

## EXISTENTIALISM

“A group of attitudes (current in philosophical, religious, and artistic thought during and after the Second World War) that emphasizes existence rather than essence and sees the inadequacy of human reason to explain the enigma of the universe as the basic philosophical question. The term is so broadly and loosely used that an exact definition is not possible. In its modern expression it had its beginning in the writings of the nineteenth-century Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger is important in its formulation, and the French novelist-philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre did the most to give it form and popularity. *Existentialism* has found art and literature to be unusually effective methods of expression; in the novels of Franz Kafka, Dostoyevski, Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir, and in the plays and novels of Sartre and Samuel Beckett, and the plays of Eugene Ionesco, it found its most persuasive media.

Basically the Existentialist assumes that existence precedes essence, that the significant fact is that we and things in general exist, but that these things have no meaning for us except as we can create meaning through acting upon them. Sartre claims that the fundamental truth of Existentialism is in Descartes' formula, “I think; therefore, I exist.” The Existential philosophy is concerned with the personal commitment of this unique existing individual in the human situation. It attempts to codify the irrational aspect of human nature, to objectify nonbeing or nothingness and see it as a universal source of fear, to distrust concepts, and to emphasize experiential concreteness.

The Existentialist's point of departure is human beings' immediate awareness of their situation. A part of this is a sense of meaninglessness in the outer world; this meaninglessness produces discomfort, anxiety, loneliness in the face of limitations, and desire to invest experience with meaning by acting upon the world, although efforts to act in a meaningless, ‘absurd’ world lead to anguish, greater loneliness, and despair. Human beings are totally free [opposite of Naturalism] but also wholly responsible for what they make of themselves. This freedom and responsibility are the sources for their most intense anxiety. Such a philosophical attitude can result in nihilism and hopelessness, as, indeed, it has with many of the literary Existentialists. Patently, however, purely nihilistic art is a practical impossibility, any creative act constituting a gesture of at least some affirmation....

The [Atheist] existentialist...denies all absolute principles and holds that human nature is fixed only in that we have agreed to recognize certain human attributes; it is, therefore, subject to change if human beings can agree on other attributes or even to change by a single person if the person acts authentically in contradiction to the accepted principles. Hence, for the Existentialist, the possibilities of altering human nature and society are unlimited, but, at the same time, human beings can hope for aid in making such alterations only from within themselves. In contradistinction to this essentially Atheistic Existentialism, there has also developed a sizable body of Christian existential thought, represented by Karl Jaspers, Jacques Maritain, Nicolas Berdyaev, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, and others.”

C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, eds.  
*A Handbook to Literature*, 6th edition  
(Macmillan 1936-92)

### CHARACTERISTICS OF ATHEIST EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism became very prominent after WWII, due in particular to the influence of Kafka, Sartre, Camus and Beckett, and to the postwar culture in Paris assimilated by many American expatriates. It emerged as a way of coping philosophically with disillusionment and the devastation of Europe, rising from the ruins as an alternative to despair and suicide. The following are characteristics of Atheist Existentialism as they impacted American culture:

1. We experience a crisis in, loss of, or lack of faith--religious and/or social.
2. We come to believe we are not immortal and may die at any time.
3. We conclude that the universe is essentially meaningless.

4. We are insignificant.
5. This makes us feel nausea, angst and despair.
6. We confront Nothingness.
7. Yet our *existence* precedes our essence.
8. We create ourselves through our choices.
9. We have *free will* and individual responsibility.
10. The only meaning is what *we create* within ourselves.
11. Our responsibility is to become *authentic* individuals.
12. There is *no exit* from this situation but death.
13. If we can overcome the temptation to suicide, we may become authentic by committing ourselves to some *project* or activity that is meaningful to us.

## EXISTENTIALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Existentialism *began* as a philosophical affirmation of faith. As early as the 19th century, Kierkegaard and Nathaniel Hawthorne expressed a Christian Existentialism. In Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful," his autobiographical credo, the idealistic artist develops his soul--creates himself--in the process of perfecting his art. American literature has contained the basis of Existentialism from the beginning: the faith in self-reliance. Calvinists were determinists, yet paradoxically, this made them extremely self-reliant and inclined to "meaningful projects." They felt a responsibility to create their characters as saints through their choices and strove for success to prove they were among the chosen of God.

Self-creation is very American. Benjamin Franklin became a national icon of the self-made man through his *Autobiography*, though in his optimistic rationalism he was the opposite of post-WWII Existentialists, who lost faith in all that is represented by the Enlightenment. In the 19th century, Ralph Waldo Emerson personified the ideal of Existentialist self-creation in his famous essay "Self-Reliance," though he too was otherwise the opposite of Atheist Existentialists in his optimistic idealism. Also contrary to the angst and pessimism of Postmodern Atheists such as Pynchon and Barth, Saul Bellow is upbeat in *Henderson the Rain King*, where the "meaningful project" of Existentialism is individuation and "authenticity" is integrity, or psychological wholeness.

Edgar Allan Poe was the first Existentialist in American literature, but Herman Melville was the first to dramatize Existentialism directly--in his case agnostic and pantheistic Existentialism--in "Squid," Chapter 59 of *Moby-Dick* (1851), where the "formless, chance-like apparition of life" with its tentacles groping "as if blindly to clutch at any hapless object within reach" is the image of a futile grasping for meaning, which is not to be found outside, but only in the depths of one's own soul, the inner sea. In many details the squid is the opposite of the whale, in particular Moby-Dick, who represents meaning, myth, Truth. The squid is thought to furnish to the sperm whale "his only food." That is, in the depths of the soul, meaning feeds on, devours and displaces meaninglessness. Before finding Moby-Dick, or Meaning, one must confront Meaninglessness, which is nauseating, hence suppressed: "rarely is it beheld."

*Moby-Dick* is an example of how Existentialism usually appears in American literature, as a phase in psychological development--the individuation process--in which the protagonist evolves beyond Atheism or agnosticism and achieves some atonement with Nature in pantheism like Ishmael, or with God. Emily Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz when I died" renders a loss of faith at the moment of death, ironic because the speaker has obviously survived in an afterlife--confirming her faith in God. That the Existential confrontation with "nothingness" is only a phase exemplifies the essential optimism typical of American literature up to the Postmodern period beginning in the 1960s, though Melville himself lost such optimism after *Moby-Dick*. Though evoking Christ, his Bartleby is Existential with a Gothic tone.

The Naturalism that begins in the late 19th century with Stephen Crane's *Maggie* (1893) is a counter tradition, in which the pessimistic late Mark Twain is included. Naturalism is the opposite of Existentialism in denying free will, which is a fundamental premise and extreme emphasis of Existentialism. Crane is not a pure Naturalist because he posits free will in most characters, such as Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). In *The Awakening* (1899), the Existential situation is more social than metaphysical, as Kate Chopin identifies herself by name with the pianist Mademoiselle Reisz, an Existentialist who uses the

metaphor of the artist in explaining to Edna Pontellier that a human being has the free will to create an authentic self in society by making responsible choices. Edna is too poor an artist of herself and too weak to live out the role she has chosen. "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903) by Henry James is about a man who misses his greatest opportunities for happiness because he believes his destiny is predetermined and fails to create a life by risking choices. Jay Gatsby creates a fake self and loses everything because he is corrupt, and a romantic fool with poor taste. Existentialism is evident too in Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning" (1915), "The Snow Man" and other poems. Only months before he died Stevens converted from Atheism to Christianity. Religious Existentialism is one of the many philosophical currents in Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), the most influential poem of the 20th century.

In Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Naturalism is a strong theme, especially with respect to the war and to Catherine Barkeley's death in childbirth, one of Nature's "dirty tricks," but her heroism affirms Existentialism--the possibility of transcendence through "grace under pressure." His story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is a classic formulation of Existentialism. Naturalism is also a strong theme throughout Faulkner's fiction, especially the determinism of the past, the history of the South, and in particular the "curse" of slavery. However, his emphasis on the heroic exertion of free will and individual integrity against the pressures of tradition and society in works such as "An Odor of Verbena" and *The Bear* (1939) is Existential, as are passages in *As I Lay Dying* (1930). But Faulkner's Existentialism is religious. He believes in God and he embodies Atheist Existentialism in Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)—adolescent, solipsistic, narcissistic, perverse, and suicidal. In all of Faulkner and in the last testament of Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), virtues traditionally considered Christian and characteristics of the transcendental mode are above and beyond Existentialism.

Naturalism is inevitably strong in the African-American tradition, emphasizing victimization, as in Richard Wright's landmark *Native Son* (1940). Ralph Ellison liberates his black protagonist from the trap of Naturalism with Existentialism in *Invisible Man* (1952), emphasizing the need to attain authenticity through enlightenment and ethnic heritage. Alice Walker advances this progression to transcendentalism in "To Hell with Dying" (1967), as does Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* (1977). The African-American tradition illustrates a progressive philosophical sequence of Naturalism, Existentialism, Transcendentalism.

Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer and Walker Percy are the most explicitly Existentialist of major American novelists. John Updike has said that he was strongly influenced by Christian Existentialism, evident in his novels about Rabbit *Angst*-rom. In drama, Tennessee Williams straddles Modernism and Postmodernism in his Existential dream allegory *Camino Real* (1952). Thomas Pynchon satirizes the Existential quest in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1967) and Postmodernists in general resemble Naturalists in denying the possibility of transcendence. On the contrary, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) is exceptional in its Existentialist Feminism, dramatizing a desperate attempt to cope with a loss of social faith through personal authenticity, commitment and potential transcendence. *Sleepless Nights* (1979) by Elizabeth Hardwick is a more positive blend of Existentialism and humanistic feminism. Most recently, *The Road* (2006), by Cormac McCarthy, is an apocalyptic allegory of Christian Existentialist faith--very powerful.

Walker Percy's Christian Existentialism is more explicitly philosophical, complex, witty, and serious than either the Christian Existentialism of Updike or the Atheist Existentialism of Bellow and Mailer. Updike is a lightweight, Mailer an adolescent. There is a tension in Christian Existentialism between the Existentialist premise of total free will--as in the heresy of Gnosticism--and the Christian doctrine that true freedom can be attained only in surrender to the will of God. See Percy's novels *The Moviegoer* (1961), *The Last Gentleman* (1966), *Love in the Ruins* (1971), *Lancelot* (1977), and *The Second Coming* (1980), and his essays in *The Message in the Bottle* (1975).

Michael Hollister (2015)

"For a whole generation [the passage on abstract words] in *A Farewell to Arms* was the great statement of protest against the butchery of the First World War. But it has a greater historical significance than that: it can be taken as a kind of manifesto of modern art and literature, an incitement to break through empty abstractions of whatever kind, to destroy sentimentality even if the real feelings exposed should appear humble and impoverished--the names of places and dates; and even if in stripping himself naked the artist seems to be left with Nothing. Modern art thus begins, and sometimes ends, as a confession of spiritual

poverty. That is its greatness and its triumph, but also the needle it jabs into the Philistine's sore spot, for the last thing he wants is to be reminded of his spiritual poverty. In fact, his greatest poverty is not to know how impoverished he is, and so long as he mouths the empty ideals or religious phrases of the past he is but as tinkling brass...The triumph of Hemingway's style is its ability to break through abstractions to see what it is one really senses and feels....

So far as the mood of Hemingway's ["A Clean, Well-Lighted Place"] is concerned, it is in no way... despairing, or nihilistic. Rather, its tone is one of somber and clear courage. As a matter of fact, human moods and reactions to the encounter with Nothingness vary considerably from person to person, and from culture to culture. The Chinese Taoists found the Great Void tranquilizing, peaceful, even joyful. For the Buddhists in India, the idea of Nothing evoked a mood of universal compassion for all creatures caught in the toils of an existence that is ultimately groundless. In the traditional culture of Japan the idea of Nothingness pervades the exquisite modes of aesthetic feeling displayed in painting, architecture, and even the ceremonial rituals of daily life. But Western man, up to his neck in things, objects, and the business of mastering them, recoils with anxiety from any possible encounter with Nothingness and labels talk of it as "negative"--which is to say, morally reprehensible....Hemingway's story may seem a tiny thing to pit against the central tradition of Western thought, but one has to take the experience of the real where one finds it; genuine witnesses to experience are so few and far between that we cannot afford not to listen to one, even at the discomfort of having to think in a way that is unfamiliar to us....

[Quentin's section of *The Sound and the Fury*] is a masterpiece, perhaps as great as anything yet written by an American; and it is to be recommended to anyone who wants to know the concrete feel of that world with which in his thinking the Existential philosopher has to deal....The abolition of clock time does not mean a retreat into the world of the timeless; quite the contrary: the timeless world, the eternal, has disappeared from the horizon of the modern writer as it has from the horizon of modern Existentialists like Sartre and Heidegger, and from the horizon of our own everyday life; and time thereby becomes all the more inexorable and absolute a reality. The temporal is the horizon of modern man, as the eternal was the horizon of the man of the Middle Ages."

William Barrett  
*Irrational Man:*  
*A Study of Existentialism in Modern Literature*  
(Doubleday/Anchor 1958) 45, 285-86, 52-3

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