A Productive Failure: Existentialism in Fin de Siècle England

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A PRODUCTIVE FAILURE: EXISTENTIALISM IN FIN DE SIÈCLE ENGLAND

by

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Marquette University,
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ABSTRACT
A PRODUCTIVE FAILURE: EXISTENTIALISM IN FIN DE SIÈCLE ENGLAND

Maxwell Patchet, B.A., M.A.
Marquette University, 2020

In my dissertation, I argue that Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and G. K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday* belong to a broader, transnational tradition of existential novelists. I discuss how recognizing their novels as existential explains why these authors exist in a liminal space in literary criticism, caught between Victorianism and modernism. My dissertation historicizes their existential contribution by placing it within the context of late-Victorian optimism. While their contemporaries celebrated Britain’s technological, imperial, and philosophical strides, Hardy, Conrad, and Chesterton wrote novels that warned against too firm a faith in the merits of progress. Their warnings about the human cost of Victorian progress appears in the novels’ dramatization of failure: the failure of representation in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, the failure of communication in *Heart of Darkness*, and the failure of understanding in *The Man Who Was Thursday*.

In addition to arguing Hardy, Conrad, and Chesterton belong to a broader existential tradition, I argue that the novel form has been overlooked in accounts of the development of existential thought. The British existentialists’ use of their novel’s formal features speaks to the way in which the novel form itself becomes a productive means of philosophical inquiry. Instead of viewing the novel as merely an useful illustration for philosophic concepts, I argue that the novel is capable of developing ideas in ways unavailable to philosophic discourse. My dissertation shows that the intersection of literature and philosophy demands critical attention be given to the individual characteristics of a novel’s form. In my chapters, I discuss how Hardy theorizes existential absence, Conrad theorizes existential horror, and Chesterton theorizes existential joy through their novel’s distinctive formal features. For each of these authors, the concept emerges out of the failure of the novel’s form. Hence, failure for the British existentialists was productive. Their incompleteness creates possibility, and possibility creates freedom.
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Maxwell Patchet, B.A., M.A.

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Introduction: Existentialism and the Novel Form

The British fin de siècle was marked not merely by the end of a century, but also by the nearing end of the long reign of Queen Victoria. The jubilee celebrations of 1887 and 1897 inspired the British public to indulge in patriotic and nationalistic fervor. Not only was Victoria a popular queen, but her reign witnessed huge advancements in technology and science (King 2, 17). When the British press began to reflect on where the nation was and where it had come from over the course of the nineteenth century, they were struck by the rapidity and scope of the changes technology, science, and empire had wrought on Britain’s place in the world. As Greg King writes, “No other monarch presided over such dramatic changes as did Victoria. From her birth in 1819 to her death in 1901, she witnessed an extraordinary transformation, not just in England but also in the world as a whole” (4).

The attitude of British subjects towards these dramatic transformations was generally positive. Victoria was destined “to preside over the greatest period of British prosperity and growth in the modern era” (5) and on her death The Times summed her reign:

To write the life of Queen Victoria is to relate the history of Great Britain during a period of great events, manifold changes, and unexampled national prosperity. No reign in the annals of any country can compare with that of the late Sovereign; and to her, whose personal influence helped in a large measure to make this epoch one that will be ever gratefully remembered, we owe more than to any of our former kings and Queens. (3)
The *Times* obituary does not merely show respect to a beloved Queen but reflects the Victorians’ optimism and faith in progress. In *The Invention of Progress* Peter Bowler writes of Victorians: “The idea of progress became central to their thinking precisely because it offered the hope that current changes might be part of a meaningful historical pattern” (3). Bowler observes that theories of social development “enabled the commercial and professional classes of Victorian Britain to maintain that the society they were creating represented the goal to which all other nations must aspire” (18). This belief is reflected in *fin de siècle* writings. Elisée Reclus observed in 1896 “it would be absurd to deny” the progress of humanity in general (783), while contemporary historian R. H. Gretton described the 1887 Jubilee as “an occasion which prompted retrospects” and England’s progress during the 50 years of Victoria’s reign “provided ground for almost unmitigated satisfaction” (212).

Given these attitudes, English national pride was extraordinarily high during this time. In 1896 Edward Dicey, commenting on England’s purported unpopularity (probably in some measure connected to the expansive empire), wrote, “England is more honest, more truthful, animated by a higher sense of duty, better fitted to govern herself, and to govern others also, than the rest of the world” (668). Two years later F. E. Younghusband wrote, “The history of mankind shows a succession of emigrations from new and higher centres of civilisation by which superior races have effected a control over inferior” (457). In the same year *Chambers’s Journal* proclaimed the Diamond Jubilee “kindled afresh in the minds of Englishmen the flame of a lofty patriotism and roused the nation to a deeper sense of the glorious heritage bequeathed by those whose dauntless courage and amazing enterprise stand forth as not the least that is admirable in
the history of the past” (277). As Bowler describes, “Since Britain was the purest expression of European development, it was her duty to lead the way in controlling as much of the world’s population as possible” (57). Britain’s dominance over a quarter of the globe was all the proof needed of the superiority of the British people.

This was joined by a view of the past century as emblematic of historical progression. H. D. Traill began his article on the Diamond Jubilee with the words, “We live in a century whose praise as an ‘age of progress’ has been in all the newspapers for the last fifty years” and that we ought to recognize that “tributes of respectful congratulation” are in fact “compliments to address of the Victorian Era. For that is the actual fact” (825). Ebenezer E. Jenkins wrote, “We are looking back over sixty years, and can produce a record of progress and of triumph to which neither ancient nor modern history can find a parallel” (447). Another journalist wrote, “I have now been engaged more or less continuously in journalistic work for a quarter of a century, and during the whole of that time I do not remember one month which on the whole, looking at it all round, has brought with it much greater gifts from the Destinies for the English-speaking man” (“The Progress of the World” 102). C. De Thierry writes that should England “as she will do, keep on in the light by which she has hitherto been guided, a new era will open out before her, eclipsing all others in moral and material grandeur” (317).

Into this context enter Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1890), Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and G. K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908). These novels find themselves ill at ease with the general optimism of the day. As late Victorians looked back on a century of progress and looked forward to a future that seemed to hold no end of promise, these authors strike a discordant note. These authors
rejected the sense of superiority that marked Victorian self-image, whether that be technological superiority, imperialism, or a faith in human progress.

Later generations noticed a difference between these novelists and their literary contemporaries. Hardy and Conrad’s place as liminal figures is seen in Virginia Woolf’s “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and “Modern Fiction” where she excepts them from her criticisms of the Edwardian novelists. In these essays Virginia Woolf reflects on the novel, drawing a clear distinction between the Edwardian and Georgian novelists in an earlier focus on the material versus a modern focus on the psychological. The exception Woolf makes for Hardy and Conrad in her dismissal of earlier novelists is motivated by these authors’ focus on subjective experience and the collision of mind and matter, prioritizing neither the materialism of their contemporaries nor the innovative psychological explorations of the modernists. As a result, these works and their authors resist traditional literary categorization. Neither truly Victorian nor truly Modern, they are liminal figures in literary history. Conrad and Hardy get read in survey courses, but they are placed oddly between Tennyson, Arnold and company and Eliot, Woolf, Joyce and the other modernists. Writing later than the other two, Chesterton’s work can be seen as a direct rebuttal to the cynicism and ennui taking hold of fin de siècle art.

My project proposes these authors are best understood as part of the existential tradition. While some novels, like Notes from Underground and those written by Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir and Franz Kafka get included in collections of existential writings, the importance of the novel form to existentialism has been neglected. It is my contention that by making fiction peripheral we are ignoring important contributions to the development of existentialism. The typical tradition traced
in accounts of existentialism draws a line from Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche to Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger before finishing with Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus. The development is one from Germany to France. In this movement England is forgotten or ignored, mostly because English philosophers did not embrace existentialism.

However, if we recognize the contributions of literature to the development of existential thought we can discern a forgotten emergence of existentialism in the literature of fin de siècle England. As the British press around them celebrated the progress and accomplishments of the nation during Queen Victoria’s reign, these authors wrote literature that wrestled with the themes of existential philosophy.

There are two driving questions that form this introduction. The first of these questions is, what is existentialism? The second of these questions is, why novels? Related to these questions are two other questions: what is an existential novel, and can we retroactively define novels as existential that were written before the movement got its name? The answers to the latter questions are best provided in the form of a case study. For this reason, we will look at critical commentary and treatment of Dostoevsky’s novella Notes from Underground. In the midst of this reckoning I will offer my own interpretation of the underground man that establishes what I argue is the through-line for the novelists Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, and G. K. Chesterton: namely the existential preoccupation with failure.

**Definitions of Existentialism**

Histories of existentialism generally acknowledge that there is no singular definition of existentialism, but rather existentialism is best understood as a cluster of
related themes. The exact understanding and analysis of these themes might differ—sometimes radically, as in the atheist Camus and the Christian Kierkegaard—but these themes overlap between the writers generally considered existential. Nevertheless, any definition of existentialism must take into account the lack of cohesion among the writers.

Most accounts of existentialism find it necessary to establish the difficulty or impossibility of defining it. Felicity Joseph, Jack Reynolds, and Ashley Woodward acknowledge there is no straightforward answer to the question, what is existentialism? (3). In the introduction to *Existentialism: Basic Writings* Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom admit, “The term is notoriously difficult to define, and no single definition will be adequate to fit all the works usually labeled ‘existentialist’” (v). Fernando Molina agrees, writing “It is not easy to define existentialism; moreover, it is probably impossible to provide a definition with which all students and members of the existentialist movement would agree” (2). Davis McElroy observes, “it is impossible to reduce” existentialism to a simple one- or two-sentence definition (xi). This apparent impossibility prompts L. Nathan Oaklander to choose not to define existentialism. He asserts “any attempt to define it would inevitably lose sight of it” (ix).

Many of these commentators explain that the difficulty of providing a definition is a feature of existential thought. Wesley Barnes explains, “We cannot define existentialism in the forms found in our current dictionaries” (9). He goes further, “the phenomenon of definition would be entirely alien to the existentialist. He would see defining as the fatal process of setting up standards which he would have to consider, admit, deny, or modify” (5). Jonathan Judaken agrees: “existentialism, in principle rejects
a neat dictionary definition or formulation” (1). Mark Tanzer affirms this understanding: “existentialists maintain that no one definition can capture the essence of existential philosophy” (2).

It is not enough for critics to recognize the difficulties in offering a definition of existentialism. A number of them also point out that there is little similarity between the figures we consider existential. Walter Kaufmann claims, “Existentialism is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy” (11), adding that many people we consider existentialists reject the label. It is not, he argues, “a school of thought nor reducible to any set up tenets” and that the writers considered existential do not agree “on essentials” (11). Robert C. Solomon begins his introduction by stating, “there is no set of doctrines common” to existentialists (3). Kevin Aho reflects, “One of the difficulties in writing a book about ‘existentialism’ is the word itself. It is an ‘ism’ that gives the misleading impression of a coherent and unified philosophical school” (ix). Mary Warnock asserts, “It does not designate a system or a school” (1) and Richard Gill echoes when he confirms existentialism is “neither a system, nor a school, nor a creed” (4).

Like a definition, having a “system”, “school”, or “creed” would go against the existentialist project. Mark Tanzer writes, “[T]he existentialists rejected the idea of a philosophical system. That is, existentialist philosophers typically deny that the age-old philosophical ambition of articulating a rational systematic account of the world and the human beings inhabiting it is anything but a misguided project” (2). Ernst Breisach explains:
Nobody has yet or will ever put down ‘the’ tenets of existentialism in any systematic work of so many volumes, nor will there at any time appear an ‘Existentialist Manifesto’ which would neatly spell out easy-to-grasp maxims. Even the word existentialism itself must be used with great caution, since it refers not to a rigid set of propositions but rather to a number of themes which recur in the works of existentialist writers...they dwell on the eternal tensions present in the human condition and shared by men of all ages. (4)

What is it about existentialism that resists definitions and creeds? The lack of clarity and unity is the result of the existentialists’ emphasis on the individual and her intensely personal struggle with philosophic thought. Solomon calls existentialism “a development of a number of themes which each existentialist stamps with his or her own personal approach” (3). Kaufmann observes a shared “perfervid individualism” and calls “the heart of existentialism” the “refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life” (12). The result of the existential insistence of personal engagement with philosophic questions, the answers individuals give to these questions will reflect their unique subjectivity. To expect a neat definition or a set of beliefs is to expect of existentialism a rigorous academic approach against which existentialism rebels due to its impersonal and abstracted character.

The rejection of distant, academic approaches to philosophy is a through-line in existential thought. Joseph, Reynolds and Woodward see “a general insistence on
philosophy being more than merely an abstract intellectual pursuit” (2). Thomas R. Flynn describes the existential approach as one that views philosophy as a way of life and care for the self. Eugene B. Borowitz explains, “It demands the whole self, not just the mind. It wants the thinker to participate in the thinking. It is satisfied to appeal to him mentally only as a means of engaging him heart and soul as well” (15). H. J. Blackham adds, “The main business of this philosophy therefore is not to answer the questions which are raised but to drive home the questions themselves until they engage the whole man and are made personal, urgent, and anguished” (151-152). The focus on the individual and the rejection of abstract, academic philosophy emerge from the same emphasis on what William Barrett calls “the unique experience of the single one, the individual, who chooses to place himself on trial before the gravest question of his civilization” (13). To the existentialist, philosophy is not an object of study but rather a subjective wrestling with the questions of meaning, purpose, and truth that existentialists felt had been lost in the abstractions of their philosophical contemporaries.

Existentialism emerged out of a sense that academic philosophies had lost sight of the human element. Paul Roubiczek observes existentialism “insists that philosophy should be connected with the individual’s own life and experience, with the historical situation in which he finds himself, and that it should be, not interesting abstract speculation, but a way of life. It should be a philosophy capable of being lived” (10). He continues, “Philosophy, therefore, should start from one’s own experience, one’s own inner knowledge, and it is inner knowledge which should be qualified, enlarged, and in this way enriched” (10). It is difficult in our day to realize how radical this approach is, but when existentialism was being established it went emphatically against philosophical
tradition. For many years the pursuit of philosophy went hand in hand with the belief that truth transcends humanity. Existentialists assert instead that truth is human and thus must wrestle with the realities of human experience.

Thus, one of the features that existentialists share is an insistence that no universal answer to philosophic questions is possible. Instead, existentialism is built around the individual and his approach to his particular, specific, and concrete situation. William Barrett argues, “No concept or system of concepts lies at the center of their philosophies, but rather the individual human personality itself struggling for self-realization” (13). L. Nathan Oaklander similarly insists “the fundamental or ultimate subject matter of existentialism is the existing, concrete, living individual. Existentialists are not primarily concerned with human life in general, but with the life of particular existing individuals” (3). And so Ernst Breisach discusses the existential project in terms of “the central existentialist concern, the actually existing individual” (6). This approach explains the differences between existentialist thinkers, the lack of a clear and specific definition, and the resistance to a creed. Because existentialists insist on an individual response to the existential questions, it is inevitable that these answers would be different.

A number of critics find it useful to invoke Wittgenstein and argue that existentialism is best understood in terms of family resemblance, and so while there is no universal existentialism, they share overlapping concerns. While the lists commentators compile bear differences, they tend to agree that existentialists share a concern with concepts like freedom, anxiety, choice, dread, death, absurdity, individual subjectivity, contingency, and finitude. While no existentialist is concerned with all of these concepts, and there is occasionally significant difference in how existentialists understand these
concerns, there emerges a certain sensibility, a certain approach to existence that we can understand as “existentialist.” The distinctions between Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers, Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir and the other existentialists result from each existentialist’s individual struggle with these concepts, the individual priorities that mark their philosophic approach. Kierkegaard might emphasize faith, Heidegger might emphasize being, and Camus might emphasize the absurd, but their philosophies overlap, and in that overlap we can begin to gain an understanding of existentialism.

**Existential Themes**

As has been noted already, existentialism begins with the individual human subject.¹ Existentialism challenged the assumption that our personal experiences, the emotions, desires, and moods humans are saddled with are not appropriate subjects of philosophy. This theme defines much of Kierkegaard’s work, with *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* asserting everyone has a choice in life, while *The Sickness Unto Death* is a meditation on the subjective experience of despair. Later existentialists continue the emphasis on the individual, whether through Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch*, de Beauvoir’s emphasis on reciprocity, or in Sartre’s concern with freedom, responsibility, and bad faith. While the emphasis might be on strength, on equality, or on authenticity the origin point is a concern with the individual.

Many of the other themes identified by writers emerge from the focus on the individual and his or her existence. The first of these themes is a concern with the nature of being. Two of the major existential works, Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and Sartre’s

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¹ See Davis McElroy, xi; Kevin Aho, x-xi; Richard Appignanesi, xi; Felicity Joseph, Jack Reynolds, and Ashley Woodward, 3; Richard Gill, 22; L. Nathan Oaklander, 3, Ernst Breisach, 6; Paul Roubiczek, 10; Steven Crowell, 22; Steven Earnshaw, 1; and William Barrett, 13.
Being and Nothingness make understanding what being means central to their work. Out of these studies emerge existential terms like Da-sien, thrownness, being-in-itself and being-for-itself. What is distinct about humans, Heidegger asserts, is that as Da-sein “in its being this being is concerned about its very being” (10). Heidegger establishes in the beginning of Being and Time that to get at the question of the meaning of being we must begin by understanding human existence.

The focus on being leads naturally to a reckoning with humans as contingent creatures. None of us are necessary beings, and thus the fact of our existence is accidental. But contingency does not relate merely to the accidental existence of humans, but further to the individual realities that mark our individual existences. The first of these is the involuntary nature of existence: no one chose to come into being, but rather existence is thrust upon individuals. Contingency includes our self-conscious awareness that our individual, particular existence—and that it is this existence and no other—is thoroughly coincidental. Contingency encompasses the realization that this consciousness is connected to this body, that this body was born to these parents, at this time, in this place, and in this culture. Existentialists are interested in the absurdity that our conscious awareness of existence is bound by a physical body that is bound by time and space.

As a result of this interest, existentialists emphasize concrete experience as a valid source for philosophizing, and thus has roots in phenomenology. Instead of rejecting human moods, emotions, or experiences as outside the purview of philosophy, the existentialists placed those parts of human experience at the center of philosophy. As Barrett says: “Ideas are not even the real subject matter of these philosophers,” rather the individual’s unique, singular experience (13). Philosophy is done from a situation, but
existentialists do not see this as a weakness of philosophy. Therefore existentialism incorporates the individual’s unique perspective into the foundation of its philosophy, deciding to turn those limits into its strength.

Out of the individuals unique, contingent existence emerges the next theme of existentialism, and that is freedom and choice. Kevin Aho’s description of existentialists’ “concern for human situation as it is lived” (x) is exemplified in works like *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* by Kierkegaard and in Sartre’s analysis of bad faith, authenticity, and responsibility. The nature of this freedom is seen in Sartre’s “Existentialism is a Humanism:”

For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s actions by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism—man is free, man *is* freedom. Nor, on the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimize our behavior. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does. (353)

Sartre uses the term “condemned” to describe man’s freedom in order to emphasize the negative aspects of this human freedom. Because one’s nature is not given, and because in Sartre’s atheistic existentialism there is no God to provide values, mankind is cast
adrift. But religious existentialists also recognize a similar undercurrent to human existence that even the existence of God cannot completely alleviate.

The result of this freedom is anxiety, otherwise called angst, anguish or dread. Out of human freedom comes the knowledge that the individual is solely responsible for choosing how to act. The typical example is to imagine walking on the edge of a cliff. While there is a typical fear of falling off that cliff, existential dread is the possibility that there is nothing that prevents you from choosing to throw yourself off the edge of that cliff. In that moment we become aware of the precariousness of our existence. As Paul S. MacDonald writes, “anxiety is the reflective awareness that there is nothing that stands between her and not being…anxiety is the face-to-face encounter with the abyss between one’s being and not being” (37). MacDonald further explains what is occurring here. Anxiety occurs when without help and on one’s own one is faced with the necessity of making a choice. Unlike fear, which has an object, “anxiety arises in confrontation with oneself” (39). This is the difference between being afraid of falling off the cliff and confronting the fact that nothing prevents one from choosing to throw oneself off the edge of the cliff. The awareness of the precariousness of existence and the necessity of making a choice produces anxiety.

The cliff example is also appropriate because it highlights the existential concern with death. While existential anxiety can occur whenever one is forced to make a choice, the fundamental, existential choice is between being and nonbeing. As Albert Camus says in The Myth of Sisyphus, “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (3). Rather than reveal a disturbing morbidity,
existentialism’s interest in facing up to the reality of death is about grappling with the meaning of life. Existentialism claims that only in the face of death can you truly live. Thus, it asks the individual to face the possibility of nonbeing because doing so is necessary in order to answer the question on the meaning of life.

The question of meaning and purpose is central to existentialism. The confrontation with nonbeing makes that all the more urgent. And by nonbeing I do not mean merely facing the possibility of one’s death, but also the realization that one is contingent and that were circumstances different (had your parents not met or had one of your grandparents died in childhood) one might not have existed at all. How does an accidental existence have meaning? Existentialism begins with the fact that the meaning of life is not a given, but rather one is thrown into existence (to use the Heideggerian phrase) without foundation. Thus, existentialists grapple with the desire for meaning and purpose in a world that resists comprehension.

Camus calls this feeling the absurd, which he defines as the “divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting” (6). He further explains, “This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (21). The world is dense, irreducible. The yearning for meaning that individuals feel finds no answers in the world, which denies any human attempt to make sense of it. The absurd describes the confrontation between human beings and the lack of any apparent meaning or purpose to existence. The absurd, Camus clarifies, is not in the world or a quality of the world but emerges out of human interaction with the world. The absurd emerges
when individuals who desire meaning are faced with a universe that refuses to make sense.

The result of this confrontation is a feeling of loneliness, of isolation, of alienation. Certainly, this feeling of alienation occurs between the individual and his setting, as Camus writes in the quote above. This can be between the subject and the physical world, as Sartre dramatizes in *Nausea*, or between the individual and the masses, which Kierkegaard called “the crowd,” or between individuals, as Camus reveals in *The Stranger*. All these forms of alienation can accompany the recognition of the absurd in human life. The first recognizes the impossibility of truly understanding the world as it “really” is, and hence the origins of existentialism in phenomenology. As Camus writes, “The world evades us because it becomes itself again” (14). The second emerges from the sense that the crowd, the herd, or the masses live inauthentic lives: they have never considered the meaning of their existence or questioned the values that society tells them they should have, that they simply adopt the gestures and habits of those around them without questioning why. In other words, existentialists feel that the masses go about their existence unaware of its absurdity, and this unawareness heightens the existentialists’ sense of isolation. Finally, the existentialists are struck with the difficulty, or even impossibility, of finding connection, of communication between individuals.\(^2\)

The absurd penetrates the entirety of the individual’s existence, and loneliness, isolation, and alienation are the human response to that absurdity.

A similar instinct instructs the existentialist’s account of nothingness. Richard Gill, Helmut Kuhn and William Barrett invoke the encounter with nothingness in their

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\(^2\) See Jaspers, Karl, *Philosophy: Volume 2*. Jaspers focuses on communication, for whom it is possible for whom it is impossible in the section titled “I Myself in Communication and Historicity” pp. 23-129.
descriptions of existentialism. While Gill calls it an “authentic and uncanny metaphysical phenomenon” that resists definition (28), Kuhn calls it “the privation of meaning and reality” (x). Perhaps the best explanation for what this experience means is William Barrett’s analogy of a man waking up blind, or not-seeing. According to philosophy not-seeing is not an entity, or has no being, but try telling the man who suddenly finds himself unable to see that his blindness is not a real entity.

Barrett finishes his description by turning to the subject of finitude:

Human finitude is the presence of the not in the being of man. That mode of thought which cannot understand negative existence cannot fully understand human finitude. Finitude is a matter of human limitations, and limitations involve what we cannot do or cannot be. Our finitude, however, is not the mere sum of our limitations; rather, the fact of human finitude brings us to the center of man, where positive and negative existence coincide and interpenetrate to such an extent that a man’s strength coincides with his pathos, his vision with his blindness, his truth with his untruth, his being with his non-being. And if human finitude is not understood, neither is the nature of man. (290)

It is the reckoning with human finitude that encompasses the themes of existentialism. The individual subject, contingency, freedom, anxiety, death, the absurd, nothingness all emerge as different expressions of human finitude. The individual is this individual and no other, and as such is limited by the historical moment in which he or she came to be. With the individual’s freedom comes the recognition of both the possibilities of existence and the limitations that come with the necessity of making a choice. Death is the most
obvious example of human finitude. That life and existence has an end gives existentialism its sense of urgency. If this existence has an endpoint, then discovering the meaning of it is all the more important. The absurd emerges from the confrontation with the limitations of our understanding, of the world resisting our attempts to give it meaning or purpose. Nothingness is our finitude as expressed as an object of contemplation.

Echoing this analysis William Barrett summarizes the themes of existential philosophy thus: “Alienation and estrangement; a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat…A single atmosphere pervades them all like a chilly wind: the radical feeling of human finitude” (36). Barrett’s choice to describe finitude as an atmosphere or a feeling is important. As we saw in the earlier section, finding language to define existentialism is at best difficult and at worst impossible. The themes of existentialism have a way of being grasped obliquely rather than definitionally.\textsuperscript{3} As languages other than English have multiple verbs for “to know,” where one indicates knowledge of facts or information about an object while the other indicates acquaintance with that object. Existentialism is a philosophy that requires one to become acquainted with the themes in order to understand them. To understand what existentialism means

\textsuperscript{3} The most sustained philosophical examination of existentialism by Wesley Barnes ends up admitting that philosophy as it is done formally cannot assimilate existentialism. He writes, “in the sense of the formal philosophical methods, existentialism turns out to be a complete failure” (viii), however, “the failure of existentialism to meet the logical consistency required in philosophical thought and inquiry becomes the very strength of existentialism. Its failure, in the philosophical sense, stems not from its being ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ from intellectual or moral standards. Its failure is one of language” (ix).
when it describes the encounter with nothingness necessitates one encounter nothingness oneself. Similarly, to grasp what Camus meant by the absurd is to experience the absurd.

It is at this point that we reach my definition for existentialism. In recognition of what has come before, I will not lay out a set of tenets or beliefs that constitute existentialism. Neither will I list a number of related themes. Rather, my definition points to the starting point for the different expressions of existential thought. My definition is this: Existentialism is the crisis that occurs when the human individual is forced to face his or her finitude.

Most of the existential themes reveal a common interest in human limitation. Contingency is the fact humans are limited in time and space. Individuality and subjectivity is the fact that humans are limited to one, singular existence. Freedom is, in existentialism, interested in the limitations of choice, with anxiety and anguish being the result of being forced to make a choice. Death is the limitation of life. The absurd is the limitations of understanding. Existentialism is, as William Barrett writes, interested in the “not” in man, in the presence of nothingness that lingers underneath our most magnificent achievements. It is in reckoning with these limitations that these three authors of the British fin de siècle begin.

Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, and G. K. Chesterton examine human finitude as it is expressed by failure. For Thomas Hardy it is the failure of narration. For Conrad it is the failure of communication. For G. K. Chesterton it is the failure of understanding. These failures express themselves in the literary styles of these novels. For Hardy, it is the inability to express female subjectivity without falling prey to the myths that threaten her subjecthood. For Conrad, the failure of communication is expressed in the very
difficulty of the text and in the opaqueness of the central phrase of the novel, “the horror.” For Chesterton, the failure of understanding is expressed in structure of the plot and in the paradox that our greatest enemy is also our greatest ally. But this brings us to the next question.

**Existentialism and the Novel Form**

Kaufmann asks the question in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, “could it be that at least some part of what the existentialists attempt to do is best done in art and not philosophy?” (49). If it is not clear yet, it is my stance that existentialism finds its most eloquent and powerful voices in art.

Kaufmann is certainly not alone in asking this question. Gordon Marino argues “Existentialism is an interdisciplinary movement that finds expression in three genres: philosophy, literature, and psychotherapy” (xv). Felicity Joseph, Jack Reynolds, and Ashley Woodward recognize that novelists “have been productively associated with existentialism” (4). Steven Earnshaw sees “a certain ‘literariness to Existentialism” and sees “a prevalence of novels and other texts in the canon of Existential literature” (1). Wesley Barnes writes that “existentialism should be seen as mainly literary and psychological in tone and operation” (vii) and later observes that existentialism is “far more literary than philosophical” (10). Steven Crowell writes, ‘Existentialism was a much a literary phenomenon as a philosophical one” (15), and Mark Tanzer argues similarly that “existentialism crossed the boundary between philosophy and literature to a greater extent than most philosophical movements did” (1). Thomas Hanna explains why this is the case:
[T]he lyrical quality...is not an accident but a necessity...it is unavoidable.
If they felt compelled to sing rather than to speak, it is because what they
had to say about the existence of man could not be directly told, could not
simply be described and thrown out to the listener. They have sung
because they were compelled to sing; they were poets made, not born. (7)
Hanna’s explanation here eloquently answers Kaufmann’s initial question. Because art
does not bear the burdens that philosophy must it is freed from the constraints of
definition and formal analysis to express human truth through other means. A novel can
communicate through other means and methods, through metaphor and through narrative
structure, through allusion and atmosphere, through other literary tools unavailable to the
philosopher.

So why am I arguing *Tess of the D’Urbervilles, Heart of Darkness* and *The Man
Who Was Thursday* should be considered existential novels? Hardy, Conrad, and
Chesterton show little familiarity with existential philosophers. Nietzsche gets the most
extensive treatment, and that treatment is none too flattering. And yet lack of familiarity
or explicit engagement with existential thought does not disqualify *Tess of the
D’Urbervilles, Heart of Darkness* and *The Man Who Was Thursday* from being
considered as part of the existential tradition. A precedent here can be seen in the
treatment of Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Most commentators on existentialism include Dostoevsky in their ranks. In
anthologies of existential texts like Gordon Marino’s *Basic Writings of Existentialism,*
Walter Kaufmann’s *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre,* Richard Gill and Ernest
Sherman’s *The Fabric of Existentialism,* Robert C. Solomon’s *Existentialism,* and *The
Continuum Companion to Existentialism edited by Felicity Joseph, Jack Reynolds, and Ashley Woodward all contain excerpts from Notes from Underground, while Thomas R. Flynn, Rivca Gordon, William L. McBride, Kevin Aho, Jonathan Judaken, Mark Tanzer, Wesley Barnes and other scholars mention him in their analyses of existential thought. Neither of these lists is exhaustive, but they are merely meant to illustrate that Dostoevsky, and Notes from Underground in particular, are commonly considered part of the development of existential thought.

Dostoevsky’s novel is taught in creative writing courses as one of the most well-developed, singular voices in fiction. The novella is structured into two halves, the first an expression of the underground man’s view of life, the second an account of events in the underground man’s life. These sections are about the same thing, something never explicitly stated in either section. Both are expressions of an overly conscious man trying to fight against a world that does not recognize his existence. This undercurrent leads to the climax of the novel, where the underground man is forced to make a free choice.

In the first half titled “Underground” the underground man touches on a number of the existential themes identified in the previous section. The underground man begins by contrasting the man of action with the self-conscious man. The man trapped in endless self-reflection cannot act, except perhaps out of spite. Thus the underground man focuses on rebellion against natural science and mathematics, against being a piano-key or organ stop (8-9, 21). He engages in talk of a primary or fundamental cause, similar to that of the existentialist need to make a choice for the meaning of existence—even if that choice is to be a sluggard or a glutton—to avoid inertia or what Sartre called bad faith. (12). He rejects the notion that enough enlightenment and education will inevitably lead to human
perfection (14). Denying the project of rationalism bears many similarities to existential thought, that were mankind reduced to a set of mathematical propositions something perverse, something human would cause him to act contrary to science and mathematics out of spite. This is an extension of the concern with freedom of will and choice (18). But despite all that the Underground man recognizes, there is something missing.

What that is gradually becomes clear in “À Propos of the Wet Snow:” the underlying need to have his existence recognized, to gain what Simone de Beauvoir calls reciprocity. The first few pages of the second section establish the underground man’s isolation and alienation from his coworkers. His loneliness is so intense that he envies a man getting thrown out of a window, and so he enters the bar in order to get into a fight, to have his existence recognized through conflict. That does not happen, and he observes, “I was not even equal to being thrown out of a window and I went away without having my fight” (33). His treatment by an officer further intensifies his feeling of insignificance:

I was standing by the billiard-table and in my ignorance blocking up the way, and he wanted to pass; he took my by the shoulders and without a word—without a warning or explanation—moved me from where I was standing to another spot and passed by as though he had not noticed me. I could have forgiven blows, but I could not forgive his having moved me without noticing me. (34)

What follows is a psychological drama that takes place entirely in the mind of the underground man as he strives to force the officer to recognize his existence. For several years he tries to find a means of forcing the officer to do so, by writing a satire or by
challenging him to a duel, but eventually settles on refusing to move aside when their paths cross. After finally working up the courage to run into the officer, “He did not even look round and pretended not to notice it; but he was only pretending, I am convinced of that. I am convinced of that to this day!” (38). We, the readers, are not so convinced. Nevertheless, this anticlimactic end to the underground man’s obsession ultimately drives home the underground man’s sense of his own insignificance even further.

The theme is further developed in the next section. While the drama with the officer is about forcing someone else to recognize his existence, the goodbye party for Zverkov is about recognizing that his existence has value. The underground man rather inelegantly forces himself into the going away party for Zverkov. While the underground man sees reason to take offense at nearly everything, what really rankles him is that they do not seem to show him the respect he feels he deserves. He resents that the attention is on Zverkov instead of himself (never mind that the gathering is for Zverkov and that he forced his presence upon them), and so he observes, “No one paid any attention to me” (52) and “they seemed to have forgotten me altogether” (52). In order to force them to recognize him the underground man refuses to join in with their toast and insists on making his own in which he insults Zverkov. The underground man fails in his goal, and the others proceed once again to ignore him. Finally, when they are about to leave, the underground man tries once more for recognition:

“I ask for your friendship, Zverkov; I insulted you, but…”

“Insulted? You insulted me? Understand, sir, that you never, under any circumstances, could possibly insult me.” (55).
Zverkov puts his finger right on the underground man’s chief anxiety. The underground man’s existence is of such little account that he is incapable of insulting another person. Despite his best attempts the underground man is being forced into an existential crisis, where he comes face to face with his own insignificance, his failure to act with dignity, the limitations his own bitterness places on him.

This culminates with his interaction with Liza. Chasing down the men whose party he has crashed, the underground man ends up in a whorehouse. After the deed is done he becomes aware of her watching him and he finds her calm regard as uncomfortable as he finds the disregard he suffered from earlier. Under her gaze the underground man begins to speak, stumblingly at first. After some perfunctory questions about her he begins to talk of death and mortality, without which one cannot truly reckon with meaning and purpose. The underground man then begins talking of his having daughters, of Liza being a wife, of how there can be joy in spite of pain.

There is of course no honor in what the underground man is doing. When he expresses his thoughts, they are as ugly as everything else about his life. Despite the insincerity of the underground man he is able to reach Liza. Thinking she is not taking him seriously “an evil feeling” (68) takes possession of the underground man and he proceeds to describe her future were she to stay on at the whorehouse. In the previous picture, with a husband and a child, there are others to recognize one’s existence, a reciprocity. In this other future she is reduced to her body as long as that remains young and pretty, and then when she finally dies it will be with relief that they bury her. As the underground man opines:
They will scatter the wet blue clay as quick as they can and go off to the tavern… and there your memory on earth will end; other women have children to go to their graves, fathers, husbands. While for you neither tear, nor sigh, nor remembrance; no one in the whole world will ever come to you, your name will vanish from the face of the earth as though you had never existed, never been born at all! (71-72)

The underground man is able to see in Liza’s situation what he is unable to see as clearly in his: that underneath the anger and frustration at Zverkov, the young officer, and the crystal palace is the need for human recognition. Channeling that longing into his speech to Liza he is able to touch her, to get her to the point he is himself unwilling to reach. His speech pushes her into despair, vividly expressed by her suppressed sobs, by her thrusting her face into her pillow and biting it. As he is about to leave she shows him a letter a medical student had written to her “because she did not want me to go away without knowing that she, too, was honestly and genuinely loved; that she, too, was addressed respectfully” (74). In other words, someone has recognized her humanity and affirmed she has value.

The underground man does not recognize the existential crisis for what it is, dismissing it as “sentimentality” and “womanish hysteria” (74). His address to Liza was motivated out of spite, out of an attempt to impress her, to make her regard him. That his speech should have a positive impact is accidental. After he leaves Liza he is gripped with fear that she is going to show up at his door.

Why is he so terrified? The underground man recognizes that were Liza to show up at his house he would be forced to make a choice, either to choose to engage in
reciprocity with Liza, to let her see him as a fellow human being with all his faults, or to reject her. If we look at *Notes from the Underground* as a whole we can see in the underground man a pattern of inertia, of inaction. It takes him years to work up the courage to bump into an officer. When he commits himself to disrupting Zverkov’s party he is unable to turn aside as he knows he ought. He hates his manservant Apollon (and clearly cannot afford him) but cannot work up the courage to dismiss him. When Liza shows up at his door the underground man is forced to face up to who he really is. The underground man has been able to avoid facing up to his personal ugliness by attributing the worst possible motives and characteristics to those around him. Liza, however, is immune to that. As a prostitute she is the lowest of the low, has no false airs, cannot be dismissed as stupid or trivial. Unlike the other interactions there is no hidden battle for superiority. Liza has let that egoism go. She is simply there because despite himself the underground man has touched her humanity.

At both partings between the underground man and Liza he gives her something. In the first instance he gives her his address, in the second he gives her money. The first action marks him as an individual.\(^4\) When he gives her his address and asks her to come visit him, he has left the impersonal experience of the brothel, of the man and the prostitute, and turned it into something personal, unique, existential. The second giving reverses all that. In addition to reducing Liza once again to a prostitute, there is something intensely impersonal about handing Liza money. Money is a means of

\(^4\) The underground man’s address functions as an identifying mark. No one seems to know how to get a hold of him (which constitutes Simonov’s excuse for not informing him of the change of time). Thus when he gives Liza his address he is inviting her to his inner sanctum, for her to see him as he is.
exchange, infinitely interchangeable, symbolizing a lack of individual humanity, implying that humans are essentially interchangeable—like a piano key or organ stop.

The underground man cannot bear his own self. In the depths of his own anguish, burying his face in a pillow in a mirror image of Liza, the underground man sees that he can give himself a reason for existence, a purpose: I exist for Liza. The tragedy of the underground man is not that the world never recognizes his unique, individual, singular existence. The tragedy is that when somebody finally does, he cannot say yes.

Throughout the novella, the underground man has been a man of spite, a man defined by negation. He asserts his individuality by saying no, no, no. As Nietzsche describes it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, there are three metamorphoses of the spirit: the camel, the lion, and the child. The camel is the one burdened by duty; the lion is the underground man. “To create freedom for itself and a sacred No even to duty: the lion is needed for that, my brothers” (55). But the lion is not truly free. “To create new values – even the lion is incapable of that” (55). All the lion can do is rebel, to say No, and this is the underground man. But when Liza comes to his house, when she responds to the underground man’s one true act of giving his address, he has the opportunity to become something more than a lion, something more than spiteful. He has the chance to become what Nietzsche calls the child. “The child is innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a sport, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes…the spirit now wills its own will, the spirit sundered from the world now wins its own world” (55). The underground man is given, by Liza’s coming to see him, the chance to break out of inertia and to make the independent choice he has declared earlier as “a most advantageous advantage” (15).
Given the chance to have an existential break with his past, the chance to say Yes to Liza and to give himself meaning and purpose, the underground man is paralyzed. He cannot choose Yes, and he tries to avoid making a choice, tries to avoid responsibility, but the existential truth is he is not free not to choose. His choice is No. When the world finally recognizes his personhood, when he finally has a personal effect on the world in the shape of Liza, the underground man cannot handle it. He is a failed existentialist. He had a chance to act, a chance to choose, a chance to exercise his existential freedom, to make something of his personal existence, and instead he backs away, and despicably gives Liza the five ruble note. He attempts to make up for his inability to say Yes, to make good on the promise to give Liza a meaningful existence by giving her money. He slips back into anonymity, into the faceless mass of which money is a symbol. By refusing the five rubles, by leaving them crumpled on the table, Liza asserts her independence and underlines the underground man’s insignificance. He had a chance to say Yes, to become significant, to assert his singular individuality, to give himself an existence that mattered, and he could not. He failed, and became the underground man, and now, years later, he is only able to rage and roar against an indifferent world.

In the very first section of the Notes the underground man observes, “I did not know how to become anything; neither spiteful nor kind, neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect” (2). At the end of the novel he observes, “[W]e are all divorced from life, we are all cripples, every one of us, more or less. We are so divorced from it that we feel at once a sort of loathing for real life, and so cannot bear to be reminded of it” (90). He continues, “Why, we don’t even know what living means now, what it is, and what it is called…We are oppressed at being men—men with a real
individual body and blood, we are ashamed of it, we think it a disgrace and try to contrive
to be some sort of impossible generalised man” (91). The novel is bookended by
existential laments. Life is defined by the absurd, by what Camus calls “The divorce
between man and his life” (153). But there does not seem to be any answer, any way out.
The underground man admits not knowing how to make meaning out of existence. We
seem to have lost any understanding of what it means to live, what it means to exist. Our
recourse is to try to reject our individuality and become absorbed into the faceless mob,
the “generalised man.”

The irony of this existential nihilism is that the underground man had the chance
to define what living means. In this way Liza is the existential hero of the novel, the one
who has seen the void and made the choice to make her own meaning, to reject the
impersonal universe of equivalent exchange, of men who are piano-keys. Liza is capable
of selfless love. The underground man in contrast is incapable of love. Love, to him,
means “tyrannizing and showing my moral superiority. I have never in my life been able
to imagine any other sort of love, and have nowadays come to the point of sometimes
thinking that love really consists in the right—freely given by the beloved object—to
tyrannise over her” (88). Given his stance for freedom against all that would threaten it,
even against his own self-interest, there is a way in which the underground man’s
rejection of Liza’s love makes sense. If love means tyranny, then how could love be
freedom?

5 The danger in Notes from Underground is not that nothing has meaning, but that the underground man has
no personal meaning, hence the qualifier “existential.” The existentialists’ recognition of the danger of utter
nihilism will be relevant to Conrad and Chesterton.
6 See Joseph Frank “Nihilism and Notes From Underground” 32.
What Liza reveals is that love is not the loss of freedom. Freedom is not a severing from everything and everyone, a freedom from connections or obligations. Rather, freedom is the freedom to make connections, to choose to become obligated. Love does not have to be tyranny; rather in the choice to love another one can find freedom. Freedom does not send one into an abyss. Freedom entails something you are freed into as well as something you are freed from. Sartre’s condemned to be free touches on this concept. Absolute and total freedom is impossible and indeed undesirable. If one is freed from everything then one is not freed into anything. Freedom is the ability to choose, and choice entails something that can be chosen.

The underground man is thus ultimately not free. As “À Propos of Wet Snow” reveals, the underground man is a prisoner of his own neuroticism. None of the choices he makes have the mark of freedom, none that is except his decision to give her his address. But the underground man was unable to see that choice through. Love remains an impossibility for him.

All throughout the novella the underground man has, in Joseph Beatty’s phrase, been engaged in a “desperate attempt to establish his being” (197). But this desperate attempt is made so by his failure with Liza. Notes from Underground reveals that it is not enough merely to echo existential sentiments. When faced with the void of his being the underground man cowers and projects, avoiding at all possible costs the necessity of action. While he ultimately fails, his failure makes all the clearer the need to make a choice, to say yes, to commit oneself to something in order to truly live. Were the underground man to have simply chosen to love Liza the book would not have been
written; the first section of the novel could not have existed. The angst and despair
underneath the underground man’s rhetoric would never have found voice.

By writing this as a work of literature Dostoevsky is able to achieve a poignancy
he would never have been able to achieve in a work of philosophy. The underground
man’s failure becomes the key to unlocking the existential heart of the novel. We must
see the underground man in all his spiteful and abject ugliness to see where the attempt to
establish one’s being can lead if one is unwilling to face the void at the center of man.
The underground man is too attached his own sense of moral superiority, too afraid of
what he will find, to confront his own nature.

The existential merits of Notes from Underground are not derived from a
philosophic consistency with Sartre or Camus or Heidegger or Jaspers. It stems instead
from a similar impulse towards asking what existence means. Trapped between the merits
of his rebellion against the Crystal Palace and the prison of his self-consciousness the
underground man captures the difficulty of finding meaning as crooked souls in an
indifferent and impersonal world.

A Productive Failure

Though the term “existentialism” would not be coined until eighty years later,
Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground is commonly considered the first existential
novel. Clearly, we academics are unconcerned with anachronistic labelling. Yet in
existentialism’s case the unconcern is even more justifiable. Existentialism is not a creed,
not a set of tenets for an individual to hold. The label “existentialist” is thus a useful
means of establishing an intellectual context for understanding a work. As Notes from
Underground is more richly understood in conversation with Sartre, Camus, Nietzsche,
and other existentialists, so *Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Heart of Darkness* and *The Man Who Was Thursday* are more fully understood if examined in the context of existential thought. But the reverse is also true: we understand the existentialists better when we have encountered the underground man. My project, then, is uninterested in merely showing parallels between existentialists and Hardy, Conrad, and Chesterton’s works. Instead, my project is interested in how these authors help us better understand the existential vision of the world.

*Notes from Underground* is a fitting place to start because of the centrality of failure to the work. Not only does the underground man fail to take the existential leap, he also fails to come to an end and is cut off by the fictional editor. Because existentialism is interested in finitude, that is in the limitations of humankind, it is fitting failure becomes a central theme to the existential novel. The project of storytelling is undertaken with the knowledge or sense it might never come to a satisfactory end. Wesley Barnes’ account of existentialism’s failure as a philosophy being its greatest strength finds merit here. As we sense a kind of nobleness in fighting for a doomed cause if that cause is right, so existentialism and the struggle to define the meaning of an unmeaning universe has a touch of nobility. As William Barrett writes:

The realization that all human truth must not only shine against an enveloping darkness, but that such truth is even shot through with its own darkness may be depressing, and not only to the utopians. But it has the virtue of restoring to man his sense of the primal mystery surrounding all things, a sense of mystery from which the glittering world of his technology estranges him, but without which he is not truly human. (275)
Existentialism takes into account the limitations of humankind. This recognition is however its greatest strength. Existentialism takes as its starting point the Shakespearean phrase “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (1.5.166-167). By accepting as a starting point human finitude existentialism has a unique ability to get at what makes us human. And yet existentialism has its own limitations. Wesley Barnes identifies existentialism’s failure as a failure of language, that what existentialism is trying to express is fundamentally inexpressible.

It is not an accident that the major existentialists turned to literature. These thinkers, as we have already seen, were “compelled to sing rather than to speak…because what they had to say about the existence of man could not be directly told, could not simply be described and thrown out to the listener. They have sung because they were compelled to sing.” Existentialism runs up against the limitations of language. The ideas, the concepts, the themes of existential philosophy exist beyond our ability to express them. Existentialism attempts to bring into philosophy the whole of the human individual, in their fallibility, in the imperfection, in their irrationality, in the emotions, their moods, their longings. For this reason, the themes of existentialism find a voice in literary form.

Existentialism is about a crisis and art has always been more effective at forcing individuals to reckon with their humanity. Hardy, Conrad, and Chesterton’s narratives force us to reckon with the anguish of the solitary individual struggling against their limitations. For Hardy it is the struggle of the female personality for self-realization in a world and a narrative that prevents her from achieving her aim. For Conrad it is the struggle of a man attempting to communicate the single most important moment of pure vision while simultaneously recognizing the impossibility of doing so. For Chesterton it
is the struggle of the individual soul to reject solipsism and to reaffirm belief in truth and beauty in a brutal and uncaring universe. These struggles are not the themes of analytic philosophy, but they are the themes of life.

None of these books provide answers to the questions they pose. It is this that makes them a productive failure. The reality of human finitude means that no book can possibly explain human existence. These novels, like Notes from Underground end without truly ending. They leave the reader with unanswered questions, with a sense that there is something there even if it is not quite visible. That ambivalence is a characteristic of the existential novel. The existential novel achieves its aim when the reader is left wondering why they feel what they feel. The existential novel achieves its aim when readers find themselves struggling to describe words the meaning they nevertheless felt. The existential novel achieves its aim when the reader is confronted with their own finitude, their own limitations, and is left asking, now what?
Chapter I: Thomas Hardy and Existential Absence

Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is, of the existential novels I will discuss in this project, the one most similar in form to the Victorian realist novel. While Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* appears to anticipate the formal experimentation of the modernists, and Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday* deviates from realism, *Tess* feels like a late-Victorian novel. Hardy’s use of an omniscient narrator and focus on social relationships make him seem, initially, formally consistent with Victorian-era realism. In general Hardy is seen as deviating from his Victorian contemporaries in theme rather than in form.

Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* describes the novel as a form whose primary break with tradition is a commitment to “truth to individual experience” (13). The novel presents in “clear and easy prose” (30) plots about “particular people in particular circumstances” (15) that are causally rather than coincidentally structured (22). While this does explain why the novel was the preferred form of literary expression for existentialists, it also raises the problem of what exactly is distinctive about the existential novel. How does it differ from earlier forms of art? In other words, what about the conventional Victorian, realist novel was inadequate to the needs of the existential novelist?

To begin answering this question, we need to identify some of the features of the realist novel. Building on Watt’s argument, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth argues that realism in the novel emerges out of a consensus, which relies on distance: “One must step back

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7 Widdowson describes the critical tendency to focus on Hardy’s so-called flaws as a symptom of the premise that Hardy is “really a practitioner of humanist realism…whose work is marred on occasion by a perverse deviation from the characteristic features of such a mode” (“Critical Theory” 75).
from particulars in order to grasp them” (35). She continues, “The implication of realist technique is that proper distance will enable the subjective spectator of the subjective consciousness to see the multiple viewpoints and so to find the form of the whole in what looks from a closer vantage point like a discontinuous array of specific cases” (35). Francis O’Gorman adds that “a defining feature of Victorian realism as a practice of writing is that it usually assumes a collective or universalist point of view” (118). This explains why the role of the narrator in the realist novel is to be a surveyor of the action of the plot. Explaining further, Ioan Williams writes that mid-Victorian novelists wrote from the belief “that Reality consisted in the material and social world around them” and “that unless the individual accepts that Reality lies outside himself and reconciles himself to its pressure upon him he can never build a firm basis for personal morality or happiness” (x). Katherine Kearns argues realist novels wrote “to teach the lessons of what it means to function humanly within a world increasingly oriented toward orderly, large-scale productivities” (5). Ian Watt, when he reflects on the veracity of claiming Defoe as the founder of the novel form, identifies as one of the signature characteristics of the novel the focus “on character and personal relationships as essential elements in the total structure” (131).

While the realist novel shares an interest in the individual with the existential novel, it is interested in the individual in relation to the his or her milieu. The novel focuses on the relationship between the individual and the broader community, between

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8 As we will see, Conrad and Chesterton find different methods of challenging the viability of this attempt.
9 The context of this is Watt’s discussion of Defoe’s individualism and treatment of his characters as self-contained units. This, he argues, prevents Defoe from being considered as the founder of the novel form. Interestingly, Watt identifies Defoe’s concern with isolated individuals as a precursor to the existential writings of Camus. He concludes that only Defoe “among the great writers of the past, has presented the struggle for survival in the bleak perspectives which recent history has brought back to a commanding position on the human stage” (133-134).
the individual and the economic, political, cultural, and social forces. In order to accurately portray this relationship, realist authors use narrators that approach the subject from a distance. Thus, Ioan Williams can discuss the individual’s “unreflecting consciousness” of himself as one part of an undivided, total Reality (xii). Katherine Kearns makes the point more explicit by stating realist authors “cannot (and they know that they cannot) afford to yield to the seductions of existentialist reverie” (5). According to Kearns, the realist project is unaccommodating to existentialism.

If this is the case, what is Hardy doing in a study on the existential novel? A number of critics, like Peter Widdowson, John Paul Riquelme, and Zena Meadowsong, note that *Tess* deviates from traditional realism. Widdowson, for instance, argues Hardy “had a consciously contradictory relationship with Realism” (“Critical Theory” 75); this, he argues, makes Hardy “ineluctably ‘transitional’ between ‘Victorian’ and ‘Modern’” (74). Hardy’s conflicted relationship with realism is picked up by other critics. According to O’Gorman, “Hardy’s interest in modes of perception, frames of observation – exemplified by *The Hand of Ethelberta* or *Tess* – included, at the amplest level, a readiness to expose realism as a representation act based on choice. He helped make realism self-conscious” (117). Tom Lloyd connects Hardy’s movement away from realism to Conrad’s experimentalism: “In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, however, Hardy emphasizes the breakdown of the realistic middle space created between experience and its organizing tropes. He looks, as it were, towards the collapse of realism into

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1 Other critics, like G. Glen Wickens, Lynn Parker, and Donald Davidson point out Hardy’s reliance on the on the ballad for the structure of his plots. According to Davidson Hardy “wrote as a ballad-maker would write if a ballad-maker were to have to write novels; or as a bardic or epic poet would write if faced with the necessity of performing in the quasi-lyrical but nonsingable strains of the nineteenth century and later” (12). Davidson later asserts, however, “this habit of mind is a rather unconscious element in Hardy’s art” (15).
kaleidoscopic visual moments in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” (141). Despite these critics’ observation of Hardy’s fraught relationship with realism, none of them claim Hardy’s novel feature formal experimentation, but rather exhibit the tension between Victorian realism and the Modernist sense that “realism” is impossible.

In this chapter, I argue that Hardy’s existentialism is developed in this tension between realism and its impossibility. *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* is deeply concerned with representing the subjective experience of its protagonist. This is paired with the realist novel’s emphasis on the personal relationships. What we discover, though, is the demands of the realist novel ultimately prevent the novel from representing Tess’s subjective experience of the world. The novel is committed to representing Tess as a “Pure Woman” whose tragic end is determined by the myths men use in an attempt to control her. But as the novel unfolds, Tess’s vibrant personality and inner life are lost, with her major choices taking place outside the narrative frame. The novel’s failure to represent Tess’s subjective experience of the world clarifies the distinction between the Victorian realist novel and the existential novel.

While the realist novel focuses on the individual in relation to her broader context, the existential novel is interested in the individual in relation to herself. The existential novel attempts to represent what Kierkegaard describes in *The Sickness Unto Death*:

“The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation [which accounts for it] that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but [consists in the fact] that the relation relates itself to its own self” (269). Or, we can use Heidegger’s description of Da-sein as a “being concerned about its very being” (10). The development of a new existential form emerges out of this focus. The realist novel is, as
Kearns says, at odds with the existentialists’ concern with the self in relation to the self. Because of the realist novel’s commitment to representing the subject in relation to the broader world, its capability of engaging in existential inquiry is limited.

*Tess’s* concern with Tess Durbeyfield’s relationship to the outside world causes the novel to fail to develop Tess’s subjective experience of the world. *Tess’s* omniscient narrator begins the novel with poignant existential commentary on Tess’s inner life, but as the novel continues Tess is absorbed into her social context, and her subjectivity is subordinated to the narrator’s concern with her relationships with men and her uncertain position as a result of the industrial revolution’s impact on rural English life. The erasure of Tess from the text of her novel undermines the novel’s stated aim, “A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented.” The novel, whether intentionally or not, is a narrative about the failure of representation. However, as we will see with *Heart of Darkness* and *The Man Who Was Thursday*, the novel’s failure is a productive one. *Tess’s* failure to present faithfully its subject reveals the lack of space available to female subjects. Industrial growth, cultural myths, and narrative form all fail to make room for Tess to determine for herself the meaning of her existence.

*Tess of the D’Urbervilles* in Context

In 1887 Queen Victoria celebrated the fiftieth year of her reign. The historian R. H. Gretton observed, “The Jubilee was an occasion which prompted retrospects, and every newspaper and review fell to taking stock of England’s progress during fifty years” (212). Dominating this reckoning was the industrial revolution. This reflection, Gretton wrote, “provided ground for almost unmitigated satisfaction” (212). The *Monthly Chronicle of North-Country Lore and Legend* reprinted an article that proclaimed, “[T]his
A casual glance through Hardy’s novels would be enough to see Hardy’s interest in a society in transition. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* turns around the technological progress that would transform rural life. While these anxieties are not as pronounced in *Tess*, Hardy nevertheless depicts the impact industrialization would have on a rural way of life. In his critical autobiography, Martin Seymour-Smith writes of Tess, “throughout the book she is seen as the feminine rural victim of male lust or misplaced idealism, and of male industrialization” (433). The most sustained argument on *Tess’s* relationship to industrialization is Zena Meadowsong’s essay “Thomas Hardy and the Machine: The Mechanical Deformation of Narrative Realism in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*.” Meadowsong argues that “the principal culprit is precisely the historical situation” and “The Machine enters *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* not only as the diabolical agent of modernization but—driving the action of the novel and producing its effects—as the primary determinant of novelistic form” (231). Reading the passage at Flintcomb-Ash where the threshing machine is transformed into a monster, Meadowsong asserts “Tess is doomed because the agricultural order that she personifies is doomed, and Alec’s diabolical tyranny—his incessant objectification of Tess—is enforced by the fatal plot of industrialization” (240). The effect of this technological progress is, according to Irving
Howe, that “Tess as a woman, Tess as a distinctive person hardly exists; she has become a factor in the process of production” (125).

Hardy’s existentialism emerges in response to the dehumanizing forces of industrial progress. This concern marks Hardy’s other works, as in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* where the appearance of a new industrial thresher becomes a key factor in the movement of the plot. Simon Gatrell argues that one of the key features of Hardy’s fictional Wessex is the passing of a way of life. He argues that Wessex takes shape through Hardy’s description of communities’ traditional practices, “but so too does Hardy’s fear that it was faced with overthrow” (23). The culmination of this, according to Gatrell, is *Jude the Obscure*. Jude, after being orphaned, is “transported to a village whose traditions have been stripped by modernizing Victorianism” (28). The tool of this loss of tradition is the railroad. In a context where progress was on the whole viewed as favorable, Hardy writes novels that reminds readers of the human cost of industrialization. Arnold Kettle argues *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*’ subject is “the destruction of the English peasantry” at the hands of capitalist farming (49). The novel functions as a warning against too eager an optimism in technology and increasing material prosperity to answer the deepest longings of the human heart.

In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* the focus turns to the impacts of industrialization on female subjectivity. The plot of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* emerges from the recognition that the social structures fail to provide rural women space, and that increasing industrialization is closing off that space even further. *Tess* is a novel that ostensibly sets out to give Tess the space she is denied by social forces, but ultimately the demands of novel’s form deny her the chance to exercise her agency.
Hardy’s Literary Existentialism

As I said in the introduction of this chapter, Tess of the d’Urbervilles initially strikes the reader as part of the realist tradition. This initial impression is a result of the use of an omniscient narrator and an emphasis on the individual’s relationship with the broader world. While critics point to a variety of ways in which Hardy’s novel is not “realist” in the purest sense, of interest to our development of Hardy’s existentialism is his use of myth. Hardy combines myth with an omniscient narrator and an emphasis Tess’s relationship with Alec and Angel. Each of these aspects operates on multiple levels. The omniscient narrator both reveals Tess’s existential impulses and reduces her to a symbol. Hardy uses myth not only as an inspiration for the structure of his novels, but also peppers his narrative with mythic allusions. Tess’s relationship with Alec and Angel reveals the way men attempt to control Tess’s existence, and reveals the absence of choice for Tess within the narrative structure of the novel.

The use of the omniscient narrator makes Tess distinct from most existential novels, which tend to privilege one character’s perspective, often choosing to write a first-person narrative. Hardy uses this narrator to comment on the situation and larger significance of the action of his novel. In this role Hardy expresses certain aspects of the novel’s existential vision. While occasionally Tess gives voice to her own vision, much of the time the narrator steps in to present her perspective. This choice is part of what makes critical responses to Tess so complicated: the narrator occasionally erases Tess’s subjectivity while simultaneously presenting that subjectivity as significant. The novel
makes problematic its own relationship to its themes. The novel’s plot reveals the harms of men’s attempts to control Tess while at the same time attempting to control Tess itself, ultimately denying Tess space within the novel. As the novel draws to a close, Tess is pushed out of the narrative and replaced with a black flag signaling her death. Thus, one of the challenges of discussing Hardy’s existentialism is to elucidate the existential commentary while simultaneously showing places where the narrator undermines Tess’s ability to make an authentic choice.

The symptom of the narrative’s conflict with its themes is seen in the narrative’s use of mythic allusion. In the narrative Angel, Alec and the narrator refer to Tess in mythic terms, as Eve (130, 170, 323, 348), Artemis and Demeter (130), the whore of Babylon (323), Faustina, Cornelia, Lucretia, Phyrne, and Bathsheba (370). Alec and Angel’s use of myth is viewed critically by the novel. Alec uses myth to blame Tess for his lack of self-control, while Angel is seduced into seeing Tess as a kind of Artemis or Demeter and as a result does not treat her as an actual person. However, the narrator, without irony, engages in the same mythic comparisons.

As a structural element, myth determines the direction of the plot. There is, however, a lack of consensus on which myth forms the foundation for the novel. Even if critics disagree on what form the myth takes or on its significance, they all see the novel deliberately invoking a mythic dimension. Donald Davidson and Lynn Parker offer

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12 I am using the term space in line with Alex Woloch’s definition of character-space as “the intersection of an implied human personality…with the definitively circumscribed form of a narrative” (13).

13 Felicia Bonaparte and G. Glen Wickens argue that Tess re-enacts the Persephone myth, Donald Davidson and Lynn Parker argue that Hardy uses the ballad form, and Brigid Lowe argues that Hardy is creating a new myth.
the most convincing argument, which is that the narrative demands Tess play the role of
the seduced maiden from folklore, forcing her to play a prescribed role in the plot—
exactly that which she fears.\(^{14}\) This use of myth as a structuring element aligns *Tess of the
*D’Urbervilles* with the other British existential novels. As *Heart of Darkness* and *The
Man Who Was Thursday* use allegorical elements, so too does *Tess*. And like the other
novels, as we shall see, the allegorical distinctions break down. Alec and Angel initially
appear as allegorical opposites: the devil and—in a demonstration of incredible
subtlety—the angel. However, the novel undermines this distinction: Alec and Angel
both fail to interact with Tess as an individual, human subject and like the narrative itself
understand her through predetermined roles.

With this collapse Hardy subverts the typical love triangle to develop the lack of
choice offered to Tess. In the typical love triangle, not unlike what Hardy uses in *Far
From the Madding Crowd*, one woman is pursued by two (or more) men that she has a
difficult time choosing between. This plot device gives the female protagonist the power
of choice (even if that choice must be within the framework of modern love). In Hardy’s
novel, however, the triangle between Alec, Angel, and Tess is used to highlight Tess’s
lack of freedom. There is never a point where Tess can choose one or the other. The force
of the plot leaves her very little autonomy. What little choices she has are poor choices
indeed. Early in the novel she has the choice to live with her rapist or leave to live with
her family as a young mother with an only child. Later, she has the choice to eke out a
miserable existence as a migrant worker or to become the mistress of her rapist. Finally,

\(^{14}\) When Tess tells Angel she has no interest in furthering her education, she explains: “Because what’s the
use of learning that I am one of a long row only – finding out that there is set down in some old book
somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part” (126). Tess wants to preserve her sense of
freedom—even if it is merely an illusion.
she has the choice to murder Alec and flee with Angel. Significantly, each of these choices takes place outside of the action of the novel. We meet Tess again after she has made these crucial decisions. We are not privy to the thought process by which she makes these choices.\footnote{The only choices we actually see Tess make is her decision to accept Angel’s marriage proposal and, more significantly, her choice to tell Angel about her past. This latter choice happens twice: once in the letter that fails to make it into Angel’s hands and once after Angel admits his past affair with a widow.}

What makes Hardy’s existentialism complicated is the difficulty in determining how much of the novel’s vision is intentional. Hardy set out to show how the lack of space afforded to women by cultural, industrial, and social forces. He succeeded, perhaps beyond what he intended, by creating a narrative that itself limits the space afforded to Tess’s subjective experience of the world. Laura Claridge observes that Tess’s actual personality is at odds with the space afforded her in the novel. She senses an attempt by the narrator “to downplay at best or, in some cases, suppress the startling portrait of Tess as assertive, shrewd young woman that surfaces throughout at the expense of the novel’s unity” (65). In the moments where the narrator, as Lloyd says, “delimits her” he observes “no indication that we are to place this ironically, as there is about Angel’s hypocrisies concerning Tess’s sexual history” (152). In contrast, Linda M. Shires argues, “In a text so profoundly concerned with names, spoken and written words, and meaning, language sometimes fails…But language does not fail because of narrative deficiency; it fails by narrative design” (157). It is difficult, then, to deduce how much of Hardy’s literary existentialism is intentional and how much of it emerges out of a sensitivity to subjective human experience which his commitment to certain realist techniques overwhelmed.
Ultimately this question is periphery. The literary existentialism of the novel emerges out of a despairing view of the social world: a world that has little no space for female agency. The novel reproduces this reality by reducing the space afforded Tess within the world of the novel. The narrative reproduces formally the violence that happens to Tess within the text. The novel, as a faithful presentation, fails as Tess is consumed by the narrative. Thus, the arc of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* emphasizes not Tess’s agency or her autonomy, but her absence.

**The Narrator**

The omniscient narrator of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* is very present in the text. Far from being an unbiased reporter of events, the narrator is prone to lecturing, commenting on the action, and attempting to sway the reader’s understanding of the events of the novel. In these reflections, the narrator paints in broad strokes a vision of the world that matches existential views of contingency, being, and meaning. This tendency not only to present but also to explain creates tensions between Tess’s individual, subjective experience and the narrative itself. What we have is a narrative that creates an existential frame but fails to create space within the text for the protagonist to undergo her own existential journey.

The narrator of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* emphasizes the random and accidental nature of existence. When an individual is born, she is thrust into existence at a specific time, in a specific place, and into a specific situation. Speaking of Tess and her siblings, the narrator says:

> All these young souls were passengers in the Durbeyfield ship – entirely dependent on the judgment of the two Durbeyfield adults for their
pleasures, their necessities, their health, even their existence. If the heads of the Durbeyfield household chose to sail into difficulty, disaster, starvation, disease, degradation, death, thither were these half-dozen little captives under hatches compelled to sail with them – six helpless creatures, who had never been asked if they wished for life on any terms, much less if they wished for it on such hard conditions as were involved in being of the shiftless house of Durbeyfield. (24)

While at first recognizing the way in which children’s quality of life depends on their parents, the narrator then moves to reckoning with the way in which parents, through the act of conception, thrust existence upon their children. Certainly Tess and her siblings are “entirely dependent” on their parents for “their existence” in terms of the circumstances they are in, but the very fact they exist is a result of their parents’ actions. No one is asked before she is brought into existence whether that is something she desires. Existence, then, is not a choice. As beings, we find ourselves already existing in a specific situation.

That Tess’s consciousness is attached to her particular body is significant—that it is this body and no other, that her parents are hers and no other, that she lives in Wessex and not some other place, all these things have significance for Tess. The narrator is creating an existential framework for the presentation of Tess. As Jaspers writes, “Man finds himself determined in his concrete environment—in his nation, in mankind, in life on earth, in the universe” (Humanism 72). Jaspers observes that existential questions are connected to this specific situation: “I do not begin at the beginning when I ask questions such as ‘What is being?’ or ‘Why is anything at all? Why not nothing?’ or ‘Who am I?’
or ‘What do I really want?’ These questions arise from a *situation* in which, coming from a past, I find myself” (“Situation” 53). Jasper’s point is that the existential questions are not the starting point, and that existential thought always starts from a situation. Hardy’s narrator shares with Jaspers an emphasis on human consciousness being anchored to an individual that exists at a certain time and place.

Because existentialism emphasizes the individual’s free choice, it can be easy to forget that existentialism also emphasizes the concrete embodied individual who must make that choice. William Barrett observes the central subject of existentialism is “the unique experience of the single one, the individual” (13). Simone de Beauvoir draws our attention to the mystery of why our singular consciousness should inhabit one particular body. Beauvoir calls “the bond that in every individual connects the physiological life and the psychic life – or better the relation between the contingency of an individual and the free spirit that assumes it…the deepest enigma implied in the condition of being human” (269). Tess, because she is embodied, is anchored in time and space to Wessex and to the house of Durbeyfield.

Hardy is not distinctive because his novels are about specific individuals in specific situations; after all, Ian Watt’s definition of the novel identifies this as one of its distinctive features. Similarly, Yi-Ping Ong argues in *The Art of Being* the emphasis on situatedness is a feature of the novel form (165). What makes Hardy distinctive is the narrator’s drawing our attention to the precarious nature of that existence. In the longer passage quoted above Hardy describes the Durbeyfield children as “entirely dependent,” “helpless,” and “captive.” Not only is existence accidental and therefore “precarious” in the sense that the existence could easily not have been, but the existence possessed is also
precarious in that it can be taken away. This sense reappears later when the narrator reflects on Angel Clare’s growing interest in Tess: “This consciousness upon which he had intruded was the single opportunity of existence ever vouchsafed to Tess by an unsympathetic First Cause – her all; her every and only chance” (154). This precariousness produces anxiety. The text describes her at different points as “agitated” (152), “distressed” (171), and suffering in “palpitating misery” (178) while deciding whether to accept Angel’s proposal of marriage. The limitations imposed on Tess by her contingent existence give her choices added weight and significance because she can (and in fact does) lose things that matter to her as a result of the choices she makes.

The narrator’s commentary on Tess’s “single opportunity of existence” as “her every and only chance” emerges out of a reflection on the nature of being. Earlier in this passage the narrator observes, “Upon her sensation the whole world depended to Tess; through her existence all her fellow-creatures existed, to her. The universe itself only came into being for Tess on the particular day in the particular year in which she was born” (154). This statement is radically subjective. The universe “came into being” when Tess was born. Other people only exist (to her) because she existed first. On this experience Jaspers writes, “Since existence is consciousness and I exist as consciousness, things are for me only as objects of consciousness. For me, nothing can be without entering into my consciousness” (57). Like Jaspers, Tess’s narrator implies that, subjectively speaking, the world only exists insofar as she is conscious of it.

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16 As we will see, it is significant that the passage that seems most to emphasize Tess’s subjective experience of the world is couched within Angel’s perspective. As affirming as it is of female subjectivity, the novel seems to imply that the male perspective is still primary. So while this passage might appear to emphasize the importance of Tess’s choices, it instead emphasizes Angel’s.

17 For instance, Tess loses the possibility of life with Angel twice: once because she tells him about her past and once because she murders Alec.
Despite this articulation of the subjective, individual, personal nature of Tess’s experience of the world, the narrator often steps in between the reader and Tess. Part of this is a function of the narrative genre. Penny Boumelha argues Tess “is not merely spoken by the narrator, but also spoken for. To realise Tess as consciousness, with all that entails of representation and display, inevitably renders her all the more the object of gaze and of knowledge for reader and narrator” (47). As a fictional character Tess is placed before the reader and the narrator as an object of contemplation. Her subjective experience is objectified through the process of narration.

We can see this play out after a conversation between Tess and Angel about her fears. Tess, after some prompting from Angel to explain why she finds existence burdensome, explains: “And you seem to see the numbers of to-morrows just all in a line, the first of ’em the biggest and clearest, the others getting smaller and smaller as they stand farther away; but they all seem very fierce and cruel and as if they said, ‘I’m coming! Beware o’ me! Beware o’ me!’” (124). After Tess’s description of the weariness of existence the narrator steps in to explain from Angel’s perspective:

She was expressing in her own native phrases – assisted a little by her Sixth Standard training – feelings which might almost have been called those of the age – the ache of modernism. The perception arrested him less when he reflected that what are called advanced ideas are really in great part but the latest fashion in definition – a more accurate expression, by words in logy and ism, of sensations which men and women have vaguely grasped for centuries. (124)
While the phrase “the ache of modernism” is arresting, what is important here is that while Tess expresses a rather poignant view of existence, the narrative prioritizes the narrator and Angel’s understanding of Tess’s attitude over Tess’s understanding of herself. We get reflections on Tess’s feelings about the world, but they are filtered through another’s perspective. Angel’s interpretation of Tess’s words is prioritized over her own understanding. It is the masculine vision which is privileged. This move confirms Boumelha’s identification of a certain masculinity to Tess’s narrator. She writes, “And so it is that all the passionate commitment to exhibiting Tess as the subject of her own experience evokes an unusually overt maleness in the narrative voice. The narrator’s erotic fantasies of penetration and engulfment enact a pursuit, violation and persecution of Tess in parallel with those she suffers at the hands of her two lovers” (47). Despite the insistence on Tess’s vivid, individualized subjectivity, the novel implies that the educated, male perspective is the preferred one.

Perhaps the clearest expression of this tension between affirming Tess’s unique, individual experience of the world while simultaneously erasing it happens after Tess begins to recover from her abuse at the hands of Alec D’Urberville. After feeling the desire “to taste anew sweet independence” despite her shame, the narrator observes, “She might have seen that what had bowed her head so profoundly – the thought of the world’s concern at her situation – was founded on an illusion. She was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations, to anybody but herself. To all mankind besides Tess was only a passing thought. Even to friends she was no more than a frequently passing thought” (91). The accumulation of words, “existence,” “experience,” “passion,” and “structure of sensations” encompass her as embodied consciousness. She
is, as in she has being. But she is in a particularly human sense. She is a subject who has desires and drives and a will she can exercise. But she is not pure consciousness. She has a physical presence, as you can see by her “structure of sensations”—she interacts with the world. But all these things that define her human experience are accessible only to her.

This passage offers a profound existential affirmation of the existence of an inner life while denying the significance of Tess’s inward sensibilities. Functionally, this serves to replace Tess’s inward experience with the narrator’s interpretation of Tess’s relation to the external social world to whom she is nothing but “a passing thought.” The irony is there exists a significant group for whom Tess is “an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations.” This group being, of course, the readers of the novel. In addition, the number of books written on Tess indicates that Tess has been far more than “a passing thought” for generations of literary scholars.

The narrator’s dedication to showing readers how little concern the world has for Tess is matched by the narrator’s gradual loss of concern for Tess’s inwardness. Early in the novel readers are presented with sense of Tess’s rich inner life. After her child’s death Tess “philosophically noted dates” of significance to her life, anniversaries whose significance emerges in how they were “individualized by incidents in which she had taken some share” (98). This habit leads her to a revelation:

She suddenly thought one afternoon, when looking in the glass at her fairness, that there was yet another date, of greater importance to her than those; that of her own death, when all these charms would have disappeared; a day which lay sly and unseen among all the other days of
the year, giving no sign or sound when she annually passed over I; but not
the less surely there. When was it? Why did she not feel the chill of each
yearly encounter with such a cold relation? …Almost at a leap Tess thus
changed from simple girl to complex woman. (98-99)
The narrator implies a significance to this realization. All the other markers of maturity—
motherhood, tragedy, loss of innocence—are not what brings Tess “complex
woman[hood].” Instead it is the knowledge and realization that one day she will die, that
her life is marked by finitude. In fact, Tess sees her death as having more significance to
her than any other date: more significance than her birth, her rape, the birth or death of
her child. The knowledge her life has an end point opens up for Tess the possibility of
authentic, free existence symbolized by her decision to leave her parents’ home to work
as a dairymaid at Talbothays.

As the novel continues, the emphasis on Tess’s inner life seen in this passage
fades. As I mentioned in the previous section, most of the significant choices Tess makes
in the novel occur outside of the text. When we meet Tess again after Alec has raped her,
she has already made the decision to leave (75, 76). In the final section of the novel, titled
“Fulfillment,” Tess’s subjectivity and inner life is noticeably absent. The section begins
with Angel returning to England, and when Tess makes an appearance it is filtered first
through Angel’s perspective and then through the perspective of Alec’s landlady. The last
time we saw Tess she had told Alec to leave her before wishing she were dead. Now she
is Alec’s mistress (378). A few pages later, from the perspective of the landlady, we
discover she has murdered Alec (382). It is jarring for there to be this distance. Tess’s
subjectivity is suddenly inaccessible. The space the narrative had given her is gone, and the reader is struck with this absence.

This erasure of Tess is paired with an erasure of agency. There is not space in the novel for her to make her decisions. But the narrator goes further: not only does the murder take place offstage, but Hardy revised the novel to emphasize Tess’s passivity.18 Lynn Parker points out that the manuscript version of the discovery of Alec’s murdered body portrays an energy in Tess’s act of murder that is absent in the final version of Tess. Tess originally drives the knife full into Alec’s heart, and her confident claim “‘I have done it well’” suggests both her vitality and her decisiveness. In contrast, the final Tess barely accomplishes the act of murder, confessing that she does not know where the energy of her actions came from (278).

She concludes, “Hardy’s alterations, which bleed off this energy, however, weaken Tess’s credibility as murderer because she seems barely capable of fulfilling the action” (278). Not only does the novel not give space to Tess’s choice, the narrative seems intent on draining the action of the finality of a choice. As Lynn Parker goes on to argue, “[T]he extent and consistency of Hardy’s changes, from the power of the blow to Tess’s exhilaration after the murder, suggest that he sought to limit or control Tess’s powers of action” (278).

18 In her article “Tess’s Purity,” Mary Jacobus illuminates these differences. In the manuscript Alec “has been stabbed—the carving knife is sticking up in his heart” and “The knife had been driven through the heart of the victim” (334). These are lessened to “He has been hurt with the carving knife” and “The wound was small, but the point of the knife had touched the heart of the victim” (334, 335). Tess’s reaction to the murder is similarly softened. In the manuscript she wears “a triumphant smile” instead of “a pitiful white smile” and tells Angel “I have done it well” instead of “I have done it—I don’t know how” (335).
In combination the lack of space given to Tess and the revisions’ erasure of Tess’s decisiveness imply that the novel cannot accommodate Tess’s existential journey. Despite the occasional appearance of a vibrant personality, the narrative of *Tess* closes off the reader’s ability to share Tess’s subjective experience of the world. Because of the demands of the plot Tess’s existential journey is interrupted. The narrative denies Tess the ability to decide for herself the meaning of her existence, mimicking the way in which she is denied existential self-determination by her social, economic, and cultural situation.

**Tess and Mythic Determinism**

In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* the lack of space in the social and novel worlds for Tess’s subjectivity is evidenced in the novel’s use of myth. The novel’s invocation of myth, especially mythic allusions, imply that Tess can only exist within defined patterns of being. This tendency to understand Tess via myth is most visible through Angel, and then to a lesser extent through Alec and in the narrator’s voice. Tess herself explains the significance of this use of mythic frameworks when she rejects Angel’s offer to tutor her. She explains:

> Because what’s the use of learning that I am one of along row only – finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad, that’s all. The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands’ and thousands’, and that your coming life and doings’ll be like thousands’ and thousands’. (126)
Tess fears studying history because she’s afraid that she will learn she is not unique: her life’s movement follows predetermined patterns and the possibilities of her existence are limited. It is with a tragic irony, then, that after this expression of longing for existential freedom Angel’s response to Tess wishing to learn “why the sun shines on the just and the unjust alike” is to decide that she “could only have caught up the sentiment by rote” (126). Tess’s concern with the world’s injustice does not fit within Angel’s understanding of her. His response is not to revise his understanding of Tess but to assume she is simply giving voice to a question she has learned elsewhere. Myth impels those who use it to erase Tess’s existential individuality.

Angel is unable to reconcile Tess with his imagined version of her. Simone de Beauvoir discusses this type of reinterpretation in The Second Sex:

Thus, as against the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women, mythical thought opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless. If the definition provided for this concept is contradicted by the behavior of flesh-and-blood women, it is the latter who are wrong: we are told not that Femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine. The contrary facts of experience are impotent against the myth. (267)

Angel consistently interprets his interactions with Tess according to mythic frames. Echoing Beauvoir, Angel seems to value Tess most when she least resembles herself and appears to take on universal significance. The narrator observes during their early-morning meetings, “It was then, as has been said, that she impressed him most deeply. She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman – a whole sex
condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names half teasingly, which she did not like because she did not understand them” (130). He views her not as a woman, but as Woman. She has become a physical manifestation of the “Eternal Feminine.” She is “a visionary essence of woman – a whole sex condensed into one typical form.” This is not merely the sense of isolation or the feeling lovers have of being the only two souls who matter: when Tess is transposed into a symbol of Woman she becomes more significant. She gains value by losing the various qualities that make her herself.

This attitude towards Tess reflects Angel’s biases towards the abstract, the transcendent, and the ideal and away from the concrete, the particular, and the individual. The narrator observes, Angel “was, in truth, more spiritual than animal” (192). He is described by one of Tess’s fellow dairymaids as “too much taken up wi’ his own thoughts to notice girls” (112), and Tess “At first…seemed to regard Angel Clare as an intelligence rather than as a man” (125). Angel is one of a number of intellectuals that populate Hardy’s Wessex. These figures often cause pain to those they live among. The problem, William Barrett explains, is “intellectuals are the embodiment of reason, and reason itself if cut off from the concrete life of ordinary mankind is bound to decay. When the head is too far away from the body, the head withers” (135).

The symptom of Angel’s severance from the “concrete life of ordinary mankind” is his inability to notice details. When the readers are reintroduced to Angel at Talbothay’s dairy, the narrator says, “Angel Clare rises out of the past not altogether as a distinct figure, but as an appreciative voice, a long regard of fixed, abstracted eyes…Nevertheless, something nebulous, preoccupied, vague in his bearing and regard,
marked him as one who probably had no very definite aim or concern about his material future” (113-114). There is a lack of definition to Angel Clare. He is not “distinct,” is “abstracted,” “nebulous,” and “vague.” The use of the word “material” to describe “future” emphasizes Angel’s disconnect from his embodied existence. This lack of concern is reflected in the way he interacts with the outside world. As previously seen, Angel’s preoccupation with his own thoughts prevents him from noticing the girls at Talbothays. The narrator reiterates this aspect of Angel, observing that “he was ever in the habit of neglecting the particulars of an outward scene for the general impression” (119). Tess herself is even at first “the merest stray phenomenon to Angel Clare as yet – a rosy warming apparition, which had only just acquired the attribute of persistence in his consciousness” (129). Angel’s habits of retreating into his mind cause him to ignore Tess on more than one occasion. After Tess makes an observation, the narrator informs us “Clare was not particularly heeding” (201), and earlier his “revived thoughts of his father prevented him from noticing her particularly” (173).

Angel’s prioritization of the intellectual over the actual prevents him from developing an authentic relationship with Tess. There is not space within his mental framework for the reality of Tess’s personality. He continuously approaches her as an example of a type rather than as the actual milkmaid he interacts with. When he is first growing intrigued by Tess, Angel observes: “What a genuine daughter of Nature that milkmaid is!” (120). The narrator continues, “And then he seemed to discern in her something that was familiar, something which carried him back into a joyous and unforeseeing past, before the necessity of taking thought had made the heavens gray” (120). Almost immediately Tess ceases to be herself for Angel, but he instantly
mythologizes her as a “daughter of nature,” as a remnant of a “joyous and unforeseeing past” before philosophy, theology, and science. Angel is a representative of Nietzsche’s claim in *Twilight of the Idols*: “Man created woman – but what out of? Out of a rib of his God, of his ‘ideal’… (33).

It is his mental construction of Tess as a daughter of nature that prevents Angel from taking her desire to know “why the sun shines on the just and on the unjust alike” seriously. Angel, the narrator tells us, “looked at the unpractised mouth and lips, he thought that such a daughter of the soil could only have caught up the sentiment by rote” (126). It never occurs to Angel that Tess might have a reason for questioning the balance of justice in the universe. Rather than ask her what she means or why she wants the answer to that question, Angel preserves his image of her. As Beauvoir might say, Tess is impotent against this myth. It is not the concept of an unspoiled daughter of the soil that is wrong; Tess is. When Tess contradicts his understanding, Angel finds a way to preserve his prior conception. In the hierarchy of Angel’s imagination, the actual Tess is placed below his conception of her.

This explains why Angel ignores her attempt to tell him about her past (187), calls her inexperienced when she wishes she had never been born (190), and later tells her “You are a child to me” (191). Angel ignores, interrupts, and infantilizes Tess because his idealized image has more solidity in his mind than the actual girl. Because Angel understands what the daughter of Nature is, he therefore understands all he needs to know about Tess. However, this image of Tess as the unspoiled daughter of nature only endures because Angel is unwilling to listen. She remains the idealized country girl in his imagination because he shows no interest learning more about the concrete subject in
front of him. Beauvoir explains: “To pose Woman is to pose the absolute Other, without reciprocity, denying against all experience that she could be a subject, a fellow human being” (267-268). And later: “Here again we have to do with the substitution of a set idol for actual experience and the free judgments it requires. For an authentic relation with an autonomous existent, the myth of Woman substitutes the fixed contemplation of a mirage” (275). Angel is constitutionally unable to recognize Tess as a peer: she must always remain mythologized. This is why he is so quick to abandon her once he finds out she is not the fresh-faced innocent maid he imagined her to be. She has destroyed the myth, and his love was as shallow as the myths he relied on to understand her.

Beauvoir implies something deeper, something more significant to the existential vision of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. What is lost in the myth of Woman, Beauvoir argues, is individual women’s subjectivity and autonomy. Earlier in the same conversation where Tess expresses her fear that she is merely following a predetermined pattern, Tess tells Angel, “My life looks as if it had been wasted for want of chances!” (126). Tess’s sense that the world has denied her the chances it has afforded Angel is partially the product of class, but furthermore the product of gender. As Beauvoir says, “For a great many women the roads to transcendence are blocked….They wonder indefinitely what they could have become, which sets them to asking about what they are. It is a vain question” (273). Societal structures and myths circumscribe women, denying them the possibility of existential self-determination. For Beauvoir, when women are unable to choose they are

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19 Beauvoir asserts, “[W]hen one offers the existent no aim, or prevents him from attaining any, or robs him of his victory, then his transcendence falls vainly into the past – that is to say, falls back into immanence. This is the lot assigned to woman in the patriarchy (267). The myths used to encode Tess cut her off from any goal, to deny her the ability to define for herself the meaning of existence. The use of myths in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* shows how woman is conceptualized in a way that undermines her autonomy. This denial of agency by the conceptual world is reflected by a similar denial of self-determination by the social world and by the novel world.
then unable “to make themselves anything” (273). They are “on the fringe of world” (273) as the actual Tess is on the fringe of Angel’s consciousness.

For Angel, Tess is significant insofar as she reflects the Eternal Feminine, and for that reason her actual history, her actual attitudes towards life, the pain of her existence are unimportant. Because Tess’s symbolic meaning is more real to Angel than the actual dairymaid, he can convince himself he loves her for her own sake: “It was for herself that he loved Tess; her soul, her heart, her substance – not for her skill in the dairy, her aptness as his scholar, and certainly not for her simple formal faith-profession” (165). What the narrative reveals is that Angel does not love Tess for herself, or her soul, heart, or substance. Angel loves Tess insofar as she represents the “daughter of Nature,” the “visionary essence of woman,” the “Eternal Feminine.” But the myth of femininity is so strong and so unchallenged that Angel does not recognize the gap between the Tess he envisions and the Tess who actually exists.

The narrator’s description of Angel’s retreat into his mind after Tess’s confession reveals his total unconcern with the concrete existent he has married:

Clare’s love was ethereal to a fault, imaginative to impracticability. With these natures, corporeal presence is sometimes less appealing than corporeal absence; the latter creating an ideal presence that conveniently drops the defects of the real. She found that her personality did not plead her cause so forcibly as she had anticipated. The figurative phrase was true: she was another woman than the one he had desired. (244)

The narrator describes Angel’s love as “imaginative” and “ethereal”, more concerned with the “ideal” than the “real.” Her “corporal presence” is in fact less appealing than her
absence—because Angel does not truly love Tess. The narrator’s insistence on Tess’s contingency is the counterpoint to Angel’s obsession with what Tess represents. We are impressed with Tess as an individual, as a subject so that when Angel is unable to treat her as one we sense the cruelty, whether intentional or not, that Tess endures because her husband cannot reckon with a specific, individual “daughter of Nature,” one who has subjectivity. Because his abstract understanding is more significant to him than the concrete world he inhabits, Angel is unwilling and unable to see anything in Tess that might not fit the innocent, pure, idyllic daughter of nature he imagines her to be. Thus he is unable to respond appropriately to her expressions of pain, to what Hardy’s narrator calls “the ache of modernism” in Tess.

Tess, for her own part, realizes that it is her “supposed untraditional newness” that attracts Clare (128). Angel’s reaction to the boy with no surname shows a nostalgia for a “joyous and unforseeing past,” for an unspoiled, natural existence. He wants to return to the Garden of Eden. But “[M]an cannot go back to being what he has been” (Ortega y Gasset 209), and “History has never allowed man to return to the past in any total sense” (Barrett 26). It is unfair of Angel to look to Tess to return him to this imagined past, and furthermore cruel of him to reject her when she no longer fits his idealized image.

Angel will never understand or recognize Tess for who she is because he is unable to offer her the reciprocity Beauvoir sees as essential for true communion. He is too rational, and in his rationality he finds himself, as Bonaparte says, “imprisoned in the

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20 Barrett’s account of German idealism is useful here: “What cannot be thought…cannot be real. If existence cannot be thought, but only lived, then reason has no other recourse than to leave existence out of its picture of reality…reason has only one means of accounting for what does not come from itself, and that is to reduce it to nothingness” (159). Because Angel cannot think Tess’s subjectivity, his only recourse is to reduce it to nothingness.
secular” (427). Angel can only see Tess as a deceiver, not as a human subject full of passion and feeling, with fears and failures to go along with dreams and desires. Angel’s pure realm of abstract thought can abide no sinner (apart from himself). Though he too has had his failings, Tess’s seems worse: she has disrupted Angel’s contemplation of the ideal, of the Eternal Feminine, by bringing in the dirt and grubbiness of reality.

It is the intrusion of reality that seems most offensive to Angel. When Tess begins to fall for Angel, she is moving through “weeds emitting offensive smells…gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights which, though snow-white on the apple-tree trunks, made blood-red stains on her skin” (122-123). While Angel Clare is imitating his namesake and playing a harp up in the attic, Tess is among the rank grasses. The contrast of heaven and earth is striking in this scene, until Hardy points out that Angel plays the harp poorly. The two approaches are not shown as equally valid, that Angel could find a woman who was as abstracted as himself, but rather Angel is dreadfully hypocritical for expecting a woman devoid of touches of the earth.

Writing on Kierkegaard, William Barrett comments, “The lover may become more fascinated by his theory about love than by the person of the beloved and so cease to love” (158). What we see in the romance between Angel and Tess is what happens when one individual has always been more fascinated by theories about the beloved than

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21 Angel’s failure is explained by Jaspers: “A man whose morality is rationalistically fixed, who is not so much acting himself as passing judgments and making demands, lacks the experience of original living. With moral pathos he will state supposedly compelling reasons for the results he applies to every case that occurs. What he shows in his life: ethical actions, developed directly from principles and then exaggerated, will be mixed with actions due to emotional drives and instinctive cunning. As himself such a man cannot enter into communication” (Vol. II, 81).

22 Angel, after all, lived with a woman for a while in a similar (and rather more willing) manner as Tess did with Alec. Yet while he excuses himself, he cuts off Tess and leaves her to travel halfway across the world with no regard for her wellbeing.
the beloved herself. It is symptom of this love that Angel spent months romancing Tess and never once asked himself why Tess expressed such a dark view of the universe, never wondered if some tragedy had cast a pall on the world for her.

Set up against the myth of the eternal Feminine, the reality of Tess cannot hope to win Angel over. When Tess tells him, “I thought, Angel, that you loved me – me, my very self!” (228), at least Angel has the self-awareness to respond, “the woman I have been loving is not you” (229). He does not have the self-awareness to recognize the harmful mythicization he has engaged in: “Here was I thinking you a new-sprung child of nature; there were you, the exhausted seedling of an effete aristocracy!” (232). Angel replaces one myth for understanding Tess with another. While one is coded as “good” and the other as “ill,” both are equally harmful. Tess is neither the “new-sprung child of nature” nor “the exhausted seedling of an effete aristocracy;” she is, as he cannot see, Tess. Which is, understandably, what she tells him to call her when he calls her by mythic names (130).

The use of myths to understand women is deeply engrained. As Beauvoir explains:

Everyone can draw on myth to sublimate his own modest experiences: betrayed by a woman he loves, one man calls her a slut; another is obsessed by his own virile impotence: this woman is a praying mantis; yet another takes pleasure in his wife’s company: here we have Harmony, Repose, Mother Earth. The taste for eternity at bargain prices and for a handy, pocket-sized absolute, seen in most men, is satisfied by myths. The
least emotion, a small disagreement, become the reflection of a timeless
Idea; this illusion comfortably flatters one’s vanity. (272)

Beauvoir’s description of men’s “taste for eternity at bargain prices” and a “pocket-sized absolute” fits Angel’s romance with Tess. It is important to recognize, however, that the myths “Harmony, Repose, Mother Earth” are as harmful as “slut” and “praying mantis” as both erase the actual woman. Even when Angel decides to return to her he does so through mythic terms: “[H]e had seen the virtual Faustina in the literal Cornelia, a spiritual Lucretia in a corporeal Phyrene; he had thought of the woman taken and set in the midst as one deserving to be stoned, and of the wife of Uriah being made a queen” (370). He still has not learned how to understand Tess, and is unsurprisingly shocked when he finds out that due to the necessities of actual life she has become Alec’s mistress.

Angel’s habitual reliance on myths to understand and explain Tess reveals the way in which myths erase identity. The tragedy of Tess’s marriage is what results when Beauvoir’s warning touches individual lives: “But to say that Woman is Flesh, to say Flesh is Night and Death, or that she is the splendor of the Cosmos, is to leave terrestrial truth behind and spin off into an empty sky. After all, man also is flesh for woman; and woman is other than [not merely] a carnal object…Assimilating her with Nature is simply a prejudice” (268). *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* reveals how the mythic frameworks for conceptualizing women limit their opportunities for authentic existence. As Beauvoir observes, “For many women, the roads to transcendence are blocked” (271). For Tess, her husband’s mythologizing of her denies her the possibility of reciprocity, of being recognized as a fellow subject, as a peer. Tess will never be seen as an equal: even as a
new-sprung daughter of nature she is worshiped insofar as she lacks the education and sophistication to appreciate what that symbolizes.

One might expect the narrator to set up a critique of Angel’s use of myth. After all, it is part of a mindset that leads to his abandonment of her. However, the narrator falls prey to similar impulses as Angel. As Lloyd observes of Tess:

> Entoiled in a historical trace, which is given form by Alec’s lust, Angel’s idealism, and the narrator’s metaphorical vision, she is pursued across formless space, as it were, by the forms others would impose on her and it. She is at once forced onto nature as essentially pure, yet is transfixed by the very setting of boundaries this entails. In this sense, her rape is reenacted throughout *Tess*, as she tries but is unable to create an identity through differentiation on her terms. (145)

Lloyd writes later, “Hardy depicts not so much a real woman as an idealized conception of her: that is, his representation is several times removed from experience, codified in a philosophical matrix framed, as it were, by the prefaces in which he implicitly acknowledges the fictiveness of the purity he defends” (152). Like Angel, this is seen in the narrator’s use of myth.

The narrator also falls into Angel’s habit of describing Tess symbolically. She, her sisters and her mother form “a picture of honest beauty flanked by innocence, and backed by simple-souled vanity” (51). When Tess is falling in love with Angel, “she regarded him as Eve at her second waking might have regarded Adam” (170). When she baptizes her baby the narrator describes her face “as a thing of immaculate beauty, with an impress of dignity which was almost regal” (94), using language meant to recall the
virgin mother. Finally, the narrator makes the dubious claim, “Beauty to her, as to all who have felt, lay not in the thing, but in what the thing symbolized” (297). Like Angel, the narrator looks past the concrete particular to the symbolic significance.

Charlotte Thompson argues that the mythical impulse Angel and Alec have infects the narrator: “In the minds of these compulsive interpreters, reality becomes contorted to fix ancient stereotypes…This language seems to corrupt the narrative voice, which begins free of it, as an innocent on a blighted star, and ends by succumbing to its vernacular” (743). Even as the narrative reveals the harms of mythical approaches to reality, the narrator still turns to myth. Thompson continues, “By pursuing this inclination for a moment it is possible to observe how such mythic structures obey the second directive of Hardy’s fictional universe: the tendency of tangible things to move toward abstraction” (746-747). Like Angel, the narrator retreats from the concrete world towards the symbolic and abstract. Tess at times appears less important than her role as representative of a “pure” woman. George Wotton claims, “Hardy’s writing produces a determinate view of the Victorian masculinist alter ideology of woman as the sexus sequior. In this ideological construction woman appears in the image of her innate difference” (38). In Wotton’s argument, the narrator falls into the contemporary Victorian myths where her characteristics as a woman are “manifestations of the unfathomable

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23 In earlier versions he also compares her to Cleopatra and Atalanta, making the call back to myth more obvious.
24 The erasure of space afforded Tess is consistent with other descriptions of women: “A field-man is a personality afield; a field-woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it” (87-88). Unlike the men who retain their personality, a woman is “a portion of the field” and is “assimilated with it.” As Bonaparte reflects on this passage, “Women for Hardy in any case…are the essence of the earth” (Bonaparte 42). Kaja Silverman comments that “the assimilation of figure into background means the abolition not just of hierarchy, but of difference, and hence of identity” (143).
mystery of her essential otherness” (38). The narrator undermines female subjectivity for the sake of symbolism.

The use of these myths ultimately denies Tess her freedom. According to Thompson:

By their persistence, these constructs determine men’s thoughts and inevitably their lives. The accompanying language, perpetuated by the desire to amplify experience, continually detaches itself from reality and rises toward the ideal or toward the ideal or toward allegory, forcing thought into those aesthetic categories that Kierkegaard saw as separating man from his ability to see the unvarnished truth. For from impeding imagination, this old language impels imagination, but impels it toward predetermined ends. (744)

The narrator’s impulse towards myth puts him at odds with the existential insistence on leaving the abstract world of ideas behind to engage with the concrete realities of existence. Thompson’s invocation of Kierkegaard reveals what happens as a result. The sense of a realized personality in Tess is lost in the narrator’s need to absolve her, to assert her status as pure.25 The result is that Tess’s life follows the same patterns Patricia Ingham is critical of this move: “The last minute addition to the novel of the subtitle ‘A Pure Woman’, though peripheral, deflects attention from the meanings that Tess herself conveys, by attempting to rehabilitate her under the old womanly category” (83). The phrasing of the subtitle, “A Pure Woman” emphasizes that Tess is representative of a

type. The novel is no longer committed to representing Tess as an individual, but instead committed to asserting her as a “Pure Woman.”

Structurally, the narrator’s use of myth touches directly on Tess’s fear that her life follows predetermined patterns, that her “doings have been just like thousands’ and thousands’.” Davidson and Parker argue that Tess’s murder is determined structurally by the novel’s faithfulness to the ballad form. Davidson writes, “Tess of the D’Urbervilles, whatever else she may be, is once more the deserted maiden who finally murders her seducer with a knife in the effective ballad way” (17). Parker invokes Davidson’s argument to explain why Tess remains a murderer throughout Hardy’s revisions despite the feeling expressed by Hardy’s contemporaries and later critics that “Tess is a poor candidate for a murderer” (279). She observes, “the inevitability of Tess’s story becomes located within the constraints of an earlier tradition” (279). This, however, creates problems for the novel.

If Tess is fated to fulfill the role of ballad maiden, regardless of her intrinsic “purity,” Hardy’s claim in the preface to the fifth edition, that Tess’s “enterprises and hopes” are not ended by seduction is misleading. Like the ballad maiden, whose fate arises from the seduction itself, Tess’s “enterprises and hopes” are only a prelude to her inevitable final act of murder. (280)

Despite her expressed longing for the freedom of choice, the folk mythology of the ballad prevents Tess from achieving any sort of authenticity. The sudden distance the narrative creates between reader and Tess in the final section also makes sense given this imposition of the ballad narrative. The glimpses of Tess’s subjectivity within the
narrative do not indicate a woman capable of murder, and so the narrative erases her subjectivity in an attempt to preserve narrative unity.

The narrative’s loyalty to the ballad plot combined with Charlotte Thompson’s argument on the narrator’s appropriation of mythic language both indicate the way the novel gradually closes off the space available to Tess. Most of the narrative reflections on Tess’s inner life as an individual subject take place early in the novel. As the novel progresses the possibilities available to Tess are closed off and all that is left is for her to follow tired patterns of past generations. The further Tess travels into her narrative, the more she is forced into playing the roles created for her by a patriarchal and classist society. As Patricia Ingham writes, “Murder and execution as the only available expression of autonomy speak for themselves as to the real limits of agency for a fallen woman” (88).

Tess reveals the way in which existential choice—the ability to define for oneself the meaning of existence—is denied women, especially poor women. Tess’s autonomy is erased by men forcing women into symbolic roles, like Angel, by narratives adhering to predetermined patterns, like the novel itself, and—as we will see in the next section—by men abusing their social capital. Laura Claridge’s contention that Hardy and his critics suppress an “assertive, shrewd” portrait of Tess makes sense given the arc of her story. Despite her best hope, and despite the intensity of her subjectivity, Tess finds no room to exercise her freedom. As Tom Lloyd says, Tess “cannot control her narrative” (156).
Caught in the myths written for her and the meanings defined by those myths, Tess is unable to make her own meaning.\textsuperscript{26}

**Existential Absence**

Understanding the literary existentialism of *Tess* clarifies Tess’s relationships with Alec and Angel. It is easy to see Alec and Angel as diametrically opposed figures in the life of Tess Durbeyfield. In many ways the novel suggests for the reader to view them this way. Alec is described using the devil-like imagery, while Angel is named, well, Angel.\textsuperscript{27} As Bonaparte observes, “All of this, however, seems so excessive we must conclude one of two things: Hardy is either pathetically clumsy in the creation of his characters and in devising imagery for them—which some have actually concluded—or he is teasing us by mirroring, in these deliberate exaggerations, what he expects our judgments will be” (426). While I agree with Bonaparte that Hardy is playing with his readers, I disagree with her conclusion that Tess should have married Alec. Instead of reversing expectations, the novel reveals Angel and Alec are not so different as the imagery suggests they are. As the omniscient narrator, ballad plot, and mythic allusions work to reveal Tess’s lack of freedom for self-determination, so too does Tess’s social relationships with Alec and Angel. Instead of giving Tess the chance to exercise her

\textsuperscript{26} What about various existentialists’ use of myth? Kierkegaard used Abraham, Nietzsche used Apollo and Dionysus, and Camus used Sisyphus. It is important to recognize the difference between male and female situation. A man, Beauvoir asserts, never begins by establishing himself as a man. It is the default state of humanness (5). Because of this the myths told with male figures do not have the kind of prescriptive effects that they do for women. Myths, she argues, “are explained in large part by the use man makes of them” (272). Men are free from the confining features of myths because they are in a position to control the meanings those myths produce. Women are not afforded this luxury. As Beauvoir writes, “They are on the whole still in a state of servitude. It follows that woman knows and chooses herself not as she exists for herself but as man defines her. She thus has to be described first as men dream of her since her being-for-men is one of the essential factors of her concrete condition” (156).

\textsuperscript{27} See Bonaparte 425-426
autonomy, the social world in which Tess moves consistently demands she act according to prescribed roles of behavior.

It is at this point I am going to assert that Tess was raped. While some critics have suggested that Tess was a willing participant in her seduction, our understanding of how men abuse their power over women makes it difficult for me to consider her relationship with Alec to be consensual. For her to be willing implies that she has a choice, which is an illusion perpetuated and sustained by the men in the novel.

An understanding of Tess and Alec’s relationship must begin with an understanding of the imbalance of power between the two. Tess feels responsible for her family’s financial difficulties, as their horse Prince died when she fell asleep driving the cart, and so she reluctantly agrees to go “claim kin” with the D’Urbervilles. By coming to claim kin, Tess is placed in a position of dependence on Alec. Her acute awareness of this, as well as her inherent sense of the indignity of it, creates a dynamic that makes her vulnerable and lessens her ability to resist his advances. This is depicted most dramatically when Alec uses her fear of the speed of his gig to coerce her into giving her a kiss: “He was inexorable, and she sat still, and D’Urberville gave her the kiss of mastery” (56). While much has been made of Tess’s passivity, her failure at resistance is more a function of Alec’s position of power over her than of any lack of will on her part.28 So while she is still, it is Alec’s inexorability and mastery that are of more

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28 Tess does, after all, resist, although ineffectually. She dodges his first attempt at a kiss (55) and wipes the spot where he kissed her with her handkerchief (56). Finally, she lets her hat blow off in the wind as an excuse to escape him (57). She is forced into deception and subterfuge because of the imbalance of power, as de Beauvoir observes, like all oppressed people, women are “also taught from adolescence to lie to men, to outsmart, to sidestep them” (271). It is Tess’s only recourse.
significance here. Tess’s ability to resist is undermined by her position as a woman dependent on a man.

Tess recognizes her own powerlessness in the situation into which she has been forced. When Alec asks her why she hasn’t told him he has made her angry, she responds, “You know very well why. Because I cannot help myself here” (69). Her dependence on him as an employer has undermined her ability to offer resistance. This is emphasized further after he asks if he can treat her as a lover: “I don’t know – I wish – how can I say yes or now when—” (70). Far from being a sign of inherited passivity Tess recognizes that her ability to say yes or no has no meaning. Yes and no can only have meaning when they indicate a free choice, and Tess is not free. Choice is an illusion. Without her answer, Alec “settled the matter by clasping his arm round her as he desired, and Tess expressed no further negative” (70-71). What Tess wants, whether she says no or not, has no meaning. Alec will do as he wishes.

While Alec is perfectly willing to use his power to force her to acquiesce, he is angry when she reacts in instinctual self-preserving ways. When he frightens her by driving out of control, he tells her he will stop if she kisses him. When she dodges him he responds: “Now, damn it – I’ll break both our necks!...So you can go from your word like that, you young witch, can you?” (55). Alec acts as though she owes him sexual favors, when he has been using his position of power to coerce her into giving them. She is a “witch” for daring to resist his advances. As noted earlier, Tess’s passivity is a result of her relative powerlessness. Alec has all the power here, as indicated in his “kiss of mastery.”
Alec’s other actions indicate a desire to keep the imbalance of power. His gifts to her family and his offer of money, and later of marriage, are designed to make her obligated to him. Tess is keenly aware of this obligation and tells Alec she wished he had not done so. Whether by fear or by kindness, Alec is nevertheless trying to control Tess, to coerce her into doing what he wills. The methods may be different, but the motives are the same. Even his statement, “I’ll never do it again against your will” (57) reveals that she is dependent on him not to take advantage of his power. Her will only matters as far as he respects it, which as the narrative shows he fails to do.

Because he is a man, and a wealthy powerful man, she ought to respond in a certain way to his interest in her. Alec views himself as the victim. When Tess apologizes for scaring his horse in her fear of him, he responds: “‘I won’t pardon you unless you show some confidence in me. Good God!’ he burst out, ‘what am I, to be repulsed so by a mere chit like you? For near three mortal months have you trifled with my feelings, eluded me, and snubbed me; and I won’t stand it!’” (70). Alec views Tess’s resistance to his advances as an offense against him, as though she owes him returned affection. Class certainly plays a role (hence his calling her a mere chit), but this is primarily gendered. In his description of her treatment, snubbing, eluding, and trifling with his feelings, there is not one moment where her agency is taken into account.

Tess realizes that her victimization is not unique, but part of what it means to be female in her society. After the rape she leaves Tantridge. When Alec intercepts her, the following exchange happens:

‘I did not understand your meaning till it was too late.’

‘That’s what every woman says.’
‘How can you dare to use those words!’ she cried, turning impetuously upon him, her eyes flashing as the latent spirit (of which he was to see more some day) awoke in her. ‘My God! I could knock you out of the gig! Did it never strike your mind that what every woman says some women may feel?’ (77)

Alec’s response to Tess indicates that women are always conceived of as guilty. “That’s what every woman says” carries with it the assumption that women are willingly seduced. Tess’s response shows the absurdity of that point of view. It also shows that, while he’s not relying on Classical mythology, Alec has his own myths he uses to read Tess. Because Tess has little power to resist him, he reads her as willing.

Alec’s view of her as willing has little to do with her choice. Tess is sexually available because her face is beautiful. She is the source of danger, not Alec’s unwillingness to control his sexual desire. During his period of religious fanaticism, he makes much of the fact that simply because of the proportions of her face and her body she is a temptress. Tess is thus coded as guilty: “And there was revived in her the wretched sentiment which had often come to her before, that in inhabiting the fleshly tabernacle with which nature had endowed her she was somehow doing wrong” (310). Tess has internalized the notion that she is partially at fault for the actions against her. Because she is beautiful and because the female body’s beauty is sexualized, Tess

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29 By reading Tess’s body as temptation, Alec lessens his culpability for what he did to Tess. Under the guise of his newfound faith, Alec tells her to put her veil down. He explains his request: “It may seem harsh of me to dictate like this…but it is better that I should not look too often on you. It might be dangerous…Well women’s faces have had too much power over me already for me not to fear them! An evangelist has nothing to do with such as they; and it reminds me of the old times that I would forget” (310). Alec doubles down on this interpretation of relations between the sexes: “I fear you at moments – far more than you need fear me; and to lessen my fear, put your hand upon that stone hand, and swear that you will never tempt me – by your charms or ways” (311).
believes her existence is inherently guilty. She is “doing wrong” merely by “inhabiting [her] fleshly tabernacle.” Her sense that her continued, embodied existence is an immoral act explains both her fancy for out-of-body experiences and her peace at her impending death. To exist in her body is to be guilty. The only thing that can absolve her is for her to leave her body behind.

Alec casually devalues Tess’s subjectivity. His experience, his sense of self-worth, is more important than whether she has to endure his taking advantage of her. Tess clearly states her lack of interest, responding to his request that she swear not to tempt him by exclaiming, “Good God – how can you ask what is so unnecessary! All that is furthest from my thought!” (311). But, again, Alec ignores her clear statement of what she wants: “Tess, Tess, I was on the way to salvation till I saw you again…And why then have you tempted me? I was firm as a man could be till I saw those eyes and that mouth again – surely there never was such a maddening mouth since Eve’s!...You temptress, Tess; you dear witch of Babylon – I could not resist you as soon as I met you again!” (323). All assertions to the contrary, Tess is still seen as purposefully tempting Alec away from the faith. And like her husband, Alec turns to myths: she is Eve, the temptress, the witch of Babylon.

These myths lay the fault of his boorish behavior at Tess’s feet. Her will is subordinated to the myths used to define her, as the following dialogue indicates:

‘Why do you trouble me so?’ she cried, reproach flashing from her very finger-ends.

‘I trouble you? I think I may ask, why do you trouble me?’

‘Indeed I don’t trouble you.’
‘You say you don’t? But you do! You haunt me. Those very eyes that you turned upon me with such a bitter flash a moment ago, they come to me just as you showed them then, in the night and in the day!...The Gospel channel is left dry forthwith; and it is you who have done it – you!’ (328-329)

Tess’s will is continuously dismissed. Alec’s response to her legitimate question is to fling it back at her. His mental obsession with her is more significant than her discomfort at his physical presence. His disregard of her request to leave her alone is not justified by the fact he thinks about her. Alec twists the meaning of her words; he takes the very real distress she feels at being in the presence of her abuser and equates it with his sexual fascination with her. Finally, he concludes by putting all the blame for his abandoning the Christian faith at her feet. He is not responsible for his actions anymore—she is.

Alec finds himself able to defer responsibility because Tess’s subjectivity is always subordinate to his. Alec displays a staggering lack of care for Tess’s feelings and her wishes, and appears completely oblivious to his lack of respect. He does not seem aware that she has feelings, desires, and a will. This can be seen by his dismissal of her reasonable request he never come near her again:

‘Well – you will see me again.’

‘No,’ she answered. ‘Do not again come near me!’

‘I will think.’ (311)

His response here shows that Tess’s will has no significance to him. Her desire, that he never approach her again, only has validity insofar as he chooses to respect it. Alec, of course, does not choose to honor her request, a fact Tess is not shy in pointing out: “You
have refused my last request, not to come near me” (314). The reason for his failure to respect her is because he wants to marry her in order to right the wrong he did to her. Alec destroys any nobility in this request when he tells her, “Will you not marry me, Tess, and make me a self-respecting man?” (316). Alec is more concerned with his self-image than he is with the sense of oppression Tess feels in his presence. His sensibilities take precedence, and because he would feel better about himself were he to marry Tess the fact she is made miserable by his presence is of no account.

The absence of choice in Tess’s relationship with Alec extends to the absence of choice between Alec and Angel. The novel both denies Tess the freedom to choose one or the other and reveals that the dichotomy between the two is a false one. The three features of Alec and Tess’s relationship, the imbalance of power, the blaming of Tess for her assault, and the erasure of her subjectivity, find parallels in Angel’s relationship with Tess. As with Alec, there is an imbalance of power in their relationship. Angel is of a higher class, highly educated, and male. Angel, at least, recognizes this imbalance of power:

Do I realize solemnly enough how utterly and irretrievably this little womanly thing is the creature of my good or bad faith and fortune? I think not. I think I could not, unless I were a woman myself. What I am, she is. What I become she must become. What I cannot be she cannot be. And shall I ever neglect her, or hurt her, or even forget to consider her? God forbid such a crime! (218)

The irony is of course that Angel does neglect, hurt, and forget to consider Tess. But this is understood in the context of Tess’s relative powerlessness. She is “utterly and
irretrievably” dependent on Angel’s “good or bad faith.” Angel does to his credit recognize the gendered nature of this power imbalance, admitting that he would not be able to understand her position unless he were a woman. This glimpse of recognizing the difference between the male and female stations in society is undermined by his view that Tess’s identity, that her being, is wrapped up in his. The language, “What I am, she is. What I become, she must become” denies Tess any freedom for self-determination, for choice. Angel determines her existence for her.

That Tess willingly places her identity in the care of Angel does not make this more palatable. Instead, her love and admiration serve to explain why she is so easily victimized by Angel despite his intentions.

There was hardly a touch of earth in her love for Clare. To her sublime trustfulness he was all that goodness could be – knew all that a guide, philosopher, and friend should know. She thought every line in contour of his person the perfection of masculine beauty, his soul the soul of a saint, his intellect that of a seer. The wisdom of her love for him, as love, sustained her dignity; she seemed to be wearing a crown. The compassion of his love for her, by comparison, made her lift up her heart to him in devotion. He would sometimes catch her large, worshipful eyes, that had no bottom to them, looking at him from their depths, as if she saw something immortal before her. (192)

While Tess’s view of Angel is badly misguided, the description reveals how dramatic the imbalance of power is. Even if Angel does not consciously abuse it—or whether he is or isn’t aware of how great that imbalance is—Tess’s absolute belief in him puts her at his
mercy. The description of her love as “wisdom” and his love as “compassion” along with her “devotion” and “worshipful eyes” cast Angel as a deity in Tess’s eyes.

Tess’s worship of Angel is a theme that carries through the novel. In the early part of their courtship, “She loved him so passionately, and he was so godlike in her eyes; and being, though untrained, instinctively refined, her nature cried for his tutelary guidance” (181). After her marriage, “She tried to pray to God, but it was her husband who really had her supplication. Her idolatry of this man was such that she herself almost feared it to be ill-omened” (214). Later, when Alec accuses her of enslaving her mind to Angel’s, the narrator observes her “triumphant simplicity of faith in Angel Clare that the most perfect man could hardly have deserved, much less her husband” (321). Angel, when he finally decides to return to her, reflects, “How her eyes had lingered upon him; how she had hung upon his words as if they were a god’s!” (341), and the narrator turns to myth himself and asserts, “He was still her Antinous, her Apollo even” (386). Then, most significantly, Tess “adhered to the letter to orders which he had given and forgotten; that despite her natural fearlessness she asserted no rights, admitted his judgment to be in every respect the true one, and bent her head dumbly thereto” (340). While different in quality—Angel’s power is to some degree one given to him by Tess—both he and Alec consciously and unconsciously use that power to coerce Tess. For Alec, that is for sexual favors. For Angel, that is remaking her into his feminine ideal.

Like Alec, Angel implies that Tess is responsible for her rape. His lack of recognition of Tess’s relative powerlessness leads him to this conclusion. While he does not say so as explicitly as Alec does, it is clear that he blames Tess for losing her innocence. His insistence throughout the immediate aftermath of her revelation that the
woman he loved was not her indicates that he views her lack of virginity as her fault. That Tess feels it necessary to tell him of her ignorance when it happened shows Tess recognizes that he is to some degree holding her responsible (232). He blames her “want of firmness” (232) for what happened.

As much as Tess’s past offends him, what is a worse offense in Angel’s eyes is the destruction of the myth of the unspoiled daughter of Nature. When Tess points out that she forgives him for doing the same thing she has done—engaged in sexual relations with another person—he argues, “Forgiveness does not apply to the case. You were one person; now you are another. How can forgiveness meet such a grotesque prestidigitation as that?” (228). Later he bemoans, “I thought – any man would have thought – that by giving up all ambition to win a wife with social standing, with fortune, with knowledge of the world, I should secure rustic unsophistication as surely as I should secure pink cheeks” (237-238). Angel finds the loss of his innocent daughter of the soil unforgiveable. To fit his ideal, Tess must still be a maiden. Because she no longer matches with his ideal, she becomes unlovable and unworthy. Thus he is able to neglect, hurt, and forget to consider her.

Angel, like Alec before him, erases Tess’s subjectivity. Earlier, before her revelation, Angel has thought to himself, “It was for herself that he loved Tess; her soul, her heart, her substance” (165). Tess attempts to point this out, “I thought, Angel, that you loved me – me my very self!...Having begun to love ‘ee, I love ‘ee for ever – in all changes, in all disgraces, because you are yourself. I ask no more. Then how can you, O my own husband, stop loving me?” (228). Angel, however, simply repeats that the woman he has been loving was not her. Angel either refuses to consider her for who she
is or is incapable of doing so. Regardless, when he impresses on her the necessity of them living apart he tells her, “Don’t think of me or of yourself, my feelings or your feelings” (243), effectively telling her that her subjective experience of the world is of no account.

But by far the way Angel erases Tess’s subjectivity is by mythologizing her, by painting over her person an ideal. This is why he keeps insisting that Tess is another woman than the one he loved. To him that is true, and to him that is all that matters. Her justified reproach of him falls on deaf ears. The difference between Alec and Angel is that the latter sublimes through myth the same sense of entitlement and ownership of Tess’s personhood. The difference, then, is that while Alec’s misogyny is obvious and transparent, Angel disguises his with high-minded ideas. Angel convinces himself that it is because of society, or respectability, or some other notion or principle, rather than facing up to his disappointment in losing out on something that does not exist.

Alec and Angel are not antitheses of each other. While Alec and Angel appear on the surface to be opposites, and Tess certainly treats them as such, the way they each relate to Tess is remarkably similar. Both fail to recognize Tess for who she is and instead treat her in terms of what they are able to get from her. Boumelha observes, “For both of these male characters, Tess is representative of her sex” (57), and Kaja Silverman argues that the gaze is always constructive: “Angel’s gaze may be more benign in intent than Alec’s, but there can be no doubt that it is informed by a similar mandate” (132). For Alec, Tess provides sexual pleasure; for Angel, Tess provides intellectual pleasure. *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* conflates the physical and mythical, the sexual and intellectual to show how in either case Tess is inevitably victimized. Instead of striking the reader in how different they are, Alec and Angel should strike the reader as two different ways in
which men take advantage of women.\textsuperscript{30} Whether knowingly, blatantly as Alec, or disguised by high minded sentiments, the result for woman is tragedy.

\textbf{Thomas Hardy and the Failure of Representation}

Despite the novel’s stated aim of being the account of “A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented,” the novel fails to deliver. The tensions between the impression of Tess and the narrative which presents her begs the question whether a novel can actually be a faithful presentation of a subject. The combination of an omniscient narrator, ballad plot and mythic allusions with the novel’s social relationships creates a novel world that has little room for the main character. Instead of being a striking narrative of Tess’s existential journey, the novel emphasizes instead Tess’s existential absence. As Peter Widdowson argues, “we know almost nothing substantive about Tess’s ‘character’, for the novel never attempts to penetrate her secret being” (“Introduction” 19). The occasional glimpses we do have only serve to make her absence more poignant.

This absence finds its most vivid picture in the novel in the depiction of Tess’s death. Tess has been replaced by her “spiritualized image” (296) who is walking hand in hand with Angel. They pause. “Upon the cornice of the tower a tall staff was fixed. Their eyes were riveted on it. A few minutes after the hour had struck something moved slowly up the staff, and extended itself upon the breeze. It was a black flag” (397). Tess’s embodied existence has been reduced to a black flag waving in the wind. What space she formerly occupied is now taken by her sister, implying interchangeability. The symbol of the flag denies the singularity and significance of Tess’s existence. On the day Tess as a

\textsuperscript{30} Boumelha argues Alec and Angel are “precisely complementary,” showing how the similarities between Alec and Angel extend to their use of transportation and fruit to gain Tess’s acquiescence. (58) Similarly, Meadowsong argues that “Angel is not the anti-Alec but in fact a new version of him.” (238)
young woman identified as having greater importance than any of her past experiences—the day of her death—Tess herself makes no appearance but is doubly replaced by her sister and a sign.

The novel’s failure to present Tess faithfully produces a poignant commentary on the need to create space for female existential self-determination. Whether the novel does this intentionally, where Hardy combines the realist novel with the ballad plot in order for the narrative to fail, or unintentionally, where Hardy genuinely attempted to represent Tess but chose forms that prevented him from doing so, the existential vision remains the same. The failure of these forms to accommodate Tess’s subjectivity indicate the need to invent new forms. In order for novels to present the individual’s existential journey the novel needs to be remade. The failure of Tess of the D’Urbervilles sets up the formal experimentation of Conrad and Chesterton. These authors pick up on Hardy’s use of mythic forms, but instead of letting those forms lead to an existential failure these novelists will set their allegories up to fail. Conrad and Chesterton’s existential vision comes into fruition with the narrative destruction of the allegory. Hardy remains faithful to the allegory with the result of the narrative destruction of Tess’s agency.

The tragedy of Tess, and what keeps readers and critics coming back to the novel, is the injustice of Tess’s experience, and the way in which the world of the novel closes in on her. That this young woman who has striven and struggled against her circumstances should find her life concluded in her execution for murder grinds against readers’ sense of how the world ought to be. Readers feel that there are glimpses of Tess that persist despite the narratives attempts to disclose her. Tom Lloyd’s closing thought on Tess are representative: “Yet the novel remains rewarding on affective and intellectual
levels…Tess eludes the narrative placement that would make her merely the victim of nature or man” (155). The “startling portrait” of Tess that Claridge identifies emerging despite narrative pressure reminds us that there is a subject to be represented. The arc of this subject’s representation within the text is tragic. As Shires observes, “The novel takes her from being a she, to a collection of aspects, to an it, and ultimately to a nothingness” (154-155). But the failure of representation in *Tess* points, strangely enough, to Tess Durbeyfield. Her absence is felt keenly by readers because they suspect the possibility of her presence. The narrator’s early concern with the accident of Tess’s parentage reminds readers that her existence could have been different. The tragedy of contingency is that this one was hers.
Chapter II: Joseph Conrad and Existential Horror

While *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* bears similarities with the Victorian realist novel, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* often finds itself categorized with the modernists. When compared to Hardy’s novel, *Heart of Darkness* immediately strikes the reader as something different from Victorian realism. The limitations of the realist novel revealed in *Tess* lead to the narrative form of *Heart of Darkness*. There is no omniscient narrator and thus no invocation of a universal perspective. Similarly, the novel demonstrates little concern with individual’s place in the social world. When the larger social setting is discussed, it is seen as denying those caught within its framework access to reality.

Kenneth Graham connects Conrad to modernism in the deployment of “personae and narrative intricacy to provide a multiplicity of viewpoints that will conceal the artist yet express his view – his sceptical view – of the world’s lack of fixed meaning” (206).

While with Hardy this project is interested in what makes the existential novel different from the realist novel, with Conrad this project is interested in what prevents the existential novel from simply being an expression of modernism.

Some of this difficulty arises from a lack of clarity on what literary modernism is. In their book *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea*, Sean Latham and Gayle Rodgers begin:

> *What is modernism?* This question has now beset, driven, and often befuddled generations of students and scholars alike. It is not, however, the question this book will answer. That’s because there is no such thing as modernism—no singular definition capable of bringing order to the diverse multitude of creators, manifestos, practices, and politics that have been variously constellated around this enigmatic term. (1)
Thus, my project is in danger of saying that *Heart of Darkness* does not belong to this ill-defined category, but instead belongs to this other ill-defined category. Nevertheless, they do argue, “The idea of modernism as a unified movement developed at the intersection of two trends: the attempt to adumbrate a new aesthetic tradition…and a new attention to the autonomy of form as the supreme marker of modernist art” (52-53). This new form was, Laura Winkiel writes, “fragmented, allusive and indirect” and as a result aesthetically difficult (2). Peter Childs adds, “Modernist writers therefore struggled…to modify if not overturn existing modes and subjects of representation” (11). We might sum up this up with Ezra Pound’s axiom to “Make it New.” While not a definition, we can usefully identify formal experimentation and a self-conscious break with the past as key characteristics of modernism.

Is Conrad self-consciously breaking with tradition? Is he interested in formal experimentation for its own sake? This language does not seem to appear in his descriptions of his art. In a letter to William Blackwood, Conrad wrote: “in its essence [my work] is action…action observed, felt and interpreted with an absolute truth to my sensations” (qtd. in Graham 204). In the Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* Conrad writes “art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect” (3). His hope is that in his art you will find “that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask” (5). As we will see, the form of *Heart of Darkness* was not meant as a break from tradition, nor conceived of as experimental, of an attempt to “Make it New.” In fact, Graham notices Conrad shares many features and aims with Victorian realism, notably a commitment to surface realism and the
significance of individual moral choice (204, 205). These parallels between Conrad and realist authors suggest that, like Hardy, he is caught between two traditions. While he leans more modern while Hardy leans more Victorian, neither fit comfortably in either tradition. Like Hardy as well, the features that place Conrad in this liminal space develop out of his literary existentialism.

By bringing attention to the form of *Heart of Darkness* we can recognize how Conrad fits within the broader tradition of existential thought. In the introduction to this project, I defined existentialism as the crisis that occurs when the individual is forced to face his own limits. *Heart of Darkness*, by confronting the reader with a narrative that slips away from the narrator, creates the sense of going through an existential crisis. *Heart of Darkness* creates its profound, powerful depiction of the angst, anxiety, and dread of an existential crisis through Marlow’s inability to find language to describe his experience. The failure of communication in *Heart of Darkness* paradoxically produces the existential horror that lies at the center of the novel.

*Heart of Darkness* in Context

Ten years after England celebrated the nation’s progress over the 50 years of Queen Victoria’s reign another celebration was in order. Dubbed the “Diamond Jubilee,” the nation once again gathered to celebrate Queen Victoria. There was, however, a different flavor to the celebrations. While empire played a role in the 1887 Jubilee, as

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31 For more thorough examinations of Conrad’s relationship to modernism, see “Conrad and Modernism” by Andrea White and “Modernism” by Michael Levenson.
32 Unlike *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *The Man Who Was Thursday*, there is a decent body of criticism dealing with Joseph Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* in terms of existentialism. See “Language, Silence and the Existential Whisper: Once Again at the ‘Heart of Darkness’” by Sanford Pinsker, “Conrad and Sartre” by Wit Tarnawski, “Conrad and Sartre” by Adam Gillon, “Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Kierkegaard’s Existentialism” by Ewa Bobroska, *Joseph Conrad: A Study in Existential Vision* by R. J. Das, and *Conrad’s Existentialism* by Otto Bohlmann. Most of these accounts simply notice similarities of language or theme and do not clearly define what makes Conrad’s contribution to existentialism unique.
historian R. H. Gretton noted, “The nation came to the celebration of the second Jubilee in a different spirit from that in which it approached the first. It may be said that Queen Victoria was herself the centre of the loyal enthusiasm of 1887, and that in 1897 the toast was rather ‘Our Noble Selves’…The Jubilee of 1897 was imperial, and the source of pride our vast territory and our possessions in men and money” (408). The cultural context of *Heart of Darkness* is one which believed very strongly in the project of imperialism, both that it was good and that England deserved preeminent place among the nations.  

The difference in the two jubilee’s focus is reflected in the subject matter of Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad’s novels. Gretton observes that the 1887 Jubilee “produced a summing-up of the enormous advances in invention, means of communication, and all the mechanism of modern life” (413) while the 1897 Diamond Jubilee found “the presence of the colonial representatives at the review was the centre of interest” (417). Greg King writes, “[T]he Diamond Jubilee would focus almost exclusively on a celebration of the British Empire, and the queen’s role as its head” (King 19-20). The expansion of the Queen Victoria’s realm transformed her into a “mystical symbol of empire” (King 43). While Hardy responds to industrialization, Conrad responds to imperialism.

Conrad’s literary existentialism can only be understood in the context of these positive beliefs about empire. *Heart of Darkness* was published just two years after England paraded representatives of their colonies through the London streets. In the essay

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33 C. De Thierry writes, “Unlike any other pageant of the same kind, [the Jubilee] developed from a great spectacle into the embodiment of a great principle. Impregnated by the passion of a united people, it brought forth the sentiment of nationality, and the British Empire ceases to deserve the sneer of its detractors” (“Imperialism” 316).
“On National Culture” Frantz Fanon writes, “the final aim of colonization was to convince the indigenous population it would save them from darkness” (149). *Heart of Darkness* reveals that not only must empire convince the colonized that they were being saved from darkness, but empire must convince the imperialists themselves that they were a necessary global force of enlightenment. Conrad reveals that this alibi is a lie. The existential crisis at the core of *Heart of Darkness* has to do with Marlow’s choice whether to make Europe face its image in Kurtz. The narrative of *Heart of Darkness* emerges out of Marlow’s failure to communicate his experience to the Intended. Yet as he tries to give voice to his experience, Marlow is forced to recognize the impossibility of communication. Marlow’s failure recognizes the way in which the existential crisis occurs beyond the bounds of language.

**Conrad’s Literary Existentialism**

The formal features of *Heart of Darkness* bear witness to the inability of traditional forms to express the existential experience and, by extension, limit these forms capabilities to operate as a critique of empire. The first of *Heart of Darkness*’s formal features is the frame narrative. The novel opens on a boat where an unnamed “I” relates to us Marlow’s story. The second feature of Conrad’s novel is Marlow’s narrative voice, which features a number of distinctive stylistics that undermine clarity. The third formal feature is an emphasis on atmosphere. *Heart of Darkness* relies on its readers’ affective response to the text. The novel wants us to feel uncertain and uneasy. Existential horror emerges out of the interplay between these formal elements.

The frame allows the development of Marlow’s distinct voice, which creates much of the atmosphere of the novel, which in turn draws an occasional comment from
the frame narrator. Together, these craft a reading experience radically different from the realist Victorian novel. No longer is there an omniscient narrator who comments on the action, draws symbolic connections, or controls what gets attention in the text. By layering two first-person narrators and emphasizing moods over action, *Heart of Darkness* suggests the knowledge an omniscient narrator implicitly claims is inaccessible.

Nor does the novel suggest that the realist project is inadequate because of the setting. When Marlow accuses his listeners of being incapable of understanding him because they have spent their lives in Europe the implication is not that in Europe is safety. Instead, the implication is that in Europe it is easier to avoid dispelling the illusion of safety. Marlow challenges an unwritten interlocutor:

You can’t understand? How could you—with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums—how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man’s untrammeled feet may take him into by the way of solitude—utter solitude without a policeman—by the way of silence—utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion. These little things make all the difference. When they are gone you must fall back on your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness. (49)
Out in the wilderness there is no social world that can cover up the abyss. Absent these influences, the silence and solitude of the wilderness takes hold—one is “assaulted by the powers of darkness” (49). The institutions of control that preserve the veneer of civilization—policemen, psychologists, public opinion—allow us to ignore civilization’s fragility. Similarly, the realist novel creates the illusion of solidity. By claiming the ability to represent reality through narrative, the realist novel implies reality can be contained and controlled. *Heart of Darkness*’s literary form implies that meaning, and therefore reality, escape control.

The fragility of civilization suggested by the novel runs against English beliefs about Empire. C. De Thierry wrote in 1897, “That destiny has made England the colonising Power of modern times is beyond dispute” (“Colonial Empires” 151). The language De Thierry uses of “destiny” and “beyond dispute” and even the capital-lettered “Power” all indicate certainty. There is no doubt in De Thierry’s mind that England not only deserves its empire but was destined to achieve global dominance. Nor was England’s dominance seen as merely the natural result of strength. Empire was itself a moral good. De Thierry describes England as “the light of the moral, social, and intellectual world” (152), and in a similar vein Edward Dicey asserts England is “the champions of Liberty, Enlightenment, and Progress, in every quarter of the globe” (667). England is both example and emissary of civilization. England’s moral, social, and intellectual achievements show the rest of the world what they ought to aspire to be, and

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34 On the effect of the social world, Paul S. MacDonald observes, “In the ordinary course of events, this absurdity or lack of reason for our existence and our anxiety in the face of this absurdity are concealed or buried by our engagement in the social world in which conventional values are already in place” (39).

35 There are certain problems with how Marlow depicts and discusses Europe and Africa and seems to deny civilization for the latter. See “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” by Chinua Achebe.
this not only justifies England’s imperial aims but makes England’s pursuit of empire a moral imperative.

Marlow explicitly counters these attitudes as he prepares to begin his story. As he winds down his initial thoughts on England once being a land of savagery colonized by an empire, he asserts that a nation’s “strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of the others” (7). There is no destiny in Marlow’s description as there is in De Thierry. The strength to build an empire is an accident. But it is the justification for imperialism that serves as the impetus for Marlow’s tale. He asserts, “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea” (7). Marlow’s set up for his story makes it an explicit commentary on the belief that empire was not only morally justified but moreover morally required.

Immediately after Marlow refers to the justification of colonialism by “an unselfish belief in the idea” the novel draws attention to its form. The frame narrator steps in, drawing our attention to Marlow’s oral storytelling, and observes, “we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences” (7). The language of “inconclusive experiences” resists the confidence in imperialism of De Thierry and Dicey. Heart of Darkness deviates from realism to introduce uncertainty, confusion, and uneasiness. Conrad’s use of the narrative frame, Marlow’s difficulties in expressing himself, and the novel’s invocation of an unclear,
unimaginable, and incommunicable threat all work together to make the reader experience existential horror.

**The Frame Narrative**

An existential crisis happens when habitual ways of being suddenly reveal themselves to be inadequate. To create this narratively, *Heart of Darkness* deviates from habitual methods of making meaning. The use of the frame gives Conrad a means of commenting on Marlow’s tale from an outsider’s perspective without invoking the authority of an omniscient narrator. Most of the frame narrator’s comments are warnings about Marlow’s lack of clarity. For instance, when the narrator introduces Marlow he observes, “The yarns of seamen have direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut” (5), before warning us that “Marlow was not typical…and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (5). In this passage, the frame narrator prepares readers for what is to come. In contrast with a typical yarn, which might operate like a fable, end with a neat bit of irony, or conclude with a happily-ever-after, *Heart of Darkness* leaves readers with, at best, a vague sense of what the story means. The narrative’s commentary on itself reveals that this is intentional and actually necessary for a narrative about an existential crisis.

The metaphors the narrator uses to describe the seamen’s typical and Marlow’s unusual narrative styles mimic the way meaning is conveyed in both. The metaphor of the kernel has the solidity of a nut while the metaphor of the glow is forced into circumlocution. The second metaphor is almost as vague as the style it is intended to
describe. What does it mean for meaning to be a glow, a misty halo? The answer is like the metaphor itself: vague, unclear, hazy. It is a warning: expect to find yourself in a fog, expect to come to moments where the meaning is not clear, expect to find yourself confused, expect for the narrative to leave you in the dark. As James Guetti describes it, “we encounter the idea of his language moving over the outside of an ‘episode,’ surrounding the episode but never penetrating it” (498). Meaning is a matter “of the surface or exterior, while the reality—not Marlow’s artificial reality but the reality beyond surfaces—is something deep within, something at the center that is not approached” (498). Through the frame narrator, Conrad prepares us for the difficult, winding, vague narrative that is to follow. We should expect to reach the end of the novel feeling uncertain.

Marlow recognizes his story’s lack of clarity. He reflects on his experience: “It seemed to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was somber enough too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No. Not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light” (7). The language of Marlow’s description emphasizes the vague nature of the forthcoming narrative. The verb “seemed” serves two purposes. The first indicates an emphasis on appearances and surfaces, resisting that inner kernel of meaning. The second emphasizes, again, a lack of certainty. This lack of clarity is emphasized by the story throwing “a kind of light on everything.” While light is commonly used as a metaphor for knowledge, Marlow’s description undermines the typical meaning of that metaphor. It is “somber,” “pitiful,” “not extraordinary,” and finally, “not very clear.” He then repeats that final description, emphasizing that of all the descriptions it is the lack of clarity that is most certain.
The novel’s self-awareness does not render irrelevant criticisms like that of E. M. Forster, who questions the existence of a point or a message to Conrad’s art. Forster writes:

What is so elusive about him is that he is always promising to make some general philosophic statement about the universe, and then refraining with a gruff disclaimer…Is there not also a central obscurity, something noble, heroic, beautiful, inspiring half a dozen great books; but obscure, obscure?...These essays do suggest that he is misty in the middle as well as at the edges, that the secret casket of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel, and that we need not try to write him down philosophically, because there is, in this particular direction, nothing to write. No creed, in fact. Only opinions, and the right to throw them overboard when facts make them look absurd. Opinions held under the semblance of eternity, girt with the sea, crowned with the stars, and therefore easily mistaken for a creed. (316)

Though Forster recognizes that Conrad is responsible for “half a dozen great books”, the overall tone of this section is one of frustration and disappointment motivated by the texts’ obscurity. Forster’s frustration is motivated by a sense that underneath Conrad’s dense prose lies nothing worth grasping. Is Forster right, and Conrad simply a master of narrative sleight-of-hand? Or do Forster and others after him reveal a profound misunderstanding of Conrad’s work?
While critics hint that Conrad’s obscurity is an artistic flaw, Conrad indicates that the obscurity is intentional. We must ask, then, what purpose does this obscurity serve? In his preface to *Nigger of the “Narcissus”* Conrad writes, “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there…perhaps…that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask” (5).

Conrad’s vision for his prose literature is that it be sensual, not a transcendent or abstract play of ideas. This isn’t to say that Conrad is uninterested in ideas, in “truth.” What he implies instead is that truth is only received in glimpses.

It would be disingenuous, then, to satisfy Forster with a clear articulation of his philosophy. While the artist “like the thinker or the scientist, seeks the truth and makes his appeal,” the truth that the artist pursues is not the same as the scientist or thinker. Conrad explains, “Impressed by the aspect of the world the thinker plunges into ideas, the scientist into facts—whence, presently, emerging they make their appeal to those qualities of our being that fit us best for the hazardous enterprise of living” (3). But for Conrad, the thinker and scientist are constantly in danger of being disproved. He continues, “The changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories. But the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition—and, therefore, more permanently enduring.” (3). The preface suggests that while science and philosophy

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36 In his letter to Cunningham Graham Conrad recognizes his friend might miss the idea (293), and as we have seen Conrad includes in *Heart of Darkness* several observations by both Marlow and the framing narrator that indicate Conrad is well aware of the obscurity of his prose. It does not appear an accident that the “vapour” Forster sees at the heart of Conrad’s genius is so similar to Conrad’s own metaphor of haze or misty halo.
are worthy exercises, they are ultimately flawed in that what passes for truth in both fields is subject to the judgment of future discoveries. The artist, on the other hand, “speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives” (4). We would be hard pressed to find in *Heart of Darkness* much delight and wonder, but we do find “the sense of mystery surrounding our lives” vividly portrayed. The haze of Marlow’s story is intended to communicate some “glimpse of truth.” Forster’s instinct is to look for something at the center, but the frame narrator suggests that, rather than obscuring the center, the haze is the truth we seem to glimpse.

*Heart of Darkness* is interested in more than just communicating a sense of mystery. It is invested in interrogating the nature of communication itself. The actual action of the novel is a ship crew listening to one of their fellows attempt to tell a tale. By narrating Marlow’s attempt to communicate in “real time,” the novel vividly depicts Marlow’s struggle to communicate. At one point in the middle of the narrative Marlow turns to his audience and asks a series of questions:

“Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams….”

He was silent for a while.

“….No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence—that which makes its truth, its
meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone…” (27)

This aside begins with a series of three parallel questions, moving from the specific “him” (meaning Kurtz), to the broader, “story,” to the all-encompassing “anything.” These questions add to the sense that Conrad has been building of a fundamental epistemological uncertainty. It is interesting that Marlow uses the word “see” to describe his listener’s response to his story, as this is the same verb Conrad emphasizes in his preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* to describe his task as an author. What we have in this quote is Conrad, through the voice of Marlow, questioning his own ability to accomplish what he saw as his task.37

Marlow’s attempt to narrate his experience makes vivid the struggle to communicate and the effect of that struggle on the speaker. R. A. Gekoski argues, “Marlow is sharply aware that he was trying to express the inexpressible; his rhetorical strategy is to invoke its inexpressibility—he constantly turns to the audience, challenging them with the fact that they are simply not equipped with a depth of experience sufficient properly to understand what he is trying to say” (63). But while Marlow does reference the incommunicability of his life-experience, Gekoski’s other point, that Marlow is

37 Conrad’s emphasis on his apparent inability to make us see is one of the most discussed features of his writing. C. B. Cox argues that “Conrad is deliberately creating a kind of writing which draws attention to its own inadequacies” (34); Anthony Fothergill adds, “the narrator self-consciously draws attention to his own activity, the difficult task of narrating meaning. Does the difficulty lie in conveying the experience to others, or in the very ‘unknowableness’ of meaning?” (2). The result of this self-conscious reckoning with the difficulties in telling a story is a strange realism, as Watt observes that “while we read we are, as in life, fully engaged in trying to decipher a meaning out of a random and pell-mell bombardment of sense impressions.” (179). Guetti observes, “Conrad knows very well what he means, but he knows also that what he means is not enough; his insistence on unresolved paradox and the failure of language suggests here, as elsewhere, that within the imagined world of his narrative there is a reality which escapes the resources of imagination itself” (503). Marlow himself calls his attempt at communicating his meaning “impossible,” that what makes an experience’s “truth, its meaning” is always beyond the reach of language.
challenging his audience, is less certain. Marlow’s final, “We live, as we dream—alone…” hardly reads as a challenge to the audience. Instead it is an expression of loneliness, isolation, and alienation that carries a note of sadness. Marlow is forced to face the impossibility of communicating the meaning of his experience even as he is impelled to try.

Thus, the narrative simultaneously indicates there is a meaning while failing to articulate that meaning. By making us aware of Marlow's struggle to communicate his personal experience in Africa, we are made aware of the struggle to communicate experience in general, particularly experience that is meaningful, impactful, or profound. Guetti observes:

Marlow suggests throughout the story that at the center of things there is meaning and that he is pursuing this meaning. And yet the intensity of Marlow’s inquiries serves to emphasize the inconclusiveness of his findings. Again and again he seems about to declare the truth about Kurtz and the darkness, but his utterance most often takes the form of either a thunderous contradiction in terms or a hushed an introspective ambiguity.

(488)

Readers are at the mercy of Marlow’s storytelling ability, and Marlow’s ability is suspect. During a pause in Marlow’s story, the narrator says, “I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river” (27). Here we see a longing for clarity and the anxiety that results when clarity is denied: the narrator waits for “the sentence” or “the word” that would explain his
uneasiness. But as the narrator has already indicated, there is no word, no sentence, no “kernel” for the narrator to grasp.

This commentary does not strike the reader as a clumsy attempt to signal the appropriate response. By the time this observation appears, Conrad has already taken advantage of the frame to disorient and confuse the reader. This happens with the very first words Marlow speaks. He begins with, “And this also…has been one of the dark places of the earth” (5). The first word is a conjunction, but there is no connection apparent. The second word “this” is a pronoun with an indeterminant referent. The next word is “also,” an enumerative, but again it is not clear what “this” is in addition to. “And this also” implies a thought antecedent but we are not privy to that thought. Conrad creates distance between the reader and the story, and this distance heightens the sense of isolation for both Marlow and the reader. This disorientation is compounded by the vagueness of the rest of the sentence. While we are able to figure out he is talking about location, we are still not sure what Marlow means by “one of the dark places of the earth.” While Marlow goes on to explain what he means, the distance between Marlow’s thoughts and the words he speaks has been made apparent. Marlow’s tendency to refer to thoughts he has not yet voiced emphasizes the gaps in our knowledge and reminds there is much we do not know.38

The frame narrative stages Marlow’s failure of communication, which produces the experience of epistemological uncertainty.39 This explains the obscurity that E. M.

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38 The first time Marlow mentions the Intended he speaks as if his listeners know who he is referring to, but then later seems to forget he has mentioned her. The sense of the story being told in real time enables Conrad to isolate both Marlow and the reader.
39 Richard Ambrosini claims that confronted with the “limitation of [Marlow’s] senses and intellect in their confrontation with the wilderness” Conrad attempts “to overcome the communication gap between himself and his audience by creating a suggestive language” (101). Direct communication is impossible, so Conrad’s narrative works by communicating obliquely.
Forster finds so frustrating about Conrad. For Forster to demand more solidity out of Conrad is to ask Conrad to do the impossible. *Heart of Darkness* relies explicitly on the sense of narrative insubstantiality, the sense as Marlow himself says, of the impossibility of conveying the “life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existents.” The “subtle and penetrating essence” will always escape any attempt to render meaning through language. Sanford Pinsker argues, “The story shows increasingly difficult attempts to reconcile fact and language; its escalating anxieties about the nature of language culminate, strangely, in a vacuum pregnant with meaning” (53).

**Marlow’s Narrative Voice**

The frame allows *Heart of Darkness* to present itself primarily as an oral narrative. The sense of the story being told in real time, without the benefit of edits, affects the linguistic style of the narrative. While critics like Ian Watt have discussed Conrad’s style in terms of impressionism and what Watt calls “delayed decoding,” very little attention has been paid to the distinctive speech patterns Marlow uses and what their thematic significance might be. Marlow’s response to an unwritten accusation exhibits a number of these stylistics:

> “Absurd!” he cried. “This is the worst of trying to tell….Here you all are each moored with two good addresses like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher around one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal—you hear—normal from year’s end to year’s end. And you say, Absurd! Absurd be—exploded! Absurd! My dear boys, what can you expect from a man who out of sheer nervousness had just

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40 Compare the impact that an audience has to *Heart of Darkness* to what happens without such an audience in *Notes from Underground*. 
flung overboard a pair of new shoes? Now I think of it, it is amazing I did not shed tears. I am, upon the whole, proud of my fortitude. I was cut to the quick at the idea of having lost the inestimable privilege of listening to the gifted Kurtz. Of course I was wrong. The privilege was waiting for me. Oh yes, I heard more than enough. And I was right, too. A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard—him—it—this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices—and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean without any kind of sense. Voices, voices—even the girl herself—now....”

He was silent for a long time.

“I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie” (48).

In this passage are abrupt shifts in thought, digressions, repetition, and the use of the pathetic fallacy, with this last characteristic part of the focus of the next section on atmosphere. Together Marlow’s abrupt shifts, digressions, and repetition produce a dense, difficult prose, with Marlow struggling to make his meaning clear.

The abrupt shifts in thought signal the difficulty Marlow has in translating his memories into language. These abrupt shifts are sometimes indicated throughout by dashes and ellipses. Here, Marlow begins “This is the worst of try to tell” but then leaves off without finishing the thought and proceeds to describe the limitations of his audience. Conrad uses dashes to indicate emphasis, Marlow struggling for words, or him getting lost in thought. The last of these uses of dashes has much the same effect as the ellipses. When Marlow leaves off in the middle of a sentence or speaks aloud his wandering
thoughts we are made aware that this is a story told by a character, and as a result the perspective is limited and finite. Our knowledge and understanding of the events of the novel are filtered through Marlow’s perspective and Marlow’s language. These abrupt shifts, signaled by dashes and ellipses, disorient the reader as Marlow refers to things the reader cannot know and often moves on without explaining.

An example of how digressions operate is found after Marlow informs his listeners he was wrong about missing the opportunity to hear Kurtz speak. He says, “Of course I was wrong. The privilege was waiting for me. Oh yes, I heard more than enough. And I was right, too. A voice. He was very little more than a voice.” Marlow reminds us of an earlier statement that Kurtz discoursed rather than acted through a vague fragment, “A voice” before adding “He was very little more than a voice,” which foreshadows the condition Kurtz is in when Marlow meets him. He continues, apparently on the same topic of Kurtz’s voice, by stating he heard Kurtz—presumably Kurtz is who Marlow means by “him”—before adding “it.” But what does “it” refer to? Kurtz’s voice? Something else? Then Marlow adds “this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices,” and it is clear he is not talking about Kurtz anymore. But what voices he is referring to is never made clear. The “this” is a determiner, it is not certain which voice he means by “this voice.” It could be “him—it—this” all refers to Kurtz, or “it—this voice—other voices” indicates Marlow’s thoughts moving away from his memories of Kurtz’s voice. We do not know.

The recurrence of “voice” and “voices” in this passage exemplifies Conrad’s use of repetition. Repetition has a rhetorical history of being used for emphasis or for clarification. In Heart of Darkness repetition reveals Marlow’s struggle to make himself
understood. The repetition of “voices” here indicates Marlow’s memories, but Marlow is not able to make that memory clear. The reader simply has an eerie sense of disembodied voices. To build on this eerie lack of clarity, Conrad has Marlow use another type of repetition to describe these voices, what I call contemplative parallelism, a recurring habit Marlow has of describing things circuitously. As simply repeating the word “voices” with indeterminate modifiers leads to no more clarity, neither does the accumulation of words here. The “dying vibration of one immense jabber” is evocative, but Marlow does not stop there and instead piles on more adjectives: “silly, atrocious, sordid, savage…mean.” He finishes with a prepositional phrase “without any kind of sense.” Adding these descriptions of the “immense jabber” serves to make the description less, not more, clear.

Conrad uses contemplative parallelism to obfuscate throughout the text. Marlow tells us that the woods “looked with their air of hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, of unapproachable silence” (56). Marlow attributes a personality to the wilderness, but this personality is not made clear by his repetitive prepositional phrases. The wilderness is “hidden,” “unapproachable,” and silent. Marlow’s repetition emphasizes an inability to understand or make sense of the wilderness. The atmosphere Marlow creates is one of confusion and incomprehension. Other moments of repetition build other sensations: “He struggled with himself too. I saw it—I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself” (66); “he could not have been more irretrievably lost than he was at this very moment when foundations of our intimacy were being laid—to endure—to endure—even to the end—even beyond” (65); “This was the unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words” (50).
Marlow’s confrontation with Kurtz indicates the purpose of the accumulation of descriptions. After finding Kurtz crawling towards the natives’ fires, Marlow tells his audience, “I’ve been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounce…They were common everyday words—the familiar vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares” (66). Conrad uses dashes here, indicating Marlow is searching for the words to describe his experience. The movement of the first two repetitions is from implied meaning to unmeaning: “what we said” becomes “phrases we pronounce,” “everyday words” become “vague sounds.” But the clearest use of parallelism is the description “of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares.” Here the parallels are structurally clear: they both use the preposition “of,” a participle modifying the object of that phrase, followed by another prepositional phrase using “in.” The repetition does not add much in terms of content. Marlow emphasizes the dreamlike nature of his experience. But the repetition refines the atmosphere—the move from “dreams” to “nightmares” is a movement towards fear. The reader is affected by this language, and Conrad is able to build a mood that readers can sense even if they cannot pinpoint exactly what’s causing them to feel that way.

Marlow’s narrative voice creates the impression of some idea, concept, or meaning existing beyond Marlow’s clumsy attempts to put it into words. F. R. Leavis contends that Conrad’s shifts, digressions, and repetition are “merely an emotional insistence on the presence of what he can’t produce. The insistence betrays the absence, the willed ‘intensity’ the nullity.” (178). What the frame narrative and Marlow’s
linguistic style imply is that the insistence and the absence are intentional. Language is meant to fail. To put Marlow’s experience in clear and precise prose is to define his experience and therefore control it. This would prevent the experience from ever becoming existential. Marlow’s attempt to put into words the meaning of his experience forces him to confront his own limitations, and the distinct patterns of speech indicate his struggle against the limits his own storytelling ability places on him. By dramatizing this linguistically, by making readers sense the existence of something that cannot be put into words, Conrad makes the failure of communication all the more poignant.

The Unseen Threat

Atmosphere refers to the reader’s affective response to the narrative. It refers to the way language and form work together to create a certain feeling or mood in the reader. The reliance on atmosphere to communicate meaning is existential. Camus claims the existential method starts with the idea that “solely appearances can be enumerated and the climate make itself felt” (12). The words “climate” and “felt” suggest that existentialism operates by means of creating affective responses in readers through the description of how things appear. Conrad reflects Camus through Marlow’s emphasis on surface-truth. Attending to “the mere incidents of the surface” (34) causes reality to fade. Marlow’s observance that his devotion to his craft had “surface truth enough…to save a wiser man” (36) implies not only that looking past surfaces is impossible, but also that the attempt itself is dangerous. There is an undercurrent in existentialism that suggest existential inquiry is perilous. In other words, facing one’s limitations places the individual at risk. Looking at Marlow’s habitual use of the pathetic fallacy, we can see
how the novel invokes both the sense of incomprehensibility and the feeling that there is something within the incomprehensible that is dangerous.

In the longer passage quoted in the previous section the pathetic fallacy is applied to the memory itself. Marlow says, “[T]he memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean without any kind of sense.” The memory is personified. It “lingers,” in a sense haunting Marlow. The disembodied nature of the voices is linked to the incomprehensible jabber by the word “impalpable,” with both meanings of the word in play. It is only after falling silent for “a long time,” Marlow explicitly references the extended metaphor: “I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie.” Implying the supernatural, the sense of being haunted, helps build the uneasiness the frame narrator describes. This ultimately leads to the final confrontation with the Intended, where the sense of being haunted is much stronger and more explicit when Kurtz “lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived” (73) and “seemed to enter the house with me—the stretcher” (73). Marlow hears again the voice of Kurtz, and “the memory of what I had heard him say…those broken phrases came back to me, were heard again in their ominous and terrifying simplicity” (73). Conrad foreshadows both the final interview with the Intended and the atmosphere he will engender in that encounter.

The use of ghostly imagery further implies the existence of the unseen. This feeling is made more explicit in Marlow’s use of the pathetic fallacy to describe the wilderness. During a conversation with the brickmaker, Marlow describes the scene:

The smell of mud, of primeval mud by Jove, was in my nostrils, the high stillness of primeval forest was before my eyes…All this was great,
expectant, mute, while the man jabbered about himself. I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that big dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn’t talk and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there? (26-27).

The wilderness has a face, but this face is ambiguous: is it an appeal or a menace? The description is accompanied by three questions that emphasize the tenuous position the two men have in the face of “that big dumb thing.” These questions emphasize the fragility and the insignificance of the human figures. Their petty squabbles are contrasted with the surrounding wilderness, which is “confoundedly big,” an “immensity” and silent. Yet at the end of this passage Marlow is left describing a feeling instead of the wilderness. He senses the presence of something in the wilderness, yet this “confoundedly big” thing is not visible.

The thread throughout these personifications of the wilderness is the feeling that it is watching and waiting. On the trip down, the African coast is likened to an “enigma” that is “smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering—Come and find out” (13). The wilderness is given a face and a voice. On the steamer, Marlow notes, “And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect” (34). The wilderness’s threatening face is paired with a threatening patience. At the station Marlow observes, “And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something
great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion” (23). This observation is repeated just before the steamer is fixed and they are able to sail up the river. Watching two of the more sinister members of the company, Marlow says, “The high stillness confronted these two figures with its ominous patience, waiting for the passing away of a fantastic invasion” (33). In both these passages the wilderness is “waiting patiently.” In the initial quote the wilderness is made abstract, something “invincible, like evil or truth.” The choice of the abstract words creates indeterminacy and uneasiness; the listeners are not sure what exactly to make of the comparison. It casts us into an unfamiliar misty world of concepts when we expect a solid world of trees and leaves and branches. In the second, the patience of the wilderness has become ominous.

Marlow tries to avoid confronting the wilderness by devoting himself to his work, to “mere incidents of the surface,” but this is ultimately unsuccessful. Marlow claims, “The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily” (34), but this is not enough. He continues, “I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey ticks” (34). The threat is there, seeming to watch, despite Marlow’s best attempts to avoid it. As descriptions of the wilderness accumulate, the reader is left with a sense of the futility of human attempts to understand and thereby control reality. Early in the final section of the novel Marlow reflects: “I looked around, and I don’t know why, but I assure you that never, never before did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness” (55). He adds, “The woods were unmoved like a mask—heavy like the closed door of a prison—they looked with their air of hidden knowledge, of patient
expectation, of unapproachable silence” (56). While there was some ambiguity with the suggestion of danger in earlier descriptions, at the end of Marlow’s journey upriver the wilderness has become overtly hostile to humanity, and especially to human attempts at understanding. The wilderness has “hidden knowledge,” and is “unapproachable.” It is “impenetrable to human thought,” which through parallelism is connected to “human weakness.” The implication being that, unlike what the Enlightenment would believe, human understanding is not a sign of human strength. That which we do understand only serves to make more vivid all that we do not.

The atmosphere invoked in these descriptions of the wilderness aligns with the sense that Marlow is haunted by his memories. As Tess emphasizes the existence of Tess’s subjectivity by denying readers access, by emphasizing its absence in the text so too does Heart of Darkness use the failure of language to hint at the existence of something that exists just past language, just out of reach of Marlow’s story. We sense the existence of a threat, but as of yet we do not have a means of describing that threat. Yet this threat underlies Heart of Darkness. Marlow’s tale takes on the characteristics of a “misty halo” because he is trying to express a response to the threat he can neither describe nor understand. Marlow is “not very clear” because the things he is working with are not very clear either. The “presence of what he can’t produce” and the “nullity” that Leavis objects to is precisely the point.

Combined with the frame narrative and Marlow’s distinctive voice, the atmosphere adds to a literary existentialism that emphasizes the existence of something that remains unrepresented in the text. This causes readers to feel the same uncertainty, anxiety, alienation, and isolation that characterize Marlow’s existential crisis. The thread
tying all these features together is the novel’s commitment to dramatizing the failure of communication. This is the action contained in the narrative frame, this is the source of Marlow’s abrupt shifts, digressions, and repetition, and this is felt in Marlow’s personification of the wilderness and his own memories. Each of these elements hint at the existence of something that escapes language and representation, something that causes uneasiness. The frame, Marlow’s style, and the pathetic fallacy prepare us for understanding the horror not as an object to be defined, but as a reaction.

**Existential Horror**

The frame narrative, Marlow’s voice, and the pathetic fallacy prepares us for Kurtz’s final words, “The horror!” In Kurtz we see someone who has taken up the wilderness’s whispered appeal to “Come and find out.” Upon witnessing evidence of Kurtz’s savagery, Marlow observes, “But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude” (58). Whatever hidden knowledge or impenetrable truth is contained in the wilderness, the effect it has had on Kurtz is horrific. Yet it is clear that whatever Kurtz found in the wilderness was a reflection of himself. The wilderness whispered to Kurtz “things about himself.” In the solitude of the wilderness Kurtz was forced to confront himself, and what he found there is the existential center of the novel. But Kurtz’s judgment “The horror!” cannot be simply reduced to a judgment on what he has found at his core. The horror is existential, which is to say Kurtz found it not in the nature of his individual being, but in the nature of being itself.
Nevertheless, while Kurtz is alive, his relationship with himself is the primary preoccupation of the novel. This realization underscores Marlow’s confrontation with Kurtz. Marlow explains: “Soul! If anybody had ever struggled with a soul I am the man…his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself and, by Heavens I tell you, it had gone mad…He struggled with himself too. I saw it—I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself” (66). Kurtz is at war with himself. But this is not a Freudian war of id and superego. This struggle is not the struggle of a man against any internalized demands. Kurtz has “no restraint,” “no faith,” and “no fear.” These are all things that involve voluntary limitations. Human desires are limited by one’s capacity for restraint, like the cannibals whose internal restraint keeps them from killing the Europeans for food. Similarly, faith controls the various lusts of humankind, whether that faith is in a god or in ideals. Finally fear prevents the individual from making choices and doing things he or she otherwise would. Marlow rejects all of these causes for internal struggle. This means that Kurtz’s soul struggles with itself not because of any limitations placed on him by internal checks, religion, or fear.

Kurtz’s internal struggle emerges out of his discovery of his existential freedom. The wilderness, by freeing Kurtz from institutions of control, gives him absolute, existential freedom. But the accompaniment to freedom is, according to Sartre and Kierkegaard, the experience of anxiety or anguish or dread. Otto Bohlmann writes on Kurtz’s discovery of his freedom that anxiety is “especially revealing about the human condition in general, a manifestation of man’s sense of radical insecurity over his precarious and contingent existence” (35). For the existentialist, freedom is accompanied
by anxiety, not because of any external force but because of possibility. To theorize
anxiety, Kierkegaard analyzes Adam’s choice to eat the fruit in the garden. He argues that
when Adam made his choice he had no concept of good, evil, or even freedom.
Kierkegaard writes, “The prohibition alarms Adam [induces a state of dread] because the
prohibition awakens in him the possibility of freedom” (“Dread and Freedom” 104). This
dread is “a nothing, the alarming possibility of being able” (104). Kurtz has discovered in
the wilderness the freedom which “gazes down into its own possibility, grasping at
finiteness to sustain itself” (105), but with “no restraint, no faith, and no fear” Kurtz has
nothing to grasp. The result is that Kurtz becomes a god unto himself.

It is Kurtz’s scrabbling towards deity that frightens Marlow, because of the
realization that there is nothing—external or internal—that restrains Kurtz. When
Marlow confronts Kurtz as he is crawling back to the natives’ fires, he observes:

the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head…but in
this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name
of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke him—
himself—his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing
either above or below him—and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of
the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He
was alone—and before him I did not know whether I stood on the ground
or floated in the air. (66)

When Kurtz kicks himself loose of the earth with nothing either above or below him, he
has severed himself from any earthly sense of duty and any heavenly sense of
righteousness.\textsuperscript{41} His absolute freedom in the wilderness, his lack of connection to others and to the world, the absence of anything for him to hold on to allows Kurtz to give full reign to his “brutal instincts” and “monstrous passions” (65). The only appeal Marlow can make to Kurtz is to Kurtz himself, “his own exalted and incredible degradation.” Kurtz’s discovery of existential freedom does not lead to the next evolution of mankind: the Übermensch is degraded.

The corruption of Kurtz’s soul is made vivid by the subject of his eloquence. Kurtz’s discourse has as its center of gravity Kurtz himself, and this makes him unaware of his own absurdity:

Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart. Oh, he struggled, he struggled. The wastes of his weary brain were haunted by shadowy images now—images of wealth and fame revolving obsequiously around his unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression. My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas—these were the subjects for the occasional utterances of elevated sentiments. (68)

While earlier the darkness “seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast” (65), implying the heart of darkness is external, here the darkness is internal. The inner darkness is not as obvious as the outer, however, as the darkness of Kurtz’s heart is hidden in his eloquence. Marlow’s ironic use of the terms “lofty expression” and “elevated sentiments” in contrast

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\textsuperscript{41} On this passage Watt writes, “Marlow is horrified, and so, just before the end, is Kurtz, to understand what happens to a man who discovers his existential freedom under circumstances which enable him to pervert the ultimate direction of nineteenth-century thought: not the disappearance but the replacement of God” (166).
with the unimaginable possessiveness of Kurtz. “My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas”—on his deathbed Kurtz is still consumed with himself, with his future, with his ideas. For Kurtz there is nothing beyond himself to reach for, no purpose beyond the satisfaction of his own voracious appetites.

Is it Kurtz’s recognition of the gap between his desires and his ability to satisfy them that causes him to cry out, “The horror! The horror!” (69)? According to Marlow Kurtz’s final words were a “judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth” (69), but this interpretation is simplistic. Marlow tells us “No eloquence could have been so withering to one’s belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity” (66). This would imply that the judgment “The horror!” is not limited to a judgment on Kurtz. But what exactly it is a judgment of cannot be made clear. The distance created by the oral narrative is mirrored in Marlow’s distance from Kurtz. We are cast again into the misty halo of Marlow’s meaning. Kurtz’s final words represent the judgment of a man who has recognized the absurdity of the universe but because of his impending death is unable to make any choice. All Kurtz has left is his magnificent eloquence, his voice, and he uses this voice to sum up, “The horror! The horror!”

Yet this pronouncement, like the rest of the narrative, describes something just beyond the edge of our vision. According to Bohlmann this pronouncement is “enigmatic, but suggestive of some profound discovery that Kurtz had made about himself and the world” (100). Kurtz “looked into the Nietszchean ‘abyss’ of his deformed self – and judged it a place of horror enveloped by a universe of horror” (100). But, Bohlmann goes on to observe, “What the precise nature of this horror was, Marlow never clarifies. But his intimations lend themselves to an existential reading that what Kurtz
perceived was the nothingness, the ‘hollowness’, of his self and the brute world” (100).

Marlow observes that “there was something wanting” (57) in Kurtz, and that the whisper of the wilderness “echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core” (58).

Marlow admits, “Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can’t say. I think the knowledge came to him at last—only at the very last” (57). Marlow couches this claim in qualifications: he “can’t say” whether Kurtz knew there was something wanting in him. But it would be a mistake to believe that the horror is limited to the confines of Kurtz’s soul—that it is his heart and his alone that is the heart of darkness.

Yet, instead of reaching this heart we forced to recognize that “horror” is not an object but a reaction. Denied Kurtz’s final vision we are left with Marlow’s interpretation of Kurtz’s final expression, one that continues to haunt Marlow. What the pronouncement “The horror!” refers to is absent. All that is available to Marlow is Kurtz’s response:

Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn’t touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision… (69)

This passage implies several things about the horror. The first is that this is not some kind of repentance. The horror is not Kurtz’s revulsion at what he had done or who he had become. There is no deathbed conversion here; no turn to faith, no rejection of the world, no humbling of the self in the face of the infinite. Kurtz’s expression mingles
pride with power with terror with despair. These are not the emotions of a repentant man. Kurtz might have relived his life in that “moment of complete knowledge” but his judgment cannot be understood as a moral one. Marlow makes this clear when he recounts his own wrestle with death. But while the judgment is not moral Marlow does imply that the horror still is a judgment on his life. It is couched in the form of a question—Marlow cannot know what image or vision it was that Kurtz saw—but the implication is still there that Kurtz’s last moment is one of reflection on “every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender.” Finally, this passage implies that Kurtz right before his death has achieved some form of insight in a “supreme moment of complete knowledge.” This is why Kurtz’s judgment can be viewed as a “moral victory.” In a narrative characterized by uncertainty and inconclusiveness Kurtz “had something to say…He had summed up—he had judged. ‘The horror!’ He was a remarkable man” (70). Marlow, on the other hand admits that “within a hair’s breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement…I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say” (70).42 Kurtz judged, but Kurtz is dead and only Marlow who “had been permitted to draw back [his] hesitating foot” from the edge can attempt to convey the meaning of the horror.

Marlow attempts to make this a story about Kurtz when it cannot be anything but a story about Marlow.43 What Kurtz does is to give Marlow the term “the horror” and an example of what happens to a man who embraces completely his freedom but remains

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42 James Guetti comments, “Marlow is torn, throughout the story, between the desire to achieve a realization as final as Kurtz’s and the conviction that he must deny such a realization if his life is to have meaning. Kurtz is destroyed in his movement toward and final confrontation of what Marlow views as ultimate truth” (502).

43 Sanford Pinkser argues that the novella is more concerned “with the anguish of the living rather than the burial of the dead…Kurtz answers the jungle’s existential whisper with, ‘The horror! The horror.’ However, the task of giving those words a meaning and significance falls to Marlow” (56).
unprepared for his unavoidable existential crisis. Marlow did not die, and “remained to dream the nightmare out to the end” (69), but by coming face-to-face with death Marlow has an insight those who have not wrestled with death have not: “Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare that could not see the flame of the candle but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up—he had judged. ‘The horror!’ (70). While before the implication is that Kurtz has looked back on his life, here we understand that Kurtz’s words refer to something deeper and more fundamental. His final stare takes in both the universe and the hearts of man. His judgment encompasses both the nature of the universe and the nature of man. The horror lies beneath everything.

Marlow’s attempt to make sense of the horror begins with an account of his experience of wrestling with death. It is this experience that leads Marlow to deny viewing the horror as a simple fear of death. After all, how could an expression of a fear of death be “withering to one’s belief in mankind”? Marlow’s own fight with death “is the most unexciting contest” and “takes place in an impalpable greyness with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary” (70). It is hard to imagine this experience pushing Kurtz to his “supreme moment of complete knowledge.” Marlow says of his near-death experience: “If such is

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44 Guetti notes, “These words seem a response to the most private nightmare, to the unknown itself, but Marlow insists that they are quite the reverse: a ‘moment of complete knowledge.’ He asserts that ‘the horror’ has to do not only with Kurtz’s unspeakable history, but also with the world at large” (489).
the form of ultimate wisdom then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be” (70). Marlow rejects the notion that those on the brink of death have some kind of special insight. By comparing his own experience to Kurtz’s, Marlow is emphasizing that “The horror” is more than the individual face to face with his own mortality. Marlow’s existential crisis happens not because of what happens to him but because of what he witnessed. The horror is a realization of something profoundly disturbing lurking beneath the surface.

It is important to recognize that describing the horror as a realization means that the horror is a reaction. If we think about our own experience with horror, it is the sensation of being horrified that we remember first—not necessarily what horrified us. It’s the unknown that terrifies. Thus, we have a clearer idea of what it means to be horrified than we do of what causes the sensation of horror. The horror operates in the same way as the absurd, which according to Camus “is not in man (if such a metaphor could have a meaning) nor in the world, but in their presence together” (165). Similarly, the horror is not in man, nor is it in the world (hence the ambiguity of the title of the novel) but is in the confrontation. It is the nature of being itself, severed from any structure of thought or language that might attempt to control it. The horror is pervasive because it is contained in the very structure of existence where the individual human is always already thrown into a hostile and incomprehensible world.

While the horror is like the existential concept of absurdity or nausea, it carries with it a sense of a threat that Camus and Sartre are unable to capture. It is this ability of

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45 While there is not space here to do so, it is fascinating to compare Roquentin’s description of the unveiling of existence in *Nausea* to Kurtz and Marlow’s experience of the horror. The whole passage from pp. 126-135 is illuminating when read in conjunction with this understanding of the horror. Like horror, nausea is a feeling and this passage offers an useful, affective response to existence.
Conrad to move in us an affective response to the horror that makes him a more profound writer of the existential crisis. There is a threat, a fear—a horror—at that moment of knowledge that only Kierkegaard seems to have been able to approach. While Camus and Sartre recognize the way in which inertia can blind one to existence, they both see the recognition of absurdity as fundamentally good. For Conrad, when one is caught up in matters of the surface, “The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks” (34).

Conrad’s existentialism is a more dangerous existentialism. His universe is a threatening one. It is not certain at the end of *Heart of Darkness* whether or not the illusions we live in every day ought to be dispelled.

**The Intended and the Crisis of Empire**

What the object of Kurtz’s horror is will never be defined. We are too distant. But Marlow takes up Kurtz’s language—the eloquence of the gifted Kurtz lives on—and brings it to Europe with him. Marlow’s own existential crisis does not occur until his interview with the Intended. He has been primed for his own crisis by his experience in Africa and has caught a glimpse of the horror witnessing Kurtz’s death, but his crisis does not occur until he is forced to choose between telling the Intended Kurtz’s last words or lying to her. This gives the Intended a significant role in the arc of the narrative. The contrast between the Intended’s idealism and utter faith and the reality of who Kurtz

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46 Conrad himself said that “the last pages of ‘Heart of Darkness’ where the interview of the man and the girl locks in—as it were—the whole 30000 words of narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa” (“Selected Letters” 299). Conrad recognizes that the Intended cannot be “out of it—completely” as Marlow believes (48).
became turns the novel from a narrative about the existential crisis of one man in Africa into a narrative about the existential crisis of empire.

The novel delays this crisis to set up the fragility of the sepulchral city. Back in Europe Marlow finds himself “resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams” (70). For Marlow to become aware of the horror, what Camus calls “the chain of gestures” (156) had to be broken. Those Marlow resents in Europe have not been shaken out of their complacency. To Marlow, “They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew” (70-71). While there is in this statement a kind of ugly pride of which Marlow is aware, there is truth in this observation. The populace of the sepulchral city have not experienced the horror, they do not know they live atop an abyss. Marlow tells his audience:

Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend. I had no particular desire to enlighten them, but I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces so full of stupid importance. (71)

William Barrett discusses the profound effect the year 1914 had on the human world, of “the awful vision of all Europe’s elegance and beauty being mere gaudy decoration over the face of a human abyss” (34) and of the realization that “the apparent stability, security, and material progress of society had rested, like everything human,
upon the void” (34). Fifteen years before the events of World War I *Heart of Darkness* places European society in the darkness that made up Marlow’s experience in the wilderness. The “flauntings of folly” recalls the gestures of the tiny humans in the face of the silent, patient wilderness. The danger—the horror—is beyond their comprehension despite their unconscious participation in it. Marlow’s final interview with the Intended reveals the emptiness of Europe’s self-perception. The nobility of European civilization rests on a lie.

Critics of *Heart of Darkness* debate whether the Intended is meant to be a symbol of the noble aspirations of Europe or whether she ironizes the civilized world. In her essay “The Ultimate Meaning of ‘Heart of Darkness,’” Florence H. Ridley interprets the story as “the balance of opposites, a core of faith versus hollowness, restraint versus its lack, civilization versus savagery, light versus darkness” (49). The crux of her interpretation rests on the Intended as being a pure symbol of goodness. This misses the way in which the text undermines morality throughout; as Guetti argues, the horror means “all hearts are in darkness; the morality and meaning with which man surrounds himself and his experience is unreal; the reality of experience lies beyond language and the processes of the human imagination” (501). While Guetti is wrong to close off possible meanings, he is right that *Heart of Darkness* reveals morality is an illusion, and if morality is an illusion than the Intended cannot be the symbol of righteousness and

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47 Relating a conversation between the Manager and his uncle, Marlow narrates: “I saw him extend his short flipper of an arm for a gesture that took in the forest, the creek, the mud the river—seemed to beckon with a dishonouring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart. It was so startling that I leaped to my feet and looked back at the edge of the forest, as though I had expected an answer of some sort to that black display of confidence” (33).
faith Ridley wants her to be. C. B. Cox, responding to F. R. Leavis’s view of the Intended as an example of innocent nobility and idealizing faith, argues

“Nobility” seems to me the wrong word to use for the Intended, and I do not agree that there is nothing ironical in the presentiment of her. We have already seen how her home is a graveyard. It is appropriate that Marlow’s should lie to her, should tell her Kurtz’s last words were her name, for her life is based on hypocrisy, like the European civilization in which she has been nurtured. Her devotion has transformed the reality of Kurtz into a false idea, and this self-deception is a psychological necessity for her. (43)

Ian Watt sees a more ambiguous conclusion where the reader is “left wondering whether it is worse that the ideals of the Intended should continue in all their flagrant untruth, or that Marlow should have been unable to invoke any faith in whose name he could feel able to challenge them” (249). To view the Intended as a pure symbol of goodness is to claim the objectivity that the novel form is invested in denying. Recognizing how the form of the novel actively resists clarity suggests we view with suspicion any interpretation of the Intended that makes her symbolic function simple.

This is not to say that the Intended is not symbolic. She is. As the African woman is the symbolic figure of the incomprehensible darkness of the wilderness, the Intended is the light of civilization. She has “a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering” (73); the light takes “refuge on her forehead” (74), implying the rational, the Apollonian to the African woman’s Dionysian. Later in the interview when “with every word spoken the room was grower darker”, her forehead “remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love” (74). She is “guileless, profound, confident, and trustful” and
seems to exist outside of time. Her rationality, her timelessness, her belief represents humanity’s capacity for transcendence. The Intended displays everything Western civilization typically associates with goodness—Marlow himself bows his head “before the faith that was in her” (75).

But as C. B. Cox has pointed out, the Intended’s home is a graveyard—it has the flavor of death and is “a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold” (74). Throughout the novel Marlow has called Brussels the “sepulchral city.” That sense culminates in the interview with the intended. The street she lives on is “as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery” (73), her piano is “like a somber and polished sarcophagus” (73), and she floats towards him like a ghost. When he enters the dead enter with him. As he approaches the Intended’s house he has a vision of Kurtz “opening his mouth voraciously as if to devour all the earth…he lived as he had ever lived—a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities, a shadow darker than the shadow of the night…The vision seemed to enter the house with me” (73). The order of the vision follows the chronology of Marlow’s experience. It begins as we have seen with him in the stretcher, then “the memory of what I had heard him say afar there, with the horned shapes stirring at my back…those broken phrases came back to me, were heard again in their ominous and terrifying simplicity” (73). It ends with Kurtz seeming “to stare at me out of the glassy panel—stare with that wide and immense stare embracing, condemning, loathing all the universe. I seemed to hear the whispered cry, ’The horror! The horror!’” (73). When he sees her enduring sorrow, Marlow collapses his experience in the wilderness with his experience in the heart of the city: “I saw her and him in the same instant of time—his death and her sorrow—I saw her sorrow
in the very moment of his death. Do you understand? I saw them together—I heard them together” (74). He hears, “mingled with her tone of despairing regret, the summing-up whisper of his eternal condemnation” (74), and

the sound of her low voice seemed to have the accompaniment of all the other sounds full of mystery, desolation, and sorrow I had ever heard—the ripple of the river, the soughing of the trees swayed by the wind, the murmurs of the crowds, the faint ring of incomprehensible words cried from afar, the whisper of a voice speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness. (75)

Marlow’s vision is accompanied by “the beat of the drum regular and muffled like the beating of a heart, the heart of a conquering darkness. It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush” (73), and as he speaks with the Intended her house is giving away gradually to the darkness: “The room seemed to have grown darker” (73-74), “the room was growing darker” (74), “The darkness deepened” (75).

The most important collapse is of the two women, who initially seemed diametrically opposed. Ridley interprets them this way, emphasizing the difference between the two, holding them as symbols of civilization and light, savagery and darkness. This misses the structure of the passage. As the interview with the Intended continues darkness gradually overtakes her home, the light is more and more feeble, until in a sudden burst of sorrow:

She put out her arms, as if after a retreating figure, stretching them black and with clasped pale hands across the fading narrow sheen of the window. Never see him! I saw him clearly enough then. I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live and I shall see her too, a tragic and
familiar Shade resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also and
bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the
glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness. (76)

It becomes meaningless to distinguish the Intended and the African woman, the symbols of Europe and Africa, the sepulchral city and the wilderness in relation to the horror. Guetti’s argument that “the essentials of experience remain amoral and, even, alinguistic” (502) and that “there is more to life than language” (504) along with Pinkser’s contention that “such experiences are always irrational, somehow beyond the province of language” (54) has the necessary implication that our terms light and dark, civilization and savagery are themselves suspect. Ian Watt argues that in this scene “We move into a world where there are no longer any easy and complacent distinctions between black and white, and there are no longer any simple choices to be based upon them” (249). He argues, “Light has been degraded to a cold and artificial brightness—it can no longer combat darkness” (251). It is “sick and pallid indeed compared with the other tragic and heroic woman whom Kurtz abandoned in the heart of darkness” (251), and “light seems to have a particular affinity with unnaturalness, hypocrisy, and delusion, and to be quite as contrary to the positive values of human life as the worst manifestations conventionally attributed to darkness” (251-252). As Guetti argues, “when Kurtz’s vision—the vision that Marlow assumes to be so similar to his own—destroyed the truth of morality and restraint, it also destroyed their availability” (495). For Ridley to argue for a positive understanding of the Intended is to accept a dubious assumption that the terms light and dark hold to their traditional symbolic meanings.
When the Intended and the African woman are collapsed into each other, Marlow undermines the project of imperialism, of the civilizing work of Europe. The “powerless charms” (76) of the African woman are no different than the Intended’s “great and saving illusion” (75). This irony undercuts all of the interactions between Marlow and the Intended and is rooted in her unwavering belief in Kurtz’s goodness. The Kurtz Marlow knows and the Kurtz the Intended worships (and in this worship she is again like the “primitive” inhabitants of the wilderness) are not the same. The Intended is guided throughout the conversation by a mistaken assumption of Marlow’s sympathy, his unspoken agreement with her view of Kurtz. This is highlighted by her finishing his sentence “It was impossible not to…” with “Love him” (74). This silences Marlow into an “appalled dumbness” (74). She believes that Kurtz “drew men to him by what was best in them” (75), unaware that he presided over unspeakable rites. “But you have heard him. You know!” She tells Marlow, and when he replies he did know, it is “with something like despair in my heart” (75). Marlow’s claims throughout are all characterized by a suggestive ambiguity. The Intended in her delusions can interpret them as praise, but Marlow’s audience knows better. “He was a remarkable man…We shall always remember him…His words will remain…His end…was in every way worthy of his life” (74, 75, 76). She claims she “knew him best” (74), but in the sepulchral city, living in the midst of her illusions she can have no knowledge of the hollowness of Kurtz and the barren darkness of his heart.

48 Conrad’s condemnation of imperialism is not free from problematic elements, as Achebe points out. For a nuanced response to Achebe’s essay in light of Conrad’s critique of imperialism, see “Heart of Darkness and Racism” by Hunt Hawkins.
It is in this scene that the full sense of the horror takes hold. Just before he enters her house Marlow “seemed to hear the whispered cry, ‘The horror! The horror!’” (73), when he sees the Intended for the first time and she says, “I have survived,” Marlow “seemed to hear distinctly, mingled with her tone of despairing regret, the summing-up whisper of his eternal condemnation” (74), and later her voice “seemed to have the accompaniment of…the whisper of a voice speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness” (75). At this point, the whisper only seems to be heard. There remains the hope that the horror will remain a memory, an echo, a shade, but when she asks him to repeat Kurtz’s last words Marlow says, “I was on the point of crying at her, ‘Don’t you hear them. The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. ‘The horror! The horror!’” (76). The threat of the horror has become utterly real once again.

As C. B. Cox argues, in entering the Intended’s house Marlow, “has journeyed once more towards the heart of darkness” (43). He finds himself even more so than in his apathetic struggle with death surrounded by the horror. It is here, at the heart of civilization that Marlow recognizes that the horror is pervasive.

Marlow finds himself unwilling or unable—“I could not tell her” (77)—to reveal the horror to the Intended.49 Even though he feels himself menaced and surrounded on all sides by the darkness, Marlow preserves her illusion. He fails to communicate the horror. But this lie is not unaccompanied by a sense of danger: “It seemed to me that the house

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49 The Intended’s sex must play a role in Marlow’s lie. Asserting unconvincingly that the women are out of it he claims, “We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own” (48). Marlow has claimed that in work is “the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself—not for others—what no other man can ever know” (29). Ian Watt notes European society denied leisure class women the chance to find themselves in work. Perhaps Marlow is unwilling to destroy her world because she has no opportunity to build a new one.
would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle. Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due?” (77). We move in these sentences between two understandings of heaven, the first, the one that would fall on his head, is the heaven that demands justice. The second, the heaven that would fall if he had given Kurtz his due, is a constructed heaven, a crystal palace of illusion built up by the illusory faith of humanity. But that destruction would be, Marlow tells us, “too dark—too dark altogether” (77).

**Joseph Conrad and the Failure of Communication**

At the beginning of the novel Marlow characterizes civilization “like a flash of lightning in the clouds” and observes “[w]e live in the flicker” (6). Ian Watt picks up on Marlow’s characterization. He argues that “we are made to see civilization, not as a stable human achievement, but as a brief interruption of the normal rule of Darkness” (79). But *Heart of Darkness* goes deeper than that, for the light of civilization is itself suspect.50 The brutalities and unspeakable acts perpetrated in the darkness are not inconsistent with civilization but lie just underneath the surface of the sepulchral city. It is the Intended, “a soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal” (70), who brings the “echo of his magnificent eloquence” (7). At the heart of European civilization we find the horror as vital and pervasive as it was in the darkness of the wilderness.

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50 Barrett writes near the end of his study on existentialism: “The realization that all human truth must not only shine against an enveloping darkness, but that such truth is even shot through with its own darkness may be depressing...But it has the virtue of restoring to man his sense of the primal mystery surrounding all things, a sense of mystery from which the glittering world of his technology estranges him, but without which he is not truly human” (275).
The horror is crystalized for Marlow in the moment when he is face to face with absolute and total faith in the moral righteousness of imperialism. The horror hits Marlow because he has seen where the faith leads. In a pamphlet authored by Kurtz Marlow discovers “the unbounded power of eloquence” (50) which had “no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases,” except “at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you luminous and terrifying like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’” (50). This is where the logic of empire leads. But the horror is not contained as a reaction to the brutalities of colonialism. Kurtz’s final stare is “wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness.” Borrowing from Sartre’s construction, the horror precedes empire. It is not that imperialism leads to horror; it is that the horror undermines the justification of imperialism.

In its denial of the horror underneath existence, civilization builds a city of light that is also a city of death. In its blindness to the “primal mystery” of the darkness, the wilderness, the horror, human truth is blind to the darkness at its heart. At the beginning of his story Marlow remarks on the “conquest of the earth,” which he admits is “not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (7). But, he continues, “What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to” (7). The entire narrative of Heart of Darkness undermines any attempt at

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51 As Barrett concludes: “The centuries-long evolution of human reason is one of man’s greatest triumphs, but it is still in process, still incomplete, still to be...But do we need to be persuaded now, after all that has happened in this twentieth century, how precariously situated these reasonable ideals are in relation to the subterranean force of life, and how small a segment of the whole and concrete man they actually represent?...the rationalism of the Enlightenment will have to recognize that at the very heart of its light there is also a darkness” (279).
justifying colonialism. The ideas undergirding imperialism are illusory. It is the realization that underneath all the beautiful trappings of European civilization lies an empty void that Marlow describes as “too dark—too dark altogether.” The fact that the heart of Europe is also a heart of darkness destroys any attempts to justify colonialism.

Marlow’s final interview transforms the story from a narrative about one man’s existential crisis into an existential crisis about the project of empire and the narrative of progress. Through Marlow’s failure to communicate, Heart of Darkness undermines us, revealing that beyond the surface of things, in the corner of our eyes lies the horror. Our contingent, absurd existence is “like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares” (14). We are cast adrift in a world that remains incomprehensible, isolated from one another living as we dream—alone. Conrad, C. B. Cox argues, “is trying to suggest a menacing force which encircles all forms of civilization, a presence of universal destruction we acknowledge but cannot control or even properly understand” (54). It is in the atmosphere of Heart of Darkness that we encounter the horror. And it is with this existential horror we must reckon. Conrad has destroyed any shelter we may have had, for existence is at its roots sick, touched by the darkness.
Chapter III: G. K. Chesterton and Existential Joy

*The Man Who Was Thursday* seems at first a strange companion to *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Heart of Darkness*, and G. K. Chesterton a strange author to place alongside Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad. But this strangeness is merely a reflection of the strange origins of existential thought. Existentialism has origins in the radically divergent voices of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, and thus has deep roots in both Christian and atheistic thought. For Kierkegaard the existential struggle with meaning, purpose, and dread were cast in relation to an authentic relationship with God. Existentialism was for Kierkegaard a means to recovering an authentic existence through faith. On the other hand, for Nietzsche, the rejection of German idealism also meant the rejection of Christianity. Instead of leading to a leap of faith, existential inquiry was meant to lead to the Übermensch, whose authentic existence is defined purely on his own terms. As the contrast between the Christianity of Kierkegaard and the atheism of Nietzsche illuminates the origins and goals of existentialism, the contrast between the faith of Chesterton and the atheism of Hardy and Conrad reveals the way failure in British existentialism can be positive and productive. While Chesterton shares Hardy and Conrad’s concern with failure, unlike them this failure leads to joy at the sheer fact of existence. The failure that lies at the center of *The Man Who Was Thursday* is not rooted in horror but in wonder. Existence for Chesterton is beyond our comprehension not because it is too evil but because it is too good.

Chesterton is driving at a similar conclusion that Camus strives for in *The Stranger*. Both are trying to find happiness in existence, an attitude Chesterton found by placing existence against the possibility of nothingness. Chesterton writes in his
Autobiography, “mere existence, reduced to its primary limits, was extraordinary enough to be exciting. Anything was magnificent as compared with nothing” (89-90). This quote gives us a faint outline of Chesterton’s existentialism, which is founded in the belief that existence in and of itself is good. This belief finds expression in Chesterton’s writings, from his Father Brown series, to his brief articles, to his advocacy for Distributism. Chesterton describes the implication of this belief: “At the back of our brains, so to speak, there was a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence. The object of the artistic and spiritual life was to dig for this submerged sunrise of wonder; so that a man sitting in a chair might suddenly understand that he was actually alive, and be happy” (90-91). The best indication of Chesterton’s success is in the anecdote where Franz Kafka “pressed [Orthodoxy and The Man Who Was Thursday] on a friend saying that they simply had to be read because the author seemed as happy and energetic as a man who had actually found God” (Royal 86). Robert Royal comments, “Kafka’s reading penetrated to a crucial point: Perhaps the most salient feature of Chesterton’s work is its sheer exuberance and joy in existence” (86).

Chesterton’s ability to express joy often causes critics to accuse him of failing to recognize the real pain and suffering of existence. This complaint responds to Chesterton’s dedication to reframing our perspective to see more or less minor annoyances in fresh and new light, to see them for the trivialities they are. This, his critics argue, indicates Chesterton’s optimism relies on ignoring actual suffering.

However, Chesterton does not outright dismiss evil and pain. Indeed, his belief in the

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52 See “Chesterton and the Problem of Evil” by Mark Knight for a response to these critics.
53 See, for instance, the essay “On Running After One’s Hat” where Chesterton invites his readers to see floods, stuck drawers, and hats blown by the wind as opportunities for adventure instead of reason for complaint.
solidity of sin is one of the reasons he turned to orthodox Christianity in the first place. But, furthermore, Chesterton recognized in the Book of Job a necessary response to the problem of pain. The Man Who Was Thursday as a novel is Chesterton’s Book of Job written in response to the harrowing intellectual experience of solipsism and skepticism. Much like existence is all the more emphasized when contrasted by nonexistence, joy is more fully recognized thrown into relief against a backdrop of pain.

Chesterton’s identification with existentialism is complicated by his identification with Thomism. Chesterton’s book Saint Thomas Aquinas reveals sympathies with existential themes. One of those being the rejection of Platonic theology and a desire to recover the human element in Christian theology. Chesterton observes that Augustine’s influence caused God to be thought of “too exclusively as a Spirit who purifies or a Saviour who redeems; and too little a Creator who creates” (79). It is Aquinas, Chesterton continues, “who saved the human element in Christian theology” (79). Chesterton’s book emphasizes Aquinas’s use of Aristotle to correct the Platonic influence on Christianity that led some to despise the body. Aristotle gave Aquinas ammunition to argue for the acceptance of physical reality, and this led him to the concept of Ens, often translated “being.” Chesterton writes, “St. Thomas Aquinas is concerned fundamentally with the idea of Being” (140). This concern, which Aquinas shares with Heidegger and Sartre, leads William Barrett to observe Thomists were “in the process of discovering St. Thomas as the true and authentic existentialist” (101).54 While there is some debate whether St. Thomas Aquinas ought to be considered existential,55 Chesterton’s book

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54 See Existence and the Existent by Jacques Maritain and Being and Some Philosophers by Etienne Gilson.
55 William Barrett, while he recognizes certain similarities, ultimately expresses skepticism towards the claim that Aquinas is an existentialist.
reveals an understanding of Aquinas that supports rather than refutes Chesterton’s existentialism.

In Chesterton’s existentialism, joy rests on recognizing the limits of reason. This is a theme in *The Man Who Was Thursday*’s nonfiction counterpart *Orthodoxy*. Comparing imagination and reason in “The Maniac,” Chesterton writes, “Imagination does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason” (219). He adds later, “Poetry is sane because it floats easily in an infinite sea; reason seeks to cross the infinite sea, and so make it finite” (220). At the conclusion of “The Maniac” Chesterton rejects materialism and solipsism and sums up what he views as “the chief mark” of insanity, which is “reason used without root, reason in the void” (230). What prevents one from ending up in this prison of reason is mysticism: “Mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity” (230). Reason unfettered destroys freedom, especially the freedom to believe which is, in Chesterton’s view, essential to joy. He writes, “The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand” (231).

Chesterton reveals his healthy skepticism towards the systematizers. Existence is always larger than our attempts to understand it. Thus, the fin de siècle British existentialists’ preoccupation with failure is expressed in Chesterton as a failure of understanding. But in a typical Chestertonian reversal, the failure does not lead to

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56 This does entail a rejection of reason, but rather a claim to the need to recognize reason’s limitations. In the next chapter, “The Suicide of Thought,” Chesterton is concerned with the freedom of the human intellect to destroy itself. “There is a thought that stops thought” (236), he writes, and it is this ultimate skepticism that Chesterton sees as the ultimate danger. Recognizing reason’s limits allowed Chesterton to retain reason.
tragedy, as in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, nor does the failure lead to isolation, as in *Heart of Darkness*, but the failure leads to faith.

**The Man Who Was Thursday in Context**

Unlike *Tess* and *Heart of Darkness* there is not a specific celebration that helps us make sense of the historical situation that produced *The Man Who Was Thursday*.

Thankfully Chesterton, in various places, makes it very clear *Thursday* was written in response to his experiences as a young man at the Slade School of Art. In the opening dedicatory poem to *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Chesterton describes an atmosphere of pessimism, where “Science announced nonentity and art admired decay” (n.p.). At that time Impressionism was the dominant artistic school, and it was a style that Chesterton found philosophically and spiritually distasteful. In his *Autobiography* Chesterton observes, “I think there was a spiritual significance in Impressionism, in connection with this age as the age of scepticism” (87). For Chesterton art for art’s sake was impossible; art always revealed a philosophy, and the philosophic underpinnings of Impressionism were a dangerous subjectivism. Chesterton argues Impressionism naturally lends itself to the metaphysical suggestion that things only exist as we perceive them, or that things do not exist at all. The philosophy of Impressionism is necessarily close to the philosophy of Illusion. And this atmosphere also tended to contribute, however indirectly, to a certain mood of unreality and sterile isolation that settled at this time upon me; and I think upon many others. (87-88)

*The Man Who Was Thursday* emerges out of this “mood of unreality and sterile isolation”. It gives voice in narrative form to the experience of struggling with solipsism
and metaphysical doubt. While *Orthodoxy* tells us where Chesterton’s philosophy ended up, *The Man Who Was Thursday* paints a picture of what it felt like to reach there.

Michael Shallcross discusses Chesterton’s Slade School experience in psychological terms. Arguing that Chesterton’s account of his solipsism is evidence Chesterton suffered from derealization he writes, “Rather than a considered, philosophical espousal of solipsism, this condition should be understood as an involuntary psychiatric state in which the subject becomes unable to conceive of the world as possessing a meaningful existence external to his or her consciousness” (“Assimilation” 323). While Chesterton does not describe a “considered, philosophical” argument for his Slade School solipsism, his *Autobiography* and *Orthodoxy* show a stronger grasp of the philosophic concepts than Shallcross’s description of an “involuntary psychiatric state” would suggest. It is more likely that Chesterton saw where current philosophic trends would lead and his “mood of unreality and sterile isolation” was his psychological response to the logical conclusions of those trends. In this, Chesterton revealed himself to be a natural existentialist. Philosophy, the existentialist argues, is a way of life. As H. J. Blackham writes, “The main business of this philosophy therefore is not to answer the questions which are raised but to drive home the questions themselves until they engage the whole man and are made personal, urgent, and anguished” (151-152).

Chesterton’s description of his mental state at the time depicts a thinker who made the questions raised by skepticism personal, urgent, and anguished.

At a very early age I had thought my way back to thought itself. It is a very dreadful thing to do; for it may lead to thinking that there is nothing
but thought. At this time I did not very clearly distinguish between dreaming and waking; not only as a mood but as a metaphysical doubt, I felt as if everything might be a dream. It was as if I had myself projected the universe from within, with all its trees and stars; and that is so near to the notion of being God that is manifestly even nearer to going mad. Yet I was not mad, in any medical or physical sense; I was simply carrying the scepticism of my time as far as it would go. And I soon found it would go a great deal further than most of the sceptics went. (88)

It is the final two sentences that stand out. First, Chesterton followed the logic of skepticism to its ultimate conclusions. Chesterton does not trace the outline of that logic here, but we can imagine it was a similar process as that which Chesterton put down in his book *Heretics*, where he follows to their conclusion the ideas of his contemporaries, such as H. G. Wells and Bernard Shaw. Impressionism leads, as Chesterton writes in *The Man Who Was Thursday*, to “that final skepticism that can find no floor to the universe” (131). Second, Chesterton associates the metaphysical doubt with a mood, implying that the two are related. In this, Chesterton reflects the existential attitude expressed by William Barrett when he wrote that those who dismissed existentialism as a mood “betrayed a curious blindness to the concerns of the human spirit, in taking the view that philosophic truth can be found only in those areas of experience in which human moods are not present” (10). Chesterton, like the existentialists, recognizes “philosophy should be connected with the individuals own life and experience” (Robicz 10). What we
believe should impact how we live. The conclusion to be drawn is to recognize that our philosophy matters and matters greatly.\textsuperscript{57}

*The Man Who Was Thursday* is a novel about the threat of nihilism. For Chesterton, this threat was urgent, for philosophy itself was urgent. As Steven R. L. Clark writes, “Chesterton was persuaded…that nihilism was a real and present danger—as indeed it had been in living memory. If poets, philosophers, administrators, scientists, and the decaying rich all agree that there is no true, objective standard of behavior, what reason can there be to suffer or to labor on behalf of ordinarily life-loving people?” (52). Chesterton communicates this urgency through the fictional department of philosophical policemen, detectives whose job it is to “trace the origin of those dreadful thoughts that drive men on at last to intellectual fanaticism and intellectual crime” (45). The protagonist, Gabriel Syme, is one of these detectives, and his battle with anarchy is the structure on which Chesterton’s existentialism is built.

**Chesterton’s Literary Existentialism**

Chesterton’s literary existentialism emerges from a dialogue with literature of nonsense. *The Man Who Was Thursday* evokes this with the masquerade at the final confrontation with Sunday which he describes “as absurd as Alice in Wonderland, yet as grave and kind as a love story” (184). Chesterton’s use of formal elements of nonsense literature does not mean *The Man Who Was Thursday* should be understood as nonsense literature. While he recognized it was “a valuable contribution to culture” he also

\textsuperscript{57} At the beginning of *Heretics*, Chesterton laments “that people care less for whether they are philosophically right” (39). He compares this to the Middle Ages, where people were set on fire for their philosophy. While admittedly a foolish thing to do, Chesterton observes, “But there is one thing that is infinitely more absurd and unpractical than burning a man for his philosophy. That is the habit of saying that his philosophy does not matter” (39-40).
described it as “humour that abandons all attempt at intellectual justification” or “folly for folly’s sake on the same lines as art for art’s sake, or more properly beauty for beauty’s sake” (“Humour” 29). The phrase “art for art’s sake” refers to a view, associated with the aestheticism of the decadents, that art does not—and for some should not—serve any political, didactic, or philosophic end. Chesterton’s view of “art for art’s sake” was generally not a positive one, and his continual comparison leads Martin Shallcross to argue that Chesterton distrusted nonsense literature. Yet, Chesterton did appreciate Lewis Carroll’s writings, though he suspected “the very best of Lewis Carroll was not written by a man for children, but by a don for dons” (“Both Sides of the Looking Glass” 68). Chesterton reserves most of his criticism of Alice in Wonderland for those who insist on taking it seriously. “It is only a lark, and no admirer of Lewis Carroll can outstrip me in liking it as a lark” (“Lewis Carroll” 234).

A further understanding of Chesterton’s appreciation for nonsense literature appears in his essay “A Defense of Nonsense,” where he draws a distinction between nonsense that is satiric and the unmeaning nonsense of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. But this unmeaning nonsense is “more than a mere aesthetic fancy” (47). Chesterton argues, “Every great literature has always been allegorical—allegorical of some view of the whole universe. The ‘Iliad’ is only great because all life is a battle, the ‘Odyssey’ because all life is a journey, the Book of Job because all life is a riddle” (47). Therefore, nonsense literature must “have its own version of the Cosmos to offer” and it is this: “the

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58 For example, in Heretics Chesterton wrote, “Now, in our time, philosophy or religion, our theory, that is, about ultimate things, has been driven out, more or less simultaneously, from two fields which it used to occupy. General ideals used to dominate literature. They have been driven out by the cry of ‘art for art’s sake.’ General ideals used to dominate politics. They have been driven out by the cry of ‘Efficiency,’ which may roughly be translated as ‘politics for politics’ sake’” (42).
world must not only be tragic, romantic, and religious, it must be nonsensical also” (48).

Nonsense literature is for Chesterton the primary means by which we are reminded of the wonder of creation. But it is difficult to remain sensitive to creation’s wonder when it is sensible. Nonsense literature reminds us of the “simple sense of wonder at the shapes of things, and at their exuberant independence of our intellectual standards and our trivial definitions” (49). Chesterton concludes by connecting nonsense to faith:

Nonsense and faith (strange as the conjunction may seem) are the two supreme symbolic assertions of the truth that to draw out the soul of things with a syllogism is as impossible as to draw out Leviathan with a hook.

The well-meaning person who, by merely studying the logical side of things, has decided that “faith is nonsense,” does not know how truly he speaks; later it may come back to him in the form that nonsense is faith.

(49-50)

In The Man Who Was Thursday, nonsense is tempered by a desire to tell a story where tearing off masks revealed not emptiness but benevolence. As Chesterton writes in his Autobiography: “So far as the story had any sense in it, it was meant to begin with the picture of the world at its worst and to work towards the suggestion that the picture was not so black as it was already painted” (99). The gradual unveiling of a more benevolent world shapes the fundamental structure of the story, as each of Gabriel Syme’s anarchist antagonists is revealed to be a fellow detective in disguise until, finally, Sunday is unmasked as both the head of the Central Anarchist Council and as the head detective who, concealed in a pitch dark room, recruited each of the detectives in the fight against anarchy. The plot progresses through a process of unmasking, with each detective serving
as the immediate danger until his true nature is revealed. Throughout the story are nightmarish evocations of nonsense, like when a decrepit old man chases a youthful Syme through the snowy streets of London, or when a French Marquis does not bleed when he is stabbed, or when Sunday hijacks a cab, an elephant, and finally a hot air balloon as he leads the detectives on a merry chase.

Of course, the novel’s commitment to unmasking reveals these nonsensical things have rather sensible explanations. For instance, the nonsense of a man being a day of the week is explained by having all the members of the Central Anarchist Council be named after days of the week. Although the surface of *The Man Who Was Thursday* looks a lot like nonsense literature it is in service of an allegory about the universe and humankind’s attempts to understand it. The purpose of *The Man Who Was Thursday*’s allegory distinguishes the project of Chesterton’s novel from that of Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear, whose nonsense was primarily a means of escape. The evocation of nonsense literature serves to create the sense of being in a nonsensical world. By combining it with allegory, Chesterton implies that from some vantage point the nonsense makes sense. *The Man Who Was Thursday* functions more like a retelling of the Book of Job than either detective fiction or nonsense literature. Instead of Job’s three friends, we have six philosophers; instead of Satan we have an anarchist poet; instead of God, we have whatever Sunday represents; and most importantly, instead of asking the question of why must good men suffer, *The Man Who Was Thursday* asks why each man must go through the nightmare of isolation and despair.

Significantly, while many of the nonsensical elements are explained, the novel purposefully fails to explain certain details. *The Man Who Was Thursday* begins
innocently enough with a debate in Saffron Park between two poets, one of anarchy and one of order. Only when the novel is finished does it become clear that this debate functions as a frame. In his *Autobiography* Chesterton observed “[H]ardly anybody who looked at the title ever seems to have looked at the subtitle; which was ‘A Nightmare,’ and the answer to a good many critical questions” (98). While the subtitle does explain the evocation of nonsense, it is not clear when the novel turns from the frame to the dream. One possible point is right after Syme finishes talking with Lucian Gregory’s sister Rosamond. After Syme loses his sense of time and takes his leave with “a sense of champagne in his head, which he could not afterward explain,” the narrator concludes, “what followed was so improbable that it might well have been a dream” (16). This begs a few questions, the most significant of which is what do we make of Gabriel Syme’s backstory? In Chapter 4 “The Tale of A Detective” we learn how Syme came to be in Saffron Park that evening, and yet his backstory contains many elements that are implied to be part of the nightmare from which Syme awakens at the end. This structural problem, where the novel seems to undermine its own shape, fits thematically with the goal of the novel. If a reader enters *The Man Who Was Thursday* with the intent of making sense of it in its entirety, the reader will end up frustrated. The narrative structure is designed to fail.

In retrospect, given how rapidly the novel turns to an anarchist threat to the entire world, it can seem a bit odd that the novel begins with a debate about art. One need only remember how seriously Chesterton took art to recognize how vital this framing debate is to the rest of the novel. As is clear in his assessment of the philosophy of Impressionism, Chesterton found art and the philosophy expressed by art to be of utmost concern. This is
seen in *Orthodoxy* where Chesterton devotes a significant portion to the dangers of certain philosophical perspectives. As amusing as a police force dedicated to going “to artistic tea parties to detect pessimists” or discovering “from a book of sonnets that crime will be committed” (45) is, there is a way in which Chesterton’s joke is at the same time entirely serious.\(^{59}\) By recognizing how *The Man Who Was Thursday* and *Orthodoxy* wrestle with the same questions, we can identify what the novel form allowed Chesterton to do that his self-described “slovenly autobiography” of *Orthodoxy* could not.\(^{60}\) The rest of the novel can be understood as an allegory meant to develop further the need to fight against what Chesterton describes in *Orthodoxy* as the suicide of thought.

**Anarchy of Thought**

At first the allegory of *The Man Who Was Thursday* turns the attack of modern thought on orthodoxy into a hidden battle between anarchists and detectives. But just like the plot, eventually that allegory is unmasked and the novel is revealed to be an allegory about humankind’s attempts to make sense of their world. The fusion of nonsense and allegory allows Chesterton to create a productive failure. The one-to-one correspondence that marks allegory breaks down. The “balance of apparent contradictions,” as he says in *Orthodoxy* (231), creates the possibility of freedom. That being said, the original allegory about the battle between chaos and order mapped onto a war between anarchists and detectives is significant to the understanding of the book. The reemergence of the

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\(^{59}\) Chesterton held the view that all jokes worth making were about serious subjects. In *Heretics* he wrote, “It is not I; it is not even a particular class of journalists or jesters who make jokes about the matters which are of most awful import; it is the whole human race” (157). He later adds that funny is not the opposite of serious: “Funny is the opposite of not funny, and of nothing else…Whether a man chooses to tell the truth in long sentences or short jokes is a problem analogous to whether he chooses to tell the truth in French of German” (159-160).

\(^{60}\) In the first chapter of *Orthodoxy* Chesterton writes, “This is not an ecclesiastical treatise but a sort of slovenly autobiography” (215).
anarchist poet Lucian Gregory as the accuser at the end of the novel is significant. The anarchist is the man who must be answered.

As previously stated, the novel begins with a debate between Gregory and Syme. This debate sets up the dialectic of the novel. In typical Chestertonian fashion, this debate turns on our looking at things the wrong way. At first, Gregory appears to be in the right, and strangely traditional: “He put the old cant of the lawlessness of art and the art of lawlessness with a certain impudent freshness that gave at least a momentary pleasure” (11). Syme introduces himself by disagreeing with Gregory on the nature of poetry: “He said that he (Syme) was a poet of law, a poet of order; nay, he said he was a poet of respectability” (12). Thus, we have order on one side and chaos on the other; law on one side, anarchy on the other.

Given literary history and the often subversive nature of art it seems at first as though Syme is outmatched. As Gregory says, “An artist disregards all governments, abolishes all conventions. The poet delights in disorder only” (13), and later, “The poet is always in revolt” (14). Art often, and perhaps even usually, is written in protest against the status quo. Furthermore, Chesterton is writing at the precipice of literary modernism, which emphasized the experimental and innovative. The old forms of fiction and poetry could no longer accommodate the artist. If we take stock of the literature produced since this fictional debate was published it would be difficult to argue that the poetry of law, order, and respectability has received the accolades. But this sense of the poet as rebel, the artist as anarchist, rests on an assumption that Chesterton is keen on undermining. And Chesterton does this through an argument on the poetic merits of the London Underground.
The misunderstanding rests on the view that chaos is a necessary disruption of an overwhelming order. Gregory argues, “The poet delights in disorder only. If it were not so, the most poetical thing in the world would be the Underground Railway” (13). Syme’s response is to say simply, “So it is” (13). The point of contention is in the predictability of the Underground. For Gregory this is an agony; if for some reason the Underground Railway threw a person up at Baker Street when they expected Victoria, that would be worthy of poetry. Syme has the opposite reaction. He replies:

   The rare, strange thing is to hit the mark; the gross obvious thing is to miss it. We feel it is epical when man with one wild arrow strikes a distant bird. Is it not also epical when a man with one wild engine strikes a distant station? Chaos is dull, because in chaos, the train might indeed go anywhere, to Baker Street or Bagdad. But man is a magician, and his whole magic is in this, that he does say Victoria, and lo! it is Victoria. (13)

Syme strikes a truth here, that chaos is only interesting if it is limited. Absolute chaos is unmeaning. Even poetry that disrupts convention must still follow certain conventions if it is going to mean anything. Otherwise gibberish is the equivalent of *Paradise Lost*, and a monkey on a typewriter is no less a poet than John Milton, and maybe even a better one for the monkey’s poetry would be truly anarchic. As Chesterton wrote in *Orthodoxy*:

   Anarchism adjures us to be bold creative artists, and care for no laws or limits. But it is impossible to be an artist and not care for laws or limits. Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame. If you draw a giraffe, you must draw him with a long neck. If, in your bold creative way,
you hold yourself free to draw a giraffe with a short neck, you will really
find that you are not free to draw a giraffe. (243)

The context of this quote is a disagreement with the will-worshippers, those who see human will as the means of escaping rationalism. Chesterton’s argument against that view is an effective commentary on Dostoevsky’s underground man. For all his praise of human will and the necessity of free choice the underground man is stuck in inertia. His paralysis prevents him from making the choice to love Liza. The underground man is unable to make an act of will because the underground man is afraid of limitation; the irony is that the underground man is therefore no longer free.

But Syme’s argument goes further. The appreciation for the Underground Railway goes beyond the need for limitation, for the dullness inherent in an anarchic world. It extends to a recognition of the wonder of existence, a further recognition of the wonder of things going right. Syme continues:

I tell you…that every time a train comes in, I feel that it has broken past batteries of besiegers, and that man has won a battle against chaos. You say contemptuously that when one has left Sloane Square, one must come to Victoria. I say that one might do a thousand things instead, and that whenever I really come there, I have the sense of hairbreadth escape. And when I hear the guard shout out the world ‘Victoria,’ it is not an unmeaning word. It is to me the cry of a herald announcing conquest. (14)

Rather than seeing chaos as a disruption of an overbearing order, Syme pictures order as a ballast against the overwhelming chaos of existence. There is a similarity here to William Barrett’s description of Karl Jaspers as a man who “philosophizes in order to
illumine human existence, but who sees this illumination as a tiny and flickering light set against the encompassing darkness of the forces of night” (33). Later in the novel, the narrator informs his readers Syme “always felt that government stood alone and desperate, with its back to the wall” (43). Unlike Jaspers, however, Syme sees the threatening chaos as a call to an adventure. It is a “battle,” a “hairbreadth escape,” a “conquest.”

The call to see existence as an adventure emerges from Chesterton’s commitment to restoring our wonder at existence. Even something as familiar as the Underground Railway is worthy of our best defense. This attitude of finding proper perspective permeated Chesterton’s thought. Alzina Stone Dale writes, “His sense that the world was a moral battleground had helped him fight to keep the attitude that has been labeled his ‘facile optimism,’ so that he could recover the wonder and surprise at ordinary life he had once felt as a child” (118). Christopher Hollis describes Chesterton’s reaction to Slade as “a passionate and exuberant affirmation of the splendour of existence” (56). As we saw Royal argue, “Perhaps the most salient feature of Chesterton’s work is its sheer exuberance and joy in existence” (86). The philosophical danger posed by anarchism was the rejection of a firm conviction in the goodness of existence.

If existence is the wonderful, joyful thing, then it makes sense that one ought to fight against those who would devalue it at all cost. It is this battle to which Syme is called. As Heretics and Orthodoxy make clear, this was not a battle Chesterton took lightly. Chesterton’s transformation of this ideological battle into a real, physical one with policemen on one side and anarchists on the other is not a mere poetical exaggeration. When Syme is recruited as a detective he is told of a “service for those
whose fears for humanity were concerned rather with the aberrations of the scientific intellect than with the normal and excusable, though excessive, outbreaks of the human will” (44). The true danger lay not with the common criminal who “accept the essential ideal of man” and “merely seek it wrongly,” but with “the entirely lawless modern philosopher” (46) who “is not trying to alter things, but to annihilate them” (47). From his essays it is clear Chesterton truly did believe that modern philosophy led to dead ends. While he does not attribute to his ideological opponents the sinister motives of his fictional anarchists, he believed the results of their philosophy would be essentially the same. It is thus absolutely essential for one to hold onto existence, to fight for good of common humanity even if the fight is doomed.

The language the novel uses to describe this battle is apocalyptic. When Syme is engaged as a detective he admits he has no experience. The man in the dark room replies, ‘No one has any experience…of the Battle of Armageddon” (49), and in response to Symes objection, “I don’t know any profession of which mere willingness is the final test,” the invisible chief responds, ‘I do…Martyrs. I am condemning you to death” (49). When Syme steps onto the steam tug that will take him to the Central Anarchist Council the atmosphere is described in terms of “dead daylight” on an “emptier planet” circling a “sadder star” (50). When he sees the Anarchist’s Council for the first time the narrator describes Syme’s state of mind using the imagery of an “old-world fable” where “if a man went westward to the end of the world, he would find something—say a tree—that was more or less than a tree, a tree possessed by a spirit; and that if he went east to the end of the world, he would find something else that was not wholly itself—a tower, perhaps, of which the very shape was wicked” (63). The anarchists “seemed to stand up,
violent and unaccountable, against an ultimate horizon, visions from the verge,” and create the sense that “[t]he ends of the earth were closing in” (63). But this imagery extends beyond the battle itself. At the beginning of the novel, before Syme is introduced, the narrator describes a “strange sunset” that “looked like the end of the world” where the “whole was so close about the earth, as to express nothing but a violent secrecy” (11). The apocalyptic imagery establishes the allegorical mode of the novel. The novel feels like a battle for the fate of humanity.

In the plot of the novel, however, the danger of Gregory’s anarchism at first goes unrecognized. After Syme and Gabriel finish their first dialogue Rosamond asks Syme if he and her brother mean what they say. Syme assures her that Gregory is quite safe. But Gregory is in truth very serious about his anarchy; it is not merely a posture he takes concerning art, but rather suggestive of his whole view of life. When Gregory reveals he belongs to a secret anarchist organization the novel ceases to be a philosophical drama that takes place in drawing rooms and becomes something more. This is the allegorical turn, where the battle for the soul of the world becomes a literal battlefield where ideas will lead to crossed swords.

It is a lonely and isolating battle. When Gregory sets out to reveal the hidden counsel of anarchists, he extracts a promise from Syme not to go to the police. Once Gregory has him in his secret underground base, Syme reveals, after receiving a similar promise of secrecy from Gregory, that he too wears the garb of a poet as a disguise. The result of this is a mutual checkmate. Syme tells Gregory,

I can’t tell the police you are an anarchist. You can’t tell the anarchists I’m a policeman. I can only watch you, knowing what you are; you can only
watch me, knowing what I am. In short, it’s a lonely, intellectual duel, my head against yours. I’m a policeman deprived of the help of the police. You, my poor fellow, are an anarchist deprived of the help of that law and organization that is so essential to anarchy. (30)

Syme’s sense of isolation carries throughout the novel. Syme manages to supplant Gregory as the newly elected Thursday on the Central Anarchist Council and is taken to London for breakfast with the other days. The effectiveness of this scene rests on Chesterton’s ability to evoke an atmosphere. He does this initially through Syme’s introduction to the secretary of the council, Monday. The secretary is described as “pale,” “intellectual,” “ascetic,” and even “noble,” but with an unnatural stillness broken suddenly by a crooked smile: “There was the silent river and the silent man, a man of even classic face. And there was the last nightmare touch that his smile suddenly went wrong” (53). When Monday speaks it is with an “utterly dead voice…as if all friendly words were to him lifeless conveniences” (54).

But whatever uncanniness Monday evokes pales in comparison with the impression Sunday, the head of the council, produces. Sunday is “too large to see” (55), a “mountain of a man” (55) “planned enormously in his original proportions, like a statue carved deliberately as colossal” (55-56), and “enlarged terribly to scale” (56). The narrator describes the effect Sunday has on Syme: “Twice already that night, little unmeaning things had peeped out at him almost pruriently, and given him a sense of drawing nearer and nearer to the headquarters of hell. And this sense became overpowering as he drew nearer to the great president” (56). As Syme walks towards the balcony “the large face of Sunday grew larger and larger; and Syme was gripped with a
fear that when he was quite close, the face would be too big to be possible, and that he would scream aloud” (56-57). Sunday’s largeness is unnerving; one is reminded of Conrad’s wilderness, of the immense wilderness that looms over Marlow.

In comparison with Sunday the rest of the council at first appears “sufficiently commonplace” (57). This, however, only lasts when the other anarchists are compared with the president. Each one has “a demoniac detail somewhere” along the lines of the secretary’s crooked smile; each one is “subtly and differently wrong” (58, 59). Monday appears wasted away by thought. Tuesday is too hairy with “every diablerie that can come from the utterly grotesque” (57). Wednesday carries with him “a rich atmosphere that suffocated” (59). Friday expresses not “decrepitude merely, but corruption” as if movement would cause an arm or a leg to fall off (60). Finally, Saturday wears dark glasses that remind Syme of “half-remembered ugly tales, of some story about pennies being put on the eyes of the dead” (61) and “Syme even had the thought that his eyes might be covered up because they were too frightful to see” (61). Together, these anarchists create a “sense of an unnatural symbolism” (63).

Each of the other members of the council have a touch of the inhuman, and this heightens our sense of the danger Syme is in, as does the fact that Sunday appears to be staring at Syme throughout the breakfast. The narrator informs us, “[I]t never occurred to [Syme] to doubt that the president and his council could crush him if he continued to stand alone” (65). And yet, because of Syme’s code of honor, he is unable to reach out to the policeman below the balcony. He is severed from that source of help. He is, as Barrett says, “solitary and unsheltered before his own death” (34). It is only by deciding that common humanity, as symbolized in the music of a barrel organ, is worthy of defense
that Syme able to gain the courage to maintain his course. To Syme, “The jingling music seemed full of the vivacity, the vulgarity, and the irrational valor of the poor” and he felt himself to be “the ambassador of all these common and kindly people in the street, who every day marched into battle to the music of the barrel organ” (67). Syme is filled with the conviction that “the president was wrong and that the barrel organ was right” (68), and that on this horrible council it is Syme’s responsibility to fight for the common people.

In spite of that decision the sense of isolation persists, especially throughout the various chase scenes that make up the bulk of the middle portions of the novel. The first of these is the Professor de Worms, or Friday, the decrepit old man who looks to be on the brink of death. Unaccountably, the professor is somehow able to keep pace with a fleeing Syme through the snowy streets of London. The literary atmosphere is built through the scene’s weather. The narrator writes, “As he crossed the great market, the snow increased, growing blinding and bewildering as the afternoon began to darken. The snowflakes tormented him like a swarm of silver bees. Getting into his eyes and beard, they added their unremitting futility to his already irritated nerves” (77). Later the narrator describes the sky “loaded with the clouds of snow, leaving London in a darkness and oppression premature for that hour of the evening” (78). Furthermore, “Under the white fog of snow high up in the heaven, the whole atmosphere of the city was turned to a very queer kind of green twilight, as of men under the sea. The sealed and sullen sunset behind the dark dome of St. Paul’s had in it smoky and sinister colors—colors of sickly green, dead red, or decaying bronze” (78-79). And yet, as with the barrel organ in his time of trial, Syme sees the top of St. Paul’s cathedral lit with a singular splash of light
and this symbol gives him the courage to face his pursuer. Chesterton’s existentialism is marked by this courage; the bravery to maintain faith when all of existence seems to deny it.

Syme’s experience is described in terms of sightlessness, confusion, pointlessness, disease, and evil. This atmosphere evokes Syme’s fear of isolation, what the novel identifies as his great fear: “Through all this ordeal, his root horror had been isolation” (90). Even when Syme discovers that the Professor de Worms is in actuality an actor in disguise as the German Nihilist, he is still prey to his fears of isolation. Though the narrator asserts “there are no words to express the abyss between isolation and having one ally” (90), Syme is still acutely aware of the threat of loneliness. Forgetting the secret code of hand signals the professor taught him Syme is plagued by sudden fears. Syme asks himself a series of questions:

His first thought was that the professor had gone mad, but his second thought was more frightful. After all, what did he know about this queer creature whom he had heedlessly accepted as a friend? What did he know, except that the man had been at the anarchist breakfast and had told him a ridiculous tale? How improbable it was that there should be another friend there beside Gogol! Was this man’s silence a sensational way of declaring war? Was this adamantine stare after all only the awful sneer of some threefold traitor, who had turned for the last time? He stood and strained his ears I this heartless silence. He almost fancied he could hear dynamiters come to capture him shifting softly in the corridor outside. (99)
Though Syme eventually realizes that the professor has been communicating to him all along, the fact that so soon after discovering in the professor an ally Syme is immediately thrown back into his doubts indicates that the feeling of isolation is a real and powerful experience. Though Syme discovers his fears are unwarranted the fear is nevertheless real. The actual reality or unreality of the fear’s object does not negate the reality of that fear.

In each of the following confrontations with the anarchists, there is a fear that must be faced and overcome. With Tuesday it is the fear of discovery. With Friday it is the fear of nightmare, of the uncanny. Dr. Bull, or Saturday, is the next anarchist encountered. There is to this scientist “a quality of cold sanity worse than the wild adventures of the past” (100), a “murderous materialism” (100) and “unbearable reality” (102) and the sense that Syme “was ascending the house of reason, a thing more hideous than unreason itself” (100). Later the narrator explains the difference between the fear inspired by Friday and that inspired by Saturday: “The first was the old fear that any miracle might happen, the second the more hopeless modern fear that no miracle can ever happen” (118). The fear Saturday represents is the destruction of freedom at the hands of materialism.61 These two fears form the basis of a comparison before Syme’s duel with the Marquis, who serves as Wednesday on the council. Syme remembers “how the fear of the professor had been the fear of the tyrannic accidents of nightmare, and how the fear of the doctor had been the fear of the airless vacuum of silence” (118). But these two fears are reduced to “fancies” (118) when Syme duels Wednesday. At the clashing of their swords Syme is struck with the “great fact of the fear of death, with its coarse and

61 See Chesterton’s comments on materialism in Orthodoxy, 225-228.
pitiless common sense” (118). Gradually, however, this fear is replaced by another one:
the fear of the occult. When Syme stabs the Marquis and Wednesday does not bleed “the
heaven of Syme again grew black with supernatural terrors” (120) and “this new spiritual
dread was a more awful thing than had been the mere spiritual topsy-turvydom
symbolized by the paralytic who pursued him. The professor was only a goblin; this man
was a devil—perhaps he was the devil!” (120).

   The fear Monday raises in the detectives is perhaps the worst, and that is the fear
of an entire world gone mad. As Syme, the professor, Dr. Bull, and the Marquis flee
through the French countryside they are helped on their way by good, solid Frenchmen.
Yet as they flee Monday’s mob those who help them are gradually turned against them. A
colonel, a peasant, an innkeeper, and a professional all help them along their way, and
then, in reverse order, are revealed to have turned against them.

   Throughout this chase the detectives, apart from Wednesday, continue to express
disbelief at how rapidly and suddenly the world seemed to turn against them. At first,
when it is just the secretary and an unknown mob Syme says in disbelief that Sunday
“cannot have carried the world with a rush like that” (129) and objects that the anarchists
“can’t be running the real world in that way” (131). When it appears the innkeeper has
given the anarchists horses, Syme exclaims “I don’t believe he’d do it” (140). Reacting to
the pessimism of Wednesday—whose real name is Ratcliffe—Dr. Bull says, “If you
really think that ordinary people in ordinary houses are anarchists, you must be madder
than an anarchist yourself. If we turned and fought those fellows, the whole town would
fight for us” (143). Only when they see the representatives of the different classes of
Frenchmen at the head of the mob after them do they admit along with Ratcliffe that the world is indeed against them.

The fear is on one hand a fear of a mass of unthinking humanity—of man turned into machine. While Syme can see them as distinct figures, “he was increasingly surprised by the way in which they moved as one man” (134). There is something unnatural about how they advanced. “They moved with a sort of dreadful and wicked woodenness, like a staring army of automatons” (134). This fear is subordinating to a more essential fear, and that is of humanity becoming inhuman. Ratcliffe vocalizes this fear with the statement, “We are the last of mankind” (150). Despite revealing each member of the anarchist council as a detective in disguise, the sense of isolation is never quite dismissed. When Dr. Bull is revealed to be a buoyant, energetic young man of commonplace goodness Syme observes “[W]e three are alone on this planet” (109); when the Marquis is unmasked as Ratcliffe he says “there were just five people, perhaps who would have resisted him” (126). But perhaps the best expression of the isolation that plagued the detectives is immediately after they flee the secretary’s mob by entering a nearby wood.

In the wood Syme experiences the solipsism that Chesterton identified with Impressionism. When a trick of the light turns Ratcliffe’s face into a facsimile of the black half-masks of their pursuers Syme begins to ask, “Was he wearing a mask? Was anyone wearing a mask? Was anyone anything?” (130). The narrative continues:

This wood of witchery in which men’s faces turned black and white by turns, in which their figures first swelled into sunlight and then faded into formless night, this mere chaos of chiaroscuro (after the clear daylight
outside), seemed to Syme a perfect symbol of the world in which he had been moving for three days, this world where men took off their beards and their spectacles and their noses, and turned into other people. (130)

As Christopher Hollis writes, in confronting Impressionism “Syme is left to face the last and most awful of his fears, the fear that there is no reality, that all is mask” (57). Syme begins to question the reality of existence itself.

Here, the narrative explains why it borrows from nonsense literature. After all, nothing is so effective at communicating the sense of bewilderment that accompanies the mental isolation of the existential crisis. One thinks of Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” or of Sartre’s Nausea when Roquentin asks, “What if something were to happen?...And someone else might feel something scratching in his mouth. He goes to the mirror, opens his mouth: and his tongue is an enormous, live centipede, rubbing its legs together and scraping his palate” (158-159). How do we react in such a universe? To what can we cling?

He felt almost inclined to ask after all these bewilderments what was a friend and what an enemy. Was there anything that was apart from what it seemed? The marquis had taken off his nose and turned out to be a detective. Might he not just as well take off his head and turn out to be a hobgoblin? Was not everything, after all, like this bewildering woodland, this dance of dark and light? Everything only a glimpse, the glimpse always unforeseen and always forgotten. (Thursday 130-131)

This is an extraordinary description of the feeling of the existential crisis, of the radical subjectivity that cannot see beyond appearances. At any moment anything might
undermine the reality we have accepted. How can we know that the world is as we perceive it?

Chesterton’s description of the world reduced to a “glimpse always unforeseen and always forgotten” grasps the lack of certainty in this experience. In this world what has come before can have no impact on what is, and what is cannot indicate what will be. “For Gabriel Syme had found in the heart of that sun-splashed wood what many modern painters had found there. He had found the thing that modern people call impressionism, which is another name for that final skepticism that can find no floor to the universe” (131). There is in this radical skepticism nothing that can be grasped, no foundation to fall back on. Chesterton’s account of impressionism contains echoes of William Barrett’s description of existential themes: “Alienation and estrangement; a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat” (36). Syme is alienated and estranged, unsure “what was a friend and what an enemy.” He senses the fragility and contingency in the “dance of dark and light” that leaves everything a “glimpse unforeseen and always forgotten.” The threat of Nothingness is contained in the question, “Was anyone anything?”

While Syme is able to escape his final skepticism, the novel describes as “genuine” these doubts (131). This brings us to an important point of existentialism: it can be easy to feel that the existential attitude is one of constant doubt, of total skepticism. However, the novels The Stranger and Nausea do not end with Meursault and Roquentin trapped in their doubt. Instead, they each have a moment of realization that gives them the strength to move forward. In other words, the existential crisis must lead
somewhere; otherwise, it is no different from nihilism. In this passage, a stunning account of the doubts that accompany an existential crisis, *The Man Who Was Thursday* realizes the threat of nihilism. The question becomes how can one go forward? How can one answer these doubts?

The answer comes with another unmasking. For most of this novel we have understood an allegory of a fight against anarchy as a fight for humanity against the philosophies that would destroy it. Once we find out that Monday is like the rest of the anarchist council, a detective in disguise, the allegory undergoes a metamorphosis. This is summed up in an exchange that occurs just before the six detectives—including Gogol—go to meet Sunday once again:

“This is more cheerful,” said Dr. Bull. “We are six men going to ask one man what he means.”

“I think it is a bit queerer than that,” said Syme. “I think it is six men going to ask one man what they mean.” (157)

For the majority of the story it has been the fate of the world that was in doubt. The detectives themselves have had a sense of certainty that they were fighting the good fight. The doubts extended outward; never inward. But here the doubts are turned back on themselves. Syme’s reframing of their confrontation of Sunday turns the focus inward. While at first it might sound like an echo of the Socratic charge to know thyself, it is more that they understand themselves only when cast up against Sunday.

**The Six Philosophers**

When the original allegory is unmasked, the novel ceases to be about an intense drama between order and anarchy and becomes instead an allegory about various
philosophies’ attempts to solve the riddle of existence. The image of six detectives chasing each other around while missing the entire point becomes an image of philosophies engaged in heated debate while missing the most important question. By bringing in these six allegorical figures into the realm of nonsense literature, Chesterton turns the conflict from detectives against anarchists into characters against setting. As existentialism asserts, the individual is embedded into a situation and must philosophize out of that situation. *The Man Who Was Thursday* places the detectives in a situation that actively resists their attempts at philosophy.

It might be tempting to treat each of the detectives only as he is revealed at the end, but the novel itself indicates that the anarchist they pretend to be is a kind of exaggeration of the detective. For instance, the professor de Worms describes Tuesday as an “idealist” (90). This refers not only to his absurd disguise as an idealized figure of an anarchist, it also describes Tuesday’s persona on the anarchist council. For example, when Sunday accurately points out the idealist does not “seem to know anything about mankind” (69), Gogol responds, “I die for zem…and I slay zare oppressors” (69). Like Sartre’s humanist who is revealed as a pedophile, a man who loves humanity in the abstract but cannot care for them in the concrete, Tuesday is ignorant of the men and women he wishes to free. At the end of the novel, the narrator observes, “his simplicity well symbolized” by being clothed as the division of the waters. There is a consistency to Gogol that is maintained throughout his various guises.

This holds true for all the days of the week. As the title to the second to last chapter “The Six Philosophers” indicates, each detective represents one means of understanding and making sense of the world. As anarchists, these figures represent those
philosophies run amok. This is indicated by the narrator when Syme first begins to note each individual’s subtle wrongness: “Each figure seemed to be, somehow on the borderland of things, just as their theory was on the borderland of thought. He knew that each one of these men stood at the extreme end, so to speak, of some wild road of reasoning” (62-63). Who they are as anarchists is who they would become if they pursued their own personal philosophy to its bitter end. This implies that contained in each philosophic temperament is the possibility of anarchy. As Chesterton writes in *Orthodoxy* that the madman “is in the clean and well-lit prison of one idea: he is sharpened to one painful point. He is without healthy hesitation and healthy complexity” (225). Any one philosophy will ultimately suffocate.

The first of these philosophers is the secretary, Monday, the rationalist. At the first breakfast Syme observes his face is emaciated and thinks at first that he suffers from a disease. But the “distress of his dark eyes denied this” (59). Syme realizes, “It was no physical ill that troubled him. His eyes were alive with intellectual torture, as if pure thought was pain” (59). This intellectualism appears in the debate on how to kill the czar and the French president. When the Marquis observes he would rather kill the president with a knife the secretary disagrees. “The knife was merely the expression of the old personal quarrel with a personal tyrant. Dynamite is not only our best too but our best symbol…It expands; it only destroys because it broadens; even so, thought only destroys because it broadens” (66). Monday refuses to allow his anarchism to be personal; rationality does not allow for something as personal as revenge. Monday continues, “My brain feels like a bomb, night and day. It must expand! It must expand! A man’s brain must expand, if it breaks up the universe” (66). Monday is prey to the madness
Chesterton warns of in *Orthodoxy*, of the logical completeness that drives a man insane.

It is not surprising then that Dr. Bull says of Monday he “is the most utterly unhappy man that was ever human” (108). These words from *Orthodoxy* seem to be directed at Monday: “How much larger your life would be if your self could become smaller in it” (223).

Even when Monday ceases to play the role of the anarchist, he is still marked by rationality. Dressed in robes representative of the creation of light out of darkness, “Syme felt also how perfectly this pattern of pure white and black expressed the soul of the pale and austere secretary, with his inhuman veracity and his cold frenzy…this man’s eyes were still stern. No smell of ale or orchards could make the secretary cease to ask a reasonable question” (182). A similar perspective infuses the secretary’s contribution to their debate over the nature of Sunday.

[When I first saw Sunday, he expressed to me, not your airy vitality, but something both gross and sad in the nature of things…He sat there on a bench, a huge heap of a man, dark and out of shape. He listened to all my words without speaking or even stirring. I poured out my most passionate appeals and asked my most eloquent questions. Then, after a long silence, the thing began to shake, and I thought it was shaken by some secret malady. It shook like a loathsome and living jelly. It reminded me of everything I had ever read about the base bodies that are the origin of life—the deep sea lumps and protoplasm. It seemed like the final form of matter, the most shapeless and the most shameful. (170-171)
To a rationalist who loves order and neatness the most unnerving thing would be the shapelessness of matter. A rationalist wants the world to make sense, to be divided into neat categories and neat definitions. The actual material of the universe is gross; it does not compare to the cleanliness of pure thought. For Monday to come across something “gross” and “shapeless,” something like a “living jelly” is to come across that aspect of the world that disturbs his philosophy the most.

Tuesday’s reaction to Sunday is typical of the idealism described above. In response to Syme’s query Gogol responds, “I don’t think of Sunday on principle…any more than I stare at the sun at noonday” (172). Tuesday’s reaction to Sunday is to flee back to his ideals. He avoids dealing with that which challenges his idealism. For this reason Tuesday is the simplest, and the reason he is featured the least in the novel. He lacks the complexity of the other detectives. The idealist’s perspective is a simple one. It is also the easiest to break apart, and why Tuesday is the first detective outed on the Central Anarchist Council.

It is fitting we move now to the most complex of the six philosophers, Wednesday. The relationship between his disguise as the Marquis and his reality as Inspector Ratcliffe is harder to recognize. At first Syme feels “that the man carried a rich atmosphere with him, a rich atmosphere that suffocated. It reminded one irrationally of drowsy odors and of dying lamps in the darker poems of Byron and Poe” (59). His mouth is “sensual and scornful” and Syme is reminded of Persian tyrants. It is he who wants to knife the French president because “it would be a new emotion to get a knife into a French president and wriggle it round” (66). We have already discussed how he strikes Syme as a devil. After he is revealed as Inspector Ratcliffe, the narrative describes him as
a pessimist (145), and his contributions during their flight from the secretary confirm this
description. He is attached to attitudes of gloom (129, 144), contempt (129), and scorn
(131). But instead of “drowsy odors” and a “rich atmosphere that suffocates” he is turned
in a figure of clear and placid pessimism with a “square, sensible face” of “not unfriendly
cynicism” (182). What is the connection? What wild road of reasoning leads a pessimist
to the poetry of Byron and Poe, to the violence of ancient Assyria?

It is substantially this: pessimism will lead to boredom, and boredom will lead to
decadence. Ratcliffe represents the darkest days of Chesterton’s Slade School doubt,
where he felt “a certain mood of unreality and sterile isolation” (Autobiography 88).
While Chesterton identifies as the primary cause a “moral anarchy within” (89), he
admits his mood in part “may have been due to the atmosphere of the Decadents, and
their perpetual hints of the luxurious horrors of paganism” (89). He describes being
“overpowered and oppressed with a sort of congestion of imagination” and having “an
overpowering impulse to record or draw horrible ideas and images; plunging in deeper
and deeper as in a blind spiritual suicide” (89). This Chesterton identifies as “the darkest
depths of the contemporary pessimism” (89). The idea that pessimism leads to decadence
is a logical one. If the world will always disappoint then the only logical conclusion apart
from suicide is to pursue pleasure. But the pursuit of pleasure will lead to ennui, and
ennui will lead to the diabolic.62 The individual’s only motivation will be the new. Thus
we have the Marquis’s reason for using a knife, because “it would be a new emotion.”

62 Chesterton’s essay “The Diabolist” is an interesting point of comparison. In this essay Chesterton recalls
a conversation he had with another student about the nature of morality. Chesterton expresses the idea that
“heresy is worse even than sin” and error “more menacing than a crime, for an error begets crime” (272)
and concludes “I hate modern doubt because it is dangerous” (273). This leads his companion replies, “You
mean dangerous to morality” (273) and then asks why Chesterton cares about morality. Chesterton

Wednesday’s impression of Sunday is one of absentminded cruelty. He begins by
describing Sunday as “ordinary” and “neat” but “absentminded” (171). He continues:

For hours, he forgets that you are there. Now absentmindedness is just a bit too awful in a bad man We think of a wicked man as vigilant. We can’t think of a wicked man who is honestly and sincerely dreamy, because we daren’t think of a wicked man alone with himself. An absentminded man means a good-natured man. It means a man who, if he happens to see you, will apologize. But how will you bear an absentminded man who, if he happens to see you, will kill you? That is what tries the nerves, abstraction combined with cruelty. Men have felt it sometimes when they went through wild forests, and felt that the animals there were at once innocent and pitiless. They might ignore or slay. How would you like to pass ten mortal hours in a parlor with an absentminded tiger? (171)

While Monday’s fear is of that which lacks form, and Tuesday’s fear is of that which blinds, Wednesday’s fear is of that which is careless. How can the pessimist expect the worst and yet be terrified of those expectations being met? The pessimist fears evil that lacks cause; the pessimist fears the cruel indifference of the world. This is what Thomas Hardy expresses in “Hap,” that “Crass Casualty” dictates the arc of our lives (9). An organized evil can be anticipated; a focused evil can be countered. A random evil, an
unpredictable evil, cannot. One does not even have the pleasure of directing ire against “some vengeful god” who enjoys causing suffering. Pain is purely coincidental. Perhaps the pessimist’s fear makes more sense when connected with decadence: if all you are living for is to experience something new, nothing could be as terrifying as facing the possibility that the next experience could be your last.

The difference between the pessimist and the nihilist is that the former accepts the world. The pessimist distrusts the world; the nihilist distrusts that there is a world. Wednesday fears Sunday’s absentminded cruelty; Friday fears there is no Sunday.

The professor de Worms is complicated for similar reasons as Ratcliffe, for the difference between man and mask is more stark than it is for the secretary, Gogol, Syme, or Dr. Bull. The key difference between Wednesday and Friday is that the former does remove his mask whereas Friday never does. Other than when he sprints after Syme the actor playing the professor remains stuck in his role, like a method actor who never finished his part. He tells Syme, “I acted the paralytic professor so well, that now I can’t leave off” (96) and at the end acts “with the elderly manner that he could never disconnect from his bleached beard and parchment face” (167). As a result, though we know little about the actor before he became a living portrait, he becomes something of a nihilist himself.

Friday’s tendency towards nihilism is exhibited when he and Syme discuss stopping the marquis and Dr. Bull. When Syme question’s the professor’s courage, he responds, “You think that it is possible to pull down the president. I know that it is impossible and I am going to try it” (88). There is to the professor a sense of resignation; that nothing he can do will make a difference. But he resists actual nihilism by deciding
that it is worth doing anyway. Later the professor admits he is “afraid of asking Sunday who he really is” out of “fear he might tell me” (156). This comment reveals how deeply doubt has penetrated. The professor doubts whether he wants his doubts answered.

However, it is his experience of Sunday that most strongly reveals his nearness to nihilism. Answering Syme’s prompting the professor says, “[W]hen I saw Sunday’s face, I thought it was too large—everybody does, but I also thought it was too loose. The face was so big that one couldn’t focus it or make it a face at all. The eye was so far away from the nose that it wasn’t an eye. The mouth was so much by itself that one had to think of it by itself” (172). For the professor, Sunday resists comprehension. Friday fears a world without connection. In *Heretics* Chesterton argues, “The human brain is a machine for coming to conclusions” (196). The professor is one whose doubts prevent him from reaching conclusions. He compares Sunday to those occasional impressions of a human face that appear as a result of an accident of perspective. He continues, “Sunday’s face escaped me; it ran away to right and left, as such chance pictures run away. And so his face has made me, somehow, doubt whether there are any faces” (172). The professor’s impression of Sunday is like Syme’s experience of impressionism in the wood.

In his *Autobiography*, Chesterton’s own struggle with impressionism is described as a taking of skepticism to its ultimate end. He describes thinking his “way back to thought itself” (88) He observes, “It is a very dreadful thing to do; for it may lead to thinking that there is nothing but thought” (88). He concludes, “While dull atheists came and explained to me that there was nothing but matter, I listened with a sort of calm horror of detachment, suspecting that there was nothing but mind…” The atheist told me so
pompously that he did not believe there was any God; and there were moments when I
did not even believe there was any atheist” (88).

It is this view that frightens the professor. “Oh, the doubts of a materialist are not
worth a dump. Sunday has taught me the last and the worst doubts, the doubts of a
spiritualist…My poor dear Bull, I do not believe that you really have a face. I have not
faith enough to believe in matter” (172-173). The professor represents the horrors of
solipsism. He represents doubt taken to its absolute extreme. He represents skepticism
taken as far as it can go. As a result, the professor represents the threat of nihilism. He is
not a nihilist himself, but the doubts Friday struggles with are the doubts that, if left
unchecked, lead to nihilism. The man has come to resemble the mask.

Amidst all these figures Saturday sticks out. This is in part due to his being the
optimist in the group; however, Saturday is better understood as the scientist. With his
glasses on Dr. Bull represents science unrestrained by humanity. The narrator emphasizes
Saturday’s virility and vitality, and before he is revealed as a detective is the one Syme
and the professor fear the most. It is his “brutal sanity” that makes Saturday so
frightening (97). As Syme ascends the interminable stairs that lead to Dr. Bull’s residence
he is struck with “a quality of cold sanity worse than the wild adventures of the past”
(100). When he was chased by the professor it had the quality of a nightmare, but with
Dr. Bull there is no escape of waking up. Rather than dreamlike, the stairs’ “infinity was
more like the empty infinity of arithmetic, something unthinkable, yet necessary to
thought. Or it was like the stunning statements of astronomy about the distance of the
fixed stars. He was ascending the house of reason, a thing more hideous than unreason
itself” (100). Before he is unmasked Dr. Bull represents the worst of the materialists. As
Chesterton writes in *Orthodoxy*, “Now it is the charge against the main deductions of the materialist that, right or wrong, they gradually destroy his humanity…They may well call their law the “chain” of causation. It is the worst chain that ever fettered a human being” (228).

Once he is unmasked Dr. Bull represents the man who finds joy in finding out the mysteries of material things. It is not that Dr. Bull is truly a materialist, in that he believes there is nothing but matter, but rather Dr. Bull is so fascinated with the material he forgets the immaterial. Thus, while every other detective is demanding answers from Sunday, Dr. Bull, though he understands nothing, is happy and simply goes to sleep (186). Metaphysical questions bear no interest for him.63 Bull departs from the others in liking Sunday. He says, “Moderate strength is shown in violence; supreme strength is shown in levity” (170). But Bull is not Nietzsche, who admires strength for being strong. “No, it’s not an admiration of force, or any silly thing like that. There is a kind of gaiety in the thing, as if he were bursting with some good news. Haven’t you felt it on a spring day? You know nature plays tricks, but somehow that day proves they are good natured tricks” (170). He concludes, ‘Why do I like Sunday? How can I tell you?...because he’s such a bounder” (170). As a scientist Bull is not plagued with the doubts of the rationalist, principles of the idealist, distrust of the pessimist, or the fears of the nihilist.

This leaves only Thursday left. In addition to being named after an arcangel, Gabriel Syme is the artist. His poetic sensibility informs his approach to the battle with

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63 Bull shares Chesterton’s view of the boundaries of science. In the essay “Science and Religion” Chesterton argues that science should be scientific. “To mix science up with philosophy is only to produce a philosophy that has lost all its ideal value and a science that has lost all its practical value. I want my private physician to tell me whether this or that food will kill me. It is for my private philosopher to tell me whether I ought to be killed” (142-143). Bull’s lack of concern at the end of the novel is reflective of his interest in science and result disinterest in philosophy.
the anarchists, and it is the artist unchecked that we find at the end of Syme’s own “wild road of reasoning.” Before he is recruited the narrator notes, “As he paced the Thames embankment, bitterly biting a cheap cigar and brooding on the advance of anarchy, there was no anarchist with a bomb in his pocket so savage or so solitary as he” (43).

Imagination if twisted can lead to isolation. But Syme is not an anarchist; his poetry is too democratic for that. As the more balanced reality Syme reveals an attitude characterized by a healthy indulgence in imagination. He has poetic intuitions that turn out to be correct (103, 116). It is his artistic temperament that causes him to characterize his doubt as impressionism instead of spiritualism as the professor does. He has a continual impulse to turn things into symbols, such as the cross at the top of St. Paul’s Cathedral or on the lamp Dr. Renard gives to the detectives when they borrow the car. Twice, Syme invokes St. George to describe his situation. The first time is when he is being taken by tug to the anarchist’s breakfast. The second occurs when the professor is chasing him and Syme waits “as St. George waited for the dragon” (79). Syme derives courage from thinking himself as part of a medieval romance. The narrator even describes his defense of order as “quixotic” (43).

Syme represents those who are imaginative. The narrator describes “a spot on his mind that was not quite sane” (42). But it is his imagination that keeps him sane. In the chapter “The Maniac” Chesterton argues that imagination does not lead to insanity. So while Syme’s sanity is a revolt (42), his poetry keeps him grounded. Yet Syme’s imagination also allows him to understand insanity, as the similarly named poet Gabriel Gale does in Chesterton’s novel *The Poet and the Lunatics*. Gabriel Gale’s power of imagination enables him to think like a criminal, resembling Chesterton’s most famous
figure Father Brown, whose familiarity with human evil enables him to understand those who engage in wickedness. In *The Man Who Was Thursday* Syme’s imaginative, poetic nature allows him the strongest grasp of who Sunday is. It is Syme, after all, who recognizes their confrontation of Sunday not as six men going to ask one man what he means, but six men going to ask one man what they mean.

Once everyone else has offered his understanding of Sunday, Syme notices “each man of you can only find one thing to compare him to—the universe itself” (173). But Syme is the only one of them to grasp most completely Sunday’s apparent dual nature. “When I first saw Sunday,” he begins, “I only saw his back; and when I saw his back I knew he was the worst man in the world” (173). He goes on to describe Sunday as an animal, as a beast in human dress. He continues, “Then I entered the hotel and coming round the other side of him, saw his face in the sunlight. His face frightened me, as it did everyone; but not because it was brutal and not because it was evil. On the contrary, it frightened me because it was so beautiful, because it was so good” (173). Later he clarifies, “[W]hen I saw him from behind, I was certain he was an animal, and when I saw him in front, I knew he was a god” (174).

While Syme gets nearer than the others his imagination still falls short of making sense of who Sunday is. In fact, this is the point of having identifying the detectives as the six philosophers. The rationalist, idealist, pessimist, artist, nihilist, and scientist represent different ways of understanding the world, and yet each fails to make sense of Sunday. Left to their own devices the detectives are idiots “running after each other like a lot of confounded babies playing blind man’s bluff” (126). Even when they are no longer working against each other the detectives are no nearer to making sense of Sunday; or, as
Syme says, making sense of themselves. The novel emphasizes the detective’s failure to understand.

This explains one of the more confusing passages of the book. After Sunday reveals to the detectives that he was not only the head of the Central Anarchist Council but also the man in the dark room who recruited them all to the fight against anarchy, he leaps into a cab and leads the detectives on a reckless chase through the streets of London. During this chase, Sunday throws notes at each of the six detectives. While the novel gestures to nonsense literature throughout, this is the only time in which the narrative does not provide an explanation. These notes therefore play an important role in the narrative. The reader’s instinctual reaction is to assume that these notes mean something, and that if one were only to discover the key these ridiculous notes would make sense. Yet this would be an exercise in futility. These notes resist any attempts to make sense of their content. Instead, the notes only make sense only in their nonsense. These notes exist outside of any meaning. They are pure absurdity. These notes represent the failure to understand. The only way for the reader to move forward is to accept that she cannot make sense of them. Chesterton demands from his readers something like the mysticism he discusses in *Orthodoxy*: “The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand” (231). In *The Man Who Was Thursday*, the interpretation of novel is understood by what cannot be interpreted.

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64 While there is much in Chesterton’s novel that is confusing and remains unexplained—for instance, the fight against anarchy seems to be a dream, yet Syme’s backstory contains most of the elements of that fight before presumably Syme enters his nightmare. But in terms of the nonsense elements, like fleet-footed old professors and marquises who do not bleed, those are explained in the course of the narrative.
While a classic example of the Chestertonian paradox, this epigram has an epistemological point: Chesterton’s fondness for limits. As he says in his *Autobiography*, “All my life I have loved edges; and the boundary-line that brings one thing sharply against another. All my life I have loved frames and limits; and I will maintain that the largest wilderness looks larger seen through a window” (25-26). In this case our understanding is brought up sharply against all that we do not understand. By introducing these nonsensical notes Chesterton forces his readers to accept there are things to existence that exist beyond our ken. And if we cannot accept that our ability to comprehend existence is limited, we cannot comprehend Sunday; if we cannot admit that our human understanding will always come up short, we cannot understand Sunday; if we never realize our own failure to understand, we will never realize how Sunday is the Peace of God.

Chesterton’s development of a literary form that combines nonsense and allegory allows him to create the experience of running against limitations of our logic, our perspective, and our interpretative schemas. This matters to both the plot of the novel and for the larger vision of the world *The Man Who Was Thursday* realizes. As Kierkegaard, Conrad, Sartre, and Camus all emphasize, the world resists our attempts to understand it.\(^6\) By extension, then, existence itself is beyond human knowledge and beyond human thought. From our limited, human perspective truth sometimes appears contradictory and

\(^6\) Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling* describes the necessity of, through faith, the “teleological suspension of the ethical” (128). In Conrad, this is most vividly seen in his use of the “incomprehensible” and similar language to describe the wilderness. In *Nausea*, two of the more powerful diary entries focuses on language’s inability to describe the world (124-135). Finally, Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* discusses how the world “evades us because it becomes itself again” (14)
we are forced to hold together and accept as true that with logic or reason would deny.\textsuperscript{66}

In the plot of the novel, the need to accept the contradiction finds its representation in the figure of Sunday.

\textbf{The Paradox of Sunday}

This question—who is Sunday?—is the question, what does it mean for your greatest enemy to also be your greatest friend? This is the central paradox of the novel, and the hinge for the narrative. Chesterton’s existentialism circles around who Sunday is and what he represents. When Monday asks Sunday who he is Sunday answers, “I am the Sabbath…I am the peace of God” (185). Yet, most of the detectives are unsatisfied. How can Sunday be peace when he the detectives each had to endure his own dark night of the soul?

Monday reacts with anger, befitting his rationalism.

“I know what you mean,” he cried, “and it is exactly that that I cannot forgive you. I know you are contentment, optimism, what do they call the thing, an ultimate reconciliation. Well, I am not reconciled. If you were the man in the dark room, why were you also Sunday, an offence to the sunlight? If you were from the first our father and our friend, why were you also our greatest enemy?” (186)

The Peace of God makes no sense. It makes even less sense given the terror each of the detectives lived under. How can Sunday be the Peace of God when he has caused the detectives to suffer?

\textsuperscript{66} In Orthodoxy, Chesterton writes, “The ordinary man…has always cared more for truth than for consistency. If he saw two truths that seemed to contradict each other, he would take the two truths and the contradiction along with them” (230).
The other detectives are similarly confused, though their reactions are different as befits their temperament. Syme is not angry like the secretary, but he is unsatisfied. He says, “My soul and heart are as happy and quiet here as this old garden, but my reason is still crying out. I should like to know” (186). Ratcliffe observes, “It seems so silly that you should have been on both sides and fought yourself” (186). Bull admits, “I understand nothing, but I am happy. In fact, I am going to sleep” (186). The professor disagrees, “I am not happy…because I do not understand. You let me stray a little too near to hell” (186). Finally, Gogol sums up “with the absolute simplicity of a child” the true cause for the detectives’ ache: “I wish I knew why I was hurt so much” (186).

Tuesday’s simple statement identifies the core of the problem: how can God have his peace if existence is inundated with so much pain?

Syme’s description of Sunday as being brutish when seen from behind and benign when seen from the front traces the beginnings of an answer for the detectives’ questions. After his initial explanation Syme describes his impressions as they chased Sunday across London:

I was suddenly possessed with the idea that the blind, blank back of his head really was his face—an awful, eyeless face staring at me! And I fancied that the figure running in front of me was really a figure running backward, and dancing as he ran…It was exactly the worst instant of my life. And yet ten minutes afterward when he put his head out of the cab and made a grimace like a gargoyle, I knew that he was only like a father playing hide-and-seek with his children. (174)
While at times Sunday evokes the world in its worst horror, Syme believes that the horror is a result of a trick of perspective. The eyeless face is merely an impression, not the way things really are.

“Listen to me,” cried Syme with extraordinary emphasis. “Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world? It is that we have only known the back of the world. We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. That is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face? If we could only get round in front—” (174).

Syme offers an explanation for the detective’s experience of horror. The brutality of existence is a result of only seeing the back of the world. Our limited perspective as individuals bound by time, space, and understanding prevents us from seeing beyond the brutality of existence. It is Syme’s final expression here that brings to the forefront the theme of the novel’s allegory. It is an expression of longing, an expression that admits to not seeing the path to getting round in front. Syme recognizes his failure to understand, the way in which his limited human perspective keeps him from seeing things as they really are. However, there are no neat answers here, and Chesterton avoids falling into easy Christian sentimentality. Syme does not see his way to seeing the face of the world. If Syme is to find peace it will not be by means of his own philosophy.

67The sentiment expressed by Syme here is similar to Father Brown’s in “The Sins of Prince Saradine.” Explaining his comment about the final judgment Father Brown tells his host, “I mean that we here are on the wrong side of the tapestry...The things that happen here do not seem to mean anything; they mean something somewhere else” (161).
In fact Sunday tells them this. When Syme asks Sunday what he is, Sunday answers,

Bull, you are a man of science. Grub in the roots of those trees and find out the truth about them. Syme, you are a poet. Stare at those morning clouds and tell me or anyone the truth about morning clouds. But I tell you this, you will have found out the truth of the last tree and the topmost cloud before the truth about me. You will understand the sea, and I shall be still a riddle; you shall know what the stars are and not know what I am. Since the beginning of the world, all men have hunted me like a wolf—kings and sages, poets and lawgivers, all the churches, and all the philosophies. But I have never been caught yet. (159)

Science, poetry, politics, religion, and philosophy come up short. The mysteries of the universe are more easily understood than who Sunday is. It is worth noting that this response precedes Sunday telling the detectives he is the peace of God. However, the statement still holds even after Sunday gives Syme and the other detectives an answer. The detectives might know that Sunday is the peace of God, but they do not know what that means. Indeed, they cannot know what that means because the peace of God is beyond our understanding.

Chesterton’s characterization of the peace of God is based on the apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians. As Paul closes his letter, he tells his readers to not be anxious but to let their requests be made known to God. Were they to do this, “[T]he peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (4:7 ESV). The peace of God, then, is characterized in the Bible as something that exists
beyond our comprehension. It reveals the limits of human understanding; none of the
detectives’ philosophies can make explain it. But if Sunday is the peace of God, why is
the peace of God both an anarchist and a policeman? Why does Chesterton make God’s
peace both the detectives’ enemy and their friend?

Syme begins to feel his way towards an answer when the anarchist poet Lucian
Gregory appears to lodge his complaint against Sunday. Gregory’s complaint is not
unlike Monday’s inability to forgive God his peace and not unlike Syme’s inability to
forgive the police their calm. Gregory claims, “The only crime of the government is that
it governs. The unpardonable sin of the supreme power is that it is supreme” (187). But
ultimately what Gregory finds offensive is their safety: “I do not curse you for being
cruel. I do not curse you (though I might) for being kind. I curse you for being safe!”
(187). He goes on, accusing them of never having had any trouble, for never having
suffered any real agony when he is interrupted by Syme who proclaims, “I see
everything” (188).

Why does each thing on earth war against each other thing? Why does
each small thing in the world have to fight against the world itself?...For
the same reason that I had to be alone in the dreadful council of the days:
so that each thing that obeys law may have the glory and isolation of the
anarchist; so that each man fighting for order may be as brave and good a
man as the dynamiter; so that the real lie of Satan may be flung back in the
face of this blasphemer; so that by tears and torture we may earn the right
to say to this man, ‘You lie!’ No agonies can be too great to buy the right
to say to this accuser, ‘We also have suffered.’ (188)
It is no accident that before Gregory speaks Dr. Bull quotes The Book of Job, for this is the inspiration for Chesterton’s answer to the anarchist. At the beginning of The Book of Job, Satan appears before God. God asks him if he has noticed Job, who is “blameless and upright” (1:8). Satan’s response is to say that Job only fears God and abstains from evil because he is blessed. But, if God were to take away all that Job has, Job would curse God to his face. And so Satan takes everything from Job, all his possessions and all his children. The majority of the book is devoted to conversations between Job and his three friends, who represent (like the six detectives) different philosophies, different attempts at answering the question: why do we suffer? Each one fails, and even though eventually God gives Job a hearing, Job is never told why he suffers. Job is never told of the bet between God and Satan. The readers of The Book of Job, however, do know, and this frame clarifies Syme’s answer.

The Book of Job is generally understood as an answer to the question why good people suffer. In The Man Who Was Thursday, Chesterton picks up on a different question, one asked not by the people of God but by those who view the people of God as those for whom life has been easy. Faith is easy, this accusation says, when life is easy. People who believe in God and trust him are those who have never understood the depths of existence. They live on the surface of reality, ignorant of the pain and suffering that occurs. It is an accusation which Chesterton would find himself accused of as his career continued: an accusation of a false optimism originating from a blindness to the agonies of existence. This is why Gregory curses the detectives for their safety. It is an accusation that echoes Satan’s rhetorical question, “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side” (1:10). In other
words, of course Job fears God, for God has made Job safe. Of course the detectives are on the side of order, for they have never “suffered for one hour a real agony” (188).

Syme’s answer is to fling the accusation back. They have suffered. And in Syme’s mind simply being able to say “We also have suffered” is worth the pain they have gone through. But why is that? Why is that worth it? Why, we might ask, does Syme talk about “the glory and isolation of the anarchist” and talk about being “as brave and good a man as the dynamiter”? The answer is found by connecting Chesterton’s novel to Kierkegaard’s meditation on faith in *Fear and Trembling*. In this work Kierkegaard interrogates the phrase “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness,” which appears in different forms in Genesis, Romans, Galatians, and James. Kierkegaard observes the when Abraham left his homeland “he left his earthly understanding behind and took faith with him” (58). Kierkegaard emphasizes that Abraham’s belief was unreasonable; Abraham is considered the father of faith because he believed even when that belief made no sense. Even as he grew old and his wife passed the age of childbearing he believed that Yahweh would provide him with a son. Even when Yahweh commanded him to sacrifice his son he believed. Kierkegaard writes:

There was many a father who lost his child; but then it was God, it was the unalterable, the unsearchable will of the Almighty, it was His hand took the child. Not so with Abraham. For him was reserved a harder trial, and Isaac’s fate was laid along with the knife in Abraham’s hand. And there he stood, the old man, with his only hope! But he did not doubt, he did not look anxiously to the right or to the left, he did not challenge heaven with his prayers. He knew that it was God the Almighty who was trying him, he
knew that it was the hardest sacrifice that could be required of him. But he knew also that no sacrifice was too hard when God required it—and he drew the knife. (56)

How does this relate to Syme’s comment about the anarchist and the dynamiter? It is that Abraham is left alone and without help. There is nothing to which he can appeal. Abraham believed despite every piece of human wisdom telling him to doubt. From this emerges Kierkegaard’s knight of faith who resembles the detectives, who “in the solitude of the universe never hears any human voice but walks alone with his dreadful responsibility” (150). This describes the detectives, especially in their most isolated but even at the end when the entire world seems to fight for the anarchists. The detectives fought for good when every human wisdom demanded despair. Sunday himself recognizes this, even from the beginning when he recruits them into the great battle. He tells the detectives, “I sat in the darkness, where there is not any created thing, and to you I was only a voice commanding valor and an unnatural virtue. You heard the voice in the dark, and you never heard it again. The sun in heaven denied it, the earth and sky denied it, all human wisdom denied it. And when I met you in the daylight, I denied it myself” (185). Chesterton’s “valor and unnatural virtue” resembles Kierkegaard’s “dreadful responsibility.” Like the knight of virtue, the detectives are isolated, but their isolation is exacerbated by denials from every source. Yet, like Abraham, the detectives kept the faith. As Sunday says, “You did not forget your secret honor, though the whole cosmos turned an engine of torture to tear it out of you. I knew how near you were to hell. I know how you, Thursday, crossed swords with King Satan, and how you, Wednesday, named me in the hour without hope” (185). As Abraham “believed by virtue of the absurd; for
there could be no question of human calculation” (75), so the detectives had to suspend
human wisdom and believe “by virtue of the absurd” in the man in the dark room.

Furthermore, in this final quote Sunday recognizes Syme and Ratcliffe’s
experiences as having veracity despite being the result of mistaken beliefs. The fact that
Wednesday was actually an ally does not negate Syme’s subjective experience and the
very real fear he felt when faced with a man who does not bleed. Syme affirms this when
he responds to Gregory’s description of them as safe. He says, “It is not true that we have
never been broken. We have been broken upon the wheel. It is not true that we have
never descended from these thrones. We have descended into hell. We were complaining
of unforgettable miseries even at the very moment when this man entered to accuse us of
happiness. I repel the slander; we have not been happy” (188). As Abraham had to endure
waiting and then giving up his promised child, so the detectives had to endure isolation
and to ignore human wisdom. They had to recognize the limits of their philosophy and
step out in faith. They had to fight despite everything turning against them because they
believed their fight was right, because they believed their fight was just.

Syme claims for the detectives the glory of the anarchist because the anarchist’s
glory resides in fighting for what he believes is right despite all of human society
repudiating him. For Kierkegaard and Chesterton, faith envelops the rational. As William
Barrett writes, “Faith is an abyss that engulfs the rational nature of man” (28). Chesterton
says in Orthodoxy “Mysticism keeps men sane” (230). Recalling Gogol, Chesterton adds,
“Like the sun at noonday, mysticism explains everything else by the blaze of its own
victorious invisibility” (231). The mysticism is this: that God made the world, and “in
making it, He set it free” (282). This allows us to be “both happy and indignant” (282), to
both “heartily hate and heartily love” the world (275). Chesterton identifies the explanation for this paradox as the fall. In other words, the world is good, for it was created by God; but the world is simultaneously broken, for man disobeyed. In the terms of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, the world is both brutal and beautiful. That the world is set free at creation explains how “one could fight all the forces of existence without deserting the flag of existence. One could be at peace with the universe and yet be at war with the world” (282). The fact that the world has rebelled against God explains why one finds oneself fighting against the world; the fact that the world was created by God explains why one finds oneself fighting for the world.

In this realization Syme turns to Sunday to ask “[H]ave you also suffered?” (188). After the question is asked Sunday’s face grows immense, filling the whole sky until everything goes black. But just before the blackness destroys Syme’s consciousness he hears a voice quoting Christ, “Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?” (189). What is the significance of this response? The answer to that is the answer to the question posed at the beginning of this section: What does it mean for your greatest enemy to be your greatest friend?

In the context of the Gospels, the “cup” Jesus refers to is his impending death on the cross, most apparent in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus prays, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matt. 26:39 ESV). Chesterton is deliberately connecting the peace of God as represented in the figure of Sunday to the cross. The cross functions in Chesterton’s thought as a collision extending outward toward infinity in contrast with the fixed, finite circle of logic. As he writes in *Everlasting Man*, “The cross has become something more than a historical memory; it does convey, almost as by
a mathematical diagram, the truth about the real point at issue; the idea of a conflict stretching outwards into eternity. It is true, and even tautological, to say that the cross is the crux of the whole matter” (154). In Orthodoxy he observes the cross “has at its heart a collision and a contradiction” (231) and, “Because it has a paradox in its centre it can grow without changing” (231). Chesterton does not define what this paradox is, but several spring to mind: How can Jesus be both God and man? How can God the Father forsake God the Son? The paradox relevant to The Man Who Was Thursday is found in what Monday calls “an ultimate reconciliation” (185). In other words, the paradox of the cross is found in its impact on the relationship between God and man.

The cross is the ultimate expression of humankind’s enmity with God. After all, the story of the cross is the story of mankind’s rebellion against God and the dreadful payment that rebellion demands. This leads to mankind’s rejection of God’s son and His death by crucifixion. In this moment Jesus and all of humanity are in opposition to one another. As Paul writes in Romans, Christ’s death occurred “while we were enemies” (5:10 ESV). Mankind was so bitterly opposed to the Son of God that He was put to death violently. It is difficult to imagine a stronger expression of animosity, a more poignant picture of hostility than an execution. The cross is a symbol of our being enemies of God.

Yet at the same time the cross is a symbol of God extending friendship to us. As Jesus says, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friend” (John 15:13 ESV). In Christian theology, Christ’s death on the cross was him laying down his life in order to bring about salvation. While the crucifixion is the result of our enmity with God, it also brings about the necessary reconciliation needed for our friendship with God. Thus the cross is both the ultimate act of enmity and the ultimate act
of friendship. Those familiar with Chesterton’s thought will see how this paradox fits Chesterton’s view of Christianity, 68 which combines “furious opposites, by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious” (299). As he writes, “Paganism declared that virtue was in a balance; Christianity declared it was in a conflict: the collision of two passions apparently opposite” (297). Out of this emerges Chesterton’s romance for the symbol of two lines crossing each other and extending to infinity. The cross symbolizes our status as enemies of God, emphasizes it to the point of us killing his Son. The cross also symbolizes our status as friends of God, emphasizes it to the point of God’s Son laying down his life for us. Instead of one diluting the other, both are held simultaneously in extremity.

This connection between Sunday and the cross explains the significance of Sunday identifying himself as the Peace of God. The peace of God is a contradiction. It is something that emerges out of a paradox. It emerges out of death and life. Sunday realizes the paradox by being the detectives’ greatest enemy and their greatest friend. But it goes further than that, for while the cross can be accepted the cross cannot be understood. As Chesterton says in Orthodoxy “it breaks out” (231). The cross can hold together furious opposites. It is not striking a balance but holding together ideas apparently in conflict. In The Man Who Was Thursday these opposites are unbearable suffering and unaccountable joy. It is this joy that defines Chesterton’s existentialism.

Existential Joy

The phrase “existential joy” might strike some readers as odd. Existentialism has a reputation for being a morbid philosophy, overly concerned with death, dread, and the

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meaninglessness of our existence. Even Kierkegaard, who shared Chesterton’s belief in the God of the Bible, wrote books titled *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness Unto Death*. The other two novels addressed in this dissertation fit better into the popular conception of existentialism. These books are dark, depressing, and paint a picture of the universe without hope. So how does Chesterton fit within this framework?

There is one existentialist who shares a similar impulse towards happiness as Chesterton: Albert Camus. In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus compares human existence to the mythical figure Sisyphus, who was punished in the underworld by having to push a rock up a hill for all eternity. For Camus this was a picture of the human condition. Our instinct would be to see this as a reason to despair, but Camus says this is not so. “Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself, forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (123). Camus argues that accepting the absurdity of our existence leads to happiness, not despair, to joy, not pain.

This view is dramatized in Camus’s novel *The Stranger*. The protagonist Meursault seems disconnected and alienated from his existence. He observes others around him trying to find meaning in things like family, love, plans, work, the law, or religion. But Meursault rejects these as having any meaning. They merely distract people from the void. They are as absurd as the stone Sisyphus must roll up the hill. But it is not until the final conversation with the priest that Meursault finally comes to this understanding. The inevitable death that waits for us all negates everything.
Nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why. So did he. 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, me and billions of privileged people like him who also called themselves my brothers? (121)

We are, Meursault later says, both privileged and condemned by existence and its end. This flattens the world; what does anything matter in such a world? But instead of leading Meursault to despair this realization leads him instead to happiness: “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” (122). As Camus writes in The Myth of Sisyphus “Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. It would be a mistake to say that happiness necessarily springs from the absurd discovery. It happens as well that the feeling of the absurd springs from happiness” (122). Camus’s Meursault and Sisyphus come to similar realizations as Chesterton’s Syme. At the end The Man Who Was Thursday Syme is left feeling “an unnatural buoyancy in his body and crystal simplicity in his mind that seemed to be superior to everything that he said or did. He felt he was in
possession of some impossible good news, which made every other thing a triviality, but an adorable triviality” (189).

There is a similarity in the feeling, in the absurd joy each figure feels. There is a similarity in how their realization makes every other thing seem unimportant. There is a similarity in the recognition that existence as existence matters; and furthermore, that the privilege of existence is sharpened by the threat of nonexistence. In his autobiography, Chesterton wrote:

I have also a pretty taste in abysses and bottomless chasms and everything else that emphasizes a fine shade of distinction between one thing and another; and the warm affection I have always felt for bridges is connected with the fact that the dark and dizzy arch accentuates the chasm even more than the chasm itself…I believe that in feeling these things from the first, I was feeling the fragmentary suggestions of a philosophy. (26)

This philosophy’s vague outline is made more explicit in *The Man Who Was Thursday*. During Syme’s duel with Wednesday. The fear of death makes other fears mere fancies (118). This dramatizes the existentialist claim that only in the face of death can one truly live. This leads Syme to the following realization: “He felt a strange and vivid value in all the earth around him, in the grass under his feet; he felt the love of life in all living things…He had the feeling that if by some miracle he escaped, he would be ready to sit forever before that almond tree, desiring nothing else in the world” (118-119). There is in Camus an echo of this when he writes, “Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world.” Both Chesterton and Camus are striving to realize joy in existence as existence. It is not a claim of meaning but it is a
claim of value. Existence *qua* existence has value. This is the legacy of Chesterton’s grandfather who claimed “he would thank God for his creation if he were a lost soul” (*Autobiography* 90). Or, as Chesterton formulates it himself, “[E]ven mere existence, reduced to its primary limits, was extraordinary enough to be exciting. Anything was magnificent as compared with nothing” (89). It is this contrast, of being with nonbeing, that informs Chesterton’s existential vision.69

Camus and Chesterton might share a goal of reaching existential joy but they differ greatly in how one achieves that joy. The difference is that Chesterton accepts a God who revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ and Camus does not. This difference reveals itself in Chesterton and Camus’s radically different views of hope. Camus rejects hope. He writes, “Eluding is the invariable game. The typical act of eluding, the fatal evasion that constitutes the third theme of this essay, is hope. Hope of another life one must ‘deserve’ or trickery of those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning, and betray it” (8). For Camus the realization of the absurd is “a privileged and bitter moment in which hope has no further place” (27) and “implies a total absence of hope” (31) asserting “the absurd is the contrary of hope” (35). He expresses frustration with other existentialists who “without exception suggest escape” and “find reason to hope in what impoverishes them” (32).70 He continues, “That forced hope is religious in all of them” (32). In contrast, the absurd man “has forgotten how to hope” (52). He “catches sight of a burning and rigid,

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69 Gary Willis writes that, for Chesterton, “Being is an exception in each of its manifestations. It appears only in definite shapes drawn in the hardest lines against the background of nonexistence.” (44).
70 This is an important point, as it shows that this discussion isn’t over whether to consider Chesterton an existentialist if he accepts and promotes faith and hope. Rather this section of the dissertation is intended to develop two different conceptions for existential joy.
transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation” (60).

Chesterton in contrast believes that hope is a good thing. When Syme is fleeing Friday he catches sight of the top of St. Paul’s Cathedral, the cross and orb at the top illuminated by the final rays of sunshine. The narrator observes, “It seemed a symbol of human faith and valor that while the skies were darkening, that high place of the earth was bright. The devils might have captured heaven, but they had not yet captured the cross” (79). The importance of the cross to Chesterton’s imagination has already been discussed, but it is important to recognize that the novel is not saying hope is good in itself. The novel implies that hope in itself is not enough; it matters where our hope is placed. Later, when it appears the world has gone completely over to the anarchists, Syme asks Ratcliffe if he is hopeless. Ratcliffe responds, “No; oddly enough, I am not quite hopeless. There is one insane little hope that I cannot get out of my mind. The power of this whole planet is against us, yet I cannot help wondering whether this one silly little hope is hopeless yet” (151). This “insane little hope” is, of course, the man in the dark room. These two objects of hope are connected in the logic of the novel: the Peace of God emerges out of the cross. But the novel also emphasizes this hope is irrational. Ratcliffe calls his hope “insane” and “silly.” In response to Ratcliffe’s profession of hope in the man in the dark room the professor says, “I also am holding hard onto the thing I never saw” (152).
While both Chesterton and Camus are seeking a means to find joy in existence, they differ greatly in how that joy is achieved. It is not even enough to say that they differ because in one hope is available while in the other hope must be rejected. This would ignore how for Camus hope is a selfish emotion while for Chesterton it is a selfless one. For Camus hope is always cast in relation to one’s own death or to one’s own life. For Chesterton, hope is cast in relation to the universe. For Camus existential joy is found when one accepts the absurd and holds it without attempting to elude it. For Chesterton existential joy is found when one recognizes an error in perspective. In Chesterton’s thought this means the need to come at things from a different angle, let go of assumptions and find a means of seeing things as if for the first time.

In The Man Who Was Thursday the need to change our vantage point is expressed in the idea of seeing the back of the world. In the Father Brown story “The Sins of Prince Saradine” Chesterton uses the image of being on the wrong side of the tapestry, where “The things that happen here do not seem to mean anything; they mean something somewhere else” (161). A different image, used for much the same purpose, is of the world turning upside down. In The Poet and the Lunatics the poet Gabriel Gale, after being observed standing on his head, echoes the similarly named Gabriel Syme, “Shall I tell you a secret?...The world is upside down. We’re all upside down” (14). This image appears in The Man Who Was Thursday after Friday reveals himself as a fellow detective. The novel reads, “Syme had for a flash the sensation that the cosmos had turned exactly upside down, that all trees were growing downward and that all stars were under his feet. Then came slowly the opposite conviction. For the last twenty-four hours, the cosmos had really been upside down but now the capsized universe had come right side up again”
Chesterton concludes *Orthodoxy* with the same image. Modern man, he says, has been “born upside down” (365). He writes, “Christianity satisfies suddenly and perfectly man’s ancestral instinct for being the right way up; satisfies it supremely in this; that by its creed joy becomes something gigantic and sadness something special and small” (365).

Together these two images, being upside down and seeing only the back of things, do not mean that Chesterton denies the existence of pain or the sense of isolation and alienation one feels. Reflecting on the dual nature of Sunday, who seems both animal and god, both brutal and beautiful, Syme reflects:

> Then, and again and always…that has been for me the mystery of Sunday, and it is also the mystery of the world. When I see the horrible back, I am sure the noble face is but a mask. When I see the face but for an instant I know the back is only a jest. Bad is so bad that we cannot but think good an accident; good is so good that we feel certain that evil could be explained. (174)

Our limited perspective and limited understanding prevent us from seeing the other side of the tapestry, or from seeing the world the right way up. Whether we’re looking at pain or looking at joy it tends to expand in our vision and block out our view. Christopher Hollis explains, “Existence itself was good. One’s own existence was good…Other existence was good. The excitement of life arose from the fact that there were other separate objects—not just a totality of reality…The good of the world proved that there was a God, the evil of the world that He was not always easily apparent—that He had to be discovered” (32). Chesterton’s commitment to holding onto both the good and the evil
in the world emerges out of his view of the cross. Chesterton wanted a philosophy that combined furious opposites, recognizing how the world itself seems to run in two directions simultaneously. The cross, as two bisecting lines extending outward, symbolized this for Chesterton. The doctrine of the fall provided a theological explanation for this combination of furious good and furious evil. In this one begins to see how Chesterton’s thought orbits around the cross. The idea that man was created for good and yet through freedom made a choice that has led to so much bad fits Chesterton’s existentialism. Armed with the doctrine of the Fall, “One could be at peace with the universe and yet be at war with the world” (Orthodoxy 282).

Chesterton blends humankind’s limited understanding with the doctrine of the Fall to explain why we feel at odds with the universe. Unable to be a pessimist and finding optimism “false and disheartening” because “it had always been trying to prove that we fit into the world” (283), Chesterton found a third option in what he calls Christian optimism, which “is based on the fact that we do not fit in to the world” (283). In this Chesterton recognizes the absurd, the divorce between man and his setting. But Chesterton has available to him something Camus does not, and that is an explanation for why man is alienated from the world in which he exists. Chesterton’s existentialism recognizes alienation, but instead of seeing that as a reason for despair, it is an opportunity for joy.

The Christian cosmology allows Chesterton to recognize the sense of meaninglessness without having to accept that as a final judgment. The world might at times seem to lack meaning or sense, but that is more a result of the limitations of our perspective than any actual lack of meaning. Chesterton develops this idea further in
Orthodoxy, where he writes “The vault above us is not deaf because the universe is an idiot; the silence is not the heartless silence of an endless and aimless world. Rather the silence around us is a small and pitiful stillness like the prompt sickness in a sick-room” (365). Chesterton recognizes that the universe seems silent, but does not accept the silence as an indication of emptiness. The universe is not a void. Instead the apparent indifference emerges out of human limitations, limitations of both understanding and perspective.

Chesterton’s existentialism consists of recognizing these limitations and then responding to these with joy. He writes of a strong feeling “that life was as precious as it was puzzling. It was an ecstasy it was an adventure; it was an adventure because it was an opportunity” (258). Out of this emerges out of gratitude for the fact of existence, the “sense that life is not only a pleasure but a kind of eccentric privilege” (267). He explains what he means more fully by comparing existence to a perilous escape:

But it is a better exercise still to remember how all things have had this hair-breadth escape: everything has been saved from a wreck. Every man has had one horrible adventure: as a hidden untimely birth he had not been, as infants that never see the light. Men spoke much in my boyhood of restricted or ruined men of genius: and it was common to say many a man was a Great Might-Have-Been. To me it is a more solid and startling fact that any man in the street is a Great Might-Not-Have-Been. (267)

In this quote, Chesterton identifies the mystery of human consciousness. In his adroit way Chesterton takes the contingency also recognized by Thomas Hardy and reframes it in a way that draws attention to its wonder and surprise. Instead of the Durbeyfield children
being brought into the world against their will, dependent on their parents for the quality of life, Chesterton imagines each individual human coming into existence as a “horrible adventure” and a “hair-breadth escape.” Out of the realization that our existence is accidental emerges a thankfulness that he exists at all. It is not unlike Syme coming face to face with death, or Meursault facing the objective reality of his impending execution. The contrast of being with nonbeing heightens our recognition of the value of existence. But instead of facing death, Chesterton asks his readers to face the improbability of their individual existences. Instead of focusing on how existence could be snuffed out, Chesterton forces us to focus on the insane fact that we exist at all. He writes in *Orthodoxy*, “The world was a shock, but it was not merely shocking; existence was a surprise but it was a pleasant surprise” (258). In *Chaucer* Chesterton goes further: “There is at the back of all our lives an abyss of light, more blinding and unfathomable than any abyss of darkness; and it is the abyss of actuality, of existence, of the fact that things truly are, and we ourselves are incredibly and sometimes incredulously real” (36). As Gary Willis observes, “The real oddity is that there are things at all. How is one to speak of tricks or types of paradox in the face of such a vision? Chesterton did not deal in many types of paradox; not in paradoxes at all. He saw one exception—Being—and it colored his talk about all beings” (39).

As a result of this Chesterton could hardly find fault with the limitations of his understanding. As he writes in *Orthodoxy*, “And it seemed to me that existence was itself so very eccentric a legacy that I could not complain of not understanding the limitations of the vision when I did not understand the vision they limited” (260). Because of Chesterton’s view that the world means something somewhere else he is able to accept
his limited understanding. But that acceptance is couched in faith. It is this view that informs the end of The Man Who Was Thursday. As a narrative about coming up against the limitations of perspective and understanding the novel allegorically dramatizes the existential crisis. But Chesterton’s view of existence leads the novel to suggest that the response to this crisis is not one of stoic acceptance or suicidal despair, but one of existential joy.

At the conclusion of Orthodoxy Chesterton writes, “Everything human must have in it both joy and sorrow; the only matter of interest is the manner in which the two things are balanced or divided” (363). In Chesterton’s view it is only Christianity that allows joy to be “the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial” (364). This leads him to conclude that joy “is the gigantic secret of the Christian” (365). This joy is only possible when one accepts his or her own limited vision and chooses faith. In The Man Who Was Thursday this moment of acceptance is not explicitly described. Nor is what Syme accepts spelled out. Instead, his acceptance is like the acceptance of Job. Logically Job’s response does not make a lot of sense. As Chesterton observes, “Verbally speaking the enigmas of Jehovah seem darker and more desolate than the enigmas of Job; yet Job was comfortless before the speech of Jehovah and is comforted after it. He has been told nothing, but he feels the terrible and tingling atmosphere of something which is too good to be told” (99). Like the Jehovah of the Book of Job, Sunday of The Man Who Was Thursday does not answer Syme’s questions. Yet Syme is comforted. He feels “an unnatural buoyancy in his body and a crystal simplicity in his mind that seemed to be superior to everything that he said or did” (189). After enduring his nightmare Syme has found joy. It is “unnatural” not because it is false or deviant, but it is unnatural because it
is not natural but supernatural. As Chesterton writes, “The optimist’s pleasure was prosaic, for it dwelt on the naturalness of everything; the Christian pleasure was poetic, for it dwelt on the unnaturalness of everything in light of the supernatural” (284). Syme’s buoyancy is unnatural because existence is unnatural. Unnatural like green grass; not because it is green but because it exists at all.

Chesterton makes us feel the wonder that leads to joy through a narrative where enemies are revealed to be friends in disguise. The plot creates this feeling of wonder and surprise through the staggered revelation that the world is not so dark as it at first appears. The combination of nonsense and allegory leads us to recognition that while we might not know what existence means, we can know that it has value. Indeed, the conviction that existence is valuable in itself is the starting point of Chesterton’s existentialism. The failure of understanding is, for Chesterton, not a moment of despair, but a moment of possibility.

G. K. Chesterton and the Recovery of Wonder

*The Man Who Was Thursday* leads readers to joy. Like Job, Syme is comforted, “He felt he was in possession of some impossible good news, which made every other thing a triviality, but an adorable triviality” (189). This final phrase, “adorable triviality,” is worth closer attention. There exists a similarity between Chesterton and the other existentialists when he calls the world a triviality. The sense that the world lacks meaning or importance is characteristic of the existential perspective. But there is a world of difference contained in the modifier “adorable.” Instead of Syme adopting an attitude of boredom or indifference, he adopts the attitude of someone who recognizes the relative unimportance of everything yet never loses his appreciation for it. It is not that everything
is in actuality a triviality, just that in comparison with the “impossible good news” it is trivial. In light of the what Syme has seen, the universe has become adorable.

This is for Chesterton, paradoxically, a means for recapturing one’s sense of wonder and delight. As he writes at the end of *Orthodoxy*, “For actually and in truth I did feel that these dim dogmas of vitality were better expressed by calling the world small than by calling it large. For about infinity there was a sort of carelessness which was the reverse of the fierce and pious care which I felt touching the pricelessness and the peril of life. They showed only a dreary waste; but I felt a sort of sacred thrift” (267). Chesterton’s decision to call the universe small is not a denial of its immensity. It is, instead, an expression of affection. He writes, “When one is fond of anything one addresses it by diminutives” (266). Syme’s sense of everything being an “adorable triviality” is an indication of his fondness for the universe. His excruciating journey has led him to a place of joy and pleasure at existence.

It would be easy to assume that Chesterton’s sense of the value of existence emerges from his Christianity. In fact, the opposite is true. Chesterton’s belief in the value of existence was only satisfied by Christianity. *Orthodoxy* gave Chesterton the necessary explanation for the vague feelings he’d had his whole life. Chesterton was already struck with wonder at existence. As he explains in his autobiography, “But as I was still thinking the thing out by myself, with little help from philosophy and no real help from religion, I invented a rudimentary and makeshift mystical theory of my own. It was substantially this; that even mere existence, reduced to its primary limits, was extraordinary enough to be exciting. Anything was magnificent as compared with nothing. Even if the very daylight were a dream, it was a day-dream; it was not a
nightmare” (89). The second to last sentence here is key to understanding Chesterton’s existentialism. As Gary Willis observes, “Being is an exception in each of its manifestations. It appears only in definite shapes drawn in the hardest lines against the background of nonexistence” (44). Faced with the horror of nonbeing, Chesterton found himself grateful for existence. All he lacked was someone to be grateful to. This was satisfied by the Christian belief in a personal God. That God made the world separate from himself was the missing piece that allowed Chesterton to love the world without trusting it (Orthodoxy 282). It was the Christian doctrine of the Fall that allowed Chesterton to understand why he felt “homesick at home” (284). It allowed Chesterton to satisfy his fierce love for the world without denying the existence of evil.

What Chesterton could not abide was “the refusal to take an interest in existence; the refusal to take the oath of loyalty to life” (276). If Chesterton often emphasized the joy and wonder of existence and overlooked sorrow and suffering, it is because he saw in his day far too much of the opposite. As a result, Chesterton’s existentialism feels like a breath of fresh air, like the breeze at the end of The Man Who Was Thursday “so clean and sweet, that one could not think that it blew from the sky; it blew rather through some hole in the sky” (189). While many other existentialists are fascinated with being and nonbeing, only Chesterton seems to emphasize wonder and surprise at being. Chesterton inspires his readers to hold on to the good in the world as something precious, to defend the commonplace, or as he says in Heretics, to defend “something more incredible still, this huge impossible universe which stares us in the face” (207).
Conclusion: A Productive Failure

The narrative crises of Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and G. K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday* reveal the anxieties of British society at the end of Queen Victoria’s reign. In this period of burgeoning prosperity and promise, Hardy, Conrad, and Chesterton wrote warnings—that the dramatic strides in science, in empire, and in philosophy were not strides towards an inevitable perfection of humanity but were themselves limited. And if those limits were ignored then these were a danger to humanity. These *fin de siècle* novels serve as a pre-emptive warning against the industrialization, imperialism, and nationalism that eventually led to the World War I and World War II. Hardy, Conrad, and Chesterton recognized that if left unchecked these impulses would lead down dangerous paths. As Laurence Lafore writes of late-Victorians in *The Long Fuse*, “They thought that mankind had progressed in enlightenment, humanity, in reason…They understood that the means to untold affluence were at hand. They believed that with it the planet might ultimately produce a civilization of perpetual peace and progress, guided by the light of exact knowledge that was rapidly being revealed to mankind” (15-26). Thomas Hardy’s novels reveal a skepticism towards this enlightenment. Many of his narratives dramatize tragedies based on the changing social order of mid-19th century Britain and feature men

71 According to Hew Strachan, in order to create a unified Germany the Kaiser developed a more nationalist and imperialist foreign policy. This was motivated by the language of social Darwinism, which held, “States were dynamic entities, rising or declining according to fitness” (9) As a result the Germans adopted *Weltpolitik*, and imperialist foreign policy emerging out of a need for markets for its growing manufacturing industry. The tension between European powers created by imperialism, industrialization, and nationalism helped ignite World War I.
of science, men of education bringing tragedy to the people of Wessex.\textsuperscript{72} Hardy’s warnings about the project of industrialization is matched in Conrad’s profound distrust about the project of empire. In \textit{Heart of Darkness} Conrad unmasks the lie of “civilizing work” that imperialists use to justify the violence done to indigenous people. Finally, Chesterton’s writings, especially \textit{Heretics} and \textit{Orthodoxy}, display a keen eye for the logical endpoints of popular ideologies. He warns against the confidence late-Victorian thinkers had in their ability to theorize and then build a more perfect world. According to Chesterton, a rational world was an insane world.

Hardy, Conrad, and Chesterton join the other existentialists in warning against too firm a faith in humanity. In the introduction to this study I defined existentialism as the crisis that occurs when the individual human subject is confronted with their limitations. The existential novel, then, is a narrative that dramatizes this crisis. There is something the protagonist is unable to do, something they are unable to control, something they are unable to understand. Their narratives reveal the need to reckon with our own, human limitations. Hardy, Conrad, and Chesterton do differ on where that reckoning leads. For Hardy and Conrad, the human limitation leads at best to humility and at worst to despair. For Chesterton, on the other hand, accepting our limitations leads to joy. We are, the British existentialists claim, all failures. And that is all right. Our human existence does not depend on the perfectibility of humankind or a historical narrative of progress. Our human existence depends on our ability to navigate human relationships, to recognize the

\textsuperscript{72} In \textit{The Mayor of Casterbridge}, the major conflict is between Henshaw, a remnant of an older order, and Donald Farfrae who brings new technology to Casterbridge and upsets the order establish by Henshaw. In \\textit{The Return of the Native}, the educated Clym Yeobright’s end is in tragedy. \textit{The Woodlanders} similarly features an educated man, in this case the doctor Edred Fitzpriers, moving to a small village and disrupting the lives of the people living there.
importance of that which we cannot express, and to find joy in our own inability to make sense of the world.

Fictional Philosophy

As the arc of this dissertation shows, the form of the novel is significant to the development of existential philosophy. This is unique, as Amy M. Kleppner wrote in 1964, “it is the only contemporary philosophy whose exponents have employed the literary medium as a significant medium of expression” (207). The appeal to the novel rests in part in its ability to affect the reader in ways that philosophy cannot. Amy Klepper writes, “Both Sartre and de Beauvoir place considerable emphasis on the reader’s experience as he responds to the work of literature” (209). The experience of the reader who reads *Tess of the D’Urbervilles, Heart of Darkness, or The Man Who Was Thursday* is essential to understanding the philosophy those novels present. As Simone de Beauvoir writes in “Literature and Metaphysics:”

Bewitched by the tale that he is told, the reader here reacts as if he were faced with lived events. He is moved, he approves, he becomes indignant, responding with a movement of his entire being before formulating judgments that he draws from himself and that are not presumptuously dictated to him. That is what gives a good novel its value. It allows one to undergo imaginary experiences that are as complete and disturbing as lived experiences. The reader ponders, doubts, and takes sides; and this hesitant development of his thought enriches him in a way that no teaching of doctrine could. (270)
In her 2018 book *The Art of Being* Yi-Ping Ong argues the aesthetics of the novel allow the creation of the illusion of characterological freedom. The ability of the novel to present life as it is lived enables the form to explore the nature of human existence in a manner unavailable to other forms. By convincing the reader “of the illusion of an open future,” the novel form “recalls the indeterminacy, possibility, and freedom of her own existence” (67). It is the ability of the novel to represent existence from the viewpoint of the one who lives it that makes it the ideal form for existential thought. As Beauvoir writes, “the novel will permit us to evoke the original upspringing [jaillissement] of existence in its complete, singular, and temporal truth” (274) and “provides a disclosure of existence in a way unequaled by any other mode of expression” (276).

And yet the sense that the novel serves as a highly effective means of illustrating philosophic ideas remains. Hardy’s novel illustrates what is meant by contingency; Conrad’s what is meant by the absurd; Chesterton’s what is meant by being and nonbeing. As Ong argues, the novel is a paradox which combines “on the one hand, the pedagogical reflection and shaping of the author, and on the other hand, the spontaneous unfolding of concrete life that resists and bewilders the author’s attempt to anticipate” (238). She concludes that for the existential philosophers the novel is “an engagement with the problem of existence in its very form” (239), and that *The Art of Being* “belongs to a larger project that seeks to reveal the potential of literary form to shape the methods and aim of philosophy” (239). It is to this larger project that this dissertation belongs.

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73 Ong spends quite a bit of her book discussing the importance of aesthetic achievement to the success of the novel. If the reader becomes aware of herself as a reader, the illusion of characterological freedom is shattered and the novel ceases to mimic the unfolding of life.
Unlike *The Art of Being*, my dissertation is interested in the limits of the novel form and the need for experimentation and innovation. The Victorian realist novel was ultimately inadequate to the needs of the British existentialists. The shrinking space for Tess Durbeyfield’s subjectivity in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* reveals the limits of the realist novel. These limitations led Conrad and Chesterton away from the realist novel. Conrad used a frame narrative and a complex linguistic style mimicking oral storytelling to create the affective experience of the existential crisis. Chesterton used a unique blend of nonsense and allegory to create a sense of exuberance and joy emerging from a lack of understanding. Like Dostoevsky before them, Conrad and Chesterton found that playing with the novel form allowed them the ability to adequately give voice to their philosophy. Simone de Beauvoir writes, “The novel is justified only if it is a mode of communication irreducible to any other” (270). The significance of these novels’ forms to the existential ideas they express confirms Beauvoir’s claim. Hardy’s narrative on the harm myths cause real women loses its power if we do not feel with Tess. Conrad’s narrative on the experience of the existential crisis loses its impact if we do not experience the confusion, uncertainty, and danger that characterizes Marlow’s experience. Chesterton’s narrative on the joy that emerges out of a failure understand loses its effect if we do not find our expectations continuously reversed.

My readings of Hardy, Conrad, and Chesterton confirm Ong’s assertion that “the philosophical significance of the novel lies in its very form” (239). While her argument focuses on an existential poetics of the realist novel, my dissertation reveals that the goals of existentialist philosophy are ultimately limited by the realist novel. While Ong discusses how existentialism offers a powerful means of understanding of the novel, the
development of existential philosophy in the novel required distinctive novelistic forms that have significance in how we understand these novels’ existential visions. The impact of myths on female subjectivity emerges out of the way the narrative voice of Tess begins mythologizing its protagonist. The meaning of the horror surfaces through distance created by the frame narrative. The experience of existential joy grows out of the tension between nonsense and allegory. The philosophical significance of each novel depends on the distinctive formal features they utilize.

The form of a novel, thus, ceases to be simply an useful means of illustrating philosophical concepts or the expression of existence beyond the scope of philosophy, but instead becomes itself a philosophical statement. In the same way that existentialism emphasizes the individual’s engagement with philosophic inquiry from the perspective of the individual, the intersection of literature and philosophy demands critical attention be given to the individual characteristics of a novel’s form. Fiction is not, then, an awkward attachment to philosophy, but instead becomes a significant part of understanding the history of ideas.

**The French Existentialists**

This dissertation’s contribution to our understanding of literary history lies in the reconsideration of traditional narratives of the development of existentialism. Rather than seeing Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky as preceding a primarily French reaction to the horrors of World War II, my dissertation reveals that we see the development of existentialism earlier, with a number of novelists anticipating the articulation of existential philosophy in the 1930s and 1940s. Existentialism is a philosophy that attempts to deal with the experience of the individual who has been forced to face her
own limitations. This confrontation impels the individual to reevaluate her individual, subjective, contingent existence. My dissertation shows that the challenges existential philosophy poses cannot be contained to a post-World War II France, but rather describe questions that have motivated and continue to motivate many generations of thinkers.

The French existentialists, far from being a unique and unprecedented moment in literary and philosophical history, are participating in a larger, transnational tradition of the existential novel. The question becomes what do we gain by identifying a broader legacy of the existential novels? How does understanding Hardy, Conrad, and Chesterton as existential novelists impact our understanding fiction of the French existentialists? If we take the concept of failure central to the British existentialists and apply it to Camus’s novel *The Stranger*, what happens? If we recognize the importance of the novel form to the British existentialists, what do we learn by paying attention to Camus’s formal choices? While Hardy’s novel emphasizes the failure of representation, Conrad’s the failure of communication, and Chesterton the failure to understand, Camus’s novel is about the failure to find meaning and the freedom and joy that results from realizing and accepting this failure.

Formally Camus, like the other existentialists, uses characters to represent different ways of being, emphasizes Meursault’s subjective experience, and has a plot lead to an existential choice. The distinctive formal choices are structural, narrative perspective, and narrative voice. Camus divides his book into two sections, one which focuses on the lead up to the murder and the second on the fallout of the murder. The
story is a first-person narrative but features a dispassionate voice and lacks the self-reflection common to that narrative style and to the existential novel in particular.\textsuperscript{74}

Where Hardy uses representative figures to interrogate men’s treatment of women, Conrad to elucidate ways of facing the darkness, and Chesterton to represent philosophical viewpoints, Camus uses representative figures to investigate ways which people attempt to cover up the abyss of nonmeaning that lies at the center of existence. As mentioned the novel is split into two sections. In terms of plot the break happens as a result of the murder. Thematically, in the first section we are introduced to means by which we find meaning on an individual or personal scale. In the second section we are shown methods society uses in order to impose meaning on existence. I will first focus on the novel’s rejection of attempts to define meaning on an individual scale.

\textit{The Stranger} begins famously with the opening lines, “Aujourd’hui, maman nest morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas” (9).\textsuperscript{75} These lines, where Meursault focuses on temporal uncertainty instead of the loss of his mother, have unsettled readers since the novel was published in 1942. When I taught the novel to undergraduates in the Spring of 2019, my students reacted with disgust. Many of my students expressed the idea that one ought to care about the death of one’s mother. Meursault’s lack of grief bothered them because the relationship between mothers and their children ought to mean something. Meursault’s indifference challenges this cultural assumption about finding meaning in family. After all, if meaning is defined by family, what does that mean for those who

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{74} Compare, for instance, how Marlow speaks in \textit{Heart of Darkness} to how Meursault narrates his life. Similar contrasts can be drawn between the narrator of \textit{Notes from Underground} and Jean Paul Sartre’s \textit{Nauseau}, which feature protagonists who use writing to reflect on their experiences and their lives.

\textsuperscript{75} “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know.”
\end{footnotesize}
have no family? Or those who are in abusive or toxic families? Family proves to be an inadequate means of defining the meaning of existence.

As the novel continues, Meursault continues to reject other methods of determining meaning. When Marie asks him if he loves her, he says, “I told her it didn’t mean anything but that I didn’t think so” (35). When Raymond discusses discovering that his mistress is cheating on him and what he should do about it, Meursault tells him, “I didn’t think anything” (32). When his boss offers him a job in Paris he says, “it really was all the same to me” (41). Meursault rejects romance, revenge, and relocation as offering any kind of meaning. Not only does he reject these on their personal, individual level but also rejects the social signs of success. Meursault lacks ambition. Building a career does not mean anything. When Marie asks him if he wants to marry, he tells her they could if she wants to, but that “it didn’t make any difference to me” (41). Almost systematically Meursault rejects various ways individuals attempt to find meaning. Love is rejected; relocation is rejected; career achievements are rejected; retributive justice is rejected; marriage is rejected.

After Meursault rejects these attempts to create meaning, the novel then focuses in on two different ways people avoid seeing the void at the center of existence. The first is a robotlike woman who meticulously plans out her existence so she does not have to face the emptiness. The second is Meursault’s neighbor Salamano who has lost his dog. Salamano does not like his dog, but he is used to it. He’d gotten it after his wife died. He hadn’t liked her much, but he was used to her. Salamano represents those who are not looking for meaning but, unlike the robotic woman, do not plan out their days so they do not have to face their lives’ lack of meaning. Instead, they go on living out of habit.
When life disrupts them—their wife dies, or their dog runs away—they do not know what to do with themselves.

After the murder Meursault is transformed into a kind of celebrity. As Meursault rejects attempts to make meaning on a personal scale, as a public figure he proceeds to reject societal institutions’ attempts to define meaning. The first of these is the law. Throughout the trial it is clear that while the law is correct at identifying Meursault as the murderer, it cannot explain why he killed the Arab. While judicial system is intended to identify truth, what we find throughout the trial is the truth not fitting within the judicial system’s framework for making sense of the world. The trial concludes with a coherent narrative, but it is not a true narrative. The meaning of events remains unexplained.

The second societal institution which attempts to define meaning is religion. The confrontation with the chaplain leads to Meursault’s moment of existential vision. During this conversation Meursault rejects religion’s claims to authority over the meaning of existence. Meursault tells the chaplain that the existence of God is unimportant (116). The chaplain refuses to accept this answer and continues to pressure Meursault to turn to God. This leads Meursault to snap and lose control in his only emotional outburst in the novel. Meursault observes, “I was pouring out on him everything that was in my heart, cries of anger and cries of joy” (120). Meursault’s outburst concerns the nature of existence in the light of the inevitable. Meursault continues:

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. I had lived my life one way and I
could just as well have lived in another. I had done this and I hadn’t done that. I hadn’t done this thing but I had done another. And so? It was as if I had waited all this time for this moment and for the first light of this dawn to be vindicated. Nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why. So did he.

(120-121)

In this passage Meursault holds in tension his life and death. Neither exists without the other, and the nature of existence means that life is filled with choice, with opportunities taken and opportunities missed, with decisions that went one way which could have gone in another. Yet none of this means anything. He continues, “Everybody was privileged. There were only privileged people. The others would all be condemned one day. And he would be condemned too” (121). The reality that we are privileged with existence and yet condemned to die levels life.

What Meursault realizes is that the reality of death renders any and all attempt to find meaning pointless. Instead the human subject is meant to recognize their existence in light of their eventual nonexistence. After this outburst Meursault reflects that his “blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope” (122). Standing before death, that one, final, ultimate limitation, Meursault says, “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” (122-123). Accepting the tension between existence and nonexistence, between life and death; accepting that it renders life meaningless allows Meursault to embrace the world and his place within it. The failure of individual and societal methods of defining meaning leaves him free to be content with existence.
Meursault’s kinship with “the gentle indifference of the world” explains the
narrative voice. Even his outburst of passion directed at the chaplain is related almost
unemotionally. When Meursault observes at the end of his speech that “All the shouting
had me gasping for air” it comes as a surprise. We readers have grown used to
Meursault’s narrative detachment. This formal feature, however, is key to understanding
the novel.

Meursault’s dispassionate voice and lack of self-reflection undermines our
empathetic responses to emotionally charged methods of determining the meaning of
existence. Meursault’s lack of emotional investment in the world in which he exists is a
foil to the way in which human emotions are unreliable at determining meaning.
Emotions trick us into thinking things life family, justice, or faith indicate meaning and
purpose. Using language devoid of the normal linguistic cues for attachment leaves the
reader unable to form emotional bonds. We are kept at a distance. Meursault’s
indifference infects our own reading experience.

But this narrative voice serves a second purpose. Meursault’s lack of self-
reflection throughout the novel establishes the failure of the final method of finding
meaning: philosophy. At the origins of Western philosophy Plato’s Socrates famously
instructs his students to first follow the Delphic maxim “Know Thyself.” *The Stranger*
presents a figure who is utterly uninterested in knowing himself. Camus uses the
narrative form of the novel to signal the rejection of philosophy as a method of finding
meaning. Philosophy, too, fails to establish the meaning of existence.

By placing *The Stranger* within a broader tradition of existential novelists we
understand the novel as a narrative of failure. The failure, however, leads to freedom. In
The Stranger, accepting that individual and institutional attempts to establish meaning will end in failure enables Meursault to recover his agency, his freedom to choose independent of any individual, institutional, or communal determinations. Like the other existential novels, the narrative arc reaches a point where the apparent goal of the narrative implodes: the presentation of Tess’s subjectivity fails; the communication of Marlow’s experience fails; the understanding of Sunday fails; the attempt to define meaning fails. Yet, like the other existential narratives, this failure reveals the novel’s existential vision. Instead of imploding into a nihilistic void, the collapse leads instead to means to move forward in this dense, incomprehensible universe.

The End Is Not The End

I see three main threads for further research. The first is to continue analyzing the philosophy embedded in the novel form. The second is to identify other moments in literary history where a concentration of existential novels emerges. The third is to identify the connections between this fin de siècle existential moment and the development of British literary modernism. While this project is more concerned with understanding these novels in their immediate historical context and in relation to existential theory, the implications of this study extend to other areas of literary studies.

In the first of these threads Yi-Ping Ong has begun the important work of describing the philosophy inherent in the form of the novel. As she herself says at the conclusion of her study, her book “belongs to a larger project that seeks to reveal the potential of literary form to shape the methods and aims of philosophy” (239). While my dissertation begins the work of understanding the implications of the novel form on existential philosophy, there is potential in the novel form for exploring different
philosophical concerns. It is for future scholarship to determine what these philosophies are and how form impacts our understanding of those philosophies.

The second of these threads asks us to recognize the existential novel as a broader, transnational tradition. These studies will enable us to better understand the situatedness of existential philosophy. As the French existentialists responded to World War II, the British existentialists responded to Victorian optimism, so too other existential novels respond to their cultural and historical situation. By recognizing how existentialism emerges out of specific contexts will enable us to better understand existential philosophy and the tension between the individual, particular characteristics of each existential thinker and the emergence of general themes that carry from one existentialist to another. Doing so will allow us to identify the ways in which existentialism is a productive philosophy in the quest for understanding, the growth of the individual, and the fight for justice.

The last thread involves modifying our understanding of literary modernism. Rather than seeing modernism as a break with the past and a rejection of tradition, recognizing this existential moment at the tail end of the Victorian and the beginning of the Edwardian period allows us to understand better the emergence of modernism and the formal experimentation that defined that period. Existentialism prefigures the fragmentation of form, the collapse of individual significance, and the falling apart of realism that occurs in modern literature. Teasing out these connections will enable us to understand better what cultural, social, and political forces led to the modernist literary movement.
Finally, I see in this study a call to take up the existential admonition to make philosophy personal, to place myself on trial before the questions these novels ask. The existential novel challenges us to recognize our own limits, our limits as readers and thinkers. These novels ask us to wrestle with how their failures challenge our assumptions about the project of interpretation. How should the failure of representation, communication, and understanding be understood in relation to literary study? What are we to do with novels that resist us? With novels that challenge literary interpretation? With novels that question our ability to make them cohere? Rather than seeing these failures as undermining the entire project of making meaning, instead, I argue, we ought to see these limitations instead as productive. Their incompleteness creates possibility, and in that possibility we find space to speak.
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