with the implication that broken romantic relationships are more the norm than the exception. Ultimately, the two offer similar messages about the state of the world. The main difference is the outlook of the respective narrators. Nick wants to find truth in the actions of Gatsby and the hope that a person is capable of finding subjective meaning in the world, whereas Roquentin is less optimistic that humans can create any truly meaningful projects for themselves, even to the point of dismissing the actions of others. Because of his worldview, Roquentin experiences the titular nausea, which in “Nausea, Melancholy and the Internal Negation of the Past,” Cam Clayton argues is “Roquentin’s reaction to the contingent absurdity of an overabundant existence. It signals a direct experience of this existence unmediated by project or purpose” (1). Under this definition, it is possible that Gatsby also experienced nausea in the period leading up to his pursuit of Daisy, and it may be that like Roquentin, nausea is actually what drove Gatsby to take up a project in the first place. Whether this speculation is true, though, is difficult to determine, as we are never given direct access to Gatsby’s mind.

From the first lines of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald sets up an existential text through the introduction of his narrative style. Nicholas Carraway tells the story of Gatsby through an intimate first person narrative, though this alone does not make the text ripe for existential analysis. What is important about Nick’s narrative is that it is not disconnected from the world, although many readers forget some of the most important developments in the opening pages, specifically that Nick is writing a book: “Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction—

Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him” (2). Fitzgerald does remind readers periodically that they are supposed to be reading a work by the narrator, and this initial claim establishes Gatsby not as a character in some kind of alternate reality, but instead, as the focus of a nonfictional account. Fitzgerald’s attempt to establish Gatsby as a real person points to an existential approach, and his work adheres to what John Duncan describes as Sartre’s primary purpose in “Sartre and Realism-All-the-Way-Down”: “Sartre, in particular, was seeking a literature that would portray individual lives, not with meticulously scientific, positivistic, or naturalistic descriptions that could pass for objective fact, but with passages that would animate the real, often uncertain, sometimes disconcerting, and very personal experiences of particular individuals” (95). Fiction writing provides the opportunity to examine another’s life from the inside, a task that is impossible in reality. It becomes clear that early in the novel, Fitzgerald wants his audience to read the novel not as merely a fiction but as the expression of an existence, not as the account of a life.

Fitzgerald also establishes the novel early on as appropriate for a phenomenological reading, and I am not the first critic to approach the novel with this theoretical lens. In “. . . In Ecstatic Cahoots’: Nick’s Authoring of Gatsby,” Winifred Bevilacqua uses Bakhtin and a discussion of phenomenology to argue that “In order to create this whole, the author must assume a standpoint that enables him to see what is inaccessible to the perception and consciousness of the hero from his standpoint within his own life. Both perspectives must be present, for together they form the architectonic structure of the text” (47). Although Bevilacqua approaches the text through Bakhtin, the

assertion that “Both perspectives [Gatsby’s and Nick’s] must be present” is an accurate assessment of the craftsmanship of the novel, and Sartre’s system of phenomenology would support this statement. When Sartre adopted phenomenology for use in *Being and Nothingness*, he did so because he considered the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology to be in line with the existential experience of the world.

Phenomenology, which values experience as the way of encountering “phenomena” that lead to a conception of truth, is a perfect approach for a method that values the individual experience. So Nick’s novel becomes a phenomenological reading of Gatsby’s life, as opposed to an account of it, and Barbara Hochman notices this same tendency, arguing that “For Nick, all narration involves a tension between open invitation and manipulated design” (n.p.). This “manipulated design” allows for Nick’s creation of Gatsby through his own experiences.

In all first person narratives, the idea of subjective experience is valued; however the difference between Fitzgerald’s novel and that of other writers is that Nick does not simply provide the details of what happens. He does not perform the role of the reliable narrator, recounting events as they come to him. Instead, Nick interprets the world around him and provides detailed accounts of how these events affect him, despite the fact that he is not the subject of the book (by his own admission). Nick’s narration is not a search for some kind of objective understanding of what happened to Gatsby; instead his account is full of conflict and nuance. In reference to phenomenological experience, H. Peter Steeves states, “we study the consciousness of the desk and not the desk per se. The desk itself is, actually, ignored. It is bracketed, and even its existence becomes a non-issue” (23). With this interpretation, it becomes clear that the details of Gatsby’s

existence are a “non-issue” for Nick, and instead his own consciousness of Gatsby, his own impression of the man, dominates his narrative.

In the previously quoted passage from the novel, Nick admits that Gatsby represented everything for which he has “unaffected scorn,” but at the same time, found something “gorgeous about him.” Nick is not telling Gatsby’s story in order to figure out whether Gatsby is “good” or “bad,” but instead to work out the details of his experience and come to a different kind of truth dictated by subjective experience. This approach is in keeping with existentialism’s ethos outlined in Everett Knight’s *Literature Considered as Philosophy: The French Example* (1962), which purports that “if we possess the truth, then it is infinitely more important to make use of it than to elucidate its functioning in the activities of the consciousness” (219). So while Fitzgerald was not setting out to write an “existential” novel, his construction of the narrative of the novel reveals a deep understanding of the manner in which individuals experience the world and the value of the “truth” generated through phenomenological study.

While Fitzgerald did not necessarily construct his novel with phenomenology in mind, as Paul Somers Jr. asserts in “Camus ‘Si’, Sartre ‘No’; Or, the Delightful M. Meursault,” Sartre was much more conscious of the philosophical construct and employed it in his fiction: “In the case of *Nausea*, Sartre did not hesitate to give explicit expression to concepts expressed later in *Being and Nothingness*. Therefore, the intelligence and perceptiveness of the spokesman, in this case, the protagonist-narrator, must be commensurate with the weighty matters which are expressed through him” (695). However, other scholars, such as John Fletcher, argue that it is not “very helpful or instinctive, in fact, to read *Nausea* as an existentialist work” (174). Excepting personal

preferences, this approach to the novel contrasts with well-documented knowledge that Sartre considered the novel explicitly existential, as Somers notes.

Roquentin's opinion about the subjective account of truth, however, places him in contrast with Nick and marks one of the most important differences between the characters and the tone of the novels as a whole. Roquentin states, "This is what I have to avoid, I must not put in strangeness where there is none. I think that is the big danger in keeping a diary: you exaggerate everything. You continually force the truth because you're always looking for something" (1). Roquentin's comments describe Nick's approach to the world, one in which the reader feels as though he may be forcing the truth and exaggerating Gatsby's traits because he is looking for "something" to give him hope. For Roquentin, however, this approach is to be avoided completely and even seems to cast doubt on the idea of finding a "truth" through personal writing of the sort practiced by the two fictional characters. This disbelief in truth characterizes all of Roquentin's subjective judgments of the world in the same way that his search for truth characterizes Nick's, and this disparity reveals the separate goals of the novelists. Fitzgerald uses an existential technique to answer the question of whether Americans can create a new sense of purpose out of the approaching modern world. On the other hand, Sartre seems to ask if there is any meaning to be made at all.

Gatsby's introduction into the story occurs alongside the initial revelation of the much written about green light on Daisy's dock, which he is grasping for as he trembles (21). I do not contest that the light is symbolic for Gatsby, as his actions toward the light—the pining over it—strongly suggest. However, I argue that the light is less a symbol for Gatsby and more a reminder of the essential project he has established for his

life. According to Sartre, we find ourselves in a life devoid of objective meaning and possessing absolute freedom to choose who we are, and a person who is going to avoid a life of “bad faith,” that is a life in which one does not live according to his or her own volition and lets existence be dictated by the facets of social life, must pursue “essential projects” that will define the self. The Gatsby Nick encounters at the beginning of the novel has decided on an essential project for his life: he will enter into the society in which Daisy lives, reveal himself, and take her away from the marriage that she is in so that they can continue the love they experienced as youths. This project will define how he will be viewed in the future, a process that Nick understands and arguably the reason why he wishes to tell Gatsby’s story. However, while on the surface Gatsby’s project seems like the kind of idea that would help him avoid a life of bad faith and feel fulfilled by his place in the world, along the way he makes a number of mistakes that lead to his downfall, and as the novel develops, it becomes clear that his plan was flawed from the very beginning.

The biggest obstacle that plagues Gatsby and perhaps the most telling for an existential reading is the society that Daisy is a part of. Life in West Egg is dictated by social constraints, in which people act not according to feeling or volition but according to an unspoken set of rules that dictate one’s success. Nick begins learning the ins-and-outs of this society during an interaction with Catherine about Daisy’s husband Tom and his mistress. Catherine tells Nick, “Neither of them can stand the person they’re married to” (33). Nick expresses disbelief, and Catherine continues with her own musing: “why go on living with them if they can’t stand them?” Her question is astute, and according to Sartre’s philosophy, continuing an unhappy existence for social reasons would constitute

a life of bad faith, meaning that Daisy herself does not present an authentic existence as the existentialists understand it. But the problems with society in West Egg go beyond just dictating how one should live. In response to the question of why Tom does not leave Daisy and marry his mistress as he wishes, Catherine responds that “It’s really his wife that’s keeping them apart. She’s a Catholic, and they don’t believe in divorce.” Nick immediately recognizes this statement is a lie, that Daisy is not Catholic, and it shocks him because it becomes clear during his first forays into this society that it produces bold lies in order to justify and support itself. In this sense, West Egg becomes in itself a representation of bad faith; in the same way that an individual will lie to himself in order to explain the life he is living as opposed to changing that life to the one he wishes to live, society in West Egg is a construct that manages to accomplish this same inauthentic mode of life, a kind of microcosm of bad faith. This environment produces people like Myrtle, whose deciding factor in choosing a spouse is whether “he was way below me” (34). And it is this microcosm of bad faith that Gatsby enters in an attempt to succeed at his essential project, never realizing that the circumstances make his success nearly impossible.

Nick’s narrative focuses on the microcosm of West Egg in order to make a greater statement about America as a whole, but Roquentin’s criticism of people living in bad faith is not as limited. During his time at a café, he argues, “I am alone in the midst of these happy, reasonable voices. All of these creatures spend their time explaining, realizing happily that they agree with each other” (8). Roquentin’s criticism of his fellow patrons could easily be used to describe the citizens of West Egg, who search for a sense of uniformity in ideology. But Roquentin does not simply talk about the other people in

the café. He immediately turns from this comment into a story from his past in order to broaden the scope of his statement, which never actually addresses the other patrons specifically, to a larger whole. This tendency to search out others in order to wallow in a sense of collusion is a trait of human beings, and doing so stifles a person's ability to conceptualize his or her own volition, hence Roquentin's disgust with the practice. However, Roquentin is not completely exempt from this practice, searching out conformity at times despite his dislike of it. Although Roquentin is a hypocrite, his hypocrisy serves an important purpose in the story according to Zahi Zalloua: "I would like to suggest that these relapses into conformity (why what Roquentin *says* and what he *does* are not always the same) constitute more than a falsification of reality: They testify to the subtle workings of power, to power's pervasiveness in everyday life: how it shapes Roquentin's beliefs, attitudes, desires, and actions" (254). Roquentin's hypocrisy acts not as a weakness but a statement about universal forces and how human beings attempt to cope with a system that will not always allow them to be completely "authentic."

Fitzgerald's decision to delay Gatsby's introduction so late in the book and instead hint at him with glimpses and rumors is a conscious one that is a further attempt to establish the kind of world that Nick and Gatsby inhabit—that is, one that knows people second-hand. Everyone seems to know "facts" about Gatsby, such as "he was an Oxford man" (49), but he remains mysterious to the point that when Nick actually meets him, he does not recognize him. However, the man Nick meets is very different from the other citizens of West Egg, as becomes clear in Nick's reaction:

He smiled understandingly—much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you

may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. (48)

Nick depicts Gatsby as a person who is interested in the life of those he meets, with the desire to put them at ease and understand, which marks a stark contrast to the superficiality of West Egg. However, some scholars, such as Giles Mitchell do not agree that he is genuine or cares about others, instead arguing that he exploits others, is extremely self-centered, and that a sense of entitlement is “a major force of his character” (390). This interpretation is not supported by Gatsby’s actions at the end of the novel that lead to his death and Nick’s own interpretation of him. At the same time, it is important to remember that this is Nick’s phenomenological impression of Gatsby and while phenomenology holds that this gleaning Nick gains from Gatsby’s character is in itself a truth, it would not be prudent to ignore the subjectivity of the situation. So the initial impression the audience is given of Gatsby is reflective of an authentic existence; however, at the same time we are provided hints that this impression might not be entirely true, or at least the circumstances are more complicated. Nick finishes his initial account of Gatsby by stating, “Some time before he introduced himself I’d got a strong impression that he was picking his words with care.” Nick understands that on top of the genuine smile that Gatsby displays is a layer of falsity, which is the first hint at bad faith

sneaking into Gatsby's life. But whether this is the product of West Egg or Gatsby's own choices is not made clear until later in the novel.

Nick's initial impression of Gatsby seems to shift perspective, and this phenomenon can be better understood through Roquentin's explanation of how people come to know themselves. He states, "Perhaps it is impossible to understand one's own face. Or perhaps it is because I am a single man? People who live in society have learned how to see themselves in mirrors as they appear to their friends. I have no friends" (18). Nick's impression that Gatsby is deliberately choosing his words is a reflection of this idea because Gatsby has only recently started living in society, only recently started making friends, and has yet to learn to see himself "in mirrors" as those around him see him. Therefore, he must actively construct a new self instead of accepting it implicitly as who he really is, which is what someone originally from West Egg might do. However, while Gatsby seems to work toward this goal of a newly-created self, Roquentin's characterization of the practice is not a positive one, and although he uses himself as an example of the "single" man, his writing implies that a person needs to view him or herself (and should desire to) in a mirror as he or she actually is, not as a false image imposed upon him or herself by an external force. Nick does not pass judgment at this point on Gatsby and the image he is creating of himself, though Roquentin's analysis hints at the negative outcome that eventually befalls Gatsby, revealing how Nick's desire to find "something" in Gatsby perhaps skews his interpretation of the truth.

Nick's account of Gatsby and his motivations is in agreement with an existential reading. When it is revealed to Nick that "Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay" (78), he reevaluates his initial impression of Gatsby staring at the

green light. He decides “it had not been merely the stars to which he had aspired on that June night. He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor.” This reinterpretation is very telling for an existential reading. The fact that Gatsby is “aspiring” to something more than “merely the stars” suggests that Nick understands implicitly that Gatsby has a project that he is working toward, and while he sensed it during that night in June, he did not understand the details of it until now.

Nick’s reading of the world around him is very much based in an existential perspective, and he has a tendency to frame his observations in terminology friendly to a philosophical reading. He also seems particularly sensitive, or at least he would have us believe he is particularly sensitive, to the inner workings of other people’s minds.

Ramesh Misra also finds this trait in Nick in “The Problem of Reliability of the Narrator in *The Great Gatsby*,” positing that “Nick has the knack of suggesting the depth even while focusing on the surface. As a matter of fact, seeing the surface is the artistic necessity; suggesting the depths beneath the surface is a tribute to Nick’s imaginative sensibility as well as to his psychological insight which enables him to peep into the hidden recesses of the human heart” (19). Nick’s “psychological insight” provides us with a perspective of his fellow character generally lost in a first person narrative yet viable through Nick’s phenomenology. Nick continues with his commentary on his friend when he states that Gatsby “came alive to me then” and that he escaped his “purposeless splendor.” The idea that Gatsby is now “alive” is in keeping with Sartre and other French existentialists’ common terminology for someone living an authentic life, meaning that by understanding Gatsby’s essential project, Nick can recognize him as unique from the other “dead” or bad faith citizens of West Egg. The fact that his new life

is marked by his leaving “purposeless splendor” also reflects the existential concept of the meaningless existence that those living in bad faith trudge through and through which they often find solace, or as Nick terms it, splendor. This moment in the novel is particularly important for an existential reading because Nick has finally realized why Gatsby is different than the other citizens of West Egg.

Whereas Nick finds Gatsby and narrates his attempt to live an authentic existence, Roquentin also finds another person who even more so than Gatsby is living an authentic life, but Roquentin’s response to the “Self-Taught Man” is far from the admiration Nick feels for Gatsby. Roquentin learns that the Self-Taught Man has taken on the essential project of reading all of the books in the library, but instead of being impressed by a person who has decided to pursue a project, he is immediately disgusted by his presence (30). The reader eventually finds out that this disgust stems from Roquentin’s world-view compared to that of the Self-Taught Man. After quoting a writer, stating, “One must first act, throw one’s self into some enterprise” (112), the Self-Taught Man scales back and states that his goal in life is humanity, that he is a humanist. Roquentin responds by disparaging humanists. As we see, Roquentin could never laud the Self-Taught Man in the way that Nick holds up Gatsby by the end of the novel because Roquentin refuses to romanticize the Self-Taught Man and disagrees personally with his approach to life. Even when the Self-Taught Man reveals that he was a prisoner of war, that he, unlike Gatsby, has substance behind the stories he tells, Roquentin revolts: “I can’t get over it: I can’t picture him as anything other than the Self-Taught Man” (105). Roquentin chooses to have a fixed impression of the Self-Taught Man because allowing for change would allow for the possibility of progression. In this way, both novels manage to tell stories

about the projects of other individuals; however, one narrator wants too fervently to believe in his subject, while the other refuses to believe in his subject at all.

Nick's perceptions of people's inner lives go beyond what he sees in Gatsby. After reuniting Gatsby and Daisy, Nick finds significance in Daisy's reaction. He states, "They had forgotten me, but Daisy glanced up and held out her hand; Gatsby didn't know me now at all. I looked once more at them and they looked back at me, remotely, possessed by intense life" (96). In this case, both Gatsby and Daisy are "possessed by intense life," and this is a big difference for Daisy, who has, throughout the majority of the novel, been a fairly typical example of a West Egg citizen, remaining in a marriage that leaves her miserable due to social norms, a lack of desire for change, and Tom's abuse. She, like most of her fellow citizens, has no real project for her life, floating aimlessly from party to party within high society. But life with Gatsby, now motivated by a desire to escape the joyless life she is living and perceiving a way to accomplish it, provides Daisy with the first inklings of an essential project. This change is embodied in the intense life that Nick sees between the two, who now share a common goal.

Although the character in the relationship is different, a parallel exists between the romantic relationships in the two novels as well. In both novels, the male protagonists and their love interests have been apart for an extended period of time and are just coming together for the events of the novels. But while we do not see the details of Gatsby and Daisy's relationship and must guess at what goes on, we are privy to Roquentin and Anny's time together, and it becomes clear that the two relationships fall apart for different reasons. For Daisy and Gatsby, the past is the link that binds them

together and acts as a promise that they will have a future. On the other hand, Roquentin and Anny's relationship suffers because of the past, as Roquentin recounts:

As long as we loved each other, we never allowed the meanest of our instants, the smallest grief, to be detached and forgotten, left behind. Sounds, smells, nuances of light, even the thoughts we never told each other; we carried them all away and they remained alive: even now they have the power to give us joy and pain. [. . .] That is why we parted: we did not have enough strength to bear this burden. (63)

Roquentin and Anny do not idealize their time together and instead hold on to all of its flaws. This approach is likely more honest than Gatsby and Daisy's, though as Roquentin admits, its toll is too heavy for a couple, hence their parting. Even their reunion after a long separation does not change the wall that an honest relationship has built between them, and after fumbling through awkward social interaction, Roquentin finally decides, "at heart she was indifferent to it all [. . .]. Anny is sitting opposite to me, we haven't seen each other for four years and we have nothing more to say" (153). This reunion is wholly unlike Daisy and Gatsby's "intense life" together, and the implication is that romanticizing their past allows Daisy and Gatsby to be together in a way that would not suit Roquentin and Anny. At the same time, because their relationship is an honest one, Roquentin does not experience a dramatic falling apart with Anny, and although Roquentin and Anny realize they can no longer be together, Roquentin, unlike Gatsby, comes away bitter and disappointed but still intact by the end of the novel.

After their reunion, we see Gatsby and Daisy in a couple more telling scenes that reveal a great deal about who they are and, in Daisy's case, how she has changed. During

his account of his true past, Gatsby presents (once again through Nick's interpretation) his outlook as a young man, which eventually led him to this point. At night, Gatsby would feel that "A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked [. . .] Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene [. . .] they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing" (99). Gatsby's thoughts as a young man suggest that he has long viewed the world as place of "fancies" and "gaudiness," so it is no surprise that he has been able to pursue this version of the universe in his adult life. However, these thoughts also hint at his eventual downfall. Gatsby views the world as dictated by imagination, meaning a "true" version of himself does not exist and he is free to create his reality as he sees fit. This aspect of his personality eventually leads James Gatz to create Jay Gatsby, and in living this second life, he begins making the mistakes that lead to inauthentic existence and a tragic end.

Gatsby's belief that he is free to create himself anew in order to achieve his goals is a bit misguided, especially if considered in the light of how Roquentin lives his life. As a writer, Roquentin would likely find it easy to create a new version of himself that he fancied more, and throughout the novel he is presented with possibilities. Even when prodded by the Self-Taught Man to tell about his adventures, Roquentin refuses, asserting that he has had none despite his account of his travels, which often appear to the reader as adventures. He even has a difficult time viewing himself as a writer, and when asked about his motivation to write, he states, "I don't know: just to write" (117). Unlike Gatsby's elaborate goal to become rich and steal Daisy away from Tom, Roquentin seems to have no goal for his life, and this fact poses a problem for existentialists,

particularly Sartre, who maintained that having an essential project was an important step in creating meaning in a meaningless world. But Roquentin does reveal an essential project, although it is very simple (though on close analysis, very difficult) compared to Gatsby's. Throughout the novel, the main assertion that Roquentin makes repeatedly is that he wishes to remain free, and, like Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy, he strives toward that goal. Roquentin seems unable or unwilling to connect himself with anything that might compromise that freedom, and although his life has less grandeur than Gatsby's, Roquentin seems to accomplish his goal and does so without compromising who he really is.

Around the time Gatsby tells Nick of his past, we also get a picture of how Daisy has changed through her interaction with Gatsby. During Daisy's discussion with her husband about society business, Nick reveals that "She was appalled by West Egg, [. . .] appalled by its raw vigor that chafed under the old euphemisms and by the too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants along a short-cut from nothing to nothing. She saw something awful in the very simplicity she failed to understand" (107). Daisy's view that West Egg moves inhabitants "from nothing to nothing" and the idea that there is "something awful in the very simplicity" suggests that she understands the false life that many people live there, that their lives of luxury lack substance that might provide a sense of meaning to their existence. While this opinion of Daisy's is not made explicit earlier in the story, it is hinted at by her seeming disdain for some of the social events going on around her. At the same time, the authenticity of this interpretation is, as always, a bit suspect, as we are receiving this news through Nick's phenomenological lens. Paul Levitt argues in "Point of View, Telephones, Doubling, and Vicarious

Learning in *The Great Gatsby*” that through the use of a theatre technique known as “doubling,” Fitzgerald “has Nick become Gatsby” (304). While this technique explains some scenes in which Nick is rephrasing Gatsby’s words, it still cannot completely account for all the knowledge Nick has, particularly of other characters in the book, meaning we have to accept that much of what we are told in the novel is subjective impressions instead of factual, objective accounts. However, Nick at least perceives a change in Daisy’s attitude after her time with Gatsby, and although she ultimately wavers about her plans with Gatsby and, as we will see later, both Nick and Gatsby question whether or not she has actually changed, she at least shows signs of having opened her eyes to a more existential perspective of the society she has inhabited for years, even if only for a brief moment.

Despite the perception that Nick has of Gatsby and Daisy as a newly “living” couple ready to reject the bad faith existence encouraged by life in West Egg, both characters display some fundamental flaws that prevent them from living truly authentic lives in the existential sense. The first major flaw of Gatsby is his focus on the past. Sartre’s form of existentialism promotes the idea of living in the present moment. A person is always creating who he or she is, and consequently, one’s focus should be mostly turned toward the present existence. Summarized by Nathan Oaklander, Sartre argues that nothing about one’s past can force someone to act a certain way in the present. No vow or promise binds human freedom and the ability to act however one chooses at any moment because “my future decision is beyond my freedom” (213). However, Gatsby’s essential project is not an attempt to take on this kind of lifestyle, and by his own admission, he is trying to recapture something he lost. After Nick informs

Gatsby that you “can’t repeat the past,” Gatsby responds, “Can’t repeat the past? [. . .] Why of course you can!” before deciding “I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before” (110). Nick reflects on Gatsby’s words and actions up until this point and comes to the conclusion that “he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life has been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was . . .” (110). Gatsby believes that his sense of self comes from his previous experience with Daisy and he wants to recover that particular sense of self. In “‘Boats against the Current’: Mortality and the Myth of Renewal in *The Great Gatsby*,” Jeffrey Steinbrink argues that Gatsby “adopts the myth of regeneration as the single sustaining principle of his existence” (161). Steinbrink’s interpretation poses the existential problem of the novel because this accepted myth is the main contributing factor to Gatsby’s lack of authentic existence. Instead of making a new existence for himself based in the moment, he tries to be some other version of himself, which is an existential error. A person can only be him or herself in that moment, and a refusal to accept this fact results in a lie, an act of bad faith. Gatsby could create a new conception of himself, one built on the confidence of his current station in life, even one that still includes Daisy, but instead he must reach toward the past. And this act of living as another version of himself contributes to his death at the end of the novel.

This dependence on the past and desire to recapture it is also an issue that Roquentin comments on. In what could be a line directed at Gatsby himself, Roquentin states, “The past is a landlord’s luxury. Where shall I keep mine? You don’t put your past in your pocket; you have to have a house. I have only my body: a man entirely alone,

with his lonely body, cannot indulge in memories; they pass through him. I shouldn't complain: all I wanted was to be free" (65). According to Roquentin, Gatsby's desire to purchase his large, extravagant house is an attempt to create a place to store the rather large dreams created from his past. In this sense, Gatsby's house comes to represent the problem with his essential project: his house is empty most of the time, just as a reliance on the past requires the pursuit of an empty goal. During his parties, when the house is packed, it is filled with the false people of West Egg. At no point does anything of substance exist in Gatsby's home because the past itself is an ephemeral thing, a poor foundation for a "great" life. While disparaging Gatsby's approach to life, Roquentin provides his solution: a life with no home and no past. He argues that this is the way to be truly free; with nothing to rely on, one must always forge ahead. This perspective possesses a bit of truth, as at the end of the novel Gatsby's future has ended while Roquentin is still moving forward.

The other major flaw in Gatsby's character that contributes to his life of bad faith is the actual life he lives, which is a false one. Nick eventually learns of the sham that is Gatsby's life. He has not earned his money the way he says, has not gone to school at Oxford, and even sports a false name. Gatsby's false life is brought to clarity best by the "owl-eyed man," who after asking Nick what he thought of the books, confides that they are real, "Absolutely real—have pages and everything. I thought they'd be nice durable cardboard. Matter of fact, they're absolutely real. [. . .] It's a bona-fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella's a regular Belasco. It's a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop, too—didn't cut the pages" (45-46). Nick does not seem to comprehend the implication of the owl-eyed man's observations, instead using

the man's drunkenness as an excuse to distance himself. However, the owl-eyed man may be one of the most insightful characters in the book, particularly in existential terms. He realizes that Gatsby has created a false life, and that he has done so with an impressive amount of detail. He is surprised that the books are real but is satisfied when he realizes that the pages have not been cut. The obvious implication is that Gatsby has purchased a number of books to appear well-read but has not actually read any of them, hence the owl-eyed man's comparison between Gatsby and Belasco, who wanted his drama to be as realistic as possible. Gatsby's appearance of being well-read contrasts with Sartre's Self-Taught Man, who unlike Gatsby, has actually read about half the books in the public library, and although the Self-Taught Man has other flaws that cause his fall, his character is presented as more authentic than Gatsby's. And ultimately, the owl-eyed man's unraveling of Gatsby's "realism" presents a stark indictment of Gatsby's character, a direct accusation of falsehood, though the owl-eyed man does not seem bothered by it and seems almost to accept it.¹ Despite the accusations and confessions concerning Gatsby's past that occur later in the book, no other scene so clearly illustrates the extent to which he has crafted a false life and, worse yet, a knowingly false life. Instead of actually reading the books and becoming the man represented by his library, Gatsby trades authenticity for appearance. And according to Cynthia Wu's "Illusion and Reality for Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway," this battle between a false life and authenticity

¹ Despite the fact that he may appear accusatory toward Gatsby, his acceptance of Gatsby's false life suggests an understanding character, and indeed many scholars have argued that he is a positive figure in the novel. David Savage says of the Owl-Eyed Man, "Perhaps Fitzgerald deliberately gave him no surname because he saw him as an Everyman figure, representing the human virtues and verities in America. [. . .] The owl is traditionally wise, and Owl Eyes is wise in his perceptions" (73). Savage may be making bold statements about a character that plays such a small role in the novel, yet his assertion that the Owl-Eyed Man is wise seems accurate for this existential reading, as his perception of West Egg and its citizens seems particularly astute. He comprehends from very little evidence that Gatsby is constructing a new identity even when those closest to Gatsby take much longer to find out the truth.

ultimately becomes the central focus: “What Nick learns about reality from contemplating Gatsby’s illusions is a profound knowledge of life. This profound knowledge of life involves the basic question in *The Great Gatsby*: ‘What is real?’” (40). Wu’s assertion that “What is real?” is the basic question of the novel is astute, though possibly vague for this existential reading. Instead of “what,” a more accurate question might be “Who is real?” Although Nick lauds Gatsby throughout the novel, by the end the reader is forced to accept that Gatsby, at least, is not real.

Like Gatsby, Daisy is also not the authentic existence waiting to bloom in the wasteland of West Egg. Despite her comments about despising the fake, meaningless existence of society life, Gatsby and Nick discover that she perhaps is not as sincere as she seems. While she will make promises to run away with Gatsby when she is with him, implying a desire to pursue an authentic existence with him outside of West Egg, when she is with Tom, her demeanor is different. Gatsby and Nick both recognize this change, but it is Gatsby who puts it into words: “Her voice is full of money” (120). With this revelation, Nick replies, “That was it. I’d never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song of it. . . . High in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl. . . .” Daisy acts differently when she is around her husband and the society he represents, and upper class life becomes so much a part of her identity that Gatsby and Nick can hear it in her speech. The import of this revelation plays out when she falters on her promises to Gatsby in the presence of Tom. It would seem as though she embraces society life when she is in it, and her abhorrence for it only really manifests when she is safely excluded from it, such as in the presence of Gatsby and Nick, both of whom are outsiders to West

Egg. This duality means that she is unable to live true to her volition, which is why she ultimately fails to achieve an authentic existence either.

So as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that both Gatsby and Daisy are flawed characters who would struggle to achieve a true authentic existence. Although these flaws may seem minor compared to the problems of the other citizens of West Egg, these flaws actually contribute to Gatsby's downfall and death in meaningful ways. While initially very angry with Gatsby's attitude after returning from the city, Nick finds out that it was not Gatsby who actually ran down Tom's mistress on the way back to West Egg; instead it was Daisy, which reverses his opinion. In "Disembodied Voices and Narrative Bodies in *The Great Gatsby*," Barbara Hochman argues that "Nick's relationship to Gatsby (as to Daisy) is informed by a pattern of alternating faith and doubt" (n.p.). Hochman uses this interpretation to make some interesting statements about the relationship between "writer and storyteller," but it is also representative of the existential experience of the novel, in which the reader wavers between having faith that Gatsby can achieve his essential project and doubt that he can maintain an authentic existence. In this back and forth, doubt begins to dominate when instead of being honest about the situation and remaining at the site to take responsibility, the two leave, and Gatsby later states, "but of course I'll say I was [driving]." This willingness to take on the role of the driver, the killer, is why Gatsby is later gunned down. If they had stopped and made the truth clear, George Wilson would not have had reason to shoot him. In a very real way, Gatsby dies for the existential sin he has been committing throughout the novel: he attempts to live a false life (one as the killer of Myrtle Wilson). We have a tendency to see his actions as well-intentioned or at least very misguided, and in *F. Scott Fitzgerald*

and the Craft of Fiction (1967), Lehan even suggests that Gatsby must take the fall because “to abandon Daisy would be to lose his sense of self” (106).² However, the circumstances of his death make a powerful existential statement about the dangers of not living true to oneself and taking responsibility for one’s freedom.

Nick’s phenomenological interpretation of the events leading up to Gatsby’s death also makes a profound existential statement. While considering the moments preceding the gunshots, Nick muses,

I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn’t believe it would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about. . . like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees. (161)

Nick’s thought that Gatsby had “paid a high price for living too long with a single dream” suggests the possibility that Gatsby may have thought living an authentic life, or at least pursuing one, would produce consequences, which he now faces. According to Sartre, living an authentic life can and will be difficult, but Nick’s interpretation suggests that Gatsby understood that living authentically in West Egg would cost him a “high price.”

² Although not an explicit existential text, Lehan’s Fitzgerald book does suggest that “Gatsby is a Sisyphus without self-knowledge or cosmic understanding” (109). Lehan seems, at least, to think a Fitzgerald/Camus reading might be fruitful, though he does not pursue this line of thinking.

Nick's reasoning for why Gatsby came to this conclusion is also very astute. The idea that he has lost the "old warm world" and now sees a rose as "grotesque," the sunlight as "raw," and "poor ghosts" "gliding toward him" all imply that Gatsby, in Nick's estimation, understood the existential state of the world. Humans are placed in a world without meaning and without objective hope, full of other people, most of whom live in bad faith for most of their existence. When looking closely at the text, it becomes clear that Nick's imagining of Gatsby's final moments paints him as an existential hero, who understands the meaninglessness of existence, and although he fails, has tried to create a worthy, authentic existence for himself. Such actions are a noble goal, but these lines are not the last Nick has to say on the subject of his dead friend.

In the same way that Nick interprets the fall of Gatsby, Roquentin witnesses the fall of the Self-Taught Man. At the library where both characters spend a great deal of time, the Self-Taught Man begins making inappropriate advances toward two boys who have been pestering him, which causes an uproar involving a patron and staff member who witness the incident. Although Roquentin also sees the encounter, he is only disappointed in the Self-Taught Man and even considers warning him that he is about to be caught. When the Self-Taught Man is assaulted, Roquentin protects him and offers to take him to get medical attention, suggesting that Roquentin's earlier comments about hating the Self-Taught Man are not completely true and possibly sees him as a friend. The fall is sealed with the Self-Taught Man's realization, "I can never come back here" (168). Because he has been banned, the Self-Taught Man will be unable to complete his essential project of reading all of the books in the library. Ultimately, his project seems inferior to Roquentin's more subtle one because it relies on the outside world to

accommodate him, which is a problem that Gatsby runs into as well. Both characters pursue goals that are dependent on variables outside of their control, and while this might not necessarily spell failure, it does allow for the life-changing mishaps that both characters experience, one of which results in death, the other of which leaves the character without meaning in his life. Sartre's novel seems to suggest that Roquentin's simple goal of remaining free, in which he relies on little outside of his own volition, may be the best path for success.

Before Nick makes his final statements of the novel, some of the most famous lines in American literature, he provides his final interpretation of Daisy as well, and she does not fare as well as Gatsby. Despite her desire earlier in the novel to escape West Egg and the inauthentic society it produces, the Daisy Nick presents at the end of the novel has not changed for the better because of Gatsby's death, nor has she really changed at all. Nick states, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made. . ." (179). At the end of the novel, Daisy has, according to Nick, "retreated back into their money" to avoid dealing with the death of Gatsby. Her desire to dodge responsibility suggests that she had never really changed during her time with Gatsby. Nick's claim that she "smashed up things and creatures" implies that this sort of action, getting a man devoted to her and making claims of love and the desire to leave, is a part of her nature as a "society woman," which is supported by her faltering when it comes to leaving her husband. To Gatsby, his relationship with Daisy is a very serious matter, but for Daisy it is a sort of romantic vacation before returning to her actual life with Tom in

West Egg. At times, the reader would like to believe this conception of Daisy's motives is not true, and since everything is filtered through Nick, it is impossible to tell how Daisy actually feels, though Nick's final interpretation paints her as steeped in a bad faith existence.

The final passages of the novel give Nick's reasoning behind why Gatsby is, as the title states, "great." He begins his interpretation with a comment about explorers reaching America for the first time, arguing that it was "the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, [. . .] face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" (180). Essentially, Nick argues that since the discovery of the Americas, humans have been lacking a great meaning in life to strive toward, leaving life less meaningful for humanity as a whole. But, "as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. [. . .] Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us." Despite his view that life is now seemingly meaningless for mankind, Nick decides that Gatsby's "wonder" at the green light is comparable to that wonder of the settlers first arriving in America. Therefore, even in a meaningless existence, Gatsby was able to create a meaning for himself that was objectively powerful in the same way that mankind's expansion and exploration into a whole new world was powerful. And it is for this reason that he is the "Great Gatsby": he is able to create meaning for himself.

However, while Nick is ready to laud Gatsby for the man he was, he does not overlook his great weakness. Despite Nick's talk about the future, he ends his account

with “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (180). Nick’s metaphor paints mankind in a continuous struggle to move forward into the future while constantly being thrust into the past by the “current,” and while this tendency is Gatsby’s flaw, some scholars such as David Minter argue that Nick’s decision not to pass judgment here and instead tell Gatsby’s story as he “imaginatively” interprets it “redeems” Gatsby (83). Instead of judging, he provides the statement as a matter of fact, suggesting instead that this was not just Gatsby’s flaw but all of mankind’s. However, not all scholars agree that the ending is a negative comment on Gatsby’s tendency to look backward, and, more importantly, not all scholars using an existential lens agree with this interpretation. In J’aime L. Sanders’s brilliant essay, “Discovering the Source of Gatsby’s Greatness: Nick’s Eulogy for a ‘Great’ Kierkegaardian Knight,” the author argues for a more positive view of the final lines of the novel: “Yet not only can one repeat the past as Gatsby believes, but the knight is always reaching back into the past to recover what he has lost in resigning himself: he has lost the princess there and continually returns to find her” (123). Sanders’s assertion relies on the philosophy of Kierkegaard, and although Kierkegaard is generally considered an early existentialist, his philosophy conflicts with Sartre’s in many ways, particularly with Kierkegaard’s view of the past and focus on historical archetypes such as Abraham.³ Therefore, while Sanders provides a clever and astute reading of the text,

³ In addition to the use of Kierkegaard by Sanders, other scholars have viewed Gatsby through philosophers who did not consider themselves existentialists yet are generally considered contributors to the movement. In particular, Alberto Lena uses Nietzschean philosophy in “Deceitful Traces of Power: An Analysis of the Decadence of Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*” to discuss power roles among the various characters (27-28). These readings, while fascinating and valuable contributions to the field, are less useful to this existential reading than one might hope for two main reasons. One, this reading is focused on the French form of existentialism, which is fairly distinguished from that which came earlier. And second, many

the use of Kierkegaard as a lens conflicts with Sartre's less optimistic philosophy. With Sartre's philosophy in mind, Gatsby is painted as very human in his inability to let go of the past. And this fact is, perhaps, the most striking reason why Gatsby can and should be considered an existential hero: he lived life in a very honest way. He struggles with those flaws in the human character, and although he could not overcome them, he attempts to create something meaningful for himself in a meaningless world.

Nausea ends in a similar way to *The Great Gatsby*, in that both narrators muse about the role of the past and the act of finding meaning in life. After pondering just how he could go about "justifying" his existence, Roquentin decides

It would have to be a book: I don't know how to do anything else. But not a history book: history talks about what has existed—an existant can never justify the existence of another existant. My error, I wanted to resuscitate the Marquis de Rollebon. Another type of book. I don't quite know which kind—but you would have to guess, behind the printed words, behind the pages, at something which would not exist, which would be above existence. A story, for example, something that could never happen, an adventure. (177-178)

Roquentin realizes that an attempt to justify one's existence cannot be based on the past, on history, which is exactly what Gatsby attempts. In the final pages, Roquentin chooses a new essential project for his life, one more complex than his previous project though one that still relies on him to make it happen more than the outside world. This decision

aspects of Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's philosophies fall outside of the realm of existentialism, and these aspects are precisely the ones being used for analysis in these essays.

reveals how much he has learned from his experiences in the novel. He is able to avoid the pitfalls of the Self-Taught Man while finding a system that might work for him. But not all scholars agree that he will actually follow through with his final epiphany, instead arguing that “His decision to write a novel is not likely to produce results either (no novel is mentioned by the Editors)” (Raoul 706). Whether he writes the novel or not, Roquentin’s final statements about the book reveal the reason that Gatsby was doomed to failure: “Naturally, at first it would only be a troublesome, tiring work, it wouldn’t stop me from existing or feeling that I exist. But a time would come when the book would be written, when it would be behind me, and I think that a little of its clarity might fall over my past. Then, perhaps, because of it, I could remember my life without repugnance” (178). Roquentin’s final revelation of the novel is that one’s essential project must justify one’s past and not the other way around. He understands that, whatever difficulties or experiences he has had up until this point, they are justified because they produced his “legendary” book. However, whether this revelation redeems him and suggests he will live a life of good faith is debatable, and most scholars agree that his ending is not positive. In “Good and Bad Faith: Weak and Strong Notions,” Joseph Catalano asks “has Roquentin escaped bad faith? It would seem not. He has simply become a novelist and assumed a new role within the bad-faith society that he is condemning by his act of writing” (80). So while Roquentin has an existential epiphany about the nature of the past, this epiphany alone does not necessarily ensure that his future will be one of good faith. And in contrast to Roquentin’s realization about the past failing to justify the present, Gatsby wishes to justify his youth with Daisy by somehow proving that they were meant to be together, but he does not realize that the Gatsby and Daisy who spent

that brief time together in their youth no longer exist and cannot be used to sustain his current existence, because as Roquentin argues, “an existant can never justify the existence of another existant.”

It becomes clear in an intertextual reading of the two novels that Fitzgerald and Sartre were working in similar territory of how human beings create meaning in this world. Fitzgerald, however, had no explicit system to work within and only described the struggle that he saw facing modern life. On the other hand, Sartre did have a complex philosophical system to work within, in addition to his exposure to not only Fitzgerald but many other American modernists. Looking at his novel, one can see how Sartre builds French existentialist literature out of an established literary tradition. Sartre may agree with the methods used by these American writers and even some of their premises, but he disagrees about the conclusions drawn. So as Sartre predicts in his essay on “American Novelists in French Eyes,” he creates something new in Roquentin’s story in order to resolve what he feels are weaknesses in American fiction. And Sartre’s novel argues that only by forsaking that past and searching for personal freedom can one discover a project that might allow for an authentic existence.

CHAPTER III: MCCULLERS AND DE BEAUVOIR

While a number of studies concerning the intersection of existential thought and literature have been written over the years, most of them were conducted during existentialism's peak, the late 1940s to early 1950s, when many women writers who have since made a strong place for themselves in the literary canon were as of yet unfound or grossly underappreciated. The result is that most of these studies omit the women writers all together, while others include a brief discussion of Simon de Beauvoir, though usually only in connection with Sartre. However, de Beauvoir used the existential philosophy of Sartre to form her own philosophical positions. Instead of providing a system of ethics for a philosophy that often bordered on nihilism, she also attempted to define the feminine experience from an existential point of view in her opus, *The Second Sex*, where she writes,

Deprived of this alter ego [that boys possess], the little girl does not alienate herself in a graspable thing, does not reclaim herself: she is thus led to make her entire self an object, to posit herself as the Other, the question of knowing whether or not she has compared herself with boys is secondary; what is important is that, even without her knowing it, the absence of a penis keeps her from being aware of herself as a sex; many consequences result from this. But these constants we point out nevertheless do not define a destiny: the phallus takes on such importance because it symbolizes a sovereignty that is realized in other areas. If woman succeeded in affirming herself as subject, she would invent equivalents of the phallus. (58)

This process of Othering oneself, of searching for a source of “sovereignty” and “asserting oneself as a subject” all describe the predicament of Carson McCullers’s young female protagonists. McCullers’s complex treatment of the young female mind, when read alongside the philosophy and fiction of de Beauvoir, can do much to illuminate an existential perspective of life. Such a reading of McCullers’s work reveals a mind working under the trappings of the situation de Beauvoir describes and bringing those trappings to the surface, where they could be analyzed by the later philosopher and corroborate her own conception of womanhood.

McCullers’s work expresses a number of major existential themes beyond those this chapter focuses on. In “Carson McCullers: The Plight of the Lonely Heart,” Leroy Thomas asserts that

the plight of the lonely heart as shown in McCullers’ Southern characters is that of the typical existential hero with universal dimensions. Carson McCullers is a writer in whose works existential forces have such a strong power over man that he is unable to realize lasting happiness. Her characters are representative examples of the diverse ways in which the important theme of alienation is treated in Southern fiction. (11)

Thomas paints McCullers as a strong existential writer because both her female and male characters experience a strong sense of alienation from life and themselves, and her plots often rely on a search for meaning to existence in order to progress. Rebellion also plays a prominent role in her fiction, giving her strong ties to Camus’s sense of existential ethics. Her characters often live on the fringes, and their outcast status makes them more capable of analyzing the objectification process outlined by Sartre and de Beauvoir.

Finally, the idea of society versus the individual, including acceptance or rejection, sits at the heart of her novels and short stories. But while McCullers offers numerous possible approaches from an existential standpoint, her writing is most in sync with de Beauvoir's critique of the feminine role in society, resulting in this particular pairing.

According to Virginia Spencer Carr's biography, McCullers was familiar with the works of Nietzsche, even writing a play when she was young that included the German philosopher as a main character beside Jesus Christ (33-34). Her familiarity with the existential icon makes the presence of existential themes in her work seem more intentional, but her connection to existentialist philosophers does not end there. While living in France, she met Sartre, Camus, and de Beauvoir, and Spencer Carr goes on to state that "Although Madame de Beauvoir said that she greatly admired Carson for *The Member of the Wedding*, their friendship never developed. Nevertheless, Carson felt that she was well known and accepted by the French Writers. And it was so—she had made an indelible mark upon Paris" (283). The fact that de Beauvoir had read and admired McCullers—and specifically that it was *The Member of the Wedding* that de Beauvoir singled out in her comments about McCullers—supports the argument of possible influence presented here. While one of McCullers's other major biographers, Josyane Savigneau, admits that de Beauvoir admired McCullers, she argues that they were never friends because de Beauvoir would have been "annoyed" by McCullers, seeing her "fragility" as "proof that women needed to be helped, supported, even rescued" (168). However, Savigneau provides no evidence for this interpretation, and although she does not admit it explicitly, her use of language ("It is easy to imagine," "she must have") belies the fact that this is nothing more than personal opinion.

While McCullers explores the subject of the developing female mind in multiple novels and short stories, the most appropriate text for an existential reading of her work (using de Beauvoir's conception of the philosophy as a lens) is *The Member of the Wedding*, in which Frankie struggles to conceptualize herself and find some form of sovereignty in the world. Likewise, de Beauvoir produced numerous works of fiction that inform her philosophy in one way or another, but the text that meshes best with McCullers's work and message is *All Men Are Mortal*. Regina's attempts to find sovereignty through the immortal Fosca mirror Frankie's attempt to do the same with her brother and his bride, what she calls her "we." However, the plight of both women only reveals how such structures fail to act as support for women looking for a personal path in the world.

McCullers begins *The Member of the Wedding* by outlining the struggle that her protagonist faces throughout the work, but this struggle conveys a deeper meaning when read alongside de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. In the novel, we are told: "It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old. This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid" (3). While this emotional response can be attributed to adolescent fear of exclusion by peer groups, Frankie's obsession with social inclusion displays a more complex underpinning. How people view themselves in relation to others is a topic that de Beauvoir deals with extensively. Building off Sartre's statements about humans encountering "Others" in the world, de Beauvoir argues, "a fundamental hostility to any other consciousness is found in consciousness itself; the subject posits itself only

in opposition; it asserts itself as the essential and sets up the other as inessential, as the object” (7). This “primitive” but also “fundamental” way of approaching others is what Frankie is having trouble coming to terms with because this approach to the world only restrains women, particularly ones wishing for the kind of sovereignty that Frankie desires. While women also view others in “opposition” to themselves, de Beauvoir suggests that the system benefits men and is detrimental to women because

she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called “the sex,” meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him, she is sex, so she is it in absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other. (6)

So while women may wish to “Other” men in the same manner that men “Other” women, the process does not work well in reverse. Women are trained to think of themselves in terms of sex, but men are given sovereignty, which allows them to feel confident in their role as “subject.” So because this system ultimately works against women, providing them no honest conception of the world around them, it is not surprising that Frankie attempts to reject this worldview.

In the opening pages of the novel, we see Frankie still conceptualizing the world in terms of opposition. She understands herself as not a member, and notes the differences between herself and others, namely that they are part of groups, while she is not. However, this worldview is unpleasant for Frankie, as it should be for any woman, and she attempts to create a sense of inclusion, to view the world not in opposition but in terms of collusion. This desire becomes the source of her obsession over her brother’s

wedding, and Frankie's ultimate failure to create a new system that is more advantageous for her provides the main conflict of the novel.

Like Frankie's obsession with Jarvis and Janice and the support structure she builds out of the idea of the wedding, Regina is also searching for a similar structure in her life. However, on the surface *All Men Are Mortal* seems like a strange choice to put alongside McCullers's work. De Beauvoir's novel is fantastical, in contrast to McCullers's very realistic take on a young girl's struggle. Additionally, the bulk of de Beauvoir's novel consists of Fosca's story, which rarely expresses the kind of search for female sovereignty that is present in Frankie's life. Yet Regina, like Frankie, is a young woman, and in the sections outside of Fosca's narrative, we see her going through the same process of creating a phallus substitute that ultimately fails her. And while the plot focuses on a fantastical element, the life of an immortal man, this element is used not to distract from a realistic struggle that Regina is facing but instead to act as an extremity, one which makes clear a philosophical idea that many men and woman have trouble comprehending without this unrealistic context, namely that the meaning many people search for in their lives has little consequence in the grand scheme of the universe—that, as the title implies, all life is ephemeral. Therefore, it becomes clear that de Beauvoir's novel takes themes used by McCullers to an extreme in order to more clearly express an existential truth that she feels readers will not come to on their own.

As the novel progresses, we see how Frankie's struggle with the society she lives in develops. We are told that "The name for what had happened to her Frankie did not know, but she could feel her squeezed heart beating against the table edge" (6), which is similar to the state that de Beauvoir describes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947); Frankie

is experiencing herself “as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things” (7).

Because she is in this state, Frankie does not explicitly understand the apparatus in place that dictates how she conceives of herself and the others around her, but she seems to have an innate sense that such apparatus exists and is worthy of the anxiety her “squeezed heart” feels. Frankie continues to express her unconscious understanding of the process of “Othering” when she states, “I wish I was somebody else except me” (7). The implication of her statement goes far deeper than wanting to be someone who is accepted into a group. Understanding that she will likely never be given the same kind of sovereignty as men have, Frankie’s wish is more accurately a wish to be a boy, or at least someone with the freedoms that a boy has. As de Beauvoir argues, Frankie wishes to possess the alter ego of the penis, a way to conceptualize herself that does not posit her as Other.

While Frankie is searching for the freedom to travel, fight, or generally live life as she might wish, the kind of sovereignty that Regina is searching for goes far beyond that. Compared to Frankie, Regina is quite free; she is older, has more money, has a certain amount of influence with powerful people, and is talented in a way that is desired by others. Additionally, Regina is able to exert power over those around her, even many males. She is manipulative, attempting to break up relationships between others and control how others think of her, and she is quite good at it. But despite the sovereignty she has managed to gain for herself, she wants more—a certain type of sovereignty. Regina wishes for a sovereignty to control how others will perceive her. It is obvious to the reader that such sovereignty does not exist, but Regina becomes obsessed with it in

the same way Frankie becomes obsessed with the wedding. And in the immortal Fosca, Regina finds what she perceives as the possibility for such sovereignty:

He lowered his head and avidly contemplated her with eyes that had looked upon so many women who were famous for their beauty, their talents. For him, all those diverse destinies made up one single history, and Regina had now become a part of that history. Now she could vie for his eternal affection with her dead rivals and those who were not yet born. “I’ll triumph over all of them and I’ll have won the contest in both the past and the future.” Her lips moved and every inflection in her voice reverberated through centuries and centuries. (38)

Regina believes that Fosca will carry an impression of her into the future, making her immortal by proxy; therefore, she begins relying on Fosca as a source of her future sovereignty, not realizing she is actually giving up much of her freedom to ensure that a certain impression is made on him. But Fosca does not make her immortal, and instead causes her to completely change her self-image by the end of the novel.

One such alter ego of the penis is provided to Frankie during the novel in the form of the “large doll with red hair and china eyes” that her brother gives her as a present (18). De Beauvoir addresses the role that baby dolls play for a young girl’s psyche. She states, “If a woman succeeded in affirming herself as subject, she would invent equivalents of the phallus: the doll that embodies the promise of the child may become a more precious possession than a penis” (58). However, Frankie does not use the doll as a substitute for a phallus. She instead views the doll as a harmful object that she detests and ultimately gives to John Henry: “I don’t know what went on in Jarvis’s mind when he

brought me that doll. Imagine bringing me a doll! And Janice tried to explain that she had pictured me as a little girl. I had counted on Jarvis bringing me something from Alaska” (18). Frankie’s active rejection of the doll suggests that she is not looking for the sovereignty offered by a phallus substitute, but this is not the case. In actuality, Frankie is still searching for such a substitute; she has simply rejected this particular one, and her context suggests why. Frankie is old enough to realize that the grandiose ideas of maternity that are passed on to most little girls really hide a life of servitude that she does not wish to live. On the matter of maternity, de Beauvoir states,

she [a mother] does not usually seek to affirm her individuality; she does not oppose either males or females; she does not have a fighting instinct; in spite of Darwin’s assertions, disparaged today, the female in general accepts the male that presents himself. It is not that she lacks individual qualities—far from it; in periods when she escapes the servitude of maternity, she can sometimes be the male’s equal [. . .]. But this individuality is not asserted: the female abdicates it for the benefit of the species that demands this abdication. (36)

Although Frankie is not necessarily conscious of her reasons for rejecting the doll as a phallus substitute, on some level she understands that what the doll represents, “the promise of a child,” will lead her toward a life of abdication. Instead of this life, Frankie seeks to prove herself “the male’s equal,” which is supported by the Tomboy behavior she exhibits by throwing knives and through other less feminine activities, because by doing so she would gain sovereignty not afforded to women. The idea that she is seeking a different phallus substitute, one that represents a different future for her, is evidenced in

her final remarks about Jarvis bringing her something from Alaska. At the time, Alaska was one of the final frontiers in America, a wild place that one must travel far to reach. Alaska represented the type of freedom that only males would generally be afforded, and it is exactly this kind of sovereignty that Frankie is searching for. Therefore, her desire to have “something from Alaska” instead of the doll makes sense because such an object could have acted as a powerful object for Frankie—a representation of the beginning of future travel that would result in a collection of such objects from various exotic locales. But that is not the future her brother sees for Frankie. Instead he sees her getting married and becoming a mother, only further frustrating the subjective life Frankie is trying to build for herself.

McCullers sets up an interesting contrast to Frankie’s rejection of the doll in John Henry’s complete acceptance of it. While the world seems to fight against Frankie’s attempt to cross gender lines and gain the sovereignty of a male, the same does not hold true for John Henry, who not only takes the doll that Frankie rejects but is free to cradle it in his arms, play with its dress, and name it as a mother might (18). This lack of social repercussion occurs because John Henry is a male and, unlike Frankie, possesses a sovereignty to act as he wishes. On top of his sovereignty, John Henry also need not conceptualize himself in terms of gender. While Frankie may not wish to see herself in terms of gender, the world requires it of her. According to de Beauvoir, “If I want to define myself, I first have to say, ‘I am a woman’; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth. A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is obvious” (5). John Henry is free to view himself not as a boy, which would in turn cause him anxiety over whether or not boys should play with baby dolls or if he is

acting too feminine, but instead he can conceptualize himself simply as John Henry, who likes to play with baby dolls right now and with little concern at the moment for social expectations. On the other hand, Frankie must first view herself as a woman, which immediately alters her perception and interrupts any attempts to be simply “Frankie” the way John Henry is “John Henry.”

The baby doll’s meaning for Frankie is mirrored for Regina in the form of her Japanese masks, which she has been collecting since becoming an actress. However, the role these masks take on is slightly different. Frankie initially identifies the baby doll as representing a possibility she rejects as not offering her the life she desires, but Regina initially finds solace in masks that represent the multiple faces she wears as an actress. She believes her acting is the source of her authenticity, that which makes her a “living force” in the world. However, this fact is called into question by Fosca, who believes humans very rarely “live.” The contention peaks when “Fosca looked at her tenderly. ‘When you act, you believe in your existence with such deep faith! [. . .] For you, other people exist too, and there were times when you succeeded in making even me exist.’” The implication irritates Regina, who views it more as an insult than a compliment, and Fosca explains, “That’s not bad, you know. Not everyone can be successful at pretending to exist,” to which Regina replies, “But it’s not pretense, [. . .]. It’s true! I do exist!” (60). Like the tribal women de Beauvoir mentions in her philosophy, Regina attempts to use the masks as a phallus substitute, and their representation, acting, provides a life that offers her sovereignty. It is through her acting that she gains fame, power, and freedom, so it is no surprise that she places such importance on the life of which they are symbolic.

But like Frankie, who rejects the life of motherhood represented by the doll, Regina eventually rejects the life of the actress.

After hearing Fosca's opinion about acting and its value, Regina begins to reassess her life's work. She realizes that while acting has allowed her much of the freedom she wished for, it has not provided her self-fulfillment; nor has it provided her the ability to shape the way she is perceived in the eyes of others, particularly Fosca. Her insatiable desire to become immortal causes her to reject her current life in a fit, quitting the theatre and embracing what Fosca calls the "will to destroy." During Regina's party,

She looked at the Japanese masks on the wall, the statuettes on their shelves, the old marionettes in the tiny theatre. And in those precious objects, she saw her whole past, her long years of self-love. But now they seemed to her nothing but cheap trash. She threw the masks to the floor. 'Cheap trash!' she repeated aloud, trampling with her feet. She threw down the statuettes and the marionettes and stamped them, crushing all the old lies. (65)

It is important that in these objects that she smashes, Regina sees "her whole past," revealing that by smashing them, she is choosing a new "life" for herself. She has created a new phallus substitute in the form of Fosca's immortality, meaning she rejects that which she no longer values. And Regina gets what she hopes for, as her actions spurn the interest of Fosca once again; he even acknowledges that she struggles very hard to be "alive," suggesting that he sees her rejection of her life as an actress and her place in that society as a step in the right direction.

In Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers

(2001), Sarah Gleeson-White suggests that Frankie possesses a “parade of feminine masks, signaled by her name changes as well as her dress, parodies of any notion of a fixed identity” (90). So, like Regina, Frankie also wears less literal masks, but in Frankie’s case they are not as much a symbol of her power in the world but instead a way to hide from herself physical traits she is unhappy with. While considering her physical appearance, Frankie becomes concerned that she will eventually grow to be over nine foot tall, in which case, “She would be a Freak” (19). This claim on Frankie’s part begins reminiscence about the freak show that she had visited. She describes all the freaks, but it is important that the final one, in the booth that Frankie knew was “always very crowded,” belonged to “the Half-Man Half-Woman, a morphidite and a miracle of science” (20). The Half-Man Half-Woman is noteworthy for its similarity to what Frankie is trying to become. She cannot escape her role as a woman, though she does not necessarily want to. At the same time, she can never completely gain the freedoms of the man, meaning she exists in a kind of liminal space between the two genders. This uncertainty causes a good deal of anxiety for Frankie; the freaks, like her, do not adhere to social norms, yet at the same time do not exercise the kind of sovereignty she is searching for due to their outcast status. Frankie sees the freaks as a possibility for her future—what might happen to her if she fails to develop her subjectivity in a way that both satisfies her desire for sovereignty and does not ostracize her from society. It is because of this anxiety that Frankie “was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you. She was afraid of their long Freak eyes. And all the years she had

remembered them, until this day” (20). The freaks “know” Frankie because, as she perceives it, they were once in her place, making the same decisions she is now making. Frankie’s concerns continue to be revealed when she says, “I doubt if they ever get married or go to a wedding” (20). By connecting freakishness with being unable to attend a wedding, Frankie disassociates herself with the freaks, as she is about to attend a wedding. Frankie’s self-association with outcast groups is a persistent theme in the novel as her desire for subjectivity develops.

Frankie’s difficulty with gender expectations continues to build over the course of the novel, and in many cases she must find some other outlet for desires she cannot pursue as a woman. When thinking about the war, Frankie decides “she wanted to be a boy and go to the war as a Marine. [. . .] But she could not join the war” (23). Up until this point in the novel, Frankie’s envy toward the freedom of men has been more subtle, but now she makes it explicit. She wishes to travel the world and fight for her country, but she is not allowed this freedom. Because she is stifled, Frankie attempts to find other ways to satisfy this desire. Instead,

She decided to donate blood to the Red Cross; she wanted to donate a quart a week and her blood would be in the veins of Australians and Fighting French and Chinese all over the world, and it would be as though she were close kin to all of these people. [. . .] And she could picture ahead, in the years after the war, meeting the soldiers who had her blood, and they would say that they owed their life to her; and they would not call her Frankie—they would call her Addams. (23)

Frankie's decision to donate blood is marked specifically by an understanding that by sharing her blood with soldiers, she would be "close kin" to people all over the world. In "Somatic Syntax: Replotting the Developmental Narrative in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*," Nicole Seymour characterizes the act of donating blood as "a form of self-extension" (308), which is precisely what Frankie desires. If Frankie herself cannot travel all around the world acting with the same freedom a man enjoys, she decides to make herself a part of the exploits of that freedom through surrogates who literarily carry some of her with them. It is also important that in response to sharing her blood, the soldiers will call her "Addams" and not Frankie. While Frankie in itself is an ambiguous nickname in terms of gender, by donating her blood and seeing it travel the world, Frankie imagines that she will then have the decidedly more masculine name Addams. In Frankie's imagination, the soldiers will acknowledge her as a male (and by extension, as possessing sovereignty) because of her service, allowing her to bypass society's regulations concerning women in the military and gaining a freedom she desires.

However, despite Frankie's desire to give blood to the Red Cross, this plan "did not come true. The Red Cross would not take her blood. She was too young. Frankie felt mad with the Red Cross, and left out of everything" (24). In this case not only have Frankie's attempts to exert her sovereignty been shut down, even her attempt to bypass this social restraint and achieve a personally meaningful action has also been prevented, and while she is not prevented from giving blood based on her gender, the fact that she consistently finds her freedom stifled by society contributes powerfully to the building

anxiety she feels and explains why she continues going to greater and greater extremes with her actions.

Another particularly important event is Frankie's reminiscence on the memory of her sexual initiation, which she perceives in a very negative fashion. She explains that "One Saturday afternoon she committed a secret and unknown sin. In the MacKean's garage, with Barney MacKean, they committed a queer sin, and how bad it was she did not know. The sin made a shriveling sickness in her stomach, and she dreaded the eyes of everyone. She hated Barney and wanted to kill him" (26). The "queer sin" committed by Frankie and Barney is left vague by McCullers and Frankie; it is possible it refers to sexual play or actual intercourse, though Frankie gives no clues, as "how bad it was she did not know." Whether the act that takes place in the garage is the prelude to sex or sex itself, Frankie's strong reaction suggests an understanding of sexuality and its implication for women far beyond that of the average person. According to de Beauvoir, one of the problems with sex is the position it places the woman in relative to the male:

His domination is expressed by the coital position of almost all animals; the male is on the female. And the organ he uses is incontestably material too, but it is seen in an animated state: it is a tool, while the female organ in this operation is merely an inert receptacle. The male deposits his sperm; the female receives it. Thus, although she plays a fundamentally active role in procreation, she endures coitus, which alienates her from herself by penetration and internal fertilization. (35)

Given what de Beauvoir says about the psychology and physiology of sex for the female, it is no surprise that a young girl like Frankie, who is actively seeking an outlet for

sovereignty and subjectivity in her life, would come away from her first sexual encounter wishing to “kill” the boy with whom it took place. Whether or not actual intercourse took place, the experience would remind Frankie of the passive role she is expected to take in life, that while men are allowed to be “animated” and active in life, she would be “alienated” from herself for the same action. And it is this alienation that she is fighting against in the novel.

In addition to wanting to kill Barney for their sexual encounter, the way that Frankie reacts to the experience is also relevant to de Beauvoir’s philosophy. We are told in the novel that it is only recently that Frankie has cut her hair and started being a “no good” and a “criminal,” and this change in her demeanor can be partially explained by her sexual encounter with Barney. De Beauvoir argues that often, in response to the “humiliation” that women suffer during sexual activity, “She reacts by a ‘masculine protest’; she either tries to masculinize herself or uses her feminine wiles to go into battle against man” (53). Out of the two options, Frankie has decided to “masculinize” herself in response to her sexual encounter, taking up the kind of rebellious streak and physical activities that are commonly associated with young men. This aspect of Frankie’s personality is elaborated on by Seymour: “the dominant social order expects femininity of Frankie’s female body, but she continues to be masculine in behavior and appearance—sometimes as an apparent matter of protest, other times due to poor execution; she has no interest in boys or in the idea of motherhood; and the majority of her affections accrue not to heterosexual or even homosexual object choices, but to the idea of her brother Jarvis’s wedding” (297-298). In this way, she is attempting to regain part of the

sovereignty that she feels was lost in her encounter with Barney by taking on a more active role—stealing from department stores and learning to throw knives.

Frankie and Regina also share the trait of exerting masculinity in ways that are meant to show the world the sovereignty they have or wish to obtain. Both women display a “meanness” that those close to them remark on, and in both cases this meanness manifests in displays of power. Frankie throws knives in an attempt to physically intimidate Berenice, while Regina denies Annie the freedom to travel with her, telling Fosca, “You must think I’m terribly mean. [. . .] It’s true. I hate seeing other people happy and I enjoy making them bow to my will. Annie wouldn’t be in the way. I’m not taking her along out of pure meanness” (49). Both Regina and Frankie admit that they have a mean streak, and it is important to note how they exercise this meanness. Both characters are cruel to other women, Berenice or Annie, likely for two reasons. One, the patriarchal system allows for women to be cruel to each other, almost encourages it, as it prevents a sense of community from building among the gender. Second, neither character feels particularly comfortable attempting too much cruelty toward men, since such an action would likely result in retribution from the offended, although as the character with a greater sovereignty, Regina is more willing to be mean to men as well. In the case of Roger, she rejects his love, though this rejection is more the product of her infatuation with Fosca as an action of “pure malice.” She also attempts to destroy her fellow actress Florence’s relationship with Sanier, and though the attempt fails, it obviously hurts him as well. Both characters attempt to exert power over others in a challenge to the patriarchal system, though in both cases, nothing beneficial results from their actions.

The last important development in Frankie's character taking place in Part One occurs right at the end, as Frankie establishes her phallus substitute in the form of her brother and sister-in-law, or, more accurately, a romanticized and objectified version of them. During her musing about what she will be and where she will go when she leaves the town, Frankie experiences an epiphany, during which she decides, "*They are the we of me*. Yesterday and all the twelve years of her life, she had only been Frankie" (42). In "Relegation and Rebellion: The Queer, the Grotesque, and the Silent in the Fiction of Carson McCullers," Melisa Free asserts that this articulation of a "we" is the manifestation of Frankie's "desire for the bride" (439), and while this interpretation works for a queer reading relying on triangulation, it does not fully realize the complexity with which Frankie constructs and utilizes the "we" as a singular entity. Frankie's struggle up until this point in her life has been with her individuality, and now that she is coming of age, she is trying to understand what that individuality entails for her. However, instead of embracing her separateness from people, since doing so would force her to view herself in opposition to others and by extension identify as a woman, including all of the social baggage a patriarchal society forces on women, she rejects this approach to the world completely. Instead, she attempts to create a system of inclusion, one in which she is still able to find subjectivity but is not forced to understand her place in the world by how she is different than others, thus avoiding societal strictures. But the reasons she chooses her particular "we" are worth a closer look in order to understand just how delicately Frankie understands this process.

Frankie specifically says that while over the summer Berenice and John Henry have been a kind of "we" for her, "that was the last *we* in the world she wanted" (42).

Frankie rejects Berenice and John Henry as a possible “we” because they represent a world that does not line up with her goals. Her life with Berenice and John Henry is one of childhood, of being taken care of and taking care of another. This relationship lacks the sovereignty that Frankie is seeking in her “we”; she could never visit Alaska or do other acts she dreams of with Berenice and John Henry because Berenice would have to look after her and John Henry, and Frankie would also need to make sure John Henry was safe. This kind of relationship is not particularly fulfilling for an adult (especially one like Frankie hopes to be), which is why Frankie does not identify her and John Henry as Berenice’s “we,” but instead “Honey and Big Mama, her lodge, or her church” (42). Berenice turns elsewhere for a fulfilling adult relationship, and Frankie realizes she must do the same.

While Berenice and John Henry are not the “we” that Frankie is looking for, her brother Jarvis and his to-be bride offer a much more desirable situation for Frankie, but why is this? If Frankie were actually to travel with her brother, would it not still be a relationship of dependence, as her brother and bride would have to look after Frankie’s safety? Yes, it would be, but the relationship would be that for Jarvis and his bride, not for Frankie, who would not be responsible for the other members, and in the same way Frankie rejects John Henry and Berenice as a “we,” Jarvis rejects taking Frankie with him after the wedding despite the protests of his little sister. However, this analysis does not address the reason Frankie chose her brother and his bride over all the other possible “we’s” around her, which lies in what Frankie has made of Jarvis and Janice. As Darren Millar asserts in “The Utopian Function of Affect in Carson McCullers’s *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Ballad of the Sad Café*,” Berenice “does not see that Frankie has

never been interested in the wedding *per se*—rather, Frankie is interested in the idea of relationship that it accommodates, and all her fantasies about being a member conceive of the wedding as a kind of induction into a much wider and much more varied world of experience. Thus, her brother and future sister-in-law are of less interest in themselves than the unexpressed and inexpressible potential that she sees in them” (94). Millar’s idea that Frankie is more interested in what they are than who in particular they are is astute, and although Frankie is unable to express the potential she sees in Jarvis and Janice, she is still willing to act on it. Frankie always addresses them as a pair, calling them “her brother and the bride” (42), remarking how beautiful they are, and arguing that “We’ll go every place together” (46). Frankie has managed to amalgamate her brother and sister-in-law into one being that provides for her the perfect phallus substitute, though one that seems impossible to realize. In her brother, she sees the sovereignty afforded to males personified, in that he is a soldier and has been to faraway places like Alaska, both goals she has set for herself and places great emphasis on. In her sister-in-law, she sees feminine beauty and the chance to be a woman in a healthy and (though romanticized, as we get no idea how her sister-in-law feels about the coupling) fulfilling relationship. By combining them into one entity, they become the best of both worlds for Frankie, but one piece is missing: Frankie herself. Frankie must also add herself, her own subjectivity, into the occasion for this idealized human entity to be meaningful and useful for her. This act of mental gymnastics on Frankie’s part also explains her strange declaration that “They are the we of me.” Essentially, Frankie’s statement is that her brother and sister-in-law are the “we,” an entity composed of the best traits of Jarvis, Janice, and Frankie’s subjectivity, of what Frankie is striving to be, her “me.” De Beauvoir tells the story of

“matrilineal societies where the women possess the masks in which the collectivity alienates itself” (58); de Beauvoir then asserts that these masks act as phallus substitutes for the women. Through her Frankenstein-esque reconstruction of her brother, her sister-in-law, and herself, Frankie has created a mask for herself to wear in which she can alienate herself and achieve subjectivity that is very difficult for women to obtain in patriarchal society. And this alienation can be seen in the description of her self-conception provided after her epiphany.

After Frankie has made up her mind that she will be leaving with her brother and his wife after the wedding, McCullers provides a somewhat odd description of Frankie: “For it was just at that moment that Frankie understood. She knew who she was and how she was going into the world. Her squeezed heart suddenly opened and divided. Her heart divided like two wings” (45). While this description can seem mystifying at first, reading it through the lens of de Beauvoir’s philosophy sheds light and reveals that it is quite appropriate for what Frankie is experiencing:

The way psychoanalysts understand it, “to identify” with the mother or the father is to alienate oneself in a model, it is to prefer a foreign image to a spontaneous movement of one’s own existence, it is to play at being. We are shown woman solicited by two kinds of alienations; it is very clear that to play at being a man will be a recipe for failure; but to play at being a woman is also a trap: being a woman would mean being an object, the Other; and at the heart of its abdication, the Other remains a subject. The real problem for the woman refusing these evasions is to accomplish

herself as transcendence: this means seeing which possibilities are opened to her by what are called virile and feminine attitudes. (60)

Frankie “alienates” herself in the same way that men alienate themselves: by metaphorically using their penis as a “graspable” thing outside themselves. By doing so, she feels her heart “dividing” into two. She is both herself and this alienated self that she can now conceptualize. But despite having achieved this process, which is intended to allow for sovereignty in the world, the passage also speaks to why Frankie’s establishing of her “we” ultimately fails to provide her the future she hopes for. De Beauvoir recounts how women are generally provided two alienations, playing as the man and playing as the woman, both of which will end in failure. So while Frankie has the foresight to see that trying to be overly tom-boyish, represented by her criminal acts and knife throwing, or overly feminine, represented by the girls’ club of which she wishes to be a member, will both be unsatisfying for her, she does not understand that her proposed solution—that is, “playing” at both man and woman by creating a hermaphroditic hybrid in the form of her brother and his wife—will also (and does) result in failure to achieve a subjective life marked by sovereignty. This creative solution to the problem of subjectivity she faces as a woman fails because she cannot “transcend” the system that she is trapped in, which is the solution that de Beauvoir identifies as the correct approach. Throughout the novel, Frankie fails to adopt “what are called virile and feminine attitudes,” which is why she is never able to come to terms with who she is and what she will do in the world. Another important problem Frankie faces is that the entity she has created in the form of the “we” is based on the volitions of others, meaning that the success of her plan relies on the

collusion of two people who are completely unaware of her desires and who have plans of their own. So it is no surprise that her entity ultimately falls apart.

Like Frankie's attempts to gain sovereignty through another source, one that possesses more freedom than she does, Regina, nearing the end of the first part of de Beauvoir's novel, does the same with Fosca. The sovereignty that Regina already possesses is not enough for her, and in her search for more, she decides that Fosca is the ultimate source of sovereignty, an interpretation he reaffirms on multiple occasions as he recounts his story: "there was nothing now to hold me back, neither remembrances, nor love, nor duty. I was above all laws, my own master, and I could dispose of puny human lives as I pleased, lives destined only for death. Under the formless sky, I drew myself up erect, felt myself alive and free, knew that I would forever be alone" (100). With no fear of death and decades to see his plans out, Fosca possesses sovereignty well beyond Regina's possibilities, and although at first she wants to fight this realization, she eventually accepts that she herself can never have Fosca's sovereignty. In her musings, she remarks, "'And if I, too, believed I were immortal? The perfume of the narcissus is immortal—and the fever that's swelling my lips. I am immortal.' [. . .] It was useless—death was in her. She knew it, and even now she awaited it expectantly. [. . .] 'One day I'll be old, dead, forgotten. And at this very moment, while I'm sitting here thinking these things, a man in a dingy hotel room is thinking, 'I will always be here'''" (28). So like Frankie, Regina turns Fosca into a kind of "we" by associating herself with him, desiring to "be" with him, in order to share his sovereignty as Frankie wishes to share her brother's sovereignty.

At the beginning of Part Two of *The Member of the Wedding*, we find Frankie has become a “new” person, and the narrator refers to her as F. Jasmine Addams, and like all the different names Frankie goes by in the novel, her new one is a strong statement about where she is at in her development. At the beginning of Part Two, we are told that “Because of the wedding, F. Jasmine felt connected with all she saw [. . .]. She walked the streets entitled as a queen and mingled everywhere. It was the day when, from the beginning, the world seemed no longer separate from herself and when all at once she felt included” (49). As the passage illustrates, F. Jasmine Addams displays a completely different outlook on her life and her place in it than the Frankie of Part One. This shift in outlook can be seen through her name change. The name Frankie is the nickname one might give a child, which is representative of the state Frankie feels trapped in during part one. It is marked by a lack of sovereignty and a separation from the adult world. Now she is going by F. Jasmine Addams, or sometimes F. Jasmine for short. The F. is a shortening of her childhood name that also works to mask her previous identity. The name Jasmine, as she recounts, is similar to the names of her brother Jarvis and sister-in-law Janice in that all start with a Ja- sound. So while tying her symbolically to Janice and Jarvice in an attempt to reaffirm the hermaphroditic entity she has created in her mind, the name is simultaneously soft and feminine, bringing to mind pleasant smells and allowing Frankie the freedom to present a womanly identity when needed. At the same time, Addams is a masculine name that her brother bears, and as she imagines earlier in the novel, it is the name most likely to be used if she were in a military setting, calling to mind sovereignty and allowing her a masculine identity as well as a feminine one. So while Frankie is a vague name when it comes to gender, she creates a new name that instead of being

ambiguous, purposely encompasses both genders separately while also tying her, Jarvis, and Janice together through the Ja- sound and last name they all share.

So equipped with a new name and the altered outlook that accompanies it, Frankie is ready to revisit the town that she has lived in all of her life. Among the places she visits in Part Two, one of the most fruitful for analysis is the Blue Moon, which she describes as “a place for holiday soldiers and the grown and free. The old Frankie had known she had no valid right to enter there, so she had only hung around the edges and never once had she gone inside. But now this morning before the wedding all of this was changed. The old laws she had known before meant nothing to F. Jasmine” (58). Specifically, Frankie names the Blue Moon as a place for the “free,” which reveals that the place has a symbolic meaning for her. Before, she had no “valid right to enter” because as a child, she met none of the requirements that the inn implied. But now the “old laws” “meant nothing” to the new her, revealing that she now meets the requirements. However, she is not a soldier or technically “grown,” so the implication is that she is free. Therefore, walking into the bar in itself is a strong statement that Frankie feels a new sense of sovereignty through her phallus substitute, and the fact that no one stops her or tells her to leave only reaffirms her newfound identity.

Frankie’s new name and phallus substitute have provided her a sense of sovereignty that she lacked previously, but these elements have also changed how she interacts with others. We are told that when looking at a soldier,

for the first time, F. Jasmine was not jealous. He might have come from New York or California—but she did not envy him. He might be on his way to England or India—she was not jealous. In the restless spring and

crazy summer she had watched the soldiers with a sickened heart, for they were the ones who came and went, while she was stuck there in the town for ever. But now, on this day before the wedding, all this was changed; her eyes as she looked into the soldier's eyes were clear of jealousy and want. Not only did she feel that unexplainable connection she was to feel between herself and other total strangers that day, there was another sense of recognition: it seemed to F. Jasmine they exchanged the special look of friendly, free travelers who meet for a moment at some stop along the way. (60)

Frankie no longer feels "jealousy and want" when she see others that have the sovereignty that she wishes for herself because she perceives herself as now having it. Why would she be jealous of someone who possesses the same freedom that she has? Another important element in this passage is the idea that she is exchanging a look between "friendly, free travelers." Frankie no longer has to concern herself with all the places that others travel, such as "New York or California," because she now views herself as just a traveler. The town is no longer her home where she has spent all the years of her life, the place where her family and loved ones reside; the town is now just a "stop along the way." All of the places she imagines soldiers going are places she could go with her new sense of sovereignty.

Frankie's response to being asked on a date by the soldier is a pause with a great deal of thought, and we are told "It took her a little while to come back to the wedding feeling of that morning" (74) because by asking her on a date, the soldier has shaken the foundation of F. Jasmine. His invitation is an acknowledgement that he does not see her

as a fellow traveler along the way or a strange conglomeration of male and female, but he views her solely as a woman, meaning she is once again vulnerable to the kind of objectifying sexual acts she experienced with Barney. Frankie is not completely conscious of the effect that the soldier's invitation has on her new self-image, and instead decides the hiccup in her feelings is just a product of the excitement of the Blue Moon. However, the experience directly following her encounter with the soldier reveals much about its actual impact.

As Frankie walks home and away from the soldier, she has an "accident" that "brought back the wedding frame of mind" (74). What Frankie actually sees is a couple of young black men in an alley engaged in an implied homosexual relationship, but because of what Frankie decides is "a mysterious trick of sight and the imagination," she decides it is actually a "picture of her brother and the bride" (75). But despite the fact that the vision put her back in the wedding frame of mind, it is ultimately not a positive experience for Frankie, who "was almost afraid" (75). Frankie's fear is a reaction to the actual image of the two young men, whose homosexuality makes her anxious about her own outsider status. This vision of her brother and the bride, however, is not just a trick of the light; it contains psychological significance for Frankie. The soldier's invitation shifts her out of her "we" and forces her to once again, even if only for a moment, view herself as a woman lacking sovereignty. As a result, she sees Janice and Jarvis outside herself. Frankie has worked hard to internalize a conception of her brother and sister-in-law that is beneficial to her, so to once again have to externalize them—to consider that they are not part of a collective including her but individuals far away—is what ultimately scares Frankie. However, this realization also puts her back into the wedding

frame of mind because it acts as a kind of wakeup call that forces Frankie to repair her phallus substitute in order to maintain the self-image that she has created. Frankie succeeds in doing so, though this is not the last time her new self-image will be challenged.

Similarly to Frankie, Regina's "we" is destined to fail her as well. Fosca has lived long enough to understand that Regina's attempt to live through him and base her self-image on how he perceives her will only be a tragedy, and he, like Berenice cautions Frankie, tries to warn her before her fall. Regina asks, "Fosca, is my life really unimportant in your eyes?" to which he replies, "You shouldn't ask me that question." The implication behind his response is that she will not like the answer, but the response also acts as an instruction. Fosca warns Regina not to ask him that question because her question implies that she is concerned about her self-worth in the eyes of another, instead of finding self-worth in her own actions and desires. This interpretation is supported by Fosca's follow-up, in which he argues that, "You shouldn't worry about what I think. That's a weakness" (57). Fosca berates Regina for her reliance on his conception of her, her "weakness," because he knows that she will never get from him what she wants. The fact that Regina is so absorbed in how others view her is a weakness in general, and on multiple occasions, Fosca questions her need for outside acknowledgements of her own value. Barbara Klaw agrees with this interpretation of the novel, arguing in "Intertextuality and Destroying the Myth of Woman in Simone de Beauvoir's *Tous Les Hommes Sont Mortels*" that "Beauvoir's plot teaches that for a woman to depend on a man for her ultimate rewards realistically ends in intense suffering" (n.p.). Ultimately,

though, Fosca sees no value in the lives of any mortal men or women. By basing her self-worth on his conception, Regina is also doomed to have her “we” fail to support her.

One of Berenice’s stories that catches Frankie’s attention is that of Lily Mae Jenkins, a man who falls in love with another man. According to Berenice, Lily Mae “changed his nature and his sex and turned into a girl” (81). The story immediately garners an intrigued reaction from Frankie, which makes sense. As a person who is currently constructing a dual-gendered personality for herself, the idea of a man being able to change his sex by will alone would be particularly interesting for Frankie because it implies that she could, under the right circumstances, change herself into a man, thus making her “we” a more concrete reality. Of course she does not understand the more complex sexual implications of Lily Mae’s story, but in it Frankie finds possibilities for her future, nor is this the only time that gender changes come up in Frankie’s life. During Berenice, John Henry, and Frankie’s summer discussions about what the “Creator” could have done better, one of the main tenets in Frankie’s “perfect world” is gender flexibility: “She planned it so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like they wanted” (97). While this switching of gender in Frankie’s world is the same kind of fantasy that she sees in Lily Mae’s story, the most important aspects to this declaration can be seen in its contrast to Berenice and John Henry’s statements on gender. Berenice—who is, as Barbara White suggests, “a completely man-oriented woman” (129)—argues that “the law of human sex was exactly right just as it was and could in no way be improved” (97). This belief is unacceptable to Frankie, who finds current gender definitions stifling. But more importantly, she also takes issue with John Henry’s idea that “people ought to be half boy and half girl” (98).

From her experience with the “Freaks” at the circus, Frankie understands that true hermaphroditism only results in being ostracized by society, and she responds to John Henry by suggesting he go live among the circus folk. Instead of being a true hermaphrodite, Frankie is searching for a system which allows her the flexibility to take advantage of the benefits of both genders and the privilege to be a woman when she feels like being a woman and a man when she feels like being a man. Such a system would allow her a greater amount of freedom. As Sarah Gleeson-White argues in “Revisiting the Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Case of Carson McCullers”: “McCullers’ portraits of grotesque adolescence challenge the very notion of female limits. A new account of the grotesque reveals that female adolescence might, rather, embody the possibility of endless metamorphosis; that is to say, the promise of childhood need not die out with Mick and Frankie’s entry into adulthood” (112). Frankie’s liminal state would allow her to continue changing as her needs change. However, as she leaves adolescence, this liminality will no longer be available to her, so her only recourse is to create such a system for herself in the form of the “we.”

The cerebral discussion of changing gender leads Berenice and Frankie into deeper discussions about the world and its constraints. And while they both come to the same conclusion, their way of describing the world is markedly different. Berenice decides that “We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don’t know why. [. . .] And maybe we wants to widen and bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught” (119). Berenice attempts to articulate the idea that society dictates most of our lives and makes demands of us. Frankie responds, “Yet at the same time you almost might use the word loose instead of caught. Although they are two opposite

words. I mean you walk around and you see all the people. And to me they look loose. [. . .] I mean you don't see what joins them up together. You don't know where they all came from, or where they're going to" (120). The fundamental difference between Frankie's "loose" and Berenice's "caught" is a matter of focus. Berenice is focused on each individual's conception of themselves. She argues that we, which in her slang refers to each person, might want to bust free. Frankie, on the other hand, is focused on those outside herself. She sees "all the people" and is concerned with knowing where they are from or going. Frankie expresses the fundamental existential understanding that people possess a freedom that makes knowing one another impossible. However, she also reveals a good deal about her mental state. Berenice is an older woman who has been married multiple times, and her focus on the individual mind suggests she has given up on the process of alienating herself in order to gain a bit of sovereignty in the world. Frankie, however, knows and acts on what de Beauvoir argues about how people understand possibilities: "Woman is not a fixed reality but a becoming; she has to be compared with man in her becoming; that is, her possibilities have to be defined: what skews the issues so much is that she is being reduced to what she was, to what she is today" (45). Frankie recognizes that women like men are not "fixed" but are actually a set of possibilities that have not been defined yet. The description of people as "loose" refers to their freedom to become something new at any moment, and that is a freedom she also wishes to have. However, a woman is also "being reduced to what she was, to what she is today." So despite the fact that Frankie is full of possibilities, those possibilities are "reduced" by society. And that is how, together, Frankie and Berenice come to an accurate understanding of reality: "People loose and at the same time caught. Caught and

loose” (121). The crux of their understanding is that everyone is imbued with an innate freedom and almost endless possibilities, but society restricts those possibilities, makes demands on people, and generally stifles those who want to break out, particularly women. Both of the women do not explicitly understand the important social criticism behind their words, but on an instinctual level they know that something prevents them from being what they might be, which is why Frankie struggles and rebels without understanding why.

The final important event that happens before the wedding is Frankie’s date with the soldier. In the presence of the soldier, she begins to feel the sovereignty he possesses as a male and a soldier, and it ultimately overshadows her own to the point of inaction: “F. Jasmine did not want to go upstairs, but she did not know how to refuse. It was like going into a fair booth, or fair ride, that once having entered you cannot leave until the exhibition or the ride is finished. Now it was the same with this soldier, this date. She could not leave until it ended. The soldier was waiting at the foot of the stairs and, unable to refuse, she followed after him” (135). Her powerless moment with the soldier reveals the weakness behind Frankie’s “we,” which does not appear powerful enough to sustain her when confronted with Others in the world. Like in her earlier encounter with the soldier, the wedding party has been pushed out of her mind along with any strength it might provide, and she is once again a child being led by the hand. However, she does perceive that something bad is about to happen to her.

As they sit in his room and he begins to make his sexual advances, the soldier takes on a different air for her. All of a sudden, “In the silent room he seemed to her unjoined and ugly. She could not see him any more in Burma, Africa, or Iceland, or even

for that matter in Arkansas. She saw him only as he sat there in the room” (136). At first, this change in perception may seem strange. Nothing about the soldier’s sovereignty has changed; he is still capable of going to all of those places and has likely traveled to some far-off locations. Yet now Frankie does not see him that way because she has stigmatized a lack of sovereignty to be a bad thing. Therefore, when she comes to understand that the soldier wants the same thing that Barney wanted from her—a connection that she makes mentally—she begins to associate him not with the positive, that is, sovereignty, but instead with a lack of it (136). She knows that her last sexual encounter had “humiliating” implications and ultimately reminded her of her lack of agency in the world. Escaping this situation is the final major scene before the wedding, and it acts as a harbinger to what will come in Part Three. Frankie’s “we” will not support her, the way it did not support her against the soldier, and in its absence we see a young woman realizing the true difficulty of escaping social norms.

The second section of de Beauvoir’s novel is much different from the first and serves a different purpose than the second part of McCullers’s novel. After Part One, the rest of the novel, up until the epilogue, is a narrative of Fosca’s life from childhood to the present, and aside from some minor interjections at the end of longer chapters in which she expresses a changing opinion about her devotion to Fosca, Regina is absent from much of the novel. However, a number of women very similar to Regina appear throughout Fosca’s narrative—strong-willed women that Fosca felt as though he loved above all others, felt that he would never forget. The purpose of this section in relation to Regina is to reveal how ultimately inconsequential she will be in Fosca’s life in the long run. Fosca understands that despite how he feels at any given moment, the feelings he has

for people always fade over time. This realization alone is enough to weaken Regina's "we" because even though earlier she wished to compete with Fosca's past and future loves in order to distinguish herself in his mind, his narrative reveals that no such competition exists, that none of his loves remain in some sort of prominent position—that they all erode with time. As this unsettling realization sets in, Regina wants to avoid the complete collapse of the support system she has built up around Fosca, asking that he not continue with his story. Fosca refuses to stop, though, insisting that it must be finished, and by the time he is done, Regina is in a worse position than she was when she began.

Part Three of *The Member of the Wedding* begins with the newly-renamed Francis in a completely different mental state. Whereas earlier she wanted to know "everyone" in the world, now "She was against every single person, even strangers in the crowded bus, [. . .]. Herself she hated the worst of all, and she wanted the whole world to die" (144). Frankie's mind has switched from wanting collusion to wanting solidarity, and by doing so, she is now in the process of "Othering" people. Frankie even considers the colored people on the bus "niggers" despite never using the word before. Essentially because her system of collusion failed, Frankie has decided to try gaining her sovereignty on her own, but as many women before her have found, this is a difficult path to take. As she wanders around the town, she desperately tries to rebuild that sustaining force in her life. She looks for anyone to align herself with, even thinking, "If she had not killed the soldier, then when she found him what could she say? [. . .] suddenly it seemed she might as well ask the soldier to marry with her, and then the two of them could go away" (155). The fact that she is now willing to marry the soldier who she nearly killed earlier reveals her new mindset, in that she hopes that through marriage she might find some sovereignty.

Her search devolves to the point that she is even willing to be with John Henry if for no other reason than she will no longer be alone (154).

Sitting alone in the Blue Moon, Frankie is approached by “the Law,” and she does not resist. Her complete submission to the police officer is representative of her finally giving up and accepting the life she has been dealt, a life without sovereignty. The officer, as a representation of the pact society agrees to live by, subdues her with nothing more than a mere presence because she understands that “once arrested, it was a bad policy to lie or trifle” (156-157), a powerful metaphor for the social norms she faces and will continue to face in life. As a woman, Frankie was born arrested by society, and only now is she beginning to accept that. As the officer questions her, she begins to feel that “Between herself and all the places there was a space like an enormous canyon she could not hope to bridge or cross. The plans for the movies or the Marines were only child plans that would never work” (157). Frankie now sees a huge gap between herself and the places she would like to go. She finally comprehends her lack of sovereignty, that society will never sanction her to travel as she wishes to travel or live as she wishes to live. It will ask her politely but firmly to settle down and start a family. The fact that she truly comprehends this now is expressed through her disappointment with not being arrested: “she would not be carried to the jail. In a way she was sorry. It was better to be in a jail where you could bang the walls than in a jail you could not see” (157). If Frankie were put in jail, she could protest in a way that forced people to notice her, but when she tries to “bang the walls” of the jail that society has placed her in, she is simply brushed aside. This final plea for a means to protest reveals Frankie’s overwhelmingly helpless state,

and the novel's resolution reveals Frankie's eventual acceptance of her expected role as a woman in society.

Frankie's impotence after the collapse of her "we" is mirrored in Regina, though her desire to continue fighting for her sovereignty is a big difference to the Regina we find at the end of de Beauvoir's novel. Her realization that Fosca does not carry some transcendental concept of those women he has loved in the past, even those he cared for above all others, crushes her dreams of being carried into eternity by the devotion of an immortal man, which he affirms at the end of the novel by shrugging his shoulders at the question of what she will mean to him, then stating, "It will come to an end" (344). But even beyond that, Fosca's story has caused Regina to question whether she can actually achieve any kind of meaning with her existence. As he walks away from her,

for a moment it seemed to her that the sorcery with which he had stripped her of her being was leaving with him. [. . .] He disappeared, but she remained the same as he had made her—a blade of grass, a gnat, an ant, a bit of foam. She looked around her; perhaps there was a way out. Furtive as the beating of an eyelid, something lightly grazed her heart; it was not even a hope, and even that quickly vanished. [. . .] She was defeated. In horror, in terror, she accepted the metamorphosis—gnat, foam, ant, until death. *And it's only the beginning*, she thought. (345)

After hearing how inconsequential the many people in Fosca's story were, even those accomplishing great things, Regina cannot view herself as anything more than minor creations. In contrast to Frankie, who eventually accepts the sovereignty that she owns at the beginning of the book, realizing that she may never gain more, Regina actually

experiences a reduction. Whereas at the beginning of the novel she is a famous and powerful actress, at the end she is “an ant, a bit of foam.” She has quit the world of acting and alienated the people who could make her famous again, but beyond that, the self-confidence and strong-will she began the novel with is drowned under a tidal wave of meaninglessness. By the final lines of the novel, Regina’s creation of a “we” and its failure has literally left her screaming, unable to respond in any other way to the circumstances before her. While Frankie laments not being able to protest her jail, Regina, now in the same jail, also does not know how to protest, instead choosing the most primal response.

The Member of the Wedding ends with Frankie making a new friend, Mary Littlejohn, and becoming obsessed with “Michelangelo and poetry” (160). At the same time, we find Berenice torn apart by legal trouble concerning Honey Brown, and John Henry passes away. Ironically, the two people who were more likely contenders for a “we” to Frankie—those who supplied far more support and understanding during her difficult time than Jarvis and Janice ever did—have fallen away, and from what the novel provides, Frankie fails to support them the way they supported her. She prefers not to think about the suffering that John Henry goes through, and whenever Berenice brings up her problems with her family, Frankie changes the subject. And in these last pages we see the extent to which Frankie changes after the wedding, entering into what Katherine Bell asserts is “a fixed sexuality and gender role” (“Grotesque Encounters” 71). She has accepted this new life with her friend, reading poetry and looking at pretty artwork. She is living the life that society expects a young girl to lead, or, as Robert Brinkmeyer asserts, she lives by “happily accepting her designated place in the cultural order” (qtd. in

Mass n.p.), without the same thoughtfulness or sensitivity that she showed earlier in the novel. The novel is ultimately the tale of a young girl who tries to live as a more sovereign woman and comes up against a system that she cannot fight. However, the fact that she gives up is not a sign of weakness on Frankie's part, and in truth reveals a great deal of bravery. Throughout the novel, she dreams of being a soldier, not realizing that like the jail cell that confines her, she is fighting a war that she cannot see.

Both Frankie and Regina are warned against basing their self-images on others, yet both do so anyway. The circumstances of the novels and the respective endings both reflect the goals of the authors. McCullers's novel reveals the effect of obsession on a life. Like most women, Frankie eventually settles on what sovereignty she can obtain and tries to live a meaningful life under an unfair patriarchal system. De Beauvoir, on the other hand, wishes to reveal how the meaninglessness of life can affect a woman's desire for sovereignty, and she utilizes the fantastic story of Fosca as an extreme example of the existential conception of existence. But despite their differences, both authors go about achieving their goals through similar means—by allowing their female leads to create systems of reliance on the sovereignty of others. The fact that neither story ends with a woman successfully negotiating a satisfying existence could be taken as a weakness, but as Helene Peters states in *The Existential Woman* (1991), “existential literature is not in the business of producing models for people—men or women—to live by” (146). Instead, they often present how not to live, and the benefit of this approach is that it allows women to find their own subjective path to a satisfactory existence, as de Beauvoir prescribes in her philosophy: women should strive to obtain “virile and feminine attitudes” (60).

In addition to the works already discussed, one more of McCullers's novels deserves a brief examination here, though not necessarily through de Beauvoir's philosophy. *Clock Without Hands* (1961) stands as one of her less critically-read novels, yet arguably provides more to work with existentially than her other novels, and Oliver Evans asserts in "The Achievement of Carson McCullers" that "the 'existential crisis,' indeed, is at the very center of [*Clock Without Hands*]" (28). The main character, J. T. Malone, is dying of cancer, and his coming to terms with his impending death and attempting to find value in his life becomes the central focus of the novel. McCullers describes the titular metaphor concerning Malone thusly:

For the first time he knew that death was near him. But the terror that choked him was not caused by the knowledge of his own death. The terror concerned some mysterious drama that was going on—although what the drama was about Malone did not know. The terror questioned what would happen in those months—how long?—that glared upon his numbered days. He was a man watching a clock without hands. (25)

Malone's situation seems singular because of his cancer, yet his circumstances are the same as all of mankind's. We will all die eventually, and we really do not know when. Malone's circumstances make him keenly aware of this fact. He is not afraid of his "own death" but obsesses about the "drama" leading up to death. In existential terms, Malone is worried about his freedom, what he will choose to make of himself, if anything, during his final days. And the metaphor of a clock without hands reflects this uncertainty about life that everyone experiences. We are all heading toward death, our time ticking away. We cannot see how this drama will play out—cannot read our futures—so we fret about

what we might be. This metaphor presents one of the fundamental existential concerns, and McCullers purposely and explicitly discusses this occurrence, which she hints at through the novel's details.

Clock Without Hands is a unique book because the main character actually reads a non-fictional existential text. About halfway through the novel, Malone comes across a copy of Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*, which he reads because the title seems particularly relevant to him. His interest in the book grows and fades, but one passage sticks with him: "*The greatest danger, that of losing one's own self, may pass off quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc., is sure to be noticed*" (147). This passage is a particularly important one for Kierkegaard's philosophy, and over the course of the book Malone comes to understand that it applies directly to him: "There was no particular time when he asked, 'Is this all there is of life?' but as he grew older he asked it wordlessly. No, he had not lost an arm, or a leg, or any particular five dollars, but little by little he had lost his own self" (149). Malone realizes that in the drudgery of his everyday life, he has forgotten who he really wanted to be. This realization is one that many people might come to, and McCullers accurately presents it as one that usually occurs in the face of death.

It becomes clear that McCullers's work is explicitly existential in nature, but she has solicited far less scholarship on her ties to existentialism than some of the other major authors mentioned here. The fact that she lived in France during the rise of existentialism but had published before places her in a position to be studied not only for what she offered to the existentialists but also what she decided to take away from them for her own writing. Her work is far from exhausted in terms of study, and even *Clock Without*

Hands offers a number of other possible paths of study, including the Judge's often hypocritical perspectives on death and religion, represented by the statement, "In fact, no one on this earth knows what death is really about" (172), or Sherman's decision to move to a white neighborhood, thus rejecting social norms about race and instead deciding to make a statement about his true value, similar to Warwick in *House Behind the Cedars*.

CHAPTER IV: FAULKNER AND CAMUS

“‘The laws of nature,’ says the engineer, ‘made Christ live in the midst of falsehood and die for a falsehood.’ Solely in this sense Jesus indeed personifies the whole human drama. He is the complete man, being the one who realized the most absurd condition. He is not the God-man but the man-god. And, like him, each of us can be crucified and victimized—and is to a certain degree” (580). This passage from Camus’s essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” presents the crux of Camus’s philosophy of the absurd.¹ Camus, an atheist, is not actually criticizing Jesus in this passage, and instead actually argues he is a “hero” in the same form that Sisyphus takes on. In Camus’s explanation of the text he is analyzing, Jesus knows he is not the son of God even though he claims he is, thus living his life in “falsehood.” However, despite preaching peace and goodwill toward one’s fellow human beings, he is executed in a torturous, painful manner. The irony of the event speaks to the absurdity of the universe, and Jesus’s willingness to go along with his undue punishment speaks to a worldview that Camus outlines later in the essay. As Camus presents it, Jesus could have cried out and admitted that he was not the son of God and possibly been set free, but he does not, instead choosing to accept his fate. Jesus understands that this is the way of the world, that people are “victimized” for no reason, and his acceptance likens him to Sisyphus.

Camus describes Sisyphus pushing the rock, and as it returns to the bottom, says, “It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. [. . .] I see that man going

¹ In “Camus’ American Affinities,” Lehan also draws attention to this passage from “The Myth of Sisyphus,” arguing that “Given this common world view, it is not surprising that characters such as Camus’ Meursault and Faulkner’s Joe Christmas should become avatars of the absurd. Both are inverted Christ figures—not God-Man but man-god” (263).

back down with a heavy yet measured step towards the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments, when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock" (591). This passage explains why the atheist Camus speaks so highly of Jesus: Jesus, slowly "stepping toward" his torment, has become "stronger than his rock," or in this case, cross. This acceptance of an absurd universe is an admirable trait according to Camus, and it is precisely this trait that he captures beautifully in *The Stranger*. Meursault's acceptance of his approaching execution, while making him a symbolic Christ-figure, also reveals how this theory that has been applied to gods affects the average person, reveals how "each of us" is "crucified" to a "certain degree." But Meursault was not the first to be punished this way in modern fiction, nor was he the first to come to a realization about the absurd nature of the universe. Years earlier, William Faulkner was exploring this same theme in a different context through Joe Christmas in *Light in August*.

Aside from having a name intended to invoke thoughts of Christ, Joe Christmas's experiences are strikingly similar to Meursault's, and both books seem to work toward the same goal outlined by Camus in *The Rebel*: "Our purpose is to find out whether innocence, the moment it becomes involved in action, can avoid committing murder" (4). Meursault and Christmas are estranged from the life they live in, finding it difficult to make meaning from the random jumble of personal connections they make with people. Both commit a murder in which their role in it, i.e. whether or not it is self defense, can be called into question not only by those around them but by the characters themselves

and the readers who are taking part in the characters' experiences. Both are put to death (though Meursault's is implied by the ending of the novel) only after coming to some sort of acceptance of their fates and feeling a healthy amount of scorn for those people who are capable of living the life they cannot. More important than the similarity of certain plot elements, however, is how the characters actually get to the mental states they find themselves in at the ends of their respective novels. Essentially the two characters live their lives as Camus recounts in his essay: "This very heart which is mine will for ever 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. For ever I shall be a stranger to myself" (508). Neither character is ever able to be comfortable with his place in the world and who he is, though Meursault decides he is happy with who he is whereas Joe Christmas only comes to accept who he is. By studying the two books intertextually, it is possible to understand how human nature reacts to the absurdity of the universe and how, as Meursault says after being imprisoned for killing the Arab, "familiar paths traced in summer skies could lead as easily to prison as to the sleep of the innocent" (97).

In "Faulkner from a European Perspective," Andre Bleikasten asks, "Did Faulkner's novels not somehow exceed the occasion of their birth, how could they have won recognition in France and be admired by Malraux and Sartre (two writers on the left, neither of whom was an expert on the South) long before they were taken seriously in Faulkner's own country?" The answer to this question lies in this existentialist reading of his texts. Definitely ahead of their time, Faulkner's novels appealed to the French because in them was a kernel of thought that while present in America, had not yet

surfaced here. Yet the French found it immediately and returned it to America in the form of existentialism. Bleikasten goes on to posit that

Faulkner's novels possess an enduring power beyond the culture out of which they arose and even beyond the language in which they were written, [. . .]. So instead of reading Faulkner *into* American contexts, why not read him out of them for a change? [. . .] The time has come, I think, for a broader and more distant perspective, allowing us to relate him, beyond regional and national boundaries—and through informed comparison rather than pious clichés—to twentieth-century novelists of equal rank on both sides of the Atlantic” (78).

This reading will attempt, through “informed comparison,” to provide a perspective on Faulkner often hinted at, sometimes discussed, but never fully detailed.

Among the American authors of the early twentieth century, Faulkner had perhaps the most widespread and overwhelmingly positive response from the French writers who came along in the following decades. Faulkner was admired by Camus and other figures of the existential movement such as Sartre, and John Couch explains that “With the exception of Melville, [. . .] Faulkner is the only other American novelist to be singled out by Camus for consistent praise” (122) and J. Giorgini adds that Camus “was possibly the most qualified to understand Faulkner’s message” in Europe (75). In his various essays on Faulkner, Camus says, “French readers know that contemporary American literature has no better nor more effective ambassador among us” (“Foreword to *Requiem for a Nun*” 311), “I like and I admire Faulkner; I believe I understand him rather well” (“Three Interviews” 317), and “I consider [him] the greatest American novelist” (“Three

Interviews” 319). Camus’s admiration for Faulkner suggests a kindred spirit, one who “understands.” At the same time, in his biography of Faulkner, Joseph Blotner explains that early in his career Faulkner stated “he did not know the work of Sartre and Camus. His feeling about some aspects of the human condition was nonetheless close to theirs. ‘Man is free, and he is responsible, terribly responsible,’ he said,” yet at the same time, he disagreed with their atheism, stating it was wrong to “do away with God” (563). Toward the end of Faulkner’s career, he met Camus at a public event, who he then “admired,” but “by the time he was introduced, the line had already taken its toll,” and Faulkner “merely shook his hand. Camus sadly withdrew” (611). Finally, upon Camus’s untimely death, Faulkner contributed a laudatory piece to *The New French Review* in his honor (678). However, despite the fact that both authors admitted that they found a kinship of ideas in the other, some scholars such as Frederick Hoffman have argued that Camus borrowed nothing from the American modernists aside from form (40), a statement which ignores the long history between the two authors.

However, before looking at *Light in August* and *The Stranger*, it is beneficial to look at how some of the existential themes appear and develop in other works by Faulkner, specifically *Sanctuary* (1931).² Among Faulkner’s major novels, all of which contain existential elements to some degree, *Sanctuary* explores the idea of absurd punishment thoroughly. However, after looking at what the trials of both Lee and Popeye

² According to M. Thomas Inge’s “Popular-Culture Criticism” from *A Companion to Faulkner Studies*, *Sanctuary* was Camus’s favorite Faulkner novel (273). This fact coupled with it being one of the first Faulkner novels available to Camus means its possible influence is higher than any of Faulkner’s later novels. According to Maurice Edgar Coindreau, Faulkner was introduced to France in 1931, predating most all of the major existentialist texts.

present to the reader, it becomes clear that the novel is not as appropriate as the pairing chosen for the intertextual reading in this chapter.

Many of the same themes are explored in *Sanctuary* as in *Light in August*, though their execution and lack of consistent treatment throughout the novel ultimately make it less useful than the story of Joe Christmas. While minor connections can be made early on, *Sanctuary* does not really become relevant to an absurdist reading until a hundred pages into the novel when Temple Drake is raped and kidnapped by Popeye. During the rape scene, Temple Drake displays a reaction similar to that of Meursault and Joe Christmas: “she began to say Something is going to happen to me. She was saying it to the old man with the yellow clots for eyes. ‘Something is happening to me!’” (102). This characterizing of events as “happening to me,” removing oneself from agency and instead suggesting a fatalistic worldview, is something both Meursault and Christmas state in relation to their respective climactic scenes. However, the difference lies in the execution. Meursault and Christmas both speak of a “happening” in premonition of receiving an absurd punishment from the universe. Temple, however, is not tried by a court for a crime she did not commit; instead, she experiences the evil present in the world that she was not aware of before. This alternate version of absurd punishment, while appropriate for the subject of *Sanctuary*, does not express the same themes as in the two novels paired here.

After the murder of Tommy and the kidnapping of Temple Drake, Lee is taken into custody for the murders, and his circumstances are very similar to both Meursault’s and Christmas’s. He argues, “Let them prove I did it. Tommy was found in the barn, shot from behind. Let them find the pistol. I was there, waiting. I didn’t try to run. I could

have, but I didn't. It was me notified the sheriff" (132). Like Meursault, Lee believes that his innocence is obvious and is taken in without resistance. However, Lee's reasoning here is different than that of Joe or Meursault in that instead of accepting the absurd punishment, Lee turns himself in because he is afraid of Popeye, who he believes will shoot him through the windows of the courthouse. Horace, however, tries to explain to Lee that fear is not a valid reason to obstruct justice; Lee states, "If it was a stall, don't common sense tell you I'd have invented a better one?" to which Horace replies, "You're not being tried by common sense, [. . .] You're being tried by a jury" (132). Unlike Lee, Horace seems to understand the absurdity of the world—that just because something makes sense or is fair does not mean that it will come to pass. Lee's trial is an even more startling case than either Meursault's or Christmas's, since he honestly had no hand in the murder of Tommy whereas Meursault and Christmas actually did kill someone. Lee's trial is still an accurate representation of the absurdity of the universe because the grounds on which he is tried are the same as those used against Meursault and Christmas.

Neither Joe nor Meursault is tried on fair terms. Joe is sentenced for his race without a proper judicial process and Meursault is condemned for not crying at his mother's funeral, and similar circumstances plague Lee's trial as well. After his arrest, Horace comments, "You should hear them down town. This morning, the Baptist minister took him for a text. Not only as a murderer, but as an adulterer; a polluter of the free Democratico-Protestant atmosphere of Yoknapatawpha county" (128). Lee's case is tainted by public rumor and speculation instead of the actual facts, just as Meursault is sentenced for circumstantial evidence. However, on the actual day of the trial, the evidence provided takes a different turn. Temple shows up, looking purposely made-up

and “her gaze fixed on something at the back of the room” (284), presumably Popeye or one of Popeye’s henchmen. She proceeds to report that Lee shot Tommy and raped her with a corn cob, both of which the reader knows are untrue. Thus, the novel does present an accurate portrayal of absurd punishment. While to the jury, Lee’s guilt looks obvious based on the testimony of Temple, the reader understands that he is sentenced to a crime he did not commit and the prosecution could not prove, yet his fate is sealed by a brutalized woman committing perjury to protect her actual attacker.

In addition to the circumstances of his trial, other similarities are present. Like Christmas and Meursault, Lee seems to accept his absurd punishment passively, stating, “I’m sick of it. I’m going to get it over with. Just tell the goddamned deputy not to walk too close to me” (279). However, closer inspection suggests that this circumstance also differs from what is going on in *Light in August* and *The Stranger*. While Lee passively accepts death, he does not accept that the world will put him to death for a crime he did not commit; instead, he accepts Popeye killing him, which he views as inevitable. Although still fatalistic in nature, it becomes clear that Lee is not the “conscious” absurd hero that Camus defines in “The Myth of Sisyphus,” making a true comparison of *Sanctuary* and Camus’s work more difficult than with *Light in August*.

Lee’s trial is the main absurd punishment of the novel, but Faulkner also provides a second instance in *Sanctuary* in order to emphasize the main plot. In the final chapter of the novel, we learn that

While he [Popeye] was on his way home that summer they arrested him for killing a man in one town and at an hour when he was in another town killing somebody else—that man who made money and had nothing he

could do with it, spend it for, since he knew that alcohol would kill him like poison, who had no friends and had never known a woman and knew he could never—and he said, “For Christ’s sake,” looking about the cell in the jail of the town where the policeman had been killed. (309-310)

In this passage, Faulkner accomplishes two main goals. One, he expresses the extent to which Popeye’s punishment is absurd. While he is not completely innocent—he has killed a man and not paid for it—he is punished for a crime he is actually innocent of. A common exclamation, his response to the trial (one which he repeats once sentenced), also appropriately invokes “Christ’s sake,” a reference to absurd punishment, which reflects Popeye’s current situation. The second goal Faulkner accomplishes in this passage is an explanation of how meaningless the life that Popeye lives is. He can find no use for his money and gains no joy from anything he does, and this meaninglessness is likely why he reacts the way he does during his trial.

Popeye’s trial, like Meursault’s and Christmas’s, is conducted by people who are disconnected from him as a person and results in an absurd outcome. We are told that “The trial lasted one day” and “The jury was out eight minutes. They stood and looked at him and said he was guilty” (311-312). And Popeye reacts to this absurd punishment as do the other two characters. During the trial and sentencing, we are told “He took it—Did you see how he took it? like he might be listening to a song he was too lazy to either like or dislike, and the Court telling him on what day they were going to break his neck” (312). More than Lee, Popeye seems to understand the absurdity of the universe and accepts it passively, most likely due to the meaningless life that he has lived up until this point. Even when help comes from Memphis to try to save him, he rejects it, which

prompts the questions, “Do you want to hang? Is that it? Are you trying to commit suicide?” (314). The townspeople wonder the same thing about Joe Christmas when he allows himself to be caught without a fight, suggesting they share a conception of the meaninglessness of struggling to escape the “machinery,” as Meursault calls it. Instead, Popeye asserts, “I’m all right,” affirming that he has accepted his fate. And like Meursault, he refuses to pray with the minister sent to him, likely suggesting that he also does not need to attach external meaning to his death. A strong argument for viewing Popeye as one of Camus’s absurd heroes can be made but his status as such is in question. He accepts the absurdity of the universe and the punishment he receives because of it. He does so passively, similar to either Meursault or Christmas. However, one could also argue that the punishment he receives is not really absurd since he actually deserves to be tried for murder in this way, though one could make the same argument for Joe’s accidental killing of his adopted father, Sam McEachern. In the end, what really makes it difficult to say one way or the other is that we do not get inside Popeye’s head the way we do Meursault or Christmas, and without understanding his motivations, it becomes difficult to know if he acts in response to an absurd universe or a completely different worldview altogether.

According to McCorquodale’s “Alienation in Yoknapatawpha County,” the reason *Light in August*, is, more so than Faulkner’s other novels, suited to an existential reading is that the novel is “a particular instance by means of which an abstract idea is given form and substance” (7). In *Light in August*, Faulkner sets up numerous characters with parallel storylines, and along these separate stories the theme of an absurd universe reappears in different, though connected, forms. Byron Bunch, after being asked about

Joe's name and whether he had ever heard anyone else with the name, thinks for the first time

how a man's name, which is supposed to be just the sound for who he is, can be somehow an augur of what he will do, if other men can only read the meaning in time. It seemed to him that none of them had looked especially at the stranger until they heard his name. But as soon as they heard it, it was as though there was something in the sound of it that was trying to tell them what to expect; that he carried with him his own inescapable warning, like a flower its scent or a rattlesnake its rattle. (33)

Here, Byron manages to introduce Christmas's character with little actual physical description and without getting into his head. The name Christmas obviously invokes Christ's birth and the purpose behind it: to sacrifice himself and be tortured for all of man's sins.³ A common name, Joe, however, invokes an everyman comparison, and when combined with Christmas the name seems to represent a common-man Christ,⁴ with no lofty implications as a divine entity, but instead as just some random "Joe." Like Christ, Joe will sacrifice himself and endure torture, but unlike Christ, his death will not redeem mankind but damn it instead—damn it for its racism, violence, and cruelty.

Likewise, this concept is strengthened by the rest of Byron's musing. He thinks that the

³ In a University of Virginia interview, Faulkner attempts to downplay the connection between Christmas and Christ, and while he says he did not *intend* to use Christmas as a Christ symbol, the "Christ story is one of the best stories that man has invented, assuming that he did invent that story, and of course it will recur. [. . .] There was no deliberate intent to repeat it. That the people to me come first. The symbolism comes second" (Minter *Twentieth Century Interpretations* 93-94)

⁴ In *Faulkner's Heroic Design: The Yoknapatawpha Novels*, Lynn Gartrell Levins likens Christmas to Job, which is an apt comparison. A strong argument can be made that Job suffers absurd punishment, but as far as I am aware, Camus never named him as such. However, the connection here reveals the way in which this conversation between literature and philosophy and go back and forth, offering new insights on both sides.

name is meant to “tell them what to expect” and that it is his own “inescapable warning.” These thoughts suggest a kind of inevitability. However, in this context the warning is less likely to concern fate and is more likely a product of an absurd universe. Joe’s outcome at the end of the novel is “inescapable” because the universe is absurd and all men attend some kind of fate similar to Christmas’s, which is what makes him a tragic hero by John Lewis Longley’s definition. In *The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner’s Heroes* (1963), Longley argues that “In a cosmos where all is chaos and all standards have disappeared, [the tragic hero] will very likely be destroyed as a result of his failure to define himself correctly in relation to that cosmos” (193). Longley’s tragic hero is very similar to the absurd hero, who, because the world has no “standards” or objective meaning, will likely be destroyed, which is exactly what happens to Christmas.

This idea of the protagonist as part of some grand scheme of fate that has been decided since before the beginning of the novel is present in Camus’s novel as well. During Meursault’s final rant to the chaplain, he argues that

Throughout the whole absurd life I’d lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was living. What did other people’s deaths or a mother’s love matter to me; what did his God or the lives people choose or the fate they think they elect matter to me when we’re all elected by the same fate. (121)

Like the “inescapable warning” implied by Christmas’s name, Meursault also claims that a fate was prepared for him, but that it also applies to everyone else in the world. In this

way Camus's Meursault is more perceptive than Byron in that when he sees someone bound by fate, he knows that same fate, the "absurd life," belongs to everyone, not just that individual. So where Byron can accurately foresee that absurd punishment will befall Joe Christmas, he is willing to look past the absurdity of chasing Lena Grove, a woman that will have nothing to do with him. Essentially, this difference in what characters understand and can articulate is a difference in the goals of the authors. Camus wants a protagonist who possesses the clarity to present his philosophy of the absurd to the world while being real and vibrant; Faulkner wishes to reveal the common man's life, where small moments of insight happen but are rarely pieced together into a coherent philosophy or enlightenment.

Byron is able to make some astute judgments about the nature of Joe Christmas's character just from hearing and pondering his name. While watching a conversation between Brown and Christmas, Byron realizes that when Brown speaks, he is "telling to the man who did not even seem to hear his voice. As if the other were a mile away, or spoke a different language from the one he knew" (40). Despite the social situation and a conversation with another person, Christmas appears to be withdrawn and unconcerned with that social world. In "The Stillness of *Light in August*" Alfred Kazin says of Christmas, "from the moment he appears, he is seen as what others say about him, he is only a thought in other people's minds. More than this, he is looked at always from a distance, as if he were not quite human, which in many ways he is not" (523). Kazin's characterization is similar to that of Meursault throughout *The Stranger*, though the comparison poses some difficult problems. At this point in Faulkner's novel, we still have not entered the mind of Joe Christmas and only see him through the eyes of others.

However, the entirety of Camus's novel is rendered from the perspective of Meursault, and while other characters do speak to their perception of Meursault, they do so toward the end of the novel during Meursault's trial, calling into question the accuracy of their statements (as his friends, they are trying to help him avoid punishment). However, judging by the verbal responses Meursault gives to others, as when Marie asks if he loves her and he responds, "it didn't mean anything but that I didn't think so" (35), it is safe to say that from an outside observer, he would be viewed like Christmas: a bit disjointed from that social world he is part of.

It would be possible to argue that, since none of the other characters in the novel seems to have any problem with the way Meursault communicates, or at least none of them acknowledges it, that he actually appears as a socially healthy person, but Alice Strange makes a strong case that these characters, such as Marie and Raymond, act "out of a self-interest which the reader does not share. They initiate the important exchanges with Meursault and choose to ignore replies that they do not wish to hear, while Meursault's failure to disagree with them is taken as assent" (38). This argument coupled with Meursault's presentation of his own actions and words supports his own disinterest in almost any aspect of the world beyond the physical. So in the end, neither Joe nor Meursault outwardly expresses a great deal of interest in the world around him, which becomes relevant as the novels progress.

People commenting on the character of Meursault also seem to find him, like Christmas, an enigma. Even his friends, who are called upon to testify for his defense, provide only surface-level interpretations of his character, calling him, "a friend" and an "honest man" (92-94). When pressed by the prosecutor for more details as to just what is

meant by “friend” or these other terms, his friends can only reply in ambiguities, saying things like “everybody knew what that meant” (92). And if his friends, who have known him for months or even years in some cases, have such trouble presenting his character to a courtroom, it is not surprising that Meursault is eventually convicted based on the court’s misinterpretation of who he is. In “The Verdict on Meursault,” J. McCann argues that “the trial is an attempt to prove that Meursault is immoral rather than amoral—a person who has turned from God rather than one whose act disproves the latter’s existence” (56). McCann’s argument seems astute, as the judge who brings Meursault in for initial questioning begins calling him the Antichrist, and the prosecutor, after judging the “soul” of the man, claims that “he had peered into it and that he had found nothing, gentlemen of the jury. He said the truth was that I didn’t have a soul and that nothing human, not one of the moral principles that govern men’s hearts was within my reach” (101). Finally, the prosecutor ends by recounting “the horror I feel when I look into a man’s face and all I see is a monster” (102).

Almost all of this interpretation is based on circumstantial evidence, namely that Meursault did not cry at his mother’s funeral and went on a date with Marie the next day, choosing to watch a comedy. All of these actions present Meursault as incapable of empathy, which of course is not true, though some scholars, such as David Sprintzen, still remark that he “shows no sign of sharing normal human feelings” (23). In actuality, Meursault shows genuine emotion at numerous points in the novel; he just displays an alternate conception of death and a relationship with his mother that defies societal expectations. Additionally, the way Meursault lives causes this sense of disconnect. When the prosecutor accuses him of feeling no remorse for his actions, Meursault thinks,

“Of course, I couldn’t help admitting that he was right. I didn’t feel much remorse for what I’d done. But I was surprised by how relentless he was. I would have liked to have tried explaining to him cordially, almost affectionately, that I had never been able to truly feel remorse for anything. My mind was always on what was coming next, today or tomorrow” (100). Meursault does not feel remorse for killing the Arab, does not feel remorse for anything, but it is not because he is a heartless monster. He simply lives in the moment, not looking back on the past because he must always make the decisions that define him, and since one feels remorse for events from the past, it is not an emotion that comes naturally to him. Thus, because his worldview does not match society’s, he seems disconnected from reality (a completely unfair claim), which is how society characterizes Joe Christmas as well.

Unlike in Faulkner’s work, most of our initial characterization of Camus’s protagonist comes through his own words and actions, and at times Meursault can be a difficult person to understand. As Rene Girard says in “Camus’s Stranger Retried,” Meursault is “a stranger to the sentiments of other men. Love and hatred, ambition and envy, greed and jealousy are equally foreign to him” (519). He is the kind of person who accepts his given circumstances with little protest, nor does he generally view the world as unfair or make complaints. He appreciates the status quo, and after thinking about it, decides that “anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed” (24). Despite the fact that he would later say he would “rather Maman hadn’t died” (65), he still views her death as having little consequence on his day-to-day drudgery. She is in a home and detached from his life, so her absence has not altered things much, which is what he prefers. When

considered for a new, more lucrative job, he rejects his boss's offer, stating, "I would rather not have upset him, but I couldn't see any reason to change my life. Looking back on it, I wasn't unhappy. When I was a student, I had lots of ambitions like that, but when I had to give up my studies I learned very quickly that none of it really mattered" (41). Ostensibly, he seems to be a person who has given up on life, though he asserts that he is "like everybody else, just like everybody else" (66). While Meursault does act as an everyman—the "workman of today" that Camus describes in "The Myth of Sisyphus," who goes about his life pointlessly pushing a stone up a hill without ever being truly conscious of it—Meursault is actually unique in terms of his worldview. The biggest difference between Meursault and "everyone else" is that he understands that his choices do not have some great meaning attached to them, that one decision is just as good as another to the absurd universe: "It was then that I realized that you could either shoot or not shoot," and that "To stay or to go, it amounted to the same thing" (56-57). This trait of Meursault, however, is not really shared by Joe Christmas. While on the outside, Joe does not always seem to care about what happens, or think it particularly important, we see when he begins narrating the story that he attaches great significance to the actions that he and others take. Given the difference between the two characters, the fact that they both ultimately come to many of the same conclusions is indicative of the inescapable absurd universe. No matter how one attempts to approach life, the conclusion is always meaninglessness.

But before Faulkner ever puts his reader into the head of Joe Christmas, we are given a preview of the theme that he (and Camus later) would explore in *Hightower*, who would appear to be a victim to be sympathized with, but the town does not view him with

sympathy. He is eventually put out of his position in the church and asked to leave the town, which he refuses to do. In Jefferson, Hightower is the victim of absurd punishment. He has no reason to receive this punishment; he is innocent, but the people of the town still inflict it upon him. And the worst part of the ordeal is how his punishment is justified by the townspeople: “there were some who said that he had insured his wife’s life and then paid someone to murder her. But everyone knew that this was not so, including the ones who told and repeated it and the ones who listened when it was told” (71). The town tries to change its own perception of Hightower, yet it is important to note that even they knew these accusations against him were not true, which affirms Hightower’s innocence. However, people do not wish to believe they are punishing an innocent person, so the attempts to defame Hightower continue, this time with a different slant:

the whispering began. About how he had made his wife go bad and commit suicide because he was not a natural husband, a natural man, and that the negro woman was the reason. And that’s all it took; all that was lacking. [. . .] Because that was all it required: that idea, that single idle word blown from mind to mind. (71)

While the attempts to defame Hightower and get him to leave are unsuccessful when they concerned only him and his wife, the moment a negro is involved, “that’s all it took” to get people riled up and ready to start a punishment that goes beyond the mental and emotional. Faulkner reveals how people search for little “truths” to grab on to and live by, which corresponds to Camus’s later thoughts in “The Myth of Sisyphus”: “I have no need to dig deeper. A single certainty is enough for the seeker. He simply has to derive all the consequences from it” (517). The townspeople, who are “seeking” a reason to hate

Hightower, need only the “single certainty” passed from “mind to mind.” And this same process of reconstructing a person’s character from a small flaw is what Camus depicts at the end of *The Stranger*, in which Meursault is sentenced to death, in what is a fairly obvious case of self-defense, because he did not cry at his mother’s funeral. And while in Meursault’s case the “certainty” charged against him is actually true, it is not a justifiable reason to have him put to death or even incarcerated. However, the idea that he is a heartless, morally-bankrupt human being capable of cold-blooded murder is passed from “mind to mind,” in this case among a jury.

In addition to the manner in which Hightower, Meursault, and Joe Christmas come to be prosecuted, they also approach the punishment in the same manner. After getting warned to leave town by the K.K.K. and refusing to go, Hightower was found “in the woods about a mile from town. He had been tied to a tree and beaten unconscious” (72). But Hightower does not fight back against his punishment: “He refused to tell who had done it. [. . .] He would not even talk about the beating, even when they offered to prosecute the men who had done it. But he would do neither. He would neither tell, nor depart. Then all of a sudden the whole thing seemed to blow away, like an evil wind. It was as though the town realized at last that he would be a part of its life until he died” (72). Hightower, much like Jesus and Sisyphus, accepts his fate, accepts the absurd punishment that has been dealt to him. Like Jesus and Sisyphus, though, this passive acceptance of the absurdity of the world empowers Hightower, makes him “stronger than his rock,” which in this case is the town. And in the face of this strength, the town gives in and lets the events “blow away.” And although he is still ostracized by the town, in

Camus's estimation, he would be a kind of absurd hero, cognizant of the absurdity of the world yet pushing forward with due progress.

Looking back on the events that led to his exile and beating, Hightower muses, "Perhaps I accepted more than I could perform. But is that criminal? Shall I be punished for that? Shall I be held responsible for that which was beyond my power?" (489).

Hightower also comprehends the fact that he is being punished for something that is not his fault. However, although he resigned himself to the punishment, he is not completely convinced of his motivations. While he claims that he allowed the punishment so his place in Jefferson was "*bought and paid for*" (490), he is worried that he actually acted the part of the "martyr" for his own selfish reasons relating to the death of his grandfather. He grapples with his motivations and eventually decides, "who can forbid me doing that? It is any man's privilege to destroy himself, so long as he does not injure anyone else, so long as he lives to and of himself" (490). Here, Hightower muses on the right of human beings to commit suicide if they so choose. But in order to commit suicide correctly, one must live "to and of himself," meaning that the person must choose, with full knowledge of his or her actions and an acceptance that it is one's will and not the product of anything or anyone else, which is a concept that Camus explores in detail. While Camus argues that one can consider suicide an authentic choice if done for the right reasons, he is against suicide on principle as it removes one from the possibility of rebellion, the more morally upright state in his opinion (*The Rebel*). So while Camus would likely agree with Hightower's "right to do so," he would also argue that he is better off living.

While Meursault, unlike Hightower, does not directly contemplate suicide, he does consider death and how people approach it in detail. According to Meursault, “everybody knows life isn’t worth living. Deep down I knew perfectly well that it doesn’t much matter whether you die at thirty or at seventy, since in either case other men and women will naturally go on living, and for thousands of years. [. . .] Since we’re all going to die, it’s obvious that when and how don’t matter” (114). Meursault’s belief that it “doesn’t much matter” how or when you die suggests that he would accept Hightower’s assertion that he should be allowed to choose suicide if he so desires. Meursault himself wants to live, as he states, so he would not knowingly choose suicide, but as we see toward the end of the novel, he accepts his approaching death with an ease that seems to verify his claim that he does not concern himself with when he dies. When the chaplain tries to pray for him at the end of the novel, Meursault grows angry, grabbing him by the cassock and shouting, “He wasn’t even sure he was alive, because he was living like a dead man. Whereas it looked as if I was the one who’d come up emptyhanded. But I was sure about me, about everything, surer than he could ever be, sure of my life and sure of the death I had waiting for me. Yes, that was all I had. But at least I had as much of a hold on it as it had on me. I had been right, I was still right, I was always right” (120-121). Meursault makes the argument that even one who is living, if not living properly, is “a dead man.” The implication is he is speaking against those “unconscious” of the absurdity of the world, those who still place a great deal of meaning and significance on everything around them. Meursault also argues that because he is willing to accept death for what it is, his end, that his view is more valid than others, indicated by the final emphasis about being “right.” When looking at their respective comments as a whole,

Meursault and Hightower seem to share a similar outlook and acceptance of death and its implication, which while appropriate for an atheist like Meursault, seems particularly noteworthy for the clergyman Hightower.

Faulkner's treatment of Hightower's situation serves to both emphasize and mirror the plight of Joe Christmas throughout the novel, but from a philosophical standpoint, Hightower also works to reveal how this absurd punishment happens to everyone, not just some special person, the unique character one might write a novel about. This absurd universe is not something that Joe Christmas alone must deal with, but it is the struggle ever present in the background of the novel. So while Faulkner develops his supporting characters more deeply than does Camus, he also explores another topic that Camus fails to flesh out in detail: the background of the protagonist. Camus's Meursault lives in the moment, always looking forward to the future, and he finds it impossible to dwell on or recollect the past for very long before deciding "it doesn't really matter." John Cruickshank argues that Camus's treatment of Meursault's life is very crafted: "if the reader were to view him through society's eyes, the point and the impact of the novel would be largely lost. By seeing experience as it presents itself to Meursault, we are helped, in a very real way, to understand what might otherwise appear to be a much more disconcerting and perplexing attitude to life" (243). This style is perhaps the most effective approach for Camus's novel, but the style is far from Faulkner's, despite Camus's admiration of him, and is, in Philip Thody's estimation, more closely akin to the writing style of Hemingway. However, Faulkner's approach to his fiction and the creation of new characters varies greatly. A southern writer, Faulkner focuses on the past and its influence on the present. As a result, his characters often

mirror the society in which they are raised, most experiencing monumental turmoil early on that leaves a lasting impression and that preempts any kind of inner peace. This treatment of the past is exactly what Richard Lehan argues lies at the crux of the difference between Faulkner and Camus: “While Faulkner saw the absurd struggle in terms of redeeming the past, the existentialists saw it in terms of living the present (Camus) or projecting oneself toward the future (Sartre)” (79). Utilizing the past is important for Faulkner’s style because in Joe’s case, his childhood circumstances mirror his adulthood, allowing Faulkner to show how one experiences the absurdity of the universe throughout life.

Our first experience with Joe Christmas as a child finds him stumbling upon Charley and his dietician in an illicit affair, none of which he really comprehends. This scene initiates the absurd punishment that Joe Christmas will experience throughout his life. As Faulkner tells us, “The dietician was twentyseven—old enough to have to take a few amorous risks but still young enough to attach a great deal of importance not so much to love, but to being caught at it” (123). This fear of being caught drives her to begin persecuting Joe, because “She was also stupid enough to believe that a child of five not only could deduce the truth from what he had heard, but that he would want to tell it as an adult would” (123). Joe’s life is uprooted and he is punished for no reason aside from the paranoid thoughts of a woman afraid of being exposed. He does not understand what the dietician was doing nor does he plan to say anything. The irony of the situation is that “he believed that he was the one who had been taken in sin and was being tortured with punishment deferred and that he was putting himself in her way in order to get it over with, get his whipping and strike the balance and write it off” (123). Like Jesus or

even Hightower, Joe is innocent of any wrongdoing in the situation, yet because of absurd circumstances, he will be punished. And how he reacts to this punishment is also telling of his future and how he will meet his death.

This misunderstanding of another's motivations, specifically the kind that leads to an absurd punishment, also happens to Meursault when he encounters the Arab on the beach. Meursault tells us, "It occurred to me that all I had to do was turn around and that would be the end of it. But the whole beach, throbbing in the sun, was pressing on my back. I took a few steps toward the spring. The sun was starting to burn my cheeks [. . .]. It was this burning, which I couldn't stand anymore, that made me move forward. I knew that it was stupid, that I wouldn't get the sun off of me by stepping forward" (59). While this odd response to the overwhelming heat eventually results in Meursault shooting the Arab, who, because of Meursault's approach, draws his knife on him, the jury is unable to understand the heat as a motivation for killing, just as the dietician is unable to understand that the young Joe Christmas is not spying on her but instead feels guilty for eating toothpaste. But while Christmas is too young to articulate his thoughts and reasons for putting himself in front of the dietician after catching her in her illicit affair, Meursault is able to explain himself, though when he attempts to do so in the courtroom, it does him little good. The judge admits to being "happy to have me state precisely the motives for my act. Fumbling a little with my words and realizing how ridiculous I sounded, I blurted out that it was because of the sun. People laughed" (103). Adrian Van Den Hoven argues this scene occurs because it is a fact of the existential world that "behavior cannot be understood correctly by our retrospective, logical, and probabilistic reconstructions" (213), which is why Meursault cannot make others understand and

Christmas does not try to. Meursault's failed attempt to express who he is to a group of people and have them actually understand suggests that even if the young Christmas were able to express his motivations, it likely would not matter. Would the dietician, so paranoid about being caught and focused on the idea of Christmas as a "nigger," really believe he did not intend to tell and only wished to eat toothpaste at late hours?

While hiding behind the curtains, Joes vomits toothpaste on the floor. At this point, "He said to himself with complete and passive surrender: 'Well, here I am'" (122). Christmas turns himself over with "complete and passive surrender," in the same way that Jesus approached the cross and Meursault is taken in after killing the Arab. At this point in his life he is too young to comprehend the situation and feel the appropriate amount of healthy scorn that Camus argues in "The Myth of Sisyphus" one should feel toward the absurd universe: "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" (591). In this scene, we do see an event that is absent from Camus's novel: we see the inception of Christmas's scorn and the forces that will follow him throughout the novel. Upon discovering the hidden child, the dietician cries out, "You little nigger bastard!" From this point, race becomes an inescapable fact for Joe Christmas. With the dietician planting doubt into the head of the matron about Christmas's race and the words of his grandfather-in-disguise, Doc Hines, he begins to become more conscious of being black: *"He hates me and fears me. So much so that he cannot let me out of his sight* With more vocabulary but no more age he might have thought *That is why I am different from the others: because he is watching me all the time"* (138). At this point, Christmas understands that he is different because he is black, and because he is black, he must be

monitored, or “watched” all the time. Joe’s new conception of himself also allows him to articulate an important idea that he will return to over and over in his life: “*He hates me enough even to try to prevent something that is about to happen to me coming to pass*” (138). Doc Hines hates Joe because he is black, and because he is black, “something is about to happen to me,” which marks a change in how he understands what is going on. Earlier, before he started to become aware of his race, Joe was ready to get his punishment for eating toothpaste out of the way, feeling as though he should surrender to it. But now he is starting to comprehend, because he is black and “hated,” that his punishment will not simply be “written off” like it might be were he still considered a white child.

Like Joe’s race, Meursault’s atheism results in people not only treating him differently than others, but also assuming the worst of him. We do not find out that Meursault is an atheist until he has been arrested and is going through his initial questioning, in which the judge, very passionate about God and the redeeming possibilities offered by faith, asks,

if I believed in God. I said no. He sat down indignantly. He said it was impossible; all men believed in God, even those who turn their backs on him. That was his belief, and if he were ever to doubt it, his life would become meaningless. “Do you want my life to be meaningless?” he shouted. As far as I could see, it didn’t have anything to do with me, and I told him so. (69)

Meursault’s disbelief in God threatens the judge’s own conception of his life, hinting at the reason that atheists were and continue to be ostracized to a certain degree in society.

And like the freed blacks, atheists like Meursault are treated as “savages” who, because of their lack of acceptance of Christianity, are unable to conceptualize true morality and live peaceably in society. But Meursault’s atheism makes his transgression worse because he is white and familiar with Christianity as a citizen of Western society, so he has no excuse not to believe. As a result, the judge and others have a tendency to frame his atheism as a symptom of psychopathy. The judge states, “I have never seen a soul as hardened as yours” (69), and the prosecutor describes Meursault as a “monster” with “nothing” in his soul, as recounted earlier. In this way, both Meursault’s and Christmas’s trials become muddled by some aspect of their physical or mental attributes—Christmas is a negro who would just kill a white woman viciously, not someone attempting to protect himself from a murder-suicide, and Meursault is a soulless atheist who goes looking to kill the Arab because he feels no empathy for anyone or anything, not even his own dead mother.⁵

Joe is vaguely conscious of the idea of absurd punishment and trouble brought about by those more concerned with his race than who he is as a person. And from this more comprehensive understanding of his race, he begins to develop the healthy scorn Camus calls for in his absurd heroes. Joe’s building scorn at the absurdity of the world is hinted at while he is still a child, especially on the day that Sam McEachern comes to adopt him. The narrator states, “He didn’t even bother to say to himself *My name aint McEachern. My name is Christmas* There was no need to bother about that yet. There was plenty of time” (144). At this point, Joe is not yet scornful, but the story implies that

⁵ The irony here is that Camus believed that it was unfair to hold Christians up to a higher standard of morality, that the same standards should apply to “any man today, whether he is or is not a Christian” (“The Unbeliever and Christians” 69). So while Camus believed that non-Christians were capable of the same amount of good as Christians, the Christians in his novels do not share this view.

he will develop scorn over years of living with his new family whose name he will reject. As Camus writes in *The Rebel*, “With rebellion, awareness is born” (15). This scorn does in fact develop alongside his blossoming concept of his body, and as Philip Hallie puts it, it helps Joe move “from thinghood to full existence” (26). After he beats a negro woman who has been used for sex by his friends, Joe decides to run away: “He felt like an eagle: hard, sufficient, potent remorseless, strong. But that passed though he did not then know that, like the eagle, his own flesh as well as all space was still a cage” (160). Christmas does not end up running away at this point, but his feelings on the matter are important. He feels both “hard” and “strong,” revealing that he, like Sisyphus, is becoming “stronger than his rock,” which in this case is the difficulties posed by his race. However, the narrator tells us that despite how Christmas feels, “his own flesh” is a cage, which both implies that his race is something that will confine him and that the physical human body is something we cannot transcend. But the narrator does not stop there. “All space” is also a cage, implying that not only is the physical body of Joe Christmas something that will hold him back, but that the universe will act as a cage. This claim is telling in that because of the absurdity of the universe, the absurdity of “all space,” both Christmas and Camus’s Meursault end up in physical cages as well as mental ones.

Once in prison for killing the Arab, Meursault begins to contemplate more completely what being imprisoned means. He comes to these realizations when complaining to one of the guards about how the prisoners are not allowed to have conjugal visits. Meursault claims “that I thought it was unfair treatment,” to which the guard replies “that’s exactly why you’re in prison. [. . .] yes—freedom, that’s why. They’ve taken away your freedom.” After thinking it over, Meursault decides “I’d never

thought about that. I agreed. ‘It’s true,’ I said. ‘Otherwise, what would be the punishment?’” (78). Meursault’s comments about his lack of freedom and his punishment mirror Faulkner’s narrator’s statement concerning “all space” as a cage because there are certain aspects of the universe that restrict one’s freedom. And it is precisely these absurd forces at work in the universe that affect Meursault and Christmas. In addition to his connection between his freedom and the punishment he is receiving, Meursault also makes some observations about imprisonment and the body. He comments, “At the time, I often thought that if I had had to live in the trunk of a dead tree, with nothing to do but look up at the sky flowering overhead, little by little I would have gotten used to it” (77). This idea develops until Meursault eventually decides that “a man who had lived only one day could easily live for a hundred years in prison. He would have enough memories to keep him from being bored. In a way, it was an advantage” (79). Here Camus provides an interesting contrast to Faulkner’s text. While Faulkner approaches this idea of bodily cages from the perspective of race, arguing that the specific attributes of people or their limitations can act as a cage that imprisons them, Camus, though not directly stating that the body cannot be a prison, seems to argue that the mind at least can provide an amount of freedom. He even goes as far to say that it is an “advantage,” suggesting that the mind’s freedom is ultimately better than the freedom granted by lack of physical restraint. This contrast is an interesting example of a dialogue present between Camus and Faulkner in which Camus tries to refine what he has found in Faulkner in order to build coherence in his own philosophy.

As the confrontations between Christmas and his adopted father begin to escalate, his scorn for his new family becomes more obvious, but also more complicated and

sometimes misdirected, particularly toward his new mother: “It was not the hard work which he hated, nor the punishment and injustice. He was used to that before he ever saw either of them. He expected no less, and so he was neither outraged nor surprised. It was the woman: that soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever victim of and which he hated worse than he did the hard and ruthless justice of men” (168-169). We are told that at this point that Christmas understands “punishment and injustice,” which we have seen from his childhood in the orphanage. We are also told that his “outrage” is not directed at the punishment, but instead toward the “kindness” of his mother. As with many elements of Christmas’s life, he is angry because people are being nice to him, which he has learned to feel is wrong since he is black. In the same way that he will feel “sick” and eventually lash out against the prostitute who will lie with him because “He did not know until then that there were white women who would take a man with a black skin” (225), the subject of his anger is a product of his self-perception. At the same time, he is angry at her kindness because he views it as a representation of the absurdity of the world. She has no reason to take up for him, to love him, since as he has asserted, “My name aint McEachern.” Christmas has rejected being part of their family, and with no actual tie, her tenderness toward him is meaningless in his eyes, which is what he asserts at the end of the chapter: “She was trying to make me cry. Then she thinks that they would have had me” (169). If Joe had cried about the trouble he caused Ms. McEachern, then it would have been his admission that he was actually a part of the family and invested in the emotional state of his adopted mother, at which point, they would have “had” him—felt confident that he cared about them and his place in the

family. But Joe does not cry, asserting his independence and reaffirming her kindness as meaningless to him.

Like Christmas, Meursault also displays a conflicted relationship with his mother. From the opening lines of the novel, in which he states, “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know. I got a telegram from the home: ‘Mother deceased. Funeral Tomorrow. Faithfully yours.’ That doesn’t mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday” (3), we are given the impression that he cares very little for his mother, especially her death. This impression over the course of the novel seems to persist. When asked if he wants to be alone with her, he replies, “I don’t know” (6). He goes on a date the following day, and when asked about her, agrees that it was bound to happen eventually (33). Yet it is easy to misinterpret how Meursault views life with callousness. He proves on small occasions that he does in fact care for his mother. When asked if he wants to smoke in the presence of his dead mother, a problem that is blown out of proportions at his trial, he does think about her and a sense of respectability: “I hesitated, because I didn’t know if I could do it with Maman right there” (8). He is not the heartless person he is depicted as in his trial, and his reason for not crying at his mother’s funeral is not completely revealed until the very end of the novel: “So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again. Nobody, nobody had the right to cry over her” (122). Meursault respects his mother for taking up a new life, finding friends and a new love interest despite being so close to death, and views it as an insult to cry for someone showing such inner fortitude. While it is strange reasoning that most others do not understand, it definitely does not suggest a cruel or psychopathic mindset. So ultimately, both Christmas and Meursault refuse to cry for their respective mothers, though they do so for

different reasons. Christmas does not want anyone to have that kind of power over him, while Meursault does not see the death of his mother as an occasion for remorse.

The conflict that Joe feels with his adoptive parents eventually peaks, resulting in the fight that leaves Sam McEachern dead. However, in this case Faulkner plays with the roles a bit, and as Joe is about to attack Sam, Sam “walked toward it in the furious and dreamlike exaltation of a martyr who has already been absolved, into the descending chair which Joe swung at his head, and into nothingness” (205). Much like Joe when he is discovered by the dietician, Sam surrenders himself to this punishment like “a martyr,” not fighting as he had fought earlier. While Sam’s situation is quite different from Christmas’s or Hightower’s, he still seems to comprehend the absurd, though not necessarily consciously. He understands that the child he gave a home to and has tried to raise is about to kill him for his actions, and while some justifiable criticism can be raised against McEachern about just how he has raised his son and whether or not he deserves some sort of punishment, the way he approaches his death is another example of the theme Faulkner establishes throughout the novel: a passive acceptance of the absurd.

As Joe begins living and having an affair with Miss Burden, he begins more completely contemplating his identity and how he conceptionalizes himself and his desires. The process starts with him thinking, “This is not my life. I dont belong here” (258). The phrase both touches on his struggle with his race, in that a black man does not “belong” in the home of a white woman, living in society as a white man and working as a white man. In addition to echoing Camus’s assertion that “I will always be a stranger to myself,” Joe’s contemplation is actually reflective of a deeper level, in that Joe views his new life as a sacrifice of who he is. This idea is returned to and refined later when Joe

begins to suspect that Miss Burden is pregnant with his child. For a moment, he considers settling down and marrying her, thinking, “*Why not? It would mean ease, security, for the rest of your life. You would never have to move again. And you might as well be married to her as this*” thinking ‘No. If I give in now, I will deny all the thirty years that I have lived to make me what I chose to be’” (265). It is important to note a difference here between Joe Christmas and Meursault. While Meursault believes that marriage “doesn’t mean anything,” Joe views marriage as a sacrifice of who he is as a person. The difference in opinion is based on the struggle that Joe has gone through. He has had to fight to allow himself the opportunity to live as he might wish, and he has to worry that anyone might find out he has negro blood and attempt to strip his freedom away from him. Joe’s refusal to let others dictate who he is reveals his role as one of Camus’s rebels: “The rebel, on the contrary, from his very first step, refuses to allow anyone to touch what he is. He is fighting for the integrity of one part of his being. He does not try, primarily, to conquer, but simply to impose” (*The Rebel* 18). Therefore, Joe settling down with Joanna would allow her to “touch what he is,” which he will not do. We get little of Meursault’s background in Camus’s novel, but nothing the character does suggests that he had to overcome any similar obstacles in his past, which could account for Joe and Meursault’s varying opinions about marriage.

Because Joe is uninterested in marriage, though, Miss Burden begins obsessing over him and their relationship. The danger begins building, and it is first hinted at when Miss Burden tells Joe, “Maybe it would be better if we both were dead” (278). While this remark foreshadows, it also reveals that Miss Burden’s attempt to kill Joe later is not a crime of passion but a premeditated act of violence. Because of her words, Joe begins

feeling the same vague premonition that he did as a child. Although appearing earlier in the novel but chronologically happening around the time that Miss Burden was voicing these vague threats, Christmas thinks, “*Something is going to happen to me. I am going to do something*” (104). Once again, Christmas’s thoughts on the matter are unrefined and are the same as when he was a child, but this instinctual warning is impressive because of its accuracy. Christmas is conscious on a basic level that the absurd punishment he experienced as a child is about to play out again now that he is an adult, and although he does not know the details, he feels it looming.

Joe sees the approach of his confrontation with Miss Burden as “something happening,” which while vague and accurate on a basic level, also carries the connotation of happenstance. Owen Robinson argues that the mantra “undermines the idea of Joe as wholly passive. Indeed, this italicized reflection brings into focus both aspects of this issue: Joe feels that he will both be affected *and* will affect” (124). This understanding that these major events are the products of both activity and passivity is also present in Camus’s work. Meursault comments in a similar way when asked why he returned to where the Arab was waiting: “he would like to know whether I had gone back to the spring by myself intending to kill the Arab. ‘No,’ I said. Well, then, why was I armed and why did I return to precisely that spot? I said it just *happened* that way” (88, emphasis mine). Both Meursault and Christmas characterize their respective murders in terms of something just “happening,” seemingly removing both of them from any semblance of active agent. Christmas even specifically says that something is going to happen “to me,” instead of taking on the active role. Removing oneself from agency is important for both characters. Christmas argues that he has made himself who he chose to be, so to

characterize two of the most important events in his development as outside his personal influence speaks to the fact that he at least on some level comprehends that one has little control of how certain events unfold in an absurd universe. The same holds true for Meursault, who, during his rant against the prison chaplain toward the end of the novel, says, “I had lived my life one way and I could just as well have lived it another. I had done this and I hadn’t done that. I hadn’t done this thing but I had done another” (121). Meursault takes responsibility for his life and the decisions he has made at the end of novel, though he does not attach nearly the same importance to the act of self-will as Joe Christmas. Meursault claims that he did not plan to return to the beach—that it just happened—but this claim is not an attempt to avoid responsibility for the murder. Instead, he is trying to express that the event was not dictated by motive, and more accurately, the murder is “bad luck,” as Celeste describes it during his trial (92). And this bad luck extends to Joe’s case; it was not bad luck that he meets Miss Burden on the night that she plans to kill him, but his bad luck started when he began staying in her cabin.

Christmas’s vague warning to himself proves true, as he is confronted by Miss Burden, who attempts to take his life after he refuses to pray with her. His refusal, however, leads him to watch as “her arms unfold and her right hand comes forth from beneath the shawl. It held an old style, single action, cap-and-ball revolver almost as long and heavier than a small rifle. [. . .] He was watching the shadowed pistol on the wall; he was watching when the cocked shadow of the hammer flicked away” (282-283). Faulkner goes to great length to provide information to the reader that other characters are not aware of, specifically that Joe kills Miss Burden in self-defense. And the full implications

of Miss Burden's actions are not revealed to Joe until later upon examining the gun after escaping. He sees "its two loaded chambers: the one upon which the hammer had already fallen and which had not exploded, and the other upon which no hammer had yet fallen but upon which a hammer had been planned to fall. 'For her and for me,' he said" (286). Joe realizes that Miss Burden planned a murder-suicide, and under normal circumstances, he would not have been punished for protecting his life. However, Joe tosses the only evidence he has of her attempt to kill him into the brush, likely because he knows that given his race and hers, evidence, no matter how damning, would mean absolutely nothing.

Like Faulkner, Camus provides details that strongly suggest that Meursault's decision to kill the Arab was in self-defense, or at least an accident made in a stressful situation. However, many scholars have argued otherwise, usually in pursuit of their own agendas. For example, Arthur Scherr argues that the murder was in "cold blood" because he interprets the novel as Camus's social commentary on the mistreatment and dismissal of Arabs (516). On the other hand, critics defending Meursault, such as Robert Champigny, have made a number of arguments for his innocence, including the assertion that Meursault is paganistic at heart and that the bullets "were merely a discharge of solar energy" (175). These differing opinions about the murder of the Arab are understandable, though, given the ambiguity and flowery prose of the scene. It is important, then, to look at what Camus does provide. Meursault's motivations for approaching the Arab, while odd to most people, are in keeping with his character, as his discomfort with heat and bright lights is discussed at multiple times before the murder. We are told that "this time, without getting up, the Arab drew his knife and held it up to me in the sun. The light shot

off the steel and it was like a long flashing blade cutting at my forehead. [. . .] All I could feel were the cymbals of sunlight crashing on my forehead and, indistinctly, the dazzling spear flying up from the knife in front of me. The scorching blade slashed at my eyelashes and stabbed at my stinging eyes” (59). The scene is muddled by Meursault’s confusing the actual blade of the knife with the “blade” of light that is reflecting off of it and into his eyes and face. Still, the fact remains that the Arab has drawn his knife on Meursault and has, only hours earlier, used it to mangle the face of Meursault’s friend Raymond. Some scholars, such as Celia Britton, have argued that the details of this scene are left vague on purpose because the event is “a symbolic absurd act,” and therefore the details are “clearly, indeed crassly, irrelevant” (114). However, while both men are reacting in self-preservation, they perceive their actions in different ways, and herein lies a distinct difference between Meursault and Christmas. Meursault considers his actions to be clear cut. When asked if he got a lawyer, “I said, I thought my case was pretty simple” (63), and on multiple occasions he reveals that he does not view himself any differently after the event on the beach: “On my way out I was even going to shake his hand, but just in time, I remembered that I had killed a man” (64). Scherr provides a different motivation for Meursault’s indifference about his case, arguing that because it was an Arab he killed, “Meursault indirectly acknowledges the prevailing racial climate, and probably expects his case to be dismissed” (520). Whether Meursault believes he is obviously innocent or no one would convict him in the Algerian justice system of the time, his eventual execution is unbelievable at this point. Meursault regularly forgets to “act” like a murderer, whereas Christmas, after informing Joe Brown what he has done, immediately starts to run from the law. Joe’s situation is the opposite of Meursault in that

while the racial climate is in Meursault's favor, it is against Joe: "for anyone in Yoknapatawpha County accused of being black also to be accused of committing an act of violence against a white woman is to make lynching a definite possibility, seemingly foreordained (not now by God, but by local custom)" (66). But despite his "foreordained" death, Joe eventually stops running and begins failing to act like a murderer as Meursault does, yet this difference in how the characters initially react suggests that Christmas is very cognizant of how his race will play into how Miss Burden's death is received. It never really occurs to Meursault that he will be branded a soulless monster because of his atheism and his acceptance of death as a natural, remorseless event.

Given the difficulty of understanding Joe's motivations, the fact that he runs after killing Miss Burden causes the town to decide he murdered her with no provocation.⁶ Given the strong reaction and lack of context, lack of implication that he was acting in self-defense, the murder and arson appear to be in cold blood by a vicious "savage," which is how the town paints Christmas after learning of his negro blood. This results in an open-and-shut case against him based on bad evidence. This same mistake is what haunts Meursault, and although his trial is not as clear cut as Christmas's, he is still plagued by circumstantial evidence.

During his time on the beach, Meursault is plagued by how bright it is and the heat he feels building on his person. The heat pushes him toward the confrontational Arab when he should back away, which he knows he should do. Part of the reason for

⁶ In "On the Difference between Prevailing and Enduring," Alexander Welsh tells how during a question and answer session at the University of Virginia, Faulkner argued that Christmas "is in fact neither good nor bad" (125). This comment, in addition to allowing for the ambiguity of Joe's actions, also reveals that Faulkner did not find it necessary to codify actions into an objective good/evil dichotomy, making his worldview more compatible with existentialism's.

this is “that my nature was such that my physical needs often got in the way of my feelings” (65). The fact that Meursault is such a physical person as opposed to a mental or emotional one explains why he reacts so thoughtlessly while on the beach. The Arab draws his blade and Meursault explains, “My whole being tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver. The trigger gave; I felt the smooth underside of the butt; and there, in that noise, sharp and deafening at the same time, is where it all started. [. . .] Then I fired four more times at the motionless body where the bullets lodged without leaving a trace. And it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness” (59). At this point, the chapter and Section One of the novel end; as with Christmas, we are given little insider knowledge into the motivations for the literal overkill Meursault takes part in. His body seems to act on its own, somehow responding to the stimulus of heat around it with little will involved. In terms of mental connections, we are only told that it was “like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness,” which could be interpreted as his annoyance at the Arab for ruining a day that he specifically names as one in which he had been “happy” only lines before. In this way, the extra four shots seem to mark his transition from happiness to unhappiness. It is strongly implied here and later in the novel that the Arab was dead after the first shot, so the four extra really serve no purpose in further killing him, and from Meursault’s perspective, firing the four extra shots into a body that was already dead probably did not “mean anything,” as he regularly states, and this act is continuously brought up in the courtroom as proof that he is a heartless psychopath. Both Camus’s and Faulkner’s plot structures to a degree rely on these mistakes in judgment on the part of their respective protagonists, and it important that they both construct these mistakes in a similar fashion.

So after the killing of Miss Burden, the chase begins, and Christmas's behavior during the chase also bothers the townspeople, just as Hightower's response to his exile does not sit well. We are told that Christmas "never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the folks so mad. For him to be a murderer and all dressed up and walking the town like he dared them to touch him, when he ought to have been skulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running. It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too" (350). Christmas does not act like the town expects someone of his race to act. He has started to transcend the world's conception of him. Earlier in the novel, he "would remember how he had once tricked or teased white men into calling him a negro in order to fight them, to beat them or be beaten; now he fought the negro who called him white" (225). This line reveals how his conception of himself in terms of race changed over the years, that he at first considered himself white, and then black, and on both occasions took great pride in who he was. But now he is doing neither, not acting like a "nigger or a white man" or a murderer, because by rejecting Miss Burden he has reaffirmed "who he has chosen to be": a person willing to face the absurdity of the world without rage. Not all scholars agree that Joe changes, and Robert Gibb asserts that "Joe is unable to take control of his life because he has yet to learn what it is he is, and since he will never learn he will be forever innocent, powerless, violent, and doomed" (333). However, looking at Joe's life through the lens of Camus's absurdist philosophy reveals a more positive change taking place in Joe's mind. In Camus's words, he is stronger than his rock now, which is revealed when he is taken in: Halliday "had already hit the nigger a couple of times in the face, and the nigger acting like a nigger for the first time and taking it, not saying anything: just bleeding sullen and

quiet” (350). The townspeople mistakenly believe that Christmas’s actions are indicative of “acting like a nigger” because he is not outwardly challenging them to a fight, but as we know from his earlier passages, Christmas has no problem physically challenging someone who is white for treating him as a black person—he actually sought white people out and goaded them for this very purpose. Instead, this passive acceptance reveals a new mental state for Joe, who no longer fights white people for considering him black or black people for considering him white. Instead he is one of Camus’s absurd heroes, conscious of the absurdity of the universe and smiling as he watches the boulder tumble back down the hill.

Like Meursault, after his capture, a trial is prepared for Christmas, though the circumstances are likewise ridiculous. The narrator tells us a “Grand Jury was preparing behind locked doors to take the life of a man whom few of them had ever seen to know, for having taken the life of a woman whom even fewer of them had known to see” (416). Faulkner makes a point to emphasize the disconnection between those doing the sentencing and those being sentenced, the same as Meursault’s judge, who cannot understand him or his emotions and ends up calling him “Monsieur Antichrist.” This disconnect is why Meursault ends up feeling like “Everything was happening without my participation. My fate was being decided without anyone so much as asking my opinion” (98). What Meursault does not understand is that he is being tried without his input because he is an atheist, and as Camus asserts in “Reflections on the Guillotine,” “the supreme punishment [execution] has always been, throughout the ages, a religious penalty” (222). Both Meursault and Christmas are sentenced with little participation on their part in an effort to show just how little agency a person has in an absurd universe,

that others, who can never really know the accused in a real way, defend, prosecute, and make decisions about whether a person is allowed to live or die. And the fact that he is being sentenced to death is relevant as Camus felt strongly on the subject: “Camus rejected such expediency, said one must live for today and not tomorrow, and insisted that no government had the right to sacrifice men in the name of the future” (Lehan 29). So Christmas is about to have an absurd trial akin to Meursault’s, yet he does something that Meursault actually dreams about doing. He escapes, yet he does not try to get away. We are told that what “the town wondered at was not so much how Christmas had escaped but why when free, he had taken refuge in the place which he did. Where he must have known he would be certainly run to earth, and why when that occurred he neither surrendered nor resisted. It was as though he had set out and made his plans to passively commit suicide” (443). In his musings about escaping, Meursault posits that there is not really much point, that one must be set free by some terms of the failed execution, or they will simply “start again.” Yet for Christmas, escaping is not a way to avoid death. Since he has strived thirty years to make his life what he chose for it to be, it is not a stretch to assume that he would want to choose his death as well.

Because of his belief that his killing the Arab was a clear case of self-defense, Meursault does not try to flee like Christmas. After being sentenced to death, he becomes obsessed with the idea of escape: “All I care about right now is escaping the machinery of justice, seeing if there’s any way out of the inevitable. [. . .] I’ve wondered if there have ever been any instances of condemned men escaping the relentless machinery, disappearing before the execution or breaking through the cordon of police” (108). Essentially, what Meursault contemplates in his cell every day is exactly what Joe does—

breaking free in the middle of town while manacled and making a run for freedom. However, while only a thought-experiment designed to give him hope for the future, Meursault still comes to the conclusion that escaping is not actually going to be very beneficial to the prisoner:

What really counted was the possibility of escape, a leap to freedom, out of implacable ritual, a wild run for it that would give whatever chance for hope there was. Of course, hope meant being cut down on some street corner, as you ran like mad, by a random bullet. But when I really thought it through, nothing was going to allow me such a luxury. Everything was against it; I would just be caught up in the machinery again. (109)

During his “wild run,” Joe also seems to come to the same conclusion as Meursault; he does not wish to be chased forever, to be run down and shot some day, or as he puts it, “*I am tired I am tired of running of having to carry my life like it was a basket of eggs*” (337). Eventually Meursault’s prediction proves true and Joe is “caught up in the machinery again,” being finally taken in after trying very hard to be captured. But he escapes again when Miss Hines gives him “hope” for freedom, and this time he is “cut down” by those bullets, though in Joe’s case he has stopped running and accepted this fate. Camus is able to build on Faulkner’s work, using it as an imaginative scenario for his own absurd hero, revealing the powerful influence that Faulkner had on Camus’s philosophical and literary development.

While we never actually see Meursault’s death scene, Faulkner provides the detailed scene of Christmas’s end. We are told by “witnesses” that “he crouched behind that overturned table and let them shoot him to death, with that loaded and unfired pistol

in his hand” (449). However, this story is told after Joe’s death on one of those now-clichéd southern verandas by two gentlemen, and the dialogue is accompanied by a justification which, by the standards of Stevens and the professor, depict Christmas as a chimera, both driven and restrained from every action by his black and white blood and still believing that Hightower might save him, despite the interpretation earlier that he had gone to Hightower’s to “commit suicide.” But this talk is just rumors and speculation, just as much is made about Hightower’s wife and those circumstances. In “Joe Christmas: The Tyranny of Childhood,” T. Adamowski states that Christmas’s “acceptance of punishment at novel’s end cannot be reduced to a function merely of his mixed blood” (243). The talk of the town is a simplification based on a limited understanding of Joe’s character, and the actual account of Christmas’s death by the narrator paints a much different picture.

Before turning to Christmas’s death, however, it is important to look at just how Meursault approaches his own. After letting loose his “blind rage” on the chaplain, he falls asleep. When he awakes, he thinks,

As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate. (123)

Meursault opens himself to “the gentle indifference of the world,” achieving a serene state that is similar to Joe’s after he is shot by Grimm. This indifference makes him happy, but it is not complete. He says specifically that for everything to be “consummated,” he needs to have a large crowd of people who hate him present when he dies. These final lines of the novel are contrasted by the earlier statement by Meursault during the trial: “I had this stupid urge to cry, because I could feel how much all these people hated me” (90). While earlier Meursault seems overwhelmed by the possibility of many people hating him to the point of tears, at the end, after accepting the “indifference of the world,” he actually wants this large group of people to hate him. Camus purposely articulates this difference in order to reveal how Meursault has changed by the end of the novel, becoming the absurd hero who feels scorn for the world. And as we see during the final death scene of Joe Christmas, he comes to a similar change in demeanor.

After putting five shots into Christmas, Grimm jumps over the table and castrates him with a butcher knife while still alive, before screaming, “Now you’ll let white women alone, even in hell” (464). But during this physical torture, we are told that

the man on the floor had not moved. He just lay there, with his eyes open and a shadow, about his mouth. For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself [. . .]. Upon that black blast [of blood] the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. (464-465)

Christmas approaches his absurd punishment as he did in the past and as others, such as Jesus, Meursault, and Sisyphus do: passively. James Spenko supports this view in his

article “The Death of Joe Christmas and the Power of Words,” in which he argues that it is Joe’s goal in life to be persecuted like Jesus. Spenko asserts that given his name, that “Jesus Christ!” is yelled just before Joe allows himself to be killed and mutilated, and that “On the day of the Crucifixion, he entered Mottstown and allowed himself to be captured and beaten,” the idea that Joe is actively choosing to be a sacrificial figure seems more likely (264). Likewise, Richard Lehan argues that “Joe spends all his life waiting for the moment of Percy Grimm to kill him, and this moment of agony is his moment of release, because it relieves his guilt, offers the final suffering that could not be anything less than death itself” (76). Lehan also sees Joe’s passive moment as an attempt to become Christ-like, even going so far as to argue that “Faulkner’s characters must become their own Christ” (79). If Faulkner’s characters must indeed become their own Christ, Joe accomplishes this goal through his torture and death. He does not struggle, and instead “just lay there” as a man brutally disfigures him. His eyes are “peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes,” to those who see him. They are peaceful because as Longley states, with “the acceptance of the tragic human situation, with all its absurdity and irrationality, [. . .] comes the emotions of peace and tranquility” (204). They are unfathomable because the other people around him are not conscious in the same way he is; they are the workers going about their everyday lives, unable to see the rock they push or the hill it rolls back down. And the eyes are unbearable because on some subconscious level they understand that he is innocent, that this punishment was not warranted. McCorquodale asserts that “with the existential look, he transformed his murderers into objects. For the first time in his life, he was completely Subject, his full Self, in command, no longer invaded or a victim [. . .] This act of Joe Christmas’, the act of

refusal to retaliate, is a decisive act of Self transcendence in existentialist terms” (“William Faulkner and Existentialism” 133-134). McCorquodale’s claim that this final scene depicts transcendence connects Faulkner’s and Camus’s work nicely. Finally, his body “rises soaring” because he has gotten what Meursault is left hoping for at the end of Camus’s novel: he is surrounded by people full of hatred for him, and their hatred runs very deep. It may seem like a strange thing to hope for at one’s death, but seeing these people hating him, an innocent man, so vehemently, only reaffirms the worldview that Christmas and Meursault based their lives and deaths upon.

The beauty of Faulkner’s work in *Light in August* is how he manages to reveal the same theme affecting the lives of multiple different characters under very different circumstances. What Hightower goes through introduces the idea of absurd punishment, but the story of Joe Christmas eventually takes focus, revealing the theme manifesting at different times in his life. But these two characters are not the only ones who experience this absurd world, though perhaps they are the only two conscious of it. As Cleanth Brooks remarks in “The Community and the Pariah,” “nearly all the characters in *Light in August* bear a special relation to the community. They are outcasts—they are pariahs, defiant exiles, withdrawn quietists, or simply strangers” (55), making them all useful for this kind of existential reading. Throughout the novel, Byron Bunch and Lena Grove live out an absurd series of events, though their circumstances are slightly different than those of Hightower or Christmas in that there is no punishment involved, at least not in the same severity.

Lena Grove has become pregnant by Joe Brown, and despite the fact that he ran out on her once, she pursues him, ostensibly working on the premise that he actually still

loves her and wishes to get married. It becomes clear to everyone in the novel touched by Grove's story that Joe Brown has no intention of marrying or taking care of the child, yet despite the fact that she has another man, Byron Bunch, who loves her and would be willing to settle down and take care of her and the child even though it is not his, she refuses him. Her actions strongly reflect the absurdity of the world—pursuing a man who wants nothing to do with her or the child while spurning a good man who does. But I cannot make the claim that Lena is completely unaware of the absurdity of her actions. When confronted by Lena and providing more false promises, Joe Brown escapes once again and attempts to catch a train that will take him out of town and away from his responsibility. Lena's response to hearing him running away is "Now I've got to get up again" (432). The passive acceptance of this fate of always pursuing a man who will, by all likelihood, never do what it is she wants of him suggests an understanding, whether conscious or subconscious, that life is absurd. Lehan suggests that Lena has "supreme day-to-day heroism that is equally courageous and stoical as that of Sisyphus" ("Camus' American Affinities" 261). Even the musing at the end of the novel by the man who gives them both a ride suggests this same understanding on her part. He says, "I think she was just travelling. I don't think she had any idea of finding whoever it was she was following. I don't think she had ever aimed to, only she hadn't told him yet" (506). Lena's relentless pursuit of a man she does not have "any idea of finding" suggests the pointless task of Sisyphus, her own rock to push up a hill, and like Sisyphus she goes about her task willingly and seems even to get a kind of enjoyment out of it. But Brian Richardson argues that unlike Christmas, Lena's "story will never be the copy of someone else's narrative [. . .]. She resists or creates meaning, but never acts to fulfill the fixed

interpretations of others” (31), suggesting that Richardson, at least, believes that Lena’s story will take a much different path than Christmas’s did, perhaps to a less tragic end.

Like Faulkner’s use of Lena Grove, Camus also finds ways to include the idea of absurdity into the background of his novel in order to forefront the events surrounding Meursault’s death sentence. However, since the narration never jumps out of Meursault’s head, Camus has to find other clever ways of bringing it in that seem outside the perception of his protagonist. He does this by having Meursault become obsessed with the “story about the Czechoslovakian” (79), who leaves home and makes his fortune, marries, has children, only to return home to surprise his family. However, instead of just surprising them, he checks into his family’s hotel, where they do not recognize him, and shows off his money. Then, “During the night his mother and his sister had beaten him to death with a hammer in order to rob him and had thrown his body in the river” (80). The wife eventually arrives and the whole thing is revealed, which results in the suicides of the mother and sister. Accidentally killing one’s son for his money when he has come to share it is a completely absurd turn of events, but what is particularly important about the story is how Meursault responds to it. He decides, “I thought the traveler pretty much deserved what he got and that you should never play games” (80). His comment is a bit ironic in that one reading of his story could just as easily conclude that his decision to write abusive letters to an acquaintance’s ex-lover and carrying a revolver around near a man he knows is antagonistic toward him is Meursault “playing games.” He obviously does not view his actions that way; however, his inability to apply the same rules to himself that he applies to others suggests that Meursault does not always view other people’s lives in the same way he views his own.

While Lena seems to enjoy her absurd task, Byron is much more upset about what he is put through. Pursuing a man and then being violently attacked by him in an attempt to keep him from leaving the woman Byron loves, the woman who will not be with him because she views this other man as her husband, is an extremely absurd action. However, Byron is not happy about being beaten, and at the end of the novel while traveling with her, he attempts to become intimate with Lena, who promptly kicks him out of the truck. However, despite his rejection and resulting frustration, Byron returns, suggesting that he too will go about his absurd task no matter the circumstances. Byron, though, seems to be more aware than Lena of the absurd nature of the world around him and is able to articulate his struggle. It is Byron who delivers the lines that seem applicable to all the main characters of the novel:

‘Well, I can bear a hill,’ he thinks. ‘I can bear a hill, a man can.’ [. . .] ‘It seems like a man can just about bear anything. He can even bear what he never done. He can even bear the thinking how some thing is just more than he can bear. He can even bear it that if he could just give down and cry, he wouldn’t do it. He can even bear it to not look back, even when he knows that looking back or not looking back wont do him any good.’

(423)

The idea of bearing a hill, bearing some great burden, fits nicely with Camus’s metaphor of Sisyphus as a representative of mankind. It is important that Byron specifically states that a man “can even bear what he never done,” since that is the case for Hightower and, to a certain degree, Joe Christmas. Byron also puts emphasis on being able to bear the idea of “not looking back” because it will not improve one’s life. What he seems to mean

is that understanding that one cannot change the past and that dwelling on it, though our natural tendency, is hard and ultimately not productive. While it is arguable that Christmas is willing to move forward with his life instead of dwelling on the past that made him who he is, none of Faulkner's characters accomplish this quite as well as Camus's Meursault, who completely accepts that what has happened in the past is no longer relevant to who he is at that moment, even though by his own admission he would like to "look back" at them.

Like Faulkner, Camus also shows how his secondary characters go about the absurdity of their lives in order to emphasize the events that Meursault experiences. However, in Camus's case, none of his secondary characters get quite the same in-depth treatment as Faulkner's. Camus's novel presents only a single narrator, so he is given less freedom concerning what he might know about other characters, while Faulkner jumps from character to character freely, able to explore the consciousness of many different people. Yet despite this difference in approach, Camus still manages to capture the essence of absurdity in a very short space through the character Salamano and his dog. In Meursault's first account of the pair, he states,

They look as if they belong to the same species, and yet they hate each other. Twice a day, at eleven and six, the old man takes the dog out for a walk. They haven't changed their route in eight years. You can see them in the rue de Lyon, the dog pulling the man along until old Salamano stumbles. Then he beats the dog and swears at it. The dog cowers and trails behind. Then it's the old man who pulls the dog. Once the dog has forgotten, it starts dragging its master along again, and again gets beaten

and sworn at. Then they both stand there on the sidewalk and stare at each other, the dog in terror, the man in hatred. (27)

This strange pattern of anger, the pulling, forgetting, and then it starting all over again, is similar to the state that Sisyphus finds himself in, pushing a boulder up a hill to have to do it again after it rolls back down. Both are repetitious, meaningless tasks, but as Meursault soon learns, the situation is even more absurd than it seems. Despite constantly referring to the dog as a “stinking bastard,” Salamano actually cares greatly for the dog, and once it has run away, he turns to Meursault for help. He asks, “They’re [the pound] not going to take him away from me, are they, Monsieur Meursault? They’ll give him back to me. Otherwise, what’s going to happen to me?” (39). Salamano’s genuine affection for the dog makes this false hatred and ludicrous game of pulling and violence seem all the more meaningless, and ultimately the scene plays out in a manner similar to Lena’s unending pursuit for Joe Brown—both seem unable to admit their true feelings and instead play out some absurd scene to replace honest expression.

The connection between Faulkner and Camus extends beyond just the details of the stories they told into the metaphysical concepts and sense of morality that each expressed through their fiction. These ideas, however, changed over time; even a philosopher like Camus often wavered on what exactly he purported to want for the world, and interpretation of his work varies greatly from novel to novel. Faulkner was likewise hard to pin down, and recent scholarship shows that he went through a number of ideological shifts over the course of his life, on matters ranging from race to social systems. Therefore, this intertextual reading of the two authors is not intended to suggest

that they were kindred spirits separated by time and culture,⁷ but, more accurately, that they were two astute writers who, at one point in each of their careers, decided to explore similar topics. The relationship between how these topics are explored suggests that the two men were able to conceptionalize a similar outlook on life in vastly different contexts and found that outlook to contain enough truth to merit putting it down on paper. And considering that Camus was very familiar with Faulkner's work—singling him out for praise on multiple occasions and adapting Faulkner's work for the stage—it is likely that what Camus took away from Faulkner's work was built upon, developed and ultimately transformed into something new, a fusion discovered in the heated, racially volatile South of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County and refined on the Franco-controlled Algerian beaches.

⁷ Not all scholars in this field agree that Camus is the best writer to compare with Faulkner, nor that *Light in August* is the most existentially appropriate of Faulkner's texts. Much has been written about Faulkner and existentialism, and the most notable of these are George Bedell's *Kierkegaard and Faulkner: Modalities of Existence*, William Sowder's "Faulkner and Existentialism: A Note on the Generalissimo" and "Colonel Thomas Sutpen as Existentialist Hero," Robert W. Funk's "Satire and Existentialism in Faulkner's 'Red Leaves'," and Deborah Clark and Christiane P. Makward's "Camus, Faulkner, Dead Mothers: a Dialogue." Despite this body of work, the scholarship can still be built upon, and these are just a few of the many perspectives that could be engaged.

CONCLUSION

The three intertextual readings performed in the previous chapters mark the culmination of years of development, during which ideas passed between writers, either directly or indirectly through the cultural hive-mind; passed between different countries, occasionally returning in a new form; and passed between different fields with varying expectations for the presentation of ideas. In detail, they outline the manner in which the philosophical ideas become manifest, but the analysis goes beyond a simple pointing to themes. The research is intended to show how more complex philosophical structures, the manifestation of multiple themes and recurring ideas, are brought together, forming a similar worldview or structure to that of the later writers. The American authors rarely come to the same conclusions as the French writers for a number of reasons; even though the time periods are similar, the separate works were produced out of very different cultures. The French cultivated a very specific goal for their fiction and philosophy, as did the American authors, but both groups used the same thematic elements to reach their conclusions, which, given existentialism's emphasis on subjective truth, seems fitting.

The developed version of existentialism that we have today would not really have been possible much earlier in history, as many factors came together to allow it to thrive as it did. And many of the elements that occurred in society to produce existentialism are the same ones often cited as contributing to the modernist movement in America. During the nineteenth century, people were entering a world in which old systems of religion were finally challenged, making way for people like Nietzsche and Emerson to voice their displeasures with the church with less fear of death, something that many proto-

existentialist thinkers would have a difficult time accomplishing.¹ This displeasure with the church eventually became a rejection of objective values and a sense of meaninglessness, both common themes in modernist and existentialist fiction. After World War I, people found themselves in a world very different than the one preceding it, one in which destruction could easily be achieved on a wide-scale, leaving the survivors to wonder if it was worth it to pick up the pieces. This perception eventually led to a sense of alienation, a popular component of modernist fiction and poetry and eventually also a part of existentialism.

A further complication of the argument presented here is the fact that the modernist movement and French existentialism overlapped to a certain degree. Most of the major modernist texts appeared between the early 1920s and late 1930s, and most of the existentialist texts appeared between the late 1930s and late 1940s. However, many of the modernist writers named here wrote all the way up to and at times beyond existentialism's most prolific period, and two of the works analyzed here, McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* and de Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal*, were even published in the same year. This overlap ultimately helps drive home one of the main assertions presented in this reading. The publication dates of the texts is a relative factor, since I do not argue that McCullers's text directly influences de Beauvoir's, and the same is true for the other texts as well. McCullers published books with similar themes years earlier, but even this detail is not the proof that such a comparison is worthwhile. The argument here

¹ Sartre actually asserts that Kierkegaard was likely one of these people, embracing religion in his philosophy because he was afraid to challenge the power structures present in his day and age. To this author and most modern scholars who look at Kierkegaard's work in detail, this seems more like an attempt to find corroboration of Sartre's atheism-reliant worldview than an actual insight into the truth of Kierkegaard's life.

operates on a grander scale. It looks at how the two movements spoke to each other, developed, and diverged over many years. The texts chosen for study are ones that best illustrate this connection, a kind of culmination of a conversation that no one text can transmit alone. And the fact that the two movements overlap is fitting, revealing that the American modernists and existentialists were really of a similar mind and responded to much of the same experience of the world.

Another important element in this equation is the American conception of philosophy. America in general is not as known for its philosophers as the French, partially because America's philosophers do not produce traditional philosophical texts, instead adhering more closely to the pragmatist tradition. However, Thoreau's *Walden* is a philosophical text in the same sense that Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's works are, yet it is often viewed only as literature. The striking difference between American philosophy and those European forms is that American philosophy does not feel obligated to explain itself in the same manner, that it is more impressionist than explicit. Frederick Hoffman states in "Camus and America" that "In modern American 'the absurd' [. . .] never becomes conceptualized; nor is it ever really used to document an intellectual criticism of the society in which it occurs" (39). However, it is present, giving an impression as opposed to expression. With this in mind, the transition of literary ideas from American modernism to French existentialism seems more natural, as it is widely accepted that philosophies speak to each other and evolve over time, and in the same manner that Husserl's phenomenology becomes something new in Heidegger, American modernism becomes something new when it crosses to France.

The preceding chapters make a case for the standing argument of this work, but some may still want a more comprehensive look at modernism itself. Only well-established modernists writers are discussed, suggesting perhaps a weaker connection than the thesis would posit. Therefore, it is pertinent to take a moment to briefly survey some other major American modernists in order to round out the argument and generate ideas for future research.

Many scholars, after reading this text, may wonder why Hemingway is not included in the major analysis. He is a very important modernist figure, and his work had a vast impact on the French writers. Many scholars, including Sartre, maintain that Camus's style in *The Stranger* is very much indebted to Hemingway's narrative technique. For this analysis, the content is more important than the form, although the use of Hemingway's style makes some important statements about the goals and achievements of both the American and French writers. Aside from his stylistic influence, Hemingway's subject matter also shares a thematic connection with the French existentialists. In many of his novels, including *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and *Islands in the Stream*, an overarching sense of purposelessness pervades the books. The protagonists find themselves in conflicts that they understand are meaningless on a universal scale, but despite this comprehension, they persist and risk their lives for these conflicts. Often the protagonists' motivations for participating are obscured behind layers of personal turmoil and are often the product of an existential worldview. For example, Thomas Hudson is never truly able to cope with the untimely deaths of his children, and though he, in true Hemingway style, never exposes his feelings about his sons' deaths in the same manner that a character from a Faulkner novel might, we are given the

impression that he views their deaths as the products of an uncaring, unforgiving universe. Yet, in despite of this absurdity, he persists, arguably making him a Sisyphean hero in the mode of Camus.

Hudson's role as a possible existential hero is not a unique occurrence in Hemingway's body of fiction. One of the ideas common in Hemingway scholarship is that of the "code hero," a lens used by scholars to understand the motivations of Hemingway's (mostly male) characters. This argument—that Hemingway's characters live by a strict code of their own devising—is very reminiscent of the existential hero. Both types of heroes live life in a subjective way, rejecting outside strictures concerning morality and purpose and instead adopting their own. Both characters also take on an essential project with their lives, whether it be fighting for a cause in whatever fashion seems fit or something less obvious. Finally, both styles of characters display a tendency to persist despite acknowledging that their actions are ultimately meaningless. In this sense, Hemingway can be viewed as a progenitor for the concept of the existential hero, and it is no surprise that the French writers put such great stake in his work.

Hemingway is likely the most researched author in relation to existentialist connections. Multiple authors have explored the subject in essays, including Annette Benert, B. Leboist, Richard Lehan, Uma Alladi, Donald Watt, and Wayne Holcombe. In addition to these shorter pieces, a number of long studies have been done on Hemingway and existentialism, including work by John Killinger, Ben Stoltzfus, and J'aime Sanders. While the lot of this scholarship does not completely cover the possible topics for existential study in Hemingway's texts, the need for more scholarship on him is less.

In addition to Hemingway, another modernist writer not discussed here is John Dos Passos. Sartre's praise for Dos Passos's work has been well-documented, and he would be a strong candidate for future study. In particular, the aspect of Dos Passos's writing that is very existential in nature is his ability to create a phenomenological impression of a world through fiction, one which is grounded in a very historical place and time. For example, in *The Big Money* (1936) Dos Passos uses the sections titled "The Camera's Eye" to present a perspective on the time period, utilizing real, fictionalized, and sensationalized headlines to not only record the actual events that happened, but to give context to his story and provide an impression of how people experienced the time period as well. He also provides alternate though often more accurate accounts of famous people of the period in order to counteract the hegemonic narrative provided by our national conception of "history." The ultimate result of this process is a strongly phenomenological exploration of history in which objective events meet subjective interpretation to form a unique experience that is then passed along to the reader.

In addition to his use of historical and created events to impress subjective truth on the mind of the reader, Dos Passos's narrative structure also lends itself to existential interpretation. In *The Big Money*, Dos Passos employs a narrative process similar to that of Edgar Lee Masters, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Sherwood Anderson. He tells an overarching narrative composed of the individual stories of separate people, and although the stories are not always overtly connected to one another, the story as a whole relies on the experiences of all the individuals in the same fashion that "history," as we understand it, is dependent upon the lives of millions of people. In this way, Dos Passos, like other

American writers of the period, rejects the single narrative in order to make a statement about the validity of subjective experience.

Dos Passos solicited a body of scholarship on the topic of existentialism, though not to the same degree as Hemingway. For Dos Passos, though, this scholarship is almost completely focused on his connection to Sartre, as a result of Sartre's praise of Dos Passos. The scholars who have analyzed Dos Passos's work in relation to existentialism include Richard Lehan, Peter Christensen, and Ben Stoltzfus. But despite these works, Dos Passos's work is mostly open for interpretation in terms of existentialism, and considering that critical study of Dos Passos dropped off not that long after the publication of his major works, he would be a very good candidate for further research.

Another important name in modernist literature omitted from this study but still relevant is John Steinbeck. Steinbeck's work expresses the senseless toil of the absurd universe arguably better than that of any other modernist American writer. The characters in novels such as *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) understand in harrowing detail that the work they put into the world does not lend value to their lives, at least in any way that those around them appreciate. And in the struggle of the Joads, the reader gets a complete picture of a careless universe, offering no breaks, only random happenstance to those who would like to believe otherwise. And through this detail, it seems as though Steinbeck's philosophy reflects that of the later French writers.

Even beyond the senselessness of the universe, the idea of absurd punishment permeates Steinbeck's fiction. In *Of Mice and Men* (1937), we are presented with Lennie, who by the end of the story ends up killing a woman by accident. It is arguable that Lennie is mostly innocent in this act, as he is mentally challenged and has almost

inhuman strength. He does not mean to kill Curley's Wife and likely does not fully comprehend what he has done. But this fact does not save him from punishment. So like the characters in other stories who receive absurd punishment, such as Meursault, Lennie will die even though he does not necessarily possess the criminal intent to harm others. But unlike many of the depictions of absurd punishment in literature, Steinbeck provides a perspective that is fairly unique: the reader is presented with the thought processes of those who must carry out the absurd punishment, which in this case is George. While we often see the motivations and rebellion of the victim in absurd punishment, Steinbeck reverses the role, providing less of Lennie's perspective and more of George's. Steinbeck suggests that absurd punishment is not always doled out by those who agree with the verdict—that even the executioner can understand that the punishment is absurd and yet know that it is demanded. This treatment of absurd punishment drives home how powerful and pervasive the idea can be and reveals the wide-reaching effects of such an aspect of society.

Steinbeck's stories often make such a clear and powerful social statement that at times it is hard to read them in any other fashion. Often they seem more akin to Marxism than to existentialism. However, Steinbeck's work offers fertile ground for new scholarship, and critics have had little to say concerning him. Barbara Heavilin's "The Existential Vacuum and Ethan Allen Hawley: John Steinbeck's Moral Philosophy" is currently the only text to make the connection between Steinbeck and the French writers, leaving much of his major work open for interpretation.

The other major modernist who should be mentioned here as a strong possibility for future study is Flannery O'Connor, and though she was writing later in the movement

than most of the other writers included here, her work still speaks very much to both modernism and existentialism. O'Connor's work showcases the "grotesque," a term strongly associated with the American South, and her grotesque people and events suggest a worldview that works well with existentialism. In many cases, the grotesque events that act as the crux of O'Connor's stories can be viewed as affirmations of the absurdity of the world. For example, in "Greenleaf" from *Everything that Rises Must Converge* (1965), Mrs. May goes about a rather mundane life full of petty conflict with the Greenleaf family, and although she would not necessarily be considered an admirable character, she lives an uneventful life. However, when she takes Mr. Greenleaf into the fields to shoot a bull, she is caught off guard when the bull charges and drives its horn through her heart. In the last lines of the story, we learn that when Mr. Greenleaf finds her body, "she seemed [. . .] to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear" (53). The gruesome and random circumstance of her death, while grotesque, also suggests an absurdity—that a person can be walking this Earth, doing his or her best to live life as he or she deems fit, yet suddenly be ripped from it by unreasoning and careless forces. This thinking is in keeping with existential thought, and one can argue that the "last discovery" that Mrs. May attempts to whisper to the bull is her realization of the nature of the universe.

However, while O'Connor's fiction does contain this absurd element, many scholars would recoil from calling her an existentialist. Much of her work has religious implications, whether explicit or implicit, and though she is willing to critique certain religious ideas, faith is a strong subject in her work. Unlike the French writers, she does not work within an objectively meaningless world. She fits more aptly with the earlier

existentialists, such as Kierkegaard, or some of the lesser-known French “Christian” existentialists. Another small complication comes up in terms of the time in which she was writing, and it is possible to argue that she was more influenced by the French writers than influenced them. Whichever perspective one takes, the scholarship confirms her link with to existentialism, including studies by Andrew Leiter, Thomas Cooksey, Raymond Benoit, Terry White, and Jay Evans. It may even seem as though O’Connor would not be a good candidate for further study, yet most of these pieces concern a specific story, and given how many short stories O’Connor wrote, a large number of viable works remain untouched and ready for analysis.

So it is clear that the modernists have much to offer in terms of further study of existentialism and literature, but if a true “conversation” is to take place, then philosophy must speak back to literature. While it is well-documented that existentialism impacted later philosophical movements like deconstructionism, its impact on later literature leaves, in this author’s opinion, much to be desired. Often contemporary literature will be deemed “existential” or certain themes will be named and discussed to varying degrees of specificity, but if this conversation is to be fully illuminated, it requires that the same level of analysis be performed on these post-modern texts and that the criteria for an existential lens be clearly identified, as employed in this and other studies. In the same way that existentialism had much to absorb and alter from American literature, so does American literature absorb and alter much from existentialism.

Contemporary literature opens up a large sphere of texts. Richard Lehan begins this process in his book, though his readings focus mostly on male-centered texts. A number of other studies take on more contemporary texts. But these studies are only the

beginning of what could be a much more comprehensive body of criticism, which could benefit from looking at authors such as Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko in order to understand what they learned from existentialism and how they made it their own.

It becomes clear when looking at early American literature, continuing through the modern period and beyond into post-modernism and contemporary literature, that existentialism found an appreciable amount of its content already present in the raw talent of American writers, and for what the French took from American writers, they gave back just as much. This exchange is ultimately a healthy one for both countries, one that will hopefully continue into the future as new ideas flower from this fertile soil. In a day and age when many countries are very territorial over what is “theirs” as opposed to “others,” we should be supportive of avenues of exchange that acknowledge what we as cultures can provide to one another on the intellectual forum instead of what we can claim as our own. This statement may seem hypocritical to some readers who have taken this work as an attempt to lay claim to existentialism for America, the proverbial planting of the flag, yet that is neither its goal nor the wish of the author. This study is, instead, an attempt to fully praise a moment in history in which both America and France (with the help of others) listened, spoke, and produced new and interesting ideas.

In the introduction, I suggested that Lehan’s book, which is the current major text, is not the final statement on existentialism and modernist literature. Making that statement, I wish to clarify that it applies as well to this work. I invite and even encourage other scholars to build upon what is here, to extend it further, to supplement it with other possibilities, and to challenge it on any grounds they see fit. I have when possible provided various “seeds” that I hope might inspire future research, as I view the

interdisciplinary approach to literature to be of vital importance. Above all, the goal of this research is to study “conversation” between fields, and I do not wish to limit anyone to the fields that obviously work well together. Most scholars acknowledge that a body of research is not meant to exist in a vacuum, that scholarship is intended to speak with other ideas. However, often we limit those ideas to our own field of study, conducting a conversation with other works of literature or literary theory while avoiding the hard or soft sciences or even many of the other humanities. Doing such work requires us as scholars to step into places that are possibly less familiar, but literary studies are, I believe, much improved by this experience. And the experience also reveals something about the nature of knowledge itself. What is a “raw” idea to one field eventually becomes something “refined” to another. This process is cyclic. The refined idea becomes the raw material with which to make something else. The study of this process is likely the greatest value that our work offers the world. It provides a path to social evolution.

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