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The Catcher of Zero

Existentialism in Contemporary U.S.-American Literature

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1. Introduction

Existentialism is often referred to as a philosophical school, although its primary characteristic is that it is not a school at all. On the contrary, the many thinkers who have dealt with existential philosophy have taken quite different approaches to the subject, and most of them have also rejected to be subsumed under the label of "existentialism." Only a small group of French philosophers, including, most notably, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, actually called themselves existentialists. It was especially these latter two, Albert Camus, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, and the German Friedrich Nietzsche, whose existential views and ideas influenced American culture and literature between the late 19th century and the early 1970s. The most significant impact was indisputably that of the French existentialists, whose philosophies and literary works became highly popular in the U.S. after World War II. As a matter of fact, their popularity was so great that, as a side effect of the dissemination of French existentialism in the American mainstream as well as on university campuses, strong clichés became attached to it. Many of these images are still associated with existentialism today: Paris cafés, black turtleneck sweaters, smoking cigarettes, and also a rather nihilistic outlook on life. However, it will be shown that the latter is indeed a cliché, and that French existentialism considered itself – and actually *was* – a positive philosophy.

The aim of this thesis is to illustrate the impact of existentialism on American culture and literature, on the one hand, and to exemplify this influence by providing an analysis of two 20th-century American novels, on the other.

Since one of the defining features of existentialism is a stress on the individual and his or her subjective perspective, literature has always been its most important vehicle of expression. Philosophers like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, or Sartre have expressed their fundamental views in literary works or made use of the stylistic features of literature to convey their philosophical views. However, there are two kinds of existential literature. The first one is the one just mentioned, written by philosophers who incorporated key concepts of their thought into literary works. The second kind is literature which deals with fundamentally existential topics without being explicitly philosophical. As will be shown in chapters 3 and 4, which deal with existential literature in general, and with American

literature in particular, the range of novels and plays that can be interpreted existentially is a vast one. A closer look at relevant American authors will reveal that there is an existential tradition in American literature, with a limited number of authors who explicitly addressed existential themes. Some of these authors were directly influenced by or identified with existentialism, such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, whereas others, including Hemingway, Faulkner, or Salinger, focussed on existential subjects in their own ways, without apparent philosophical backgrounds. After a survey of existential philosophers and writers, as well as of typical elements and features of their literature, the center of attention in my discussion of American existential literature will move to two 20th-century novels, which will be examined from an existential angle.

J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* was published in 1951 and at a time when French existentialism was on the rise in the US. Even though Salinger is not known to have been influenced by it directly, an analysis of the novel will show that existential elements can be found in the novel both in terms of contents and style.

Finally, a temporal leap will take this thesis to the 1980s and Bret Easton Ellis's novel *Less Than Zero* (1985). Even though existentialism's influence waned in the early 1970s, the reading of *Less Than Zero* in an existential context will be justified extensively in chapter 6, by drawing parallels to *The Catcher in the Rye* on the one hand, and by examining and illustrating existential themes in the novel, on the other hand.

It will become clear after the discussion of the two novels that although existentialism as a philosophy did not survive the philosophical, political, and especially economic changes of the late 20th century, its ideas and concerns are so universal that they can still be found in contemporary culture and literature.

2. Existentialism: An Introduction to Existential Philosophies and Literatures

2.1 Terminology

Before launching into any in-depth discussion of existentialism and its literatures, it is absolutely necessary to refer to the problems posed by the terminology which will be used in this thesis.

The term "existentialism" itself was coined in 1925 and was not widely used until 1945.¹ It would therefore be an anachronism to refer to such writers or philosophers as Dostoyevsky or Nietzsche as "existentialists," even though they may have laid some important groundwork for this particular philosophical school of thought, and their works may already contain many thoughts and viewpoints typical of existentialism. In addition, even 20th-century philosophical writers already familiar and frequently associated with the term, most notably Heidegger and Camus, rejected the label "existentialist" for their works.² This is all the more problematic in the case of Camus, seeing that he is in general regarded as inseparable from French existentialist thought.

In the following discussion of existential philosophies and literatures, various terms are therefore going to be used. "Existential philosophy" or "existential thought" will generally be applied to philosophers who deal with existential themes and ideas, but who lived and worked before the term "existentialism" emerged, or who rejected the latter label (or, in fact, any kind of label) for their philosophical works and ideas. "Existential writing," on the other hand, is going to be used to refer to all literature dealing with existential and existentialist subjects, except those written by self-labeled "existentialists,"³ in which case it is acceptable to apply the term "existentialist" to literature as well.

Thus the use of the term "existentialist" – for a person, a philosophy, or a literary work – will be largely restricted to those who have adopted the label for themselves. An exception will be made when referring to views, themes or motifs in literature typical of or influenced by 20th-century existentialism; in those cases, even

¹ Cf. Brosman, 7.

² Cf. Brosman, 3.

³ In this thesis, this will mostly concern Sartre.

works by writers who do not identify themselves with existentialism in the narrower sense will be examined in terms of "existentialist" elements.

2.2 Existential Philosophy and Existentialism

"Streng genommen gibt es keine Philosophie, die nicht existentialistisch wäre."⁴ (Mounier, 8)

Philosophy is not anymore restricted to refer to, as its literal meaning implies, the love of wisdom or knowledge. It is, on the contrary, a humanistic discipline concerned with "fundamental questions of being, knowing, thinking, judging, and doing, in such branches as metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, logic, aesthetics, and ethics" (Brosman, 231). In other words, it deals with the fundamental aspects of human existence. "Man fragt sich, was eine Philosophie wohl tun würde, wenn sie nicht die Existenz und die Existierenden erforschte"⁵ (Mounier, 8-9). Of course, speaking of existential philosophy and modern existentialism does not imply that, before the 17th century, philosophy did not explore existence. Precursors of existential philosophy can be found as early as in antiquity, for example in Socrates' demand "Erkenne dich selbst!"⁶

There are, however, two important new aspects from the 17th century onwards, notably beginning with Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* (1680, *Thoughts*). One is the explicit occupation of philosophy with individual existence and personal experience, and the other, becoming central especially in 20th-century Sartrean existentialism, is the view that existence precedes essence. The first of these novel notions – individualism and the fundamental role of the human being – may be a reaction to anterior abstract philosophies such as Kant's or Hegel's. Emmanuel Mounier speaks of existential thought as a "Reaktion der Philosophie vom Menschen gegen die Übersteigerung der Philosophie von den Ideen und von den Dingen"⁷ (Mounier, 9).

⁴ "Strictly speaking, there is no philosophy which is not existentialist." (All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are the author's own.)

⁵ "One may ask oneself what a philosophy would do if it did not explore existence and those who exist."

⁶ "Recognize yourself!" Cf. Mounier, 9.

⁷ "reaction of the philosophy of the human being against the excess of the philosophy of ideas and things."

This individualism may be accompanied by a strong religious faith, as in Pascal's or Kierkegaard's philosophies, or else be the result of a categorical atheism, as in Sartre's case: in the absence of a God, all that is left is the human being and its existence. In all cases, there is a new stress on the human and his experience, and subjectivity and personal responsibility have gained a new importance.

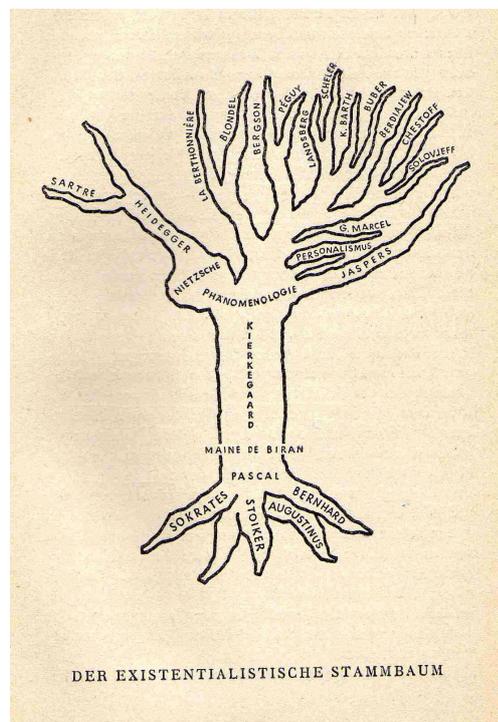
The second notion – existence precedes essence – presupposes not only atheism in existentialism, but also a complete disbelief in any meaning inherent to life before, or other than, existence. Contrary to the opposing philosophy of essentialism, it is the view that all possible meaning is created by man himself, and that there is no essence in the world, or in humans, prior to existence.

2.3 Existential Philosophy from the 17th to the early 20th Centuries

Even though existential philosophy from the 19th century on can be divided into two main branches, according to their metaphysical contents – namely a theistic and an atheist branch –, its historical development is rather linear. Modern existentialism takes its point of origin in 17th-century France, where Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, originally intended as a defense of the Christian faith, were published. In the 19th century, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard took up the notion of subjectivity in his philosophy which is, if not founded on, certainly marked by strong religious faith. 1907 saw the publication of Edmund Husserl's *The Idea of Phenomenology*, which, in combination with Kierkegaard's philosophical reflections, would influence all future branches of existentialism. From this period onward, existential philosophy developed into two major directions: a religious branch with its most famous representatives Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, and an atheist branch, initiated already before Husserl by Friedrich Nietzsche, continued by Martin Heidegger and brought to perfection by Jean-Paul Sartre (see illustration on page 10). Since the latter branch has had the strongest impact on literature and general consciousness both in Europe and in the United States until well into the 20th century, it is mainly this direction that is going to be taken into account in the following chapters.

2.3.1 Blaise Pascal (1623–1662)

All sources agree that the foundation of all later existential philosophies is laid by Blaise Pascal and his unfinished *Pensées*, published posthumously in 1680. In these *Thoughts*, the French philosopher, mathematician, and physicist turns against his contemporaries' and predecessors' – notably Descartes' and Montaigne's – tendency to rationalize existence and to understand life by using science, instead of seeing it "personally, as a lived experience, fraught with infinite importance" (Brosman, 37). This experience is shaped by the inherent "misère de l'homme" (misery of man), which is a result of the "[c]ondition of man: inconstancy, boredom, unease" (ibid., 39). Pascal calls the activities which humans use to forget their condition or to chase away the boredom "divertissements" (diversions), such as gambling or hunting. His solution or way out of the "misère" is the Christian faith, which is, however, beyond reasoning and outside rational arguments – a "leap over reason" (ibid., 41) later criticized by Camus as unjustified, not only in Pascal's argumentation, but also in the philosophies of his successors Jaspers and Kierkegaard.⁸



(Illustration: Mounier, 11)

⁸ Cf. Brosman, 37-41; see also *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 54-63.

2.3.2 Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821–1881)

The beginning of modern existentialism is marked by the philosophy of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Arguing against a rationalist approach to reality, existence, and religious faith, he emphasizes the importance of subjective truth. "[I]t is by, through, and for the subject that truth is to be sought. Kierkegaard did not mean, however, arbitrary subjectiveness; rather, that truth and the search for truth must be subject-directed" (Brosman, 43). His stress is on "passion, free choice, and self-definition in opposition to the rationalist philosophies [...], in particular Hegelianism" (Mautner, 326). Existence is more than just being there, it means passionate living and commitment to choices. The image he uses to illustrate the difference between existence and "so-called existence" (ibid., 327) is that of someone riding a wild stallion as opposed to falling asleep in a hay wagon. For Kierkegaard, one example of passionate commitment is Christianity: "To be or become a Christian [...] it is necessary to passionately commit oneself, to make a 'leap of faith' in the face of an 'objective uncertainty'. One cannot know or prove that there is a God; one must simply choose to believe" (ibid.).

Most later existential philosophers adopted Kierkegaard's views on subjectivity, personal experience, and commitment to choices (in the sense of personal responsibility), as well as his preference for the concrete over the abstract. As a consequence of the latter, Kierkegaard wrote in a literary rather than in a scientific or theoretical style, making use of devices such as "first-person discourse, dialogue, metaphors, personae and pseudonyms, irony, and narrative" (Brosman, 44). Camus and Sartre would also publish some of their most important works in the form of novels or plays, making their philosophical groundwork more easily accessible thanks to the concrete, palpable, subjective quality of literature.

After Kierkegaard, the 19th-century existential "movement"⁹ developed in two opposing directions, both of them incorporating Husserl's phenomenology into their bodies of thought. The religious branch was most notably represented by Karl

⁹ It would be inaccurate to talk about existentialism as a movement without the quotation marks, as "existentialists differ widely from one another and, given their individualistic emphasis, it is not surprising that many of them have denied involvement in any 'movement' at all" (Mautner, 207).

Jaspers and later continued by Gabriel Marcel. The former is, however, also cited, as well as contradicted, by Sartre and Camus. The atheist branch, which will lead directly to 20th-century existentialism, is famously represented by Friedrich Nietzsche in philosophy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky in literature.

Even though Dostoyevsky was neither a philosopher nor an existentialist, nor could he even have known the term, since he was not familiar with Kierkegaard and his concept of *existential*, he is however considered to be a "kindred thinker by many existential authors" (Brosman, 14). Camus, for example, called Dostoyevsky's work a "literary embodiment of the absurd" (ibid.). Four years before Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-5) and his famous proclamation "God is dead," Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov already contemplates the consequences of a godless society: "Without God, there is no ground for morality [...]. If God does not exist, 'everything is permitted'" (ibid., 15). Although this conclusion has been interpreted as nihilistic, especially Camus, Malraux, and Sartre have contemplated it in the light of possibility, "showing how reasons for acting morally can be derived from the very absence of God [...]" (ibid., 16).

Whereas, however, Dostoyevsky's literature is usually not characterized by positivity, but rather by inner conflict, moral struggles, drama, and crime, the most famous atheist of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche, founds his boundless optimism on the very absence of God.

2.3.3 Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900): Nihilism and Optimism

The importance of Nietzsche's philosophy and his influence on 20th-century thought becomes obvious considering that virtually every Western person with a reasonable education will be able to associate key concepts such as "God is dead" or "nihilism" with Nietzsche. Perhaps a considerable percentage among this imaginary survey group would already struggle, however, when asked to explain the exact meaning of these ideas.

To many people, the word "nihilism," quite understandably, has a negative ring to it. After all, the word stems from the Latin "nihil," meaning "nothing." The general interpretation of nihilism has therefore come to be something along the lines of "belief in nothing" or, worse, a negative outlook on human existence in

general – comparable to the perspectivelessness of punk rock, iconized in the band The Sex Pistols and their song "God Save the Queen" with the recurring line "there's no future."¹⁰ However, like French existentialism, defended against its critics by Sartre as being a positive rather than a negative philosophy,¹¹ nihilism also deserves a defense and a reevaluation of its meaning and, especially, of its positive potential. Nietzsche considered it a positive force, which serves to redefine traditional conceptions of "good" and "evil," and to free society from old values in order to create new, more up-to-date ones:

"[N]ihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals – because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what values these 'values' really had. – We require, at some time, new values."
(from Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* in Brosman, 47)

Nihilism can be regarded as the philosophical equivalent to political anarchism. What the latter demands, before new social and political values and forces can come into effect, is the "destruction of existing society" (Brosman, 27). Likewise, nihilism, especially as expressed in Nietzsche's lyrical masterwork *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-5), insists on the annihilation of all existing values, morals, and predefined philosophical thought or opinion. The reason for this demand is not despair, nor an intention to remain in a spiritual and moral realm of nothingness. The goal is to build from scratch a new outlook on life, new spiritual and philosophical values, and a new image of the self, which will allow for an uninhibited and light existence without the heavy burdens of the outdated attitudes of our ancestors.

Nietzsche was not the first intellectual to pronounce God's death. What was new were the consequences he drew, suggested in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: the need to destroy all existing value systems, the complete freedom of man to decide whether he adopts a "slave" or a "master morality," and the rejection of existing traditions of religion, morals, and values. His nihilism is a positive, optimistic one, a "transitory state which could be used as a regenerative force" (Griem, 59). The crushing of everything traditional and familiar serves to build new values – values

¹⁰ An even closer parallel between nihilism and rock music was drawn in the film *Morphic Fields of Nihilism* (2000) by the Austrian filmmaker Ullly Aris, who explores traces of Nietzschean nihilism in the music, lyrics, and attitudes of American industrial rock band Nine Inch Nails.

¹¹ In his lecture published as *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, see chapter 2.4.1.

that have not been blindly adopted by authorities or from tradition, but have been reassessed by an independent, self-conscious human being. Man must rid himself of the burden of the past, which weighs him down:

Fast in der Wiege giebt man uns schon schwere Worte und Werthe mit: "gut" und "böse" – so heisst sich diese Mitgift. [...]

Und wir – wir schleppen treulich, was man uns mitgiebt, auf harten Schultern und über rauhe Berge! Und schwitzen wir, so sagt man uns: "Ja, das Leben ist schwer zu tragen!"

Aber der Mensch nur ist sich schwer zu tragen! Das macht, er schleppt zu vieles Fremde auf seinen Schultern. Dem Kameele gleich kniet er nieder und lässt sich gut aufladen.¹² (*Zarathustra*, 201)

The rejection of such blind submission and of predefined conceptions of good and evil is the key to a free and happy existence. The individual is his own master or, as the saying goes, the architect of his own fortune. It is only through self-awareness and self-love that freedom of thought and experience, as well as greatness, can be achieved.

Der aber hat sich selber entdeckt, welcher spricht: Das ist mein Gutes und Böses: damit hat er den Maulwurf und Zwerg stumm gemacht, welcher spricht "Allen gut, Allen böse."¹³ (*Zarathustra*, 201-2)

The ideal outcome of this difficult task is to become an *Übermensch* (*superman/superhuman*), a supreme being who is his own master, creating his "own life in the way the artist creates his works" (Mautner, 426). We will encounter a very similar view in Sartre's philosophy, which maintains the idea of man as a "project," as inventing himself at every moment, and as free to choose, despite all "given" facts, including his own nature.

2.3.4 The 20th century – Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)

The last important forerunner of French, and especially Sartrean, existentialism is the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Despite his difficult language, his incomplete work and, not least, his being a supporter of German

¹² "Almost in the cradle we are already given heavy words and values: 'good' and 'evil' – these are the names of this dowry. / And we – we drag loyally what we are given to take with us, on hard shoulders and over rough mountains! And if we sweat, we are told: 'Yes, life is a heavy load!' / But only man is his own heavy load! That is because he is carrying too much on his shoulders that is foreign. Like the camel he kneels down and lets himself be well loaded."

¹³ "But he has discovered himself who speaks: This is my good and my evil: thus he has silenced the mole and the dwarf which speaks: 'Good to all, evil to all.'"

National Socialism, he is still regarded as one of the most important modern thinkers, and considered the first existentialist philosopher of the 20th century (a label which he himself, however, rejected). The fact that Sartre – a convinced communist – read Heidegger and wrote *L'Être et le Néant* (*Being and Nothingness*) partly under his influence¹⁴ proves the importance of his work.

Heidegger's philosophy is based on a phenomenological approach, borrowed from his teacher Edmund Husserl, which dealt with the "structure of experience" (Mautner, 208). Unlike Husserl, however, Heidegger was not primarily interested in abstract questions, but used his method to look at "more personal problems – questions about how human beings should live, what they are, and the meaning of life and death" (ibid.). His concept of existence appears under the term *Dasein* (*Being-There*),¹⁵ and its main problem is "to find out who one is and what to do with oneself," or, in Nietzsche's words, "how to become what one is" (ibid., 208-9).

Contrary to Descartes, for whom a human being was a *res cogitans*, i.e. a thinking thing – a view famously expressed in his phrase "I think, therefore I am" –, Heidegger's notion of human existence is that of being indeterminate and without distinctive properties: it is a "range of possible ways to be. I define the individual I become by projecting myself into those possibilities which I choose, or which I allow to be chosen for me" (ibid., 268). The term *project* will later become central in Sartre's existentialism. Heidegger differentiates between two types of people. Those who are aware of their own mortality and act accordingly lead an existence which is authentic. The second type are people who live superficially and "let their lives be determined by social convention and conformism: their existence is inauthentic" (ibid.).¹⁶ Finally, according to Heidegger, we are "thrown" into the world "for no discernible reason" (ibid., 269), an idea which is also taken up by Sartre.

¹⁴ Cf. Brosman, 51.

¹⁵ From his work *Being and Time*, 1927.

¹⁶ Cf. Mautner, 268.

2.4 French Existentialism

Despite the many existential philosophers and philosophies, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe, the term "existentialism" has come to be associated mainly with its French protagonists, notably Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus. This is not surprising, given that Sartre himself coined the term¹⁷ and was one of the few to apply the label "existentialist" to themselves. Even Camus, invariably and indispensably mentioned in all existentialist contexts and discussions, rejected the term for his literature and philosophy. Existentialism's stress on the individual and on individual experience is mirrored in most existential philosophers' hesitation to standardize or systematize their philosophy, which includes providing it with a name or label. In addition, existence is too vague a subject, and being can never be described objectively. Karl Jaspers, an important commentator of Kierkegaard and influential for Sartre's work, "agreed with Kant that human consciousness cannot attain pure Being since, by its essence, it cannot be objectified" (Brosman, 56).

According to Heidegger, "every thinker thinks from his own historical situation" (Mautner, 269), and it is certainly no coincidence that existentialism emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries. In the face of the industrial revolution in many European countries, the individual was in danger of becoming a worker ant, a tool to serve society and progress, with no personal value in itself. This threat was surely one of the factors which gradually alerted philosophy to the needs of human beings, their personal experience, and their individual existence. Similarly, 20th-century French existentialism was not only the product of a lineage of thinking descending from Pascal and finding its master in Sartre, but also the result of World War II and its political aberrations, as well as its bleak effects on society and life in general.

French philosophical and literary existentialism were closely connected, especially in the works of Sartre, Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir, who concretized their philosophical views in works of fiction and drama. Purely literary existentialists, such as Malraux, Saint-Exupéry, or Anouilh, will briefly be touched

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 207.

upon in chapter 3.1 on existential literature. Since Sartre and Camus were the existentialists who influenced American society and literature the most, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, they will be treated here somewhat more extensively.

2.4.1 Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980)

For many people, the name Jean-Paul Sartre has come to be synonymous with existentialism, and there are several reasons for this. Firstly, as has been mentioned previously, it was Sartre who coined the term existentialism. Secondly, he was one of the very few who accepted to be called an existentialist, along with his lifelong friend and companion, Simone de Beauvoir. Finally, of all existentialists, existential philosophers, and writers of existential fiction, Sartre was undoubtedly the one who went furthest in his insistence on the individual's responsibility for his acts, on the necessity to lead an honest existence free of hypocrisy, and on an uncompromising incorporation of his philosophical views into everyday life. Along with his philosophical and literary works, which present Sartre's humanistic existentialist views, it was his political commitment which earned him much respect, but also criticism. In 1964, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, which he refused "[i]n accordance with revolutionary principles" (Mautner, 551).¹⁸

The first important statement in Sartre's philosophy is that *existence precedes essence*. Essentialists, following Plato's notion of "ideas" – concepts which are inherent to things and beings prior to, or independent of, their existence –, believe that "some properties inhere necessarily in the individuals to which they belong" (Mautner, 199). This implies, of course, that essentialism presupposes a higher being with the power to implement such an essence in the world. Sartre, on the contrary, an adamant atheist, believes that there is no inherent essence; what comes first is existence, and all meaning within this existence is meaning invented and attributed to it by man. Life is, so to speak, without meaning, which does not by any means signify that it does not have the potential of being filled with meaning, as will become clear shortly.

¹⁸ Another source indicates that his refusal resulted from his "dislike of America and its purported humanism, which he viewed as hypocritical" (Brosman, 104).

The individual is born into a life and faced with situations which are not under his control and which he did not choose. In Heidegger's terms, man is "thrown" into the world. But by applying his own free will, choices, and actions, he influences the course of his life at each moment. "One is never free of one's 'situation,' Sartre tells us, but one is always free to 'negate' that situation and try to change it" (Mautner, 549). For lack of an essence or a God, it is man himself who is in full control of his acts and whose life is neither predetermined, nor unalterable. Similar to Nietzsche's idea of the superhuman, who is his own master and "his own creation" (Lehan, 1), Sartre states that man creates meaning for himself, and he does so through his acts:

[...] il n'y a de réalité que dans l'action ; [...] l'homme n'est rien d'autre que son projet, il n'existe que dans la mesure où il se réalise, il n'est donc rien d'autre que l'ensemble de ses actes, rien d'autre que sa vie.¹⁹
(*L'Existentialisme*, 55)

Man being his own *project*, an elementary term in Sartrean existentialism, implies that "human reality is future-directed" (Brosman, 17) and that "[t]he self is an ongoing project in the world" (Mautner, 550). In other words, we are constantly in the process of self-definition, "we are always an 'open question', a self not yet made" (ibid.). However, Sartre makes a point of underlining that this does not, and should not, mean pursuing unrealizable or illusory goals. According to Sartre, "no one is better than his life" (Brosman, 18). A person's life is the essence of his existence, of what he is – an essence created by himself, and not implanted in him at (or before) his birth. It is one's acts which define this existence and turn it into an overall picture, which is complete at any point in time and should therefore be lived accordingly. Ideally, thus, one should make the best of every moment and situation, acting and choosing in accordance with one's beliefs and convictions, instead of postponing decisions or dreaming of future accomplishments. In his play *Huis Clos*, Sartre's three protagonists, imprisoned together in hell, have to deal with the consequences of such a wasted existence:

Garcin: Je suis mort trop tôt. On ne m'a pas laissé le temps de faire *mes* actes.

¹⁹ "[...] there is no reality except in action; [...] man is nothing else but his project, he doesn't exist except to the extent to which he realises himself, he is therefore nothing else but the totality of his acts, nothing else but his life."

Inès: On meurt toujours trop tôt – ou trop tard. Et cependant la vie est là, terminée; le trait est tiré, il faut faire la somme. Tu n'es rien d'autre que ta vie.²⁰
(*Théâtre*, 165)

In addition to the necessity to make choices and to act in order to render one's life meaningful, Sartre stresses the individual's complete freedom of will, and freedom to choose. The fact that one cannot change the situation one is born into or situations which befall one (such as war, social circumstances, physical advantages or disadvantages, etc.), does not mean that one is less free. These situations may be completely accidental, but their arbitrariness does not curtail freedom, as they are only a starting point, the background and circumstances within which the individual "is always free to choose (though not free not to choose)" (Mautner, 209):

One may be cowardly or shy, but such behavior is always a choice and one can always resolve to change. One may be born Jewish or black, French or crippled, but it is an open question what one will make of oneself – whether these will be made into handicaps or advantages, challenges to be overcome or excuses to do nothing. (ibid.)

Within one's unalterable situation, one is always free to choose. Sartre goes as far as saying that even under the Nazi regime of World War II, everyone had options: one could choose to collaborate with or accept the regime, one could join the Resistance or help refugees, one could decide to emigrate or stay.²¹ Even in captivity, there is freedom: "to cower before [one's] captors, try to assist others, maintain [one's] political or religious faith, or abandon it" (Brosman, 18). However limited one's situation is, Sartre insists that there is always room for choice.

Since life is not predetermined, and since man is his actions, and since man's freedom is absolute, there is a fundamental consequence which constitutes the heart of Sartrean existentialism. Life may not have an essential meaning, but contrary to Dostoyevsky's hero Ivan Karamazov, who claims that "[w]ithout God, there is no ground for morality [...]. If God does not exist, 'everything is permitted'" (Brosman, 15), Sartre concludes that since there is no God and no higher instance,

²⁰ "*Garcin*: I died too soon. They didn't leave me time to achieve my deeds. / *Inez*: One always dies too soon – or too late. And yet your life is there, completed. The line is drawn, you have to add up the figures. You are your life and only your life." (Translation by Barnes, 27)

²¹ Cf. Brosman, 18.

man is fully responsible for all of his actions, for himself and for others. "If one is totally free, one is totally responsible. [...] Moreover, one's responsibility is for everything" (ibid., 19):

Si, d'autre part, Dieu n'existe pas, nous ne trouvons pas en face de nous des valeurs ou des ordres qui légitimeront notre conduite. Ainsi, nous n'avons ni derrière nous, ni devant nous, dans le domaine lumineux des valeurs, des justifications ou des excuses. [...] L'homme est condamné à être libre. Condamné, parce qu'il ne s'est pas créé lui-même, et par ailleurs cependant libre, parce qu'une fois jeté dans le monde, il est responsable de tout ce qu'il fait.²² (*L'Existentialisme*, 37)

"[L]'enfer, c'est les Autres"²³ (*Théâtre*, 167). This famous observation leads us to another central aspect of Sartre's philosophy. Other people are frequently our advisors, our frame of reference, and our judges. We therefore tend to adapt our behavior, and even our choices, to other people's expectations instead of being true to ourselves and sticking to our convictions. "Someone 'catches us in the act' and we define ourselves in their terms" (Mautner, 550). The problematic result of this *being-for-others*, in Sartrean terms, in combination with our accidental situations is the final crucial point in Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant* (1943, *Being and Nothingness*): bad faith.

Similar to Heidegger's description of authentic and inauthentic existences,²⁴ Sartre differentiates between good faith (*bonne foi*) and bad faith (*mauvaise foi*). Someone acting in good faith accepts and realizes his responsibility, regardless of his situation or of the roles which others expect him to play in his life or in society. Although we occupy certain social roles, "we always transcend such positions" (Mautner, 550):

When we try to pretend that we are identical to our roles or the captive of our situations, we are in 'bad faith'. It is bad faith to see ourselves as something fixed and settled, defined by 'human nature', but it is also bad faith to ignore the always restrictive facts and circumstances within which all choices must be made. (ibid.)

²² "If, on the other hand, God does not exist, we do not find in front of us values or orders which will legitimate our behavior. So we do not have neither behind us nor ahead of us, in the luminous domain of values, justifications or excuses. [...] man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he has not created himself, and furthermore still free, because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does."

²³ "Hell is other people." (Mautner, 551)

²⁴ Cf. chapter 2.3.4.

In order to lead an authentic existence in good faith, it is therefore necessary to be responsible, committed, and ready to use one's right (and duty) to make choices and act, and not to give in to the temptation of assuming an existence of bad faith, which includes "lying, but also [...] role playing, denial, hypocrisy, and other subterfuges adopted for others and oneself" (Brosman, 19). In the words of Terry Eagleton, for existentialists "it is the fact of being committed, rather than the exact content of our commitments, which is the key to an authentic existence" (Eagleton, 53). Because without action, ultimately, one's life amounts to nothing.

Critics of Sartre and Camus in their time claimed that (especially atheist) existentialism was a negative philosophy, as it dealt with meaninglessness and absurdity, and as it denied the existence of God. It is therefore often associated with nihilism and negativism. However, in his famous lecture *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme* (1946, *Existentialism is a Humanism*), Sartre defends his philosophy against this accusation and argues that existentialism is, on the contrary, a positive and humanistic philosophy, above all because its main focus is on existence, life, actions and decisions in the "here and now." In other words, existentialists concentrate on what they can do and be, instead of having dreams and illusions about what they could be, which would mean defining oneself negatively:

[...] les rêves, les attentes, les espoirs permettent seulement de définir un homme comme rêve déçu, comme espoirs avortés, comme attentes inutiles ; c'est-à-dire que ça les définit en négatif et non en positif ; cependant quand on dit « tu n'es rien d'autre que ta vie », cela n'implique pas que l'artiste sera jugé uniquement d'après ses œuvres d'art, mille autres choses contribuent également à le définir. [...] Dans ces conditions, ce qu'on nous reproche là, ça n'est pas au fond notre pessimisme, mais une dureté optimiste.²⁵ (*L'Existentialisme*, 57-8)

There is a close affinity of this view to Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence,²⁶ which is a positive alternative to the Christian doctrine, because it defines life by existence, not by its end.²⁷

²⁵ "[...] dreams, expectations, hopes only allow to define a man as disappointed dream, as failed hopes, as useless expectations; that means that this defines them negatively and not positively; however, if one says "you are nothing else but your life," that does not imply that the artist will only be judged according to his works of art, a thousand other things contribute equally to define him. [...] Under these conditions, what we are accused of is actually not our pessimism, but an optimistic rigidity."

²⁶ "[...] the doctrine that time is cyclical, repeating itself over and over again. [...] If one is really living a good life, he argues, one would be happy to repeat it over and over" (Mautner, 425).

Contrary to classic liberalism, which has been opposed to existentialism by critics as being more humanistic, existentialism is much more so according to Sartre, as it does not present humanity in abstract terms. For Sartre, humanism cannot be abstract. In addition, the abstractions of classic liberalism often include ideals such as "homeland, honor, glory, a people's history" (Brosman, 20), which undermine the individual or may even result in fascism.²⁸ One of the determining features of existentialism is its dislike of abstractions and its stress on the practical and the concrete, which, for Sartre, includes the realization of one's principles in one's practical life and, as a result, unlimited personal responsibility with regard to oneself and others.

2.4.2 Albert Camus (1913–1960)

Even though Albert Camus rejected the label "existentialist" for himself, his writing is closely connected to existentialist thought, and he was a close friend of Sartre's for several years, before their friendship ended over diverging political views in 1951.²⁹ Due to this close bond, Camus can therefore not be omitted from any discussion of existentialism. However, his philosophical main concerns lie elsewhere than Sartre's. To begin with, although he agrees with Sartre that life is initially without meaning and that there is no God, he does not concur that this means the absence of a human nature. On the contrary, Camus feels that

we must postulate some kind of human essence. It is needed to explain man's very sense of "the human." Without it there could be no solidarity among men; the Rebel would have no feeling that there are "limits" beyond which it "is not right" to go; no person would ever choose to give up his life to preserve an idea more precious than his own existence. (Barnes, 368)

The idea of a human nature does not exclude Sartre's view that everyone is fully responsible, but gives it a more humanistic touch. In his novel *La Peste* (1947, *The Plague*), the doctor, Rieux, fights a losing battle against the spreading epidemic, but still feels morally obliged to do everything in his power to help as much as possible. Without a human nature, or an "essence," perhaps responsibility would

²⁷ Cf. Mautner, 425.

²⁸ Cf. Brosman, 20.

²⁹ In detail, Sartre was put off by Camus' denunciation of communist tyranny in the latter's *L'Homme révolté* (1951, *The Rebel*), even though Camus was not solely attacking communism, but also fascism and McCarthyism (cf. Mautner, 94).

make a person fulfill his tasks dutifully, but Rieux' commitment goes far beyond mere duty.

That for which Camus is best known, however, are his thoughts on absurdity and suicide, the main concerns of his essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1943, *The Myth of Sisyphus*). The term "absurdity" (*l'absurde*), even though introduced into French existentialist vocabulary by André Malraux, who himself may have borrowed it from Dostoyevsky,³⁰ is not only inseparably associated with Camus, but has also "(wrongly) come to represent the whole of existentialist thinking" (Mautner, 209). This inaccurate generalization may have resulted from the great popularity of Camus' writing, which was doubtlessly a result of the accessible and humanistic nature of his writing, both in terms of style and of content. Camus' popularity also shows how influential he was as an existential thinker, and that, to some degree, sympathy for him outweighed sympathy for Sartre among intellectuals in France as well as in America.³¹ Of course, Camus had an important advantage over Sartre, as morbid as this may sound: he died early. His premature death in a car accident in 1960 took him at the height of his philosophical thought and popularity, and "spared" him from having to react to new social or political developments, or from becoming a "hardliner" in his philosophical and political convictions like Sartre, whose last major philosophical work *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), an ambitious attempt to combine existentialism and Marxism, was not considered a success by all critics.³² However, this does not belittle the significance of Camus' contribution to existential thought.

As mentioned above, at the heart of Camus' philosophy is the notion that life is absurd. Absurdity is, for one thing, our inability to grasp the meaning of life. Following from one of atheist existentialism's basic assumptions, to wit that there is no God, there is no meaning inherent to existence. However, we have the mental capacities to ask ourselves fundamental questions about life, and must necessarily fail in our attempts to make sense of it. This state of ignorance is compared with a capacity of seeing which, due to the lack of something to be seen (either because it is not there, or because it is hidden from view), is never satisfied – whereas one is

³⁰ Cf. Brosman, 80.

³¹ Cf. chapter 4.1.

³² Cf. Brosman, 105-106.

constantly aware of this absence.³³ The fate of Sisyphus, the Greek mythological king, who was condemned to roll a rock up a hill for all eternity in the afterworld, is the central image of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. He is a vivid symbol of man's absurd condition and his futile efforts to reach the top – be it because there is no top to be reached, or because we are prevented from seeing or reaching it by forces we cannot control or even imagine.

There are different reactions to the absurdity of our existence, and different ways of dealing with it. One of them is the "leap over reason" (Brosman, 41) of which Camus blames religious existential philosophers such as Kierkegaard, and which is the active choice of believing in God, for whom there can be no proof.

L'important, disait l'abbé Galiani à Mme d'Epinau, n'est pas de guérir, mais de vivre avec ses maux. Kierkegaard veut guérir. [...] C'est ainsi que, par un subterfuge torturé, il donne à l'irrationnel le visage, et à son Dieu les attributs de l'absurde : injuste, inconséquent et incompréhensible.³⁴ (*Sisyphe*, 60)

However, the most frequent response to our lifelong blindness, which is the absurdity of our situation, is despair. As a direct consequence, Camus' central question poses itself: the question of suicide. The famous opening sentence of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* is: "Il n'y a qu'un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux : c'est le suicide"³⁵ (*Sisyphe*, 17). A great portion of the essay is dedicated to the subject of the absurdity of life and why we deal with it instead of putting an end to it right away, since life resembles the work of Sisyphus, futile and without meaning.

An initial answer Camus gives to this question is habit: we continue to live because we are used to living before we are used to thinking. "Nous prenons l'habitude de vivre avant d'acquiescer celle de penser. Dans cette course qui nous précipite tous les jours un peu plus vers la mort, le corps garde cette avance irréparable"³⁶ (*Sisyphe*, 23). Furthermore, even though life may be without an essential meaning, Camus agrees with Sartre that one is free to create meaning for

³³ Cf. Mautner, 94.

³⁴ "The important thing, said the cleric Galiani to Mme d'Epinau, is not to convalesce, but to live with one's pains (or evils). Kierkegaard wants to convalesce. [...] It is thus that, by means of a tortured subterfuge, he gives a face to the irrational, and to his God the attributes of the absurd: unjust, inconsistent, and incomprehensible."

³⁵ "There is only one really serious philosophical problem: suicide."

³⁶ "We take up the habit of living before acquiring that of thinking. In this race which pushes us every day a little further towards death, the body keeps this irreparable head start."

oneself. Suicide, however, would mean acknowledging the complete futility of one's existence:

Mourir volontairement suppose qu'on a reconnu, même instinctivement, le caractère dérisoire de cette habitude, l'absence de toute raison profonde de vivre, le caractère insensé de cette agitation quotidienne et l'inutilité de la souffrance.³⁷ (*Sisyphes*, 20)

It is, on the contrary, necessary to "confront and embrace that absurdity head on" instead of abdicating our responsibility to do so by suicide, which "tempts us with the promise of an illusory freedom" from it (Cholbi, 2009). In the act of accepting absurdity there also lies the key to avoiding despair. By refusing to give in to the feeling of meaninglessness, or hopelessness, man can create meaning "through a free act of affirmation in which he gives meaning to a situation which until then had none" (Mautner, 94). At the heart of this affirmative act is revolt – the decision to continue living despite the lack of an inherent meaning.³⁸

For Camus, the moment of revolt is when Sisyphus stops to watch his rock roll down the mountain again, and the time of his descent. It is at this moment that he is free from his absurd task, and free to consider his situation or ignore it – he is "supérieur à son destin" and "plus fort que son rocher" (*Sisyphes*, 165): superior to his fate and stronger than his rock. While he descends the hill to take up his work again, he can choose to be desperate or happy. Even though – or even because – the task itself cannot be changed or avoided, he can enjoy moments of liberty. His freedom lies in the acceptance of his fate as well as in his contempt of it, and in the possibility to make of his situation whatever he chooses to make of it. It is this freedom which provides the reason not to despair. This view is similar to Sartre's, which states that even though one cannot change one's original situation, one can act freely within it and is therefore always free. It is this freedom which leads Camus to conclude his essay with a sentence as famous as its opening: "Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux" (*Sisyphes*, 168): One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

³⁷ "To die voluntarily implies that one has recognized the derisory character of this habit, the absence of all deep reason to live, the nonsensical character of this daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering."

³⁸ Cf. Barnes, 218.

2.5 Existentialism and the Meaning of Life

Existential philosophy and existentialism have many faces, and can sometimes only be summarized with difficulty, owing to the great diversity of their subjects and representatives:

Kierkegaard was a devout Christian; Nietzsche was an atheist; Jean-Paul Sartre was a Marxist and Heidegger, at least briefly, a Nazi. Kierkegaard and Sartre enthusiastically insisted on the freedom of the will; Nietzsche denied it; Heidegger hardly talked about it at all. (Mautner, 207)

However, there are certain ideas shared by most existential philosophers: The stress on the individual and subjective experience; a sense of despair in the face of the incomprehensible nature of existence (both in atheist and religious existentialism); or the importance of choices and acts in order to give meaning to an otherwise absurd life. What existentialists also agree on, despite the philosophy's contrary reputation, is the positive potential of these notions. Be it Camus' proposition to see Sisyphus as a happy man, Kierkegaard's leap to faith, or Sartre's and Heidegger's view of existential *angst* as an indispensable part of human existence, a "symptom of freedom and self-awareness, not as despair" (Mautner, 209) – the possibilities of our condition, according to existentialism, are far greater than its constraints. In other words, absurdity and meaninglessness do not mean that it is impossible to lead a happy and fulfilled life.

Existentialism's idea that "life has no meaning" does not imply that there cannot be one, but only that there is no predefined, predetermined, and inherent meaning to our existence. To make life meaningful, one has to make decisions – among others, the one to want to make one's life significant. It is our choices and acts which define our lives, and by which we create our own meaning. And action itself, as we have seen, may well be more important than what exactly it is that we do. With an exuberant optimism akin to Nietzsche's, Terry Eagleton agrees with this view:

What we need is a form of life which is completely pointless, just as the jazz performance is pointless. Rather than serve some utilitarian purpose or earnest metaphysical end, it is a delight in itself. It needs no justification

beyond its own existence. In this sense, the meaning of life is interestingly close to meaninglessness. (Eagleton, 100)

Despite the difficulty to classify or generalize existentialism, it is certainly true that it "represented a certain attitude particularly relevant to modern mass society" (Mautner, 207). This relevance will become very clear later in this thesis, when two 20th-century American novels – both shaped by the achievement-oriented, capitalist society of postwar America – will be discussed in the light of existentialism.

3. Existential Literature

In a reaction to Martin Esslin's ground-breaking volume *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1962), British theater critic Kenneth Tynan laments Esslin's all-too broad approach to his dramatic field of interest, complaining that Esslin presents dramatists such as Shakespeare, Goethe, or Ibsen as "harbingers of the Absurd," and concludes quite pointedly: "[...] I wish I had an extra month of life for every playwright in connexion with whose work Mr Esslin refers to 'the human condition'" (Hinchliffe, 8). His criticism may be justified, but so is Esslin's choice to include a wide range of dramatists in his volume.

Classifying literature is always problematic, especially when labeling works that were written a long time ago with modern or contemporary terminology. It would, of course, not be accurate to call Shakespeare an existential writer. However, it cannot be denied that his plays deal with deeply existential topics, especially in the case of *Hamlet*: "[H]e must look to himself to decide on a course of action, but at the same time he questions the grounds of his action and, by implication, all activity that requires choice and commitment" (Brosman, 11). In a similar way that there is no philosophy that is not existentialist,³⁹ it would probably take a long time to find a novel, a poem, or a play, that does not deal with human existence in one way or another. Be it the Romantic poets and their observations of the Sublime in nature (and its effect upon them), or the Gothic novelists who produce fear and shivers among their readers; no lyrical or narrative content created by any author is ever detached from the writer, from a persona created by him or her, and from the human nature within them.

It is only natural that all things we humans produce end up bearing witness or even resemblance to our human nature and to our situation in this world. Likewise, all literature bears witness to man's existence and everything connected to it, everything resulting from it, and everything problematic about it. The "human condition" is omnipresent. Therefore, adapting the famous proposition that all art is political, one might claim that all art is existential, and for very similar reasons. Just as it is impossible to create a work of art without having a sociopolitical

³⁹ Cf. chapter 2.2.

background, it is inconceivable to write a poem, essay, or novel without being aware of human existence, or to exclude the implications of the latter from anything that is written.⁴⁰ Therefore, all literature is, in this light, existential.

It is, however, not the purpose of this literary investigation to track down traces of every remotely existential theme or way of dealing with human existence throughout literary history. The selection of works and authors in this thesis will be narrowed down to those dealing closely with existentialist concerns such as meaninglessness, absurdity, responsibility, good and bad faith, death and suicide, and nihilism. It has already been established that existentialism's dislike of abstractions has always made literature its primary vehicle to transport its theoretical framework and philosophical ideas. But even literature that does not spring directly from a philosophical background can provide useful insights into human experience:

Literature, to be sure, has never needed a philosophic foundation for subjectivity: whatever the genre, period, language, context, or themes, the speaking *I* has always been heard in its claims for its own authority (seeing, hearing, feeling, knowing, loving, choosing, and suffering). That is one of literature's essential functions: the expression of experience in such a way that it is transmitted to an audience as concrete and vital, not dessicated [*sic!*]. (Brosman, 50)

When discussing existential literature, we therefore need to distinguish between two types. One is literature written by existential philosophers, especially Sartre, Camus, Nietzsche, and also Kierkegaard, whose objective was to illustrate in a concrete and palpable, accessible way the fundamental ideas of their philosophies, making use of the literary genre, sometimes even in a highly poetic style, like Nietzsche. In this case, basic concepts of existential thought are incorporated in the texts, and constitute the main themes of the narrative: Sartre's concepts of bad faith, responsibility, man as a project or his acts; Camus' notion of the absurd; Kierkegaard's stress on subjectivity; and Nietzsche's celebration of the present and hope for a higher human being.

The second type is fiction by non-philosophical writers with either an open affinity to existentialism or existential ideas, such as Ralph Ellison or Richard

⁴⁰ Even the most unphilosophical study of the most scientific subject such as, say, molecular biology, is the result of an underlying human motivation and may eventually raise philosophical questions.

Wright,⁴¹ or whose works deal with existential topics without any specific philosophical knowledge or personal background as regards existentialism. Existential literature in this broader sense is on the one hand not written by philosophers, and on the other hand may place the narrative function of the work above the philosophical or moral one – even though, certainly, the line between these functions cannot always easily be detected.

Literature has always been existentialism's most powerful tool. And even though the line between existential writing and other genres of prose fiction, such as the psychological novel or social realism, is sometimes difficult to draw, it is not always necessary to make a distinction at all, as any literary work has several levels and layers of meaning, and more than one stylistic as well as thematic foci.

3.1 Essential Works of Literary Existentialism

Before turning to the central works of Sartre and Camus, who mastered the discipline of literary existentialism like few others, I will briefly mention three non-philosophical authors frequently associated with French existentialism.

The first one is André Malraux (1901-1976), whose "work provide[d] a bridge between Pascal, Dostoyevsky, and Nietzsche [...] and [...] his slightly younger contemporaries who became the existentialists" (Brosman, 78). In his novels, most famously *La Condition Humaine* (1933, *Man's Fate*), Malraux addressed many existential themes such as absurdity, anguish, revolt, or Pascal's notion of *divertissements* (*diversions*).⁴²

Another French writer who addressed existential concerns is Jean Anouilh (1910-1987). Even though he was not unanimously regarded as a literary existentialist, his version of the classical play *Antigone* (1942) has been interpreted as an existentialist statement of free will and political responsibility, especially in the historical context of World War II, since the eponymous heroine disobeys King Créon's orders, following the superior authority of her own conscience at the price of her own life.⁴³

⁴¹ See chapter 4.2.3.

⁴² Cf. Brosman, 80.

⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*, 121.

Finally, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944) is best known to most people as the author of *Le Petit Prince* (1943, *The Little Prince*). His novels about aviation, such as *Terre des Hommes* (1939, *Wind, Sand and Stars*) operated on a deeply existential level in which even Sartre "recognized important existential themes" (Brosman, 72): "freedom, will, action, and responsibility" (ibid., 74). The point of view of the pilot changed the author's perspective of the world and of human existence, whereas geography becomes concrete when flying, "abolishing distances" (ibid.), and giving a homogeneous appearance to the earth.⁴⁴ Man's approach to reality and "hard facts" was a constant source of mild mockery in Saint-Exupéry's works, especially in *Le Petit Prince*, which he explicitly addressed to children:

Et la géographie, c'est exact, m'a beaucoup servi. Je savais reconnaître, du premier coup d'œil, la Chine de l'Arizona. C'est très utile, si l'on s'est égaré pendant la nuit.⁴⁵ (*Le Petit Prince*, 12)

The great literary works of existentialism are doubtlessly those written by Sartre and Camus, despite the latter's unwillingness to be called an existentialist. In Sartre's play *Huis Clos* (1944, *No Exit*), three people find themselves in a small room in hell. They have been sent there for various crimes, and they try to find out what the others' crimes were. The atmosphere is tense, but except for each other's company, no infernal punishments are inflicted to them. However, their difficult relationships to each other, resulting from their past crimes as well as from their present situation, is torture enough, prompting Garcin to conclude: "[L]'enfer, c'est les Autres!"⁴⁶ (*Théâtre*, 167). In other words, hell is our wish to comply with other people's expectations and the importance we accord to their opinions and judgement, instead of focussing on our own freedom, convictions, and choices. In the novel *La Nausée* (1938, *Nausea*), on the other hand, Sartre's partly autobiographical character Roquentin is sickened by anxiety and pointlessness, before finally facing the meaninglessness of existence by accepting it not only as a fact, but also as an opportunity to create meaning for himself.

⁴⁴ Cf. ibid., 72-74.

⁴⁵ "And geography, it is true, has served me a great deal. I could tell, at first sight, China from Arizona. That is very useful if one is lost in the night."

⁴⁶ "Hell is the others!" (Usually, however, it is translated as: "Hell is other people.")



(from Lange, Henrik. *90 Classic Books for People in a Hurry*. Borås: Nicotext, 2008.)

Finally, it is especially Camus' novel *L'Étranger* (1942, *The Stranger* or *The Outsider*) which is of utmost interest to the discussion of literary existentialism in this thesis. On the one hand, it is one of the best-known works of French existentialism. On the other hand, its style, which can be regarded as prototypical of existentialism, will serve as a stylistic, formal, and thematic "matrix" for the analysis of the two novels *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J.D. Salinger and *Less Than Zero* (1985) by Bret Easton Ellis. Moreover, it will become evident in the respective chapters that there are several parallels between the three novels.

L'Étranger is the story of Meursault (whose first name is not mentioned in the novel), who returns to Algiers to attend his mother's funeral. He does not behave as it is usually expected at such occasions: He does not weep or show emotions, and he appears to lack respect for his late mother when he smokes and drinks coffee at the wake. During his stay, he takes up a sexual relationship with Marie, who wants to get married to him, which he comments by saying that they can get married if she wishes, but it does not really make a difference. After getting involved in his neighbor Raymond's breakup with his girlfriend and a fight with her brother, he meets the latter's Arab friend on the beach and, partly because of the

knife in the Arab's hand, partly because of the blazing sun, Meursault shoots him. The second part of the novel takes place in prison, where Meursault is waiting for his verdict. His lack of emotional display continues, and it is used by the prosecution to claim that he has no feelings of remorse, perhaps no feelings at all. His behavior towards his mother during her last living years and at her funeral serves as proof of his lack of emotions. In the end, Meursault receives the death sentence and told that he is to die by the guillotine the next morning. He wards off the attempts of a priest to convert him before his death, and finally accepts his sentence and even welcomes the indifference of the universe.

L'Étranger is written in a style which constantly reflects sensory perceptions, provides detached descriptions of places, people, and events, and lacks emotion as well as linguistic ornaments. These and other typical linguistic features of existential literature will be outlined in the following section.

3.2 Existential Literature: Language

As has already been stated, important features of existential philosophy and fiction are personal experience, individual thought, and subjective perception. These aspects have a significant impact on the language which carries the existential message. Camus' *L'Étranger* is the best-known novel of this kind, utilizing a typical noncommittal style and decor-free vocabulary with an excellence singular not only in French fiction, equalled perhaps only by Hemingway before him, while imitated by many others after him.

Both Hemingway and Camus "let action [...] speak for itself" and they "depend on precise rendering of perceptions (light, shadow, taste, colors, gestures, and voices)" (Brosman, 216). These emotionally detached descriptions of sensory perceptions recall "the phenomenologists' approach to consciousness and the world" (ibid., 152). In other words, they describe experience directly, "separately from its origins and development, independently of the causal explanations that historians, sociologists or psychologists might give" (Mautner, 464). This phenomenological influence is also evident in the use (or rather: omission) of certain grammatical elements in Camus, Hemingway, and many of their successors: "Logical transitions such as 'consequently' and 'However' are nearly eliminated in

favor of temporal ones" (Brosman, 152). In the case of Meursault, the protagonist of *L'Étranger*, this "near-absence of logical adverbs and conjunctions [...] underlines his resistance to the far-reaching effects" (ibid., 154) of his act of murder.

The existentialist tendency towards the concrete, as opposed to the abstract, is also reflected in literature dealing with existential topics. Meursault's "indifference to abstractions" (Brosman, 153) goes so far that when asked by his girlfriend "whether he loves her, he says that the question is meaningless, but he supposes not [...]" (ibid.). Perceptions and action are described as directly as possible and metaphors are hardly used at all. Likewise, Hemingway recreates direct experience by describing events rather than interpreting them, even if these events are highly personal, as in this example from *The Sun Also Rises* (1926):

I was thinking about Brett and my mind stopped jumping around and started to go in sort of smooth waves. Then all of a sudden I started to cry. Then after a while it was better and I lay in bed and listened to the heavy trams go by and way down the street, and then I went to sleep. (*The Sun Also Rises*, 31)

In addition, Hemingway's simple style, frequently stringing together descriptions of people, places, and events without evaluating them, results from his dislike of an overcomplicated style,⁴⁷ which is closely related to existentialism's preference of the concrete over the abstract. A similar style can be found in *L'Étranger*, where Camus' protagonist describes the most unsettling events, such as his shooting the Arab under a torrid sun, and even his own emotions, in simple and detached words:

C'est alors que tout a vacillé. La mer a charrié un souffle épais et ardent. Il m'a semblé que le ciel s'ouvrait sur toute son étendue pour laisser pleuvoir du feu. Tout mon être s'est tendu et j'ai crispé ma main sur le revolver. La gâchette a cédé, j'ai touché le ventre poli de la crosse et c'est là, dans le bruit à la fois sec et assourdissant que tout a commencé. J'ai secoué la sueur et le soleil. J'ai compris que j'avais détruit l'équilibre du jour, le silence exceptionnel d'une plage où j'avais été heureux.⁴⁸ (*L'Étranger*, 71-2)

⁴⁷ Cf. Killinger, 48 and chapter 4.2.3.

⁴⁸ "It was then that everything vacillated. The sea transported a thick and fiery breath. It seemed to me that the sky was opening over its whole expanse to let fire rain down. My whole being tensed and I clenched my hand on the revolver. The trigger yielded, I touched the polished belly of the butt and it was there, in the noise which was at the same time dry and deafening, that everything started. I shattered the sweat and the sun. I understood that I had destroyed the balance of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I had been happy."

Such a detached style is typical of existential literature and frequently mirrors the protagonists' alienation from their social environment. As will be shown in chapters 5 and 6, this type of existential expression is hardly applied in *The Catcher in the Rye*, but therefore perfected beyond the pain barrier by Bret Easton Ellis in his *Less Than Zero*.

Finally, the language Camus' Meursault uses serves to express his thoughts, sometimes his wishes or even his feelings, but he does not go beyond that. In other words, he does not employ exaggeration or hypocrisy, for example by pretending to feel more than he does or by veiling an unwanted reality.⁴⁹ It is here that his *bonne foi* – his good faith – manifests itself. "He is his acts" (Brosman, 152). Salinger's Holden Caulfield is very similar in this respect, trying to be honest at all times and unwilling to become one of the insincere "phonies" surrounding him.

3.3 Existential Literature: Themes and Motifs

Themes which qualify and characterize existential fiction and which recur frequently in its works are personal responsibility, the absurdity of existence, death, suicide, emotional detachment and social alienation, limit situations, and (what is generally considered as) antisocial behavior as a result of one or more of the above. In view of this broad range of deeply human and humanistic topics, it would, of course, be easy to label almost any literary work as existential, as the subjective nature of most works of prose and poetry might be interpreted as an existential contemplation of the individual. However, only fiction in which existential concerns or individual experience are the central motifs qualify as existential literature. In connection with Sartre's literary oeuvre, Hazel Barnes states that

there are three distinctive characteristics that illuminate the literature of humanistic existentialism. First, this literature must work with myth; second, it must concern itself with the basic situations in which human freedom affirms itself; third, it must have a keen sense of social responsibility. (Baker, 79)

Myth is indeed used in several existential novels and plays. Anouilh's *Antigone* and Camus' *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* are only two examples, but myth can extend beyond classical mythology to include more contemporary "legends." For

⁴⁹ Cf. Brosman, 152

instance, Richard E. Baker observes that Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) "explodes the myth that America is a classless society" (Baker, 79), and the myth of the glamorous world of Hollywood as a "happy place" is mentioned in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and entirely unmasked in Ellis's *Less Than Zero*.

Secondly, Barnes names "basic situations in which human freedom affirms itself" (ibid.) as typical of existential literature. These situations can simply be times in the protagonists' lives which require a decision to accept or reject responsibility towards themselves or others, as is the case in Camus' *Les Justes* (1949, *The Just Assassins*). In this play, Russian terrorists preparing to assassinate the Grand Duke discuss whether it is just to murder one person in order to save the lives of many. More often, however, the situations in which the existential hero finds himself⁵⁰ are marked by a clearly defined limit. This limit may be of a temporal, spatial, or social nature. Whereas in Sartre's *Huis Clos*, the prison cell in hell serves as a confined space which forces its inmates to face and accept their past – similar, in that respect, to the second half of Camus' *L'Étranger* – , the plots of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Less Than Zero* are confined to short periods of time: two days in the former novel, the Christmas holidays of approximately four weeks in the latter. A confined situation may also result from social circumstances, as is the case in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), whose African-American protagonist's freedom is restricted by the external social situation of the U.S. in the 1950s. Ellison's novel ends on a Sartrean act of choice or a Camusian act of revolt when the nameless character decides to leave his underground existence and face his fate, whichever it may be, as best he can.

In each of these cases, confinement forces the protagonists to confront their situations, their fate (which is of course, from a non-deterministic, atheist point of view, utterly accidental), and act accordingly. One of Sartre's main ideas is that man is always free to choose but not free not to choose.⁵¹ Thus it is the existential protagonist's responsibility within his specific, limited situation to make active decisions, even if the decision is to accept things as they are and not take any action whatsoever.

⁵⁰ Except in the works of Simone de Beauvoir, one will struggle to find an existential heroine – which is perhaps the single area in which existential literature has not exploited its full potential.

⁵¹ Cf. chapter 2.4.1.

Social responsibility, according to Hazel Barnes the third feature of humanistic existentialist literature,⁵² is indeed central and therefore obvious in the works of Sartre, Camus, Beauvoir, or Malraux. Writers of non-philosophical existential literature, frequently address this aspect less directly. Some writers omit it altogether, like Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*, who stresses the individual and his subjective perception rather than argue for social commitment.

As a result of existentialism's emphasis on subjectivity and individuality, loneliness and alienation are frequent motifs in existential literature. Reality is perceived by the protagonist in his own, singular way – one which cannot be shared by others. Consequently, a feeling of isolation and solitude pervades the pages of many existential works. The solitude of the protagonist is often stressed by an alienated language, as described in the preceding section, which distinguishes him clearly from his social environment. Alienated style, however, "is not to be confused with the deliberate grotesquerie and mock brutality of social-minded, humanist satiric artists like Swift [...] or Daumier [...]" (Finkelstein, 169). Similarly, writers of the American Absurd, such as Joseph Heller in his novel *Catch-22* (1961),⁵³ do not work with an alienated style. Instead, these writers expose absurdity openly and blatantly.

In existential literature, alienation may be expressed verbally, for example through dehumanized descriptions of people or environments, or indirectly through the feelings and behavior of the characters. However, alienation is not only the separation of a person from other people, but it can also mean the distance between the human being and (its) nature. As Camus stated, absurdity is not in the human, neither is it in the world, but it is the result of their common presence and of the relationship between the two.⁵⁴ In an unfathomable, sometimes hostile nature, a human being can easily feel lost and lonely, and this emotion is expressed in many works of existential literature, from *L'Étranger's* Meursault, who is blinded by the merciless sun at the beach, to *Less Than Zero's* Clay and his fear of storms and earthquakes.

⁵² Cf. Baker, 79.

⁵³ Cf. chapter 4.2.3.

⁵⁴ Cf. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 50.

Contrary to the Literature of the Absurd, existential literature does not usually address absurdity openly, even though it is certainly one of existentialism's principal themes. Of course, the fact that "[a] man is sentenced to death, so to speak, because he did not weep at his mother's funeral" (Brosman, 154), which is the case in *L'Étranger*, borders on the absurd. This absurdity, however, is not directly exposed here, but rather developed subtly in the course of the plot. The reaction to absurdity is, in many cases, despair. Therefore existential angst and death are frequent themes in existential literature, taking many different shapes, as will be shown at length in the following chapters.

To conclude, a motif which is perhaps not specific to existential literature but reappears in its works repeatedly is the journey. In 19th-century literature, journeys are usually directed towards certain goals – even if those goals have been set by irrational obsessions, as Captain Ahab's in Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). However, with the decline of the spiritual directions (and directives) of religion in the 20th century, the journeys in literature gradually become more erratic too, culminating in the 1950s and especially Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1951, published in 1957). The meaninglessness of life is reflected in the directionlessness of travel. As there are no goals or ideals to achieve, traveling has simply become one of various ways to kill time, to forget one's situation and to forget that concrete action and responsibility might improve one's existence. In Pascal's terminology, travel has become another important diversion to avoid considering one's misery. On the other hand, the journey may also symbolize the quest for meaning, as it is the case in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Protagonist Holden Caulfield wants to get away from all the much-detested social structures he is familiar with by traveling first to New York, then he shortly considers "hitchhiking [his] way out West" (*Catcher*, 198) and at the end of his narrative, he is in California. Traveling may not have cured him of his depression and dissatisfaction, but it has certainly offered him some new insights and perspectives.

In the following survey of American existentialism and the subsequent analyses of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Less Than Zero*, the themes, motifs, and linguistic particularities of existential literature presented in this chapter will be frequently encountered and employed again.

4. Existentialism in the U.S.

As has been shown in the introductory chapters, existentialism is, first and foremost, a philosophical school of thought associated with France during and after World War II. Its most prominent figures have been introduced: Jean-Paul Sartre, who immortalized existentialism in his theoretical works as well as in his novels and plays; Albert Camus and his reflections on the Absurd in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and *L'Étranger*; and writers such as Malraux or Anouilh, who gave literary bodies to existential concerns.

An isolation of these writers and philosophers, a confinement of their lives and works to the "Hexagon" (i.e. France), could easily be evoked when introducing existentialism. This, however, would be wrongly omitting the mutual influences between French existentialism and the U.S. American literary scene. After World War II, reading Sartre and Camus became highly popular in the United States, and French existentialism constituted not only a source of philosophical inspiration among American students and intellectuals, but signified also a much cherished and, at times, somewhat romanticized way of life, encompassing images of cafés, cigarettes, and black turtlenecks.⁵⁵ The level of romantic fascination with existentialism can be discerned even in theoretical literature on the subject. As George Cotkin remembers,

[...] I was excited by the roll of the word "existential," especially as pronounced by my teacher, with perfect French inflection. It distanced me from the Coney Island scene and transported me into French café life, into a rich intellectual world full of serious ideas about the depths of the human condition. (Cotkin, 1-2)

Of course, it was the existentialists' philosophy and ideas that struck, above all, a chord with young intellectual Americans, but Cotkin's reference to "French café life" also betrays a certain dreamy, almost exoticist, approach towards the French philosophical and literary scene. As Sidney Finkelstein observes, there was "much about the popularity of existentialism that [was] faddist" (Finkelstein, 12).

Despite this incontestable influence on American culture, thought, and literature, it is important to note two facts. Firstly, existential thought had been

⁵⁵ Cf. Cotkin, 1.

introduced to America before the arrival of the French existentialism of Sartre and Camus, to wit via publications of Nietzsche in English as early as 1896⁵⁶ and Walter Lowrie's translations of Kierkegaard in the 1930s.⁵⁷ Secondly, as we will see in chapter 4.2, existential writings and existential themes had already found their place in U.S. literature long before the incorporation of Sartre and Camus into general American consciousness. More than that, some American writers were of particular interest to the French existentialists. Sartre was influenced by and wrote on John Dos Passos and William Faulkner, whereas Camus wrote on Melville, Faulkner, and Hemingway, and found Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) to be a perfect example of an absurd novel.⁵⁸ In addition,

[...] French existential fiction is indebted to American fiction of the 1920s and the 1930s, including the detective novel, called *roman noir* (black novel), so that subsequent borrowings by American authors from French existentialists are, to some degree, a reclaiming of what was already theirs. (Brosman, 203)

In other words, the relationship between French existentialism and American literature worked both ways. In the following chapters, the impact of existentialism on American thought and its presence in American literature will be outlined in order to provide a useful framework for the later discussion of two 20th-century novels.

4.1 Existentialism in American Thought and Culture

The first representative of existential thought who entered the American philosophical discourse was Friedrich Nietzsche, whose works were first published in the United States in 1896. However, in this first English edition, an arbitrary selection was made and the order of Nietzsche's original writing was inverted, prioritizing later works such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* or *The Genealogy of Morals*.⁵⁹ As a consequence, Nietzsche's "complex and controversial interconnection and development of thought was distorted beyond recognition" (Pütz, 3). The readers were presented with Nietzsche's most elaborate, perhaps most difficult, but

⁵⁶ Cf. Steilberg, 24.

⁵⁷ Cf. Cotkin, 35-6.

⁵⁸ Cf. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 153.

⁵⁹ Cf. Steilberg, 24.

certainly most perfected works, without having read their precursors and without, therefore, being able to follow the process of Nietzsche's thought and reasoning.⁶⁰

Immediate reactions to Nietzsche's works were discussions which, at that time, concentrated mainly on ethics and "morally informed politics" (Pütz, 4). However, despite his considerable influence on American thought up to the 1920s, his popularity sank in the 1930s due to his penchant toward the irrational and, more importantly, the fact that his works were abused by Nazi Germany to breed anti-Semitism.⁶¹ It was only in 1950, with Walter Kaufmann's study *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, that the second period of Nietzsche reception in America was triggered.⁶²

As a result, it was another European philosopher who most influenced the U.S. American consciousness in the first half of the 20th century: Søren Kierkegaard, who is generally regarded as one of the founding fathers, if not *the* father, of modern existentialism. Walter Lowrie introduced fundamental concepts of existential philosophy to a wide public in America with his translations of Kierkegaard into English in the 1930s. Kierkegaard's existential thought caught on among American intellectuals as well as among "common people" to such an extent that "[b]y the mid-1940s, everyone, from soldier to statesman, seemed to be reading and talking about Søren Kierkegaard" (Cotkin, 54).

One reason for – especially clerical – America to welcome the Kierkegaardian concept of anxiety was a Neo-Orthodox tendency which had emerged in the 1890s and continued to increase in the following decades. Theologians of this movement complained about the all-too positive outlook of liberal theology, with its "overly optimistic view of human nature and progress" (Cotkin, 37). According to the more conservative theologians, liberals were "too darned assured of their own salvation, too unacquainted with spiritual anguish" and they "rested too comfortably in their belief that God smiled down upon middle-class America, and that all was, by and large, right with the world" (*ibid.*). Walter Lowrie, an Episcopal clergyman himself, embraced the Neo-Orthodox views, found a mentor in theologian Albert

⁶⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

⁶¹ Cf. Finkelstein, 11.

⁶² Cf. Pütz, 8.

Schweitzer,⁶³ and "sought a religious perspective that sweated with anguish and celebrated ultimate salvation" (ibid., 38). His Kierkegaard translations helped spread fundamental terms and concepts of existential philosophy in America on a large scale. *Anxiety* became a common term and sentiment in the years after the Second World War, expressed most famously in W.H. Auden's long poem "The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue" (1947), which in its turn inspired Leonard Bernstein to compose his Symphony No. 2 for Piano and Orchestra, "The Age of Anxiety" (1949).⁶⁴

French existentialism, embodied by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, arrived in America in the 1940s – via their theories, as well as their personal visits to the U.S. Especially Sartre and Beauvoir were immediately "adopted" by the popular press, where their bohemian café lifestyle was presented along with their main philosophical ideas. Likewise, great stress was put on personal descriptions of Sartre and Beauvoir. "Idea and intellect strolled hand in hand down the boulevard of fashion" (Cotkin, 95) when an essay by Sartre was published in *Vogue*. Both Sartre and Beauvoir, however, consciously encouraged the personality cult surrounding them, in order to reach a wider audience among Americans, whom they found to be generally shallow and lacking in philosophical depth.⁶⁵ Their policy of building up this specific image of themselves succeeded with mainstream audiences, because among a large public, there was a fascination with France and its culture. The prestige of all things French in America was caricatured in the *New Yorker* with a cartoon which showed two street vendors, one of them offering "ties" for 25 cents, the other one selling "cravats" for one dollar.⁶⁶ The presence of existentialism in popular culture was also proven by several ironical references and articles about it, such as a satirical article in the *New York Times Magazine*, introducing a new (but imaginary) doctrine called "resistentialism," which was "counter-phenomenological" and dealt with "what Things think about us."⁶⁷

Sartre and Beauvoir were not so warmly welcomed by New York intellectuals, who were on the one hand put off by existentialism's success with

⁶³ Schweitzer, incidentally, was a great-uncle of Jean-Paul Sartre's.

⁶⁴ Cf. Cotkin, 55.

⁶⁵ Cf. ibid., 96.

⁶⁶ Cf. ibid., 92.

⁶⁷ Cf. ibid., 102-103.

popular middlebrow magazines and audiences and, on the other hand, by Sartre's and Beauvoir's open disdain for Americans. According to several critics, especially Beauvoir arrived in America with a ready-made opinion in mind, filling only the occasional gap during her visits.⁶⁸ Furthermore, New York had just begun to develop a new cultural self-confidence and prided itself on having become the new cultural capital, replacing Paris. The literary canon American intellectuals had established comprised in particular the Modernists, with a stress on creativity and a literature of ideas. The bleak and realistic literatures of Steinbeck or Dos Passos struck them as unimaginative and artistically worthless, which is why Sartre's praise for them proved, for New York intellectuals, his lack of literary knowledge and served, in their opinion, to justify his own, comparatively weak literary style. Finally, Sartre's Marxism found no support among American intellectuals, who were mainly anticommunists.⁶⁹

Despite the "remarkably cheerful outlook on life" which they sported in their private lives,

magazine articles on Sartre and Beauvoir regularly presented existential doctrines as pessimistic effusions arising largely out of the exigencies of the Second World War, contingent upon the hardships and scarcity of postwar Europe. (Cotkin, 93)

This view of existentialism as a product of World War II and therefore an ephemeral – and European – phenomenon did not facilitate its reception in the U.S. In a newly confident, aspiring country, the alleged pessimism of existentialism was viewed as irrelevant to American thought and culture.

However, from the 1950s onwards, existentialism – whose impact on American culture could, after all, not be denied – was presented more favorably by some American scholars, especially Hazel E. Barnes, who translated Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant (Being and Nothingness)* into English. In contrast to other academics, notably Walter Kaufmann with his ground-breaking *Existentialism: From Dostoyevsky to Sartre* (1956), Barnes

did not celebrate the German philosophical tradition, nor did she seek to validate Nietzsche above all others. A partisan of French existentialists, she

⁶⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 115-116.

⁶⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 105-108.

helped popularize French existentialism in the 1960s among university students. (Cotkin, 154)

On the other hand, Kaufmann's volume was of utmost importance for the dissemination of existentialism in the U.S., as it provided many students with an introduction to this philosophy, a good overview, and a useful starting point. In addition, Kaufmann's great achievement was to include literature in his discussion of existentialism, thus not only presenting philosophers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, or Sartre and Camus, who wrote both philosophy and literature, but also writers of fiction, to wit Dostoyevsky, Rilke, and Kafka.⁷⁰ Barnes and Kaufmann brought Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus to American campuses, where the rising student movements of the 1960s were significantly influenced by existentialist notions of action and responsibility.

Albert Camus was generally preferred, philosophically and personally, by the New York intellectuals who were rather cool towards Sartre and Beauvoir for the above-mentioned reasons.⁷¹ His denunciation of totalitarian political systems, including communism, gained him sympathy in America while simultaneously being responsible for his ultimate break with Sartre (or rather, Sartre's break with him). Camus' "politics of moderation and revolt" (Cotkin, 117) appealed to American intellectuals and students alike, and his *L'Homme Révolté* (*The Rebel*, 1951) was not inconsequential for the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s.⁷²

In general, despite the glamorous aura emanating from Sartre and Beauvoir, more American sympathies went out to Camus. There are various possible and likely reasons for this. Firstly, works of Camus such as *L'Étranger* or *La Peste* are highly accessible and "readable" novels, their plots presenting fundamental existentialist maxims in a perhaps more humanized and less stylized and dramaturgical way than, say, Sartre's plays. Camus' literary style is powerful – enough so to reward him with the Nobel Prize in 1957 – but at the same time it is easily comprehensible and therefore also suited to be read by high school and, of course, university students. Camus, therefore, shaped a whole generation of young intellectuals. However, Sartre was equally represented on the academic reading lists, and there were even

⁷⁰ Cf. Cotkin, 148.

⁷¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 116.

⁷² Cf. *ibid.*, 225-228.

those who reproached him for "vulgarizing philosophy by putting a diluted form of it into the hands of the man on the street" (Killinger, 4). Compared to other philosophers, Sartre's thought was certainly more graspable. This means there must be another reason than mere accessibility for Camus' greater success.

The fact that Sartre stated that the U.S. was a nation without pessimism concerning human nature or social organization⁷³ may be telling of his own perception of life and approach to existential philosophy. After all, his lecture *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme* was written as a defense against accusations that existentialism could be equated with pessimism, even nihilism, a negative outlook on life, and despair. While he successfully dispelled these claims in his lecture, stressing the humane and positive principles of existentialism, the criticism did not materialize out of nothing. It is certainly true that Sartre's existentialism was, if not pessimistic, at least more rigid, stern, and demanding than, for example, that of Camus. However, Sartre's influence must not be underestimated, and all French existentialists were highly popular in American mainstream culture as well as among many intellectuals. Camus was read alongside Sartre, as well as Simone de Beauvoir with her ground-breaking feminist work *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949, *The Second Sex*). Still, the categorical nature of Sartre's philosophical and political demands, especially in combination with his Marxism, did not fall on fertile ground in the allegedly non-pessimistic America of the 1940s and beyond.

Even though Hazel E. Barnes chose to replace the term "existentialism" with "humanistic existentialism" in her works on Sartre, for many American students and intellectuals this term would have seemed to be more accurate for the philosophy of Camus. His views were less rigid than Sartre's or Beauvoir's – something that the latter also reproached him with, claiming that his "universalism and moralism [...] insulat[ed] him from really hard choices" (Cotkin, 118). But for an American public, more interested in humanistic and social than in political engagement, Camus must have come as the perfect link between American and European thought. Whereas Sartre stressed the importance of politics in his philosophy, Camus was interested in subjectivity and the individual, although he did not neglect that individual's responsibility vis-à-vis his fellow human beings. In a manner of speaking, Sartre was

⁷³ Cf. Cotkin, 2. See also chapter 4.2.

political and Camus was private, and the latter must therefore have appeared more tangible than Sartre – and more likeable, as he "had the good sense to keep private his deeply negative impressions of America" (Cotkin, 116), unlike Sartre and Beauvoir.

Despite the fascination for the French lifestyle which existentialism brought to the U.S., perhaps Sartre was a little "too French" for Americans – in other words, too earnest and uncompromising in his philosophical and political views, and personally too arrogant and condescending towards Americans – whereas Camus' moderate existentialism and the more accessible style of his literature, as well as his compassion and his commitment, made him, so to speak, more American. This is confirmed by Hannah Arendt, political theorist and one of the New York intellectuals, who described Camus as a new type of European, "at home everywhere," whereas she found Sartre to be "much too typically a Frenchman, much too literary, in a way too talented, too ambitious" (Cotkin, 117).

4.2 American Existential Literature

Existential writing has a tradition in American literature which precedes the translations of the earliest existential and existentialist philosophies into English by almost a century. This is all the more surprising as Jean-Paul Sartre once remarked that "[t]here is no pessimism in America regarding human nature and social organization" (Cotkin, 2). Against this statement, Cotkin argues rightly that there certainly are "darker and deeper elements in the history of the American spirit" (ibid.), quoting Hawthorne's "power of blackness" (ibid.) and the African-American experience.⁷⁴ However, one must distinguish between existential "angst" (i.e. anxiety) or despair, at the base of which there lies a profound sentiment of the meaninglessness of existence, and "dark and deep," "black," or absurd elements in thought or in literature which result from historical experience or social circumstance rather than from a philosophical reflection on life. In American existential writing, we encounter both types of motivation, although it seems that the latter form prevails to a certain degree. As will be shown in the following overview, even during the years of World War II, and even under the strong

⁷⁴ Cf. Cotkin, 2.

influence of the existential philosophies and literatures of Sartre and Camus, the stress of American existential literature on subjectivity (of the individual, as well as of "American-ness" in various forms) is somewhat stronger than with its French counterpart, which puts much more emphasis on personal and social commitment and responsibility.

Contrary to Sartre's above-mentioned opinion, a sense of loneliness, alienation, absurdity of existence, or "blackness," seems deeply rooted in the American mind, despite – or perhaps as a result of – its Puritan heritage. The religious aspect is certainly central in the writing of Nathaniel Hawthorne, most notably in his famous novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and his early short story "Young Goodman Brown" from the year 1835. Both works are devoted to themes such as amorality and hypocrisy among Puritans, not least because Hawthorne's great-grandfather had been a judge at the Salem Witch Trials. It is therefore not an accident that in "Young Goodman Brown," the village whose entire population is befallen by religious corruption exhibited in a nightly ritual, is Salem village. Hawthorne, in his writing, was concerned with morality, honesty and righteousness – all, of course, in a Puritan context – , by way of the depiction of these virtues' exact opposites. The dark contents of his works led Herman Melville, in his essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850), to attribute him with the aforementioned "power of blackness,"⁷⁵ drawn from the background of profound Puritan notions:

Certain it is, however, that this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free. (Melville, 1850)

Hawthorne wrote during a literary period which is referred to as American Romanticism or American Renaissance, which is closely linked with the Transcendentalists and can roughly be placed between the years 1820 and 1865. Writers of that time include Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau, the latter two of which pleaded for a non-capitalistic world-view and a stronger connection with nature and therefore precede European phenomenology in stressing the importance of direct experience and a practical

⁷⁵ Which is, contrary to Cotkin's claim (Cotkin, 2), not Hawthorne's, but Melville's phrasing.

approach, as opposed to the predominance of theory, in social, political, or financial matters.

Another writer active during this period was Edgar Allan Poe, whose Gothic tales concentrated on themes of darkness and fright, addressing human primal fears such as that of being buried alive ("The Premature Burial," 1844), or terrifying fantasies like murder victims' revenge on the culprit ("The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," 1843). Poe's literary fascination with death may have had biographical reasons, as he was faced with several cases of death and disease in his family. Yet it has also been claimed that he anticipated existential philosophy's interest in and "privileging of death" (Kennedy, 180), which manifested itself later in the philosophies of Nietzsche or Heidegger, as well as in the literature of Ernest Hemingway, who demanded that the reader be not spared death as the logical and only possible ending of any story: "All stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is no true story teller who would keep that from you" (Kennedy, 179).⁷⁶

On the following pages, I will briefly present some works of American literature that can be placed into the category of an American existential literature.

4.2.1 *Moby Dick* (1851)

Herman Melville's monumental masterwork, originally published as *Moby-Dick or The Whale*, can be seen as the earliest cornerstone in American existential literature. As has been mentioned before, even Albert Camus himself was impressed by the novel about an obsessive, egotistical and absurd quest that eventually kills all but one protagonist, Ishmael, who lives to tell the tale. Whereas Camus called *Moby Dick* a perfect example of absurdity, its anti-hero Captain Ahab, according to Richard Lehan, is the "first American existentialist, albeit a misguided one," because he "refuses to disobey himself, exalts the self over God" (Lehan, 9).

Existential considerations have a habit of appearing most significantly in the face of death, and extreme situations confront us with our mortality. This is why Melville's Captain Bildad asks Captain Peleg whether he thought of death during a fierce storm in Japan, whereupon Peleg replies:

⁷⁶ Cf. Kennedy, 179-183.

What? With all three masts making such an everlasting thundering against the side; and every sea breaking over us, fore and aft. Think of Death and the Judgment then? No! no time to think about death then. Life was what Captain Ahab and I was thinking of; and how to save all hands – how to rig jury-masts – how to get into the nearest port; that was what I was thinking of. (*Moby*, 91)

There are two conclusions that can be drawn from this observation. One, thinking about death is the result of inactivity, something that we do during quiet hours and on idle days. With too much time on our hands, all things have the potential of worrying or scaring us, especially so the "weight of the world" in the shape of our existence. Stubb, second mate on the *Pequod*, has come to the same conclusion and found his own way to deal with it: "Damn me, but all things are queer, come to think of 'em. But that's against my principles. Think not, is my eleventh commandment; and sleep when you can, is my twelfth" (*Moby*, 123-4). Time is an important element in existential fiction. An overdose of time and an underdose of action can have fatal effects on the soul, which are pointedly depicted in many 20th-century novels. At the same time, the limited temporal settings in most existential literature force the protagonists to contemplate or face their situations.

The second lesson one might learn from the above quotation is that once one's existence or general situation has been considered and contemplated, once one has decided to live by making choices and engaging in action, when one acts with courage instead of resting and worrying, death is of no importance anymore. What matters then, and Sartre and Camus will later stress this distinct point, is the here and now, the acceptance of one's "lot," and the significance of making all possible efforts to keep the "ship" from going down against the turbulences of life. However, at times of milder weather and of daily routine, life often seems bland rather than turbulent, and an absurd repetitiveness characterizes existence, which resembles the task of Sisyphus:

[N]ew cruises were on the start; that one most perilous and long voyage ended, only begins a second; and a second ended, only begins a third, and so on, for ever and for aye. Such is the endlessness, yea, the intolerableness of all earthly effort. (*Moby*, 59)

Hawthorne's and Melville's rather gloomy and serious contemplations of life and society were not the only approach to existence in 19th-century American

literature. A more positive outlook on life can be found especially in the poetry of Walt Whitman, who captured the self-affirming attitude of a new individualism. However, both ways of thinking coexisted in the 19th and 20th centuries, as will be shown in the following section.

4.2.2 The Two Faces of American Existential Literature

1855 saw the publication of the first edition of Walt Whitman's poetry collection "Leaves of Grass," including the long poem "Song of Myself," which marked a "turning-point" not only "in the history of American poetry" (Ousby, 1015) in terms of style and language, but also in the American world-view. Whitman's celebration of individuality and individual subjective perceptions, his expression of an explicit American-ness, in terms of themes as well as of language, was instrumental in shaping a new American consciousness. With its generally optimistic tone and its stress on the self in the here and now, in combination with evocations of people and landscapes of the United States, one might venture to call the "Song of Myself," along with *Moby Dick*, one of the earliest American declarations of existentialist thought:

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.
(Moore, 118)

The unique poetic stream-of-consciousness style of Whitman's poem influenced many who came after him, but was most notably adopted by the Beat Generation in the 1950s. Poet Allen Ginsberg even addressed Whitman in his poem "A Supermarket in California," referring to him as "dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher" (Moore, 478). Since there is a thematic connection between American existentialism and the Beat Generation's psychedelic monologue poetry and drug-soaked road novels, as will be shown in chapter 4.2.3, this influence is more than relevant.

All of the above-mentioned 19th-century men of letters laid the groundwork for existentialism in American consciousness and literature in the 20th century. The positive force of Whitman's subjectivity was an important step in the evolution of

the American Dream – the certainty that "all men are created equal" and that anyone in this country can achieve anything he wants through will-power and hard work. It is probably this striving, aspiring, achievement-orientated and forward-thinking aspect in American society that led Sartre to his aforementioned remark that there is no pessimism in America "regarding human nature or social organization" (see 4.2). Interestingly enough, it is exactly the latter part – social organization – which has caused the most pessimism, and triggered the most existential thought and literature, in America. Be it Hawthorne's disillusion with his Puritan community in the 19th century, or the African-American experience evoked in 20th-century novels such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, American existential writers frequently have a distinctly social motivation.

It is especially in the 20th century that the two extremes of American society, of the "American soul," meet – and the clash manifests itself in literature. The profoundly optimistic "American philosophy" of pioneering frontier thinking, the spirit of exploration and achievement, "rags to riches" mentality, production and productivity are taken to the extreme by the boost of capitalism and its collateral damage, advertisement, promoting greed for money and success. Simultaneously, existential concerns occupy many intellectuals and littérateurs, who ponder on the darker sides of the shiny coin. Disillusion with progress, discontent with the dehumanized ambitions and mannerisms of capitalist society, and an unwillingness to tolerate unacceptable social inequality mark the works of these authors. When the two sides of the coin collide in literature, especially in the late 20th century and most notably and violently in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), the effect can be devastating and highly disturbing. There are, however, also other, milder forms of protest by existential writers in the 20th century. One of the milder protesters – J.D. Salinger – will be discussed separately in chapter 5, and one of the wilder protesters – Bret Easton Ellis – will be the topic of chapter 6. Firstly, however, some of their antecessors and their works are outlined below.

4.2.3 20th-Century Existential Literature in the U.S.

In a thoroughly existential passage, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* claims that

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
(*Macbeth* V.5., 229)

Clearly, Shakespeare was not an existential writer (nor, for that matter, an American). His plays, however, display deeply existential themes and concerns such as guilt, responsibility, the meaning of life – one must only think of Hamlet's dilemma – , which inspired numberless writers throughout the centuries that followed. The above quotation is taken up in American literature in an existential context twice. Already in the 19th century does Melville include Macbeth's wording in a rather unphilosophical context in *Moby Dick*:

From Icelandic, Dutch, and old English authorities, there might be quoted other lists of uncertain whales, blessed with all manner of uncouth names. But I omit them as altogether obsolete; and can hardly help suspecting them for mere sounds, full of Leviathanism, but signifying nothing. (*Moby*, 142)

Whereas Melville only alludes to the Shakespeare quotation in passing, William Faulkner uses Macbeth's words for the title of one of his best-known novels, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). In his novels, short stories, and plays, Faulkner examines the dichotomy between humanization and alienation, man being estranged from nature by industrial progress, and he does so with an "alternation of alienated and humanized sensitivities" (Finkelstein, 194). Faulkner's style typically "evokes the senses: sight, sound, touch, smell" (ibid., 194-5). This style of sensory perceptions is typical of existential literature, which prefers the "palpable" to the abstract. Among Faulkner's admirers were Sartre, who was inspired by his style and even borrowed his literary technique for the novel *Le Sursis* (1947, *The Reprieve*),⁷⁷ and Camus, who adapted Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* for the stage.⁷⁸

Loneliness and alienation as common sentiments in 20th-century America were not only portrayed in literature. Among visual artists, especially painter Edward Hopper (1882-1967) captured the specific spirit of the modern, industrial, urban U.S. His works frequently show characters who are lonely in a sterile urban

⁷⁷ Cf. Brosman, 140.

⁷⁸ Cf. ibid., 115.

landscape. Even though America's big cities, notably New York, were surely not quiet or deserted in the 1920s and the subsequent decades, in which Hopper's most famous paintings were created, this is exactly how he portrayed them. Works like *Nighthawks* (1942) or *Automat* (1927) show solitary figures in the artificial environment of the city, not communicating but silent, even when they are in company. Their solitude represents the "loneliness of modern urban existence" (Cotkin, 23), the lonely condition of man in an emerging mass society.



Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks* (1942)
The Art Institute of Chicago

The first American writer of the 20th century who relied on existential themes was Ernest Hemingway. In a study called by the author a "defense of Hemingway's work against those who deny that he has ever been truly serious about life" (Killinger, 100), John Killinger examines the works of Ernest Hemingway in terms of existentialism and even places him in a line of thought with philosophers such as Heidegger, Nietzsche, or Sartre. Hemingway's fiction features many notions which are also elementary in existentialism. For example, "he stresses the extreme importance of the individual as the only genuinely vital entity of existence" (Killinger, 97). Furthermore "he sees that individuality [...] must be internally achieved by a decision to be at all times an authentic person and to accept the full responsibility of action" (ibid.). Finally, in many of his works, "a moment of crisis [...] is produced by confronting death or violence" (ibid.) in order to "induc[e] the moment of choice" (ibid., 98). Thus Hemingway deals with very similar ideas as

those of existential philosophy, especially of Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche.

Even though Hemingway was not a philosopher by profession, "it cannot truly be said of any man who has thought seriously about life that he is not a philosopher" (ibid., 101). And there are several elements in Hemingway's literary creations which testify to a strong existential awareness. One of these elements is the fear of meaninglessness:

"I can't stand it to think my life is going so fast and I'm not really living it."
"Nobody ever lives their life all the way up except bull-fighters."
(*The Sun Also Rises*, 10)

Death plays an important role in Hemingway's works, as it does in existential philosophy. Since death is the limit of existence towards which we all move, it defines our lives and the way we live them. Like Captain Peleg in *Moby Dick*, and like numerous protagonists in French existentialist literature, many of Hemingway's (anti-) heroes feel most alive when faced with death or the possibility of it: "In the face of death, freedom; life is reduced to its simplest terms, and the way is cleared for the future" (Killinger, 20). This simplicity of life, caused by the imminent threat of death, is symbolized in the bull-fights Hemingway privately enjoyed, and also included in his fiction, most notably *The Sun Also Rises* (1926).

Simplicity is another essential ingredient in Hemingway's fiction. The frequent opposition of simple versus complicated corresponds to existentialism's differentiation between the concrete and the abstract, between authenticity and bad faith.⁷⁹ A dislike of complication is also apparent in Hemingway's language itself, which is kept straightforward and lacks any linguistic frills and furbelows, concentrating directly on content and message instead. That this "distrust of the complicated in any form, even in language" (ibid., 48) is typical of existential literature has already been stated in chapter 3.2.

Finally, the lack of religious beliefs of Hemingway's (frequently autobiographically inclined) protagonists is another existential concern, which sometimes openly troubles his characters. Thus, Jake Barnes says of himself that he is "[t]echnically" a Catholic (*The Sun Also Rises*, 124) and tries, without success, to

⁷⁹ Cf. Killinger, 34.

pray to a God he does not believe in.⁸⁰ *The Sun Also Rises* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) also provide – interpreting somewhat liberally – a first glimpse of what in the 1980s and 90s will be labeled "yuppie lit" by cynical critics,⁸¹ and among which Ellis's *Less Than Zero* may be counted. These novels, as different as the backgrounds from which they spring may be, tend to describe a superficial upper-class lifestyle, listing somewhat carelessly people, events, parties, and alcohol or drug excesses. The link from "yuppie lit" to existential literature is closer than one might think, as "[m]uch of the literature which embraces or approaches existentialism deals with [...] 'the malaise of the privileged'" (Finkelstein, 213).

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) is incontestably one of the most famous narratives in American literature. In an existential context, the novella about the old man Santiago and his silent fight to bring back to shore an 18-foot marlin he caught at sea has been read as a "Nietzschean tragedy" by critic Charles Taylor, who argues that "Santiago's adventure has more in common with Nietzsche's notion of tragic affirmation of life than with the Christian themes of sin, punishment, and salvation" (Kuhn, 224). However, there are two flaws in this interpretation. Firstly, Nietzsche's affirmation of life in the face of meaninglessness is, as we have seen, an optimistic rather than a tragic one, and this spirit is certainly missing in Santiago's long and contemplative duel with the fish. Secondly, as Kuhn notes, even though there are indications that Hemingway read Nietzsche, there is no proof that he was directly influenced by him.⁸²

Despite an equal lack of evidence for this theory, it seems much more likely that Hemingway, installed in Cuba at the time of *The Old Man and the Sea*, but closely linked to Paris and its literary scene before World War II, conceived Santiago as a maritime Sisyphus. Although the novella is frequently described as a "*Moby-Dick* for our time" (Killinger, 24), there is no Ahabian obsession in the struggle between old Santiago and the fish, no wish to put himself above his fate, but simply a quiet acceptance of what happens, and the hope to bring back to shore at least a part of his hard work. But like Sisyphus, Santiago is left with nothing when he reaches his goal, and there is nothing for him to do but to accept the facts and start all over

⁸⁰ Cf. *The Sun Also Rises*, 97.

⁸¹ Cf. Sheppard, 1987.

⁸² Cf. Kuhn, 223.

again. As long as the absurd man, as Camus calls any human aware of his existential situation, continues in the face of apparent hopelessness, he is free:

"But man is not made for defeat," he said. "A man can be destroyed but not defeated."
(*The Old Man and the Sea*, 89)

Hemingway's consistent style and recurrent themes over the decades may be explained by his long absences from the U.S., due to which he was able to focus on his own originality rather than be influenced by the three social and literary phases in America from the 1920s to the 1940s. The Roaring Twenties, also called the Jazz Age, were marked by the prosperity resulting from the First World War, and by a culture – at least among an affluent upper class – of parties, alcohol (despite the Prohibition), jazz music, and loose personal relations. The Jazz Age has been captured most prominently by F. Scott Fitzgerald in novels such as *The Great Gatsby* (1925). At one point during a lavish party hosted by Gatsby, Jordan Baker remarks: "I like large parties. They're so intimate. At small parties, there isn't any privacy" (*Gatsby*, 50). This inversion, almost perversion, of conventional social notions not only speaks of a taste for glamorous parties, but also of a certain personal alienation and an inability to be alone with oneself or comfortable in intimate situations. This lack of a "healthy" social life may be part of the problem addressed earlier, the "malaise of the privileged" (Finkelstein, 213).

The age of social exuberance, with all its advantages and dark sides, lasted until 1929, when the Great Depression ended prosperity on a large scale and ended in 1941. In terms of literature, this period was marked by social realism, and especially John Steinbeck, who captured the dire situation of the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). However, as has been indicated, the literary value of this type of fiction was disputed by postwar intellectuals, while at the same time praised by Sartre and recognized also by the Swedish Academy, which awarded Steinbeck with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962.

Finally, World War II brought on changes in American economy as well as society, and optimism was restored both through a renewed material wealth and through America's role as a "savior" in the war. A positive, ambitious, achievement-oriented society was evolving, with apparently only few obstacles on the road to success. One of those hurdles was racial injustice, which led to very specific

existential sentiments among some writers, most notably Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

As has been shown in chapter 4.1, (post-) World War II America was indebted and drawn to Camusian rebellious existentialism somewhat more than to Sartrean notions of responsibility and bad faith. Therefore, it is not surprising that African-American author Richard Wright entitled his third novel *The Outsider* (1953) – one of the titles under which Camus' *L'Étranger* appeared in English (the other being *The Stranger*). Wright had emigrated to France in 1946, where he felt free from the climate of racial oppression in America, "keeping him in a constant state of alienation [...]" (Baker, 78). *The Outsider* tells the story of the African American Cross Damon, who is alienated, like Wright himself, by racist society on the one hand, and his own internal thoughts and feelings on the other hand. In his life and works, Wright "sought to bring [existentialism and black life] together to speak to the universal problems of human existence and to the specific realities of African-American oppression" (Cotkin, 167).

The Outsider is a rare example of an American existentialist novel, as Wright openly associated himself with the French existentialists and is known to have been influenced by their principles and philosophies. As opposed to French existentialism, however, atheism is not a fundamental feature of American existential literature.⁸³ On the contrary, America's tradition as a religious nation is continued even in existentialism, and Wright's *The Outsider* has not only been called a Christian existentialist novel, but also a "work of secular religion" due to its dependence on the "psychological and religious structure of Kierkegaard" (ibid., 171).

The second novel in this social and philosophical line, which appeared one year earlier in 1952, is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. In this novel, told by a nameless narrator, existentialist concerns which are more general than merely focussing on the African-American experience, are being expressed. They mirror Ellison's admiration for French existentialist author André Malraux, who addressed the human condition in his works. A generalization of experience is also present in

⁸³ For our purposes, it is justified to rudely ignore Gabriel Marcel and the religious branch of French existentialism here in favor of Sartre and Camus, who are more elementary to existentialism in America.

another important element in the novel: Jazz and Blues music. Cotkin argues that even though Blues is not only an indispensable part of African-American culture, but even "the specific vernacular expression of African Americans" (Cotkin, 175), it does not usually explicitly deal with themes such as social experiences, racial discrimination, or oppression, but rather with love, sadness, or loneliness. Blues and existentialism are closely related, however, as they share general human themes, and "existentialism's vocabulary of dread, absurdity, and death captures the tempo of [African Americans'] experience" (ibid., 176).

And that I, a little black man with an assumed name should die because a big black man in his hatred and confusion over the nature of a reality that seemed controlled solely by white men whom I knew to be as blind as he, was just too much, too outrageously absurd. And I knew that it was better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others [...]. (*Invisible Man*, 559)

The fact that Ellison's protagonist is living, at the time of the narration, in a basement or space under a building, where he ended up after falling into a manhole, is an allusion to Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, whereas his eventual decision to reemerge and take action at the end of the novel can be seen as a Sartrean act of responsibility towards his own life.

Another meeting point of Jazz music and existential literature is the 1950s Beat Generation of writers such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, or William S. Burroughs. Their "spiritual godfather," Henry Miller, states in *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1940): "Madame, there are always two paths to take; one back towards the comforts and security of death, the other forward to nowhere" (Finkelstein, 208). And it is this second path the Beats choose, forward without a plan and without a mission. In some ways, they – and their protagonists – are the ultimate existentialists, living by personal experience, which is more often than not enhanced by the use of alcohol or drugs, with Jazz (or sometimes other types of popular music) as the soundtrack to their lives. In the tradition of Hemingway, especially of *The Sun Also Rises*, Kerouac's characters in *On the Road* (1951) float from one place to another, without a goal or a clear idea of a What or Why. It is the journey, and not the destination, which matters – simply because the destination is unknown. In this sense, the journey is a highly symbolic expression of existential awareness. Since we do not know the meaning, or ultimate goal, of life (if there is

one at all), all that we can do is live in the here and now, make the most of the moment and live life in a concrete, active, experiential way. Unlike Melville's Ahab, these 20th-century literary travelers have lost their sense of being driven by a purpose. Their journeys are erratic and somewhat futile, but the experience itself is held sacred and regarded as the goal.

There are numerous other authors one might add to the list of existential American writers, such as Norman Mailer – another "first American existentialist" (Brosman, 205), this time according to himself –, John Dos Passos, Walker Percy, Saul Bellow (who hated being associated with existentialism⁸⁴); Betty Friedan, whose *Feminine Mystique* (1963) was strongly influenced by Simone de Beauvoir and which was instrumental in starting the Second Wave of the Women's Movement; Bernard Malamud, whose *The Assistant* (1957) features the strongly Dostoyevskyan themes of guilt and responsibility in a Jewish-American context; the poets Ezra Pound, T.S.Eliot, or e.e.cummings, who were akin to existentialism by content as well as by linguistic style; and J.D. Salinger, whose only novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, as well as his numerous short stories, caught the spirit of the America of the 1940s and 1950s.

Finally, the European Theatre of the Absurd has a significant counterpart in American prose fiction, to wit the American Absurd with writers such as Pynchon, Vonnegut, Barth, and Joseph Heller. The sense of existential anguish or of the Absurd in American (cultural) history and literature can frequently be seen as the result of certain social situations or structures rather than of a contemplation of the human condition in general. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), for example, is a demonstration of the absurdity of a specific situation (in this case, war) which derives from social circumstances. But like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) from the French Theatre of the Absurd, it can also be read as a metaphor of life and human existence, the futility of all attempts to escape, and the occasional (or constant) cruelty and illogical nature of reality. And like Camus or Sartre, and many existential writers, Heller chooses a confined setting without escape for his plot – the Italian island of Pianosa – , in order to force his protagonists to face their

⁸⁴ He "disliked the intellectual pretensions and language of existential pessimism" (Cotkin, 125) and "[t]he notion of the creative writer having to turn to a dense Germanic philosopher [Husserl] struck Bellow as ludicrous." (Ibid., 124)

existence head-on, but also to symbolize the human "fate" of being trapped in our limited lifetime, with nothing else to do than try to live as meaningfully as possible. Of course, this attempt frequently fails, and in Heller's novel absurdity becomes so unbearable at times that institutional procedures and social interaction often border on insanity. Heller echoes Sartre's more optimistic view of personal freedom and interprets it with a winking cynicism that is typical of Absurd Literature:

With a devotion to purpose above and beyond the line of duty, he had then raised the price of food in his mess halls so high that all officers and enlisted men had to turn over all their pay to him in order to eat. Their alternative – there was an alternative, of course, since Milo detested coercion and was a vocal champion of freedom of choice – was to starve. (*Catch-22*, 423)

As Robert Hipkiss noted, "[e]xistentialist humor is stoic; the Absurdist's is black" (Hipkiss, 3). This approach to existence, applied by dramatists as well as novelists of the Absurd, might be summed up in the words of Paul Watzlawick, who entitled one of his books: the situation is hopeless, but not serious.

Apart from the symbolic level of the contents, the absurdity of the situation is also reflected in Heller's literary style. As in plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, paradoxes, repetitions, and farcical dialogues are ever-present to provide the nonsensical nature of the protagonists' situation with a formal equivalent, as in the following dialogue between Yossarian and Clevinger:

"Who's they?" he wanted to know. "Who, specifically, do you think is trying to murder you?"
"Every one of them," Yossarian told him
"Every one of whom?"
"Every one of whom do you think?"
"I haven't any idea."
"Then how do you know they aren't?"
(*Catch-22*, 19)

With the social and political changes in the U.S.A. from the 1950s onwards, including post-war sentiment, civil-rights and feminist movements, and most importantly, the full impact of capitalism, the American literary landscape also changed. The disillusion with progress, already typical of earlier existential literature, united with a more down-to-earth and realistic perspective in many respects. In literature, this rather pessimistic, sociocritical point of view was expressed, in its fiercest and most merciless form, by the writers of Dirty Realism.

The most prominent representatives of this literary school of the 1970s and 80s are Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff, and Raymond Carver, with Charles Bukowski as their forerunner. Dirty Realism has been characterized as "downbeat, minimalist American short fiction," indebted with its "laconic prose and elliptical narrative style to Hemingway" (Ousby, 260), and not only for this reason akin to existential literature. However, the philosophical and symbolic component is largely missing in the literature of Dirty Realism, whereas the depiction of the protagonists' social circumstances and personal encounters become central.

Dirty Realism is in stark contrast to "Yuppie Lit," whose authors and protagonists belong to the new class of young urban professionals of the 1980s and 1990s. Since Bret Easton Ellis's novels have been given this label, along with writers such as Jay McInerney, they will be dealt with in chapter 6.

4.3 The Remains of Existentialism in Contemporary American Culture

As a cultural movement, existentialism belongs to the past. As a philosophical inquiry that introduced a new norm, authenticity, for understanding what it means to be human [...] existentialism has continued to play an important role in contemporary thought, in both the continental and analytic traditions. (Crowell, 2008)

In France, existentialism as a philosophical and literary movement lost its influence on the one hand with Camus' death and Sartre's comparatively weaker later works of the 1970s and 1980s, and, on the other hand, with the appearance of deconstructionists Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault on the philosophical scene. The former attacked Husserl's phenomenological approach to reality,⁸⁵ whereas the latter "rejected what he saw as Sartre's centralization of the subject (which he mocked as 'transcendental narcissism')" (Gutting, 2008). There are, however, also parallels between these two philosophers and existentialism, especially in their general reflections on responsibility and choice, morality without God, freedom, and death.⁸⁶

In the U.S., too, other world views and values replaced existentialist idealism. The rebellious 60s generation with its civil-rights and anti-war movements, which had been, among other factors, shaped by the influence of French philosophical and

⁸⁵ Cf. Mautner, 149-150.

⁸⁶ Cf. Crowell, 2008

American literary existentialism, gradually "outgrew" its high adolescent ideals. Capitalism and advertising conquered the Western world, and the U.S. became the prototypical capitalist nation. From the late 1970s onwards, consumerism changed the role of the individual in American society. Individualism still remained an integral part of being American, which it had always been, but there was a new stress on personal advancement, professional as well as financial. The great altruistic movements of the 1960s had subsided – some after, some without notable successes. What took their place was a boost in economy and industry, especially propagated in the 1980s by President Ronald Reagan and his "Reaganomics," a program to lower taxes, but also the social expenses of the country. This policy resulted in a booming economy, a new elite of the super-rich, an increase in wealth among the upper middle-class, and a vast majority of an impoverished lower or working class.

What did this new material culture do to existentialism? According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "[b]y the mid 1970s the cultural image of existentialism had become a cliché, parodied in countless books and films by Woody Allen" (Crowell, 2008). And George Cotkin, author of *Existential America*, provides a lively example of this phenomenon, quoting a scene from Woody Allen's movie *Manhattan* (1979). Allen's character expresses his affinity to Ingmar Bergman's films, to which Diane Keaton's character replies:

"So Scandinavian, bleak, my God, all that Kierkegaard. Right? Real adolescent, fashionable pessimism. I mean, the silence. God's silence, Okay, Okay, Okay. I mean I loved it when I was at Radcliffe, but alright you outgrow it, you absolutely outgrow it." (Cotkin, 277)

There obviously exists a position which views existentialism as a certain stage in the process of growing up, a part of adolescence which can be "outgrown," or which automatically loses its pertinence the moment one passes the threshold to adult life. There is more than a Woody Allen quotation to support this supposition. During the research for this thesis, I more than once encountered remarks by friends along the lines of "Camus? Existentialism? I read that when I was at school," with a bored intonation betraying not only that existentialism was old news to them, but also that it had no more relevance whatsoever to their present lives. In Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), the second person narrator mentions

several existentialism-inclined books on his shelf, adding a telling remark: "*As I Lay Dying, Under the Volcano, Anna Karenina, Being and Time, The Brothers Karamazov.* You must have had an ambitious youth" (*Bright Lights*, 39).

The connection between existentialism and adolescence is also reflected in the somewhat romanticized reception of existentialism mentioned earlier, where superficial symbols (cafés, cigarettes, black turtlenecks) played as important a role in the establishment of its popularity as its body of thought itself. Perhaps like romanticism, this highly idealistic philosophy is more likely to be outgrown than other, more rational approaches to life. Reason seems to be getting the better of many people with the years, or the growing needs and increasing self-centeredness of the more mature age leave no more space for all-encompassing responsible actions and choices.

In a similar way that it can be outgrown on a personal level, existentialism now also seems to be regarded as a bygone stage in America's cultural history, part of its adolescence, too fundamental in its questioning and too radical in its consequences to be maintained. In a capitalist society founded on the fulfilment of egotistical needs, moral responsibility and deep reflections on the meaning of human existence have no place. What such a system needs most of all are happy, affluent, optimistic consumers. It is this aspect which is frequently taken up in contemporary American literature, especially of the last two decades of the 20th century, and we some more reflection will be dedicated to it in the context of Bret Easton Ellis's novel *Less Than Zero*.

The fact that the protagonists of the two novels discussed extensively here later are adolescents themselves has resulted in the works being repeatedly categorized as adolescent novels. However, if we keep in mind all that has just been said about existentialism and cultural adolescence, there is an interesting analogy to be made. In particular in the case of *The Catcher in the Rye*, youthful Holden is characterized by a strong belief in social and personal ideals, as opposed to the grown-up world of "phonies" he despises. Ellis's novel, written 34 years later, on the contrary clearly bears all the signs of the "matured" capitalist society, in which ideals and responsibility have become a distant memory and the lack of meaning can only be filled with cheap entertainment, drugs, and sex, because that is all there

seems to be. Even adolescence has lost its innocence in the process of society's evolution towards materialism and consumerism.

To conclude, George Cotkin argues that existentialism today survives, but in a state of "living death" (Cotkin, 277), proven for example by its ubiquity in everyday culture, which sometimes reaches an extent of meaninglessness, with cameos in popular movies and even advertisements.⁸⁷ While this may be true, it can only be said to be so for the term existentialism, but not for its concepts or contents. It is true that existentialism in a rigidly defined sense may be outmoded in the cultural and philosophical discourses. The ideas of anxiety, despair, alienation, or the notion of absurdity may not be openly addressed anymore since the 1970s, except in the already mentioned Woody Allen movies, whose approach to existentialism is half-serious, half-jocular.⁸⁸ However, all these profoundly existential notions have played a major role in American cultural history, pervaded American thought and literature for several decades, and have therefore moved into general (sub)consciousness. Existentialism's influence on the present may not always be obvious, but it will always persist, and it is therefore also legitimate to take it into account when dealing with contemporary literary production. No intellectual or spiritual movement vanishes into thin air or disappears without traces and consequences.

⁸⁷ Cf. Cotkin, 277-278, who quotes the examples of Ethan Hawke reading Heidegger in *Reality Bites* and an advertisement of Microsoft's Encarta '95.

⁸⁸ "[...] I got one hundred on the existential philosophy exam by not answering any of the questions." (From *Stardust Memories*. Cotkin, 280)

5. *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger – Innocence, Experience, and Existential Concerns

J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in 1951, has been discussed extensively by various scholars and critics, despite the fact that it is sometimes omitted from the American literary canon altogether and dismissed as irrelevant. The main reason for the exclusion from the canon is the fact that it is more often than not considered an "adolescent novel," and in this function seen fit for classroom reading, but not for serious critical analysis. It is important to note, however, that unlike the second novel we will take into account later, *Less Than Zero*, which could more rightly be accused of the literary "crime" of youth, *The Catcher* was not even written by an adolescent or young adult writer. After all, Salinger was 32 years old when his only novel was published, and it will be shown in this chapter that more universal themes than youth and growing up are addressed in the novel, despite its adolescent protagonist. Especially in light of Salinger's later work, in which his interest for spirituality and Eastern religion became a recurrent theme, it is safe to say that his motives and intentions for *The Catcher* were probably more profound than to simply describe a specific period of adolescent pains and worries, culminating in a partial acceptance of the adult world – a process we usually refer to as "growing up."

Already in the opening paragraph of the novel, the narrating protagonist Holden Caulfield announces to the reader (or the intradiegetic listener) that his story is not going to bear any resemblance to the classical *Bildungsroman* with its usual trials and tribulations:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. (*Catcher*, 1)

One reason for his opposition to this "David Copperfield kind of crap" may be the fact that, unlike many *Bildungsroman* heroes, Holden does not spring from a modest social background. But more importantly, he does not consider his story as one of growing up and maturing, but rather as one of a personal identity crisis, concentrating on one concrete critical point in his recent life rather than on his

whole development towards maturity. Holden, like most 17-year-olds, does not consider himself a "child," and it can be safely claimed that Salinger does not treat him as one, either.

On the other hand, some critics clearly do. Jonathan Baumbach, despite his positive attitude towards the novel and its favorable assessment of it, still constantly (and possibly unconsciously) degrades it by referring to Holden as a "child" and by stressing his childlike perceptions and views of the world. He states, for example, that "[w]hereas the adult observer [...] censors his irreverent or unpleasant responses [...], the child tells all" (Baumbach, 59). It is true that Holden's narrative frankness implies a childlike naïveté. Yet it will be shown that his forthrightness is the expression of high ideals of innocence, honesty, and integrity, akin to Meursault's in *L'Étranger*, rather than a narrative device used to portray the adult world in uncensored words, as it is the case in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) – whose protagonist, one must not forget, is only ten years old.

However, Baumbach does make interesting observations about the inverted roles of "child" and adult roles in *The Catcher*. Failing in his search of a father figure, Holden eventually turns out to be more mature than his elders (but not better, from his point of view), because in his uncompromising innocence, Holden is more open-hearted and emotionally more tolerant than the grown-ups he encounters. He is able to forgive people their personal flaws, to show compassion and understanding – even for a teacher who had to fail him⁸⁹ –, he has strong sympathies even for those others find repulsive, and despite his claim to be "the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life" (*Catcher*, 16) and his resulting potential unreliability as a narrator, one cannot help feeling that he is utterly honest and that the account of this episode from his life is true. The reader feels that Holden is pure and mature in comparison with the adult world: "In a world in which the child is the spiritual father of the man, old age represents not wisdom but spiritual blindness and physical corruption" (Baumbach, 59). The wisdom Holden is looking for can therefore only be found in himself, because he rejects what is presented to him by parents and teachers as "social knowledge" (Finkelstein, 223):

⁸⁹ Cf. Baumbach, 57-59.

Holden is not rejecting maturity but is looking for a better model than his elders by and large present. [...] he is a seeker after wisdom. That Salinger can make the search for wisdom seem important to large numbers of young people is not exactly cause for alarm. (Hicks, 194)

However, as has been mentioned, the "adolescent novel" is only one way of interpreting *The Catcher*, and it is not the interpretation that will be followed here, even if some aspects of that reading will also become pertinent in an existential context. After all, it has been shown earlier that existentialist ideals and existential concerns of all kinds are frequently associated with youth or adolescence, as this seems to be, for many people, the time in which they still allow themselves to cultivate spiritual, philosophical, or social ideals. These latter are often abandoned later in favor of the adaptation needed to lead comfortable lives – something which can rarely be achieved while following one's principles and ideals to the last consequence. In *American Psycho*, Bret Easton Ellis cites "Miss Manners (Judith Martin)":

One of the places we went wrong was the naturalistic Rousseauian movement of the Sixties in which people said, "Why can't you just say what's on your mind?" In civilization there have to be some restraints. If we followed every impulse, we'd be killing one another. (*American Psycho*, introductory quotation, n.p.)

German satirist Max Goldt ironically agrees in an almost anti-Sartrean statement: "Scheinheiligkeit und vorgetäuschte Freundlichkeit gehören zu den größten zivilisatorischen Errungenschaften, denn sie bewahren uns davor, auszusprechen, was wir denken"⁹⁰ (Goldt, 153). The "phoniness" of this type of social and "civilized" conventions is one of the main subjects of *The Catcher* and of Holden's criticism, and it is thus that the novel is

concerned far less with the education or initiation of an adolescent than with a dramatic exposure of the manner in which ideals are denied access to our lives and of the modes which mendacity assumes in our urban culture. (Hassan, 272)

What existential fiction and those literary works usually called "classics" have in common is that they deal with questions which go beyond their own time, questions which remain relevant and are still of interest even if read decades, or

⁹⁰ "Hypocrisy and feigned cordiality belong to civilization's greatest achievements, because they keep us from saying what we think."

even centuries, later. This "ultimate concern" (Harper, 3) – the "unique truth" art achieves because "it is not required to make a case for anything" (ibid., 4) – can be found, for example, in the works of Melville, Twain, Faulkner, and Hemingway.⁹¹ In *The Catcher*, such ultimate concerns are the themes of death, alienation, integrity versus "phoniness," and innocence and experience, which will be discussed in sections 5.2 and 5.3 of this chapter. Holden Caulfield, "as a frustrated, disillusioned, anxious hero, stands for modern man rather than merely for the modern adolescent" (Galloway, 204) and therefore, far from being "an important minor novel" (Baumbach, 56), "*The Catcher in the Rye* is a major achievement, not only as a technical tour de force, but as a serious, relevant, and permanently interesting view of life: a classic" (Harper, 94-5).

5.1 Language and Style

Critic Jonathan Baumbach presents, at the beginning of his discussion of *The Catcher in the Rye*, a host of allegations which have been made against the novel in various critical works. One of the points of harsh criticism is that "the prose is mannered (which is the pejorative word for stylized); no one actually talks like its first-person hero Holden Caulfield" (Baumbach, 55). It may be true that none of the critics who have made this observation would have talked like that, but Holden's colloquial style is realistic to the extent that one can easily imagine him telling his story to an intradiegetic listener. Baumbach himself remarks that Salinger's is "finely honed prose, at once idiomatically real and poetically stylized" (ibid., 56).

Despite Holden's style, which obviously imitates oral conversation, the reader never finds out whom the narrator is addressing and the question is left to speculation. One possibility that has frequently been suggested is that Holden's narration is part of his psychoanalysis and that he is, in fact, addressing a psychoanalyst at his present institution. However, it is difficult to imagine, despite his youthful age and irrespective of his psychological condition, that Holden would keep up his adolescent slang when talking to an adult. After all, in the first five sentences, he already manages to include the words "crap," "hell," and "goddam" –

⁹¹ Cf. Harper, 3.

a style which he continues throughout the novel and which is more likely to be used when addressing someone of one's own age.⁹²

What is much more important than the question of the addressee, however, is Holden's frequent incapacity to express his deepest concerns in an adequate language. There is a highly existential dimension to this gap between experience and the inability to express it in words:

The very inadequacy of [Holden's] adolescent language becomes moving because it represents still another kind of irony – the tragic gulf between the magnitude of human suffering and the poverty of our means for understanding or even expressing it. (Harper, 69)

What Holden can and does express, however, are his feelings, at least to a certain extent. Unlike the existential protagonists introduced in earlier chapters, such as Hemingway's autobiographical Jake Barnes (*The Sun Also Rises*) or Camus' Meursault (*L'Étranger*), Holden's style is emotional, sympathetic, and emphatic. Although he is as uncompromising in his own honesty and in his opposition to "phoniness" as any exemplary existentialist, the rigidity of his idealistic principles does not extend to social relations. Holden expresses sympathy and compassion for many people he encounters, rather than merely concentrating on his own condition, even or especially if those people are not very popular, or even physically repulsive:

"I brush my teeth. Don't gimme *that*."

"No, you don't. I've seen you, and you don't," I said. I didn't say it nasty, though. I felt sort of sorry for him, in a way. I mean it isn't too nice, naturally, if somebody tells you you don't brush your teeth. (*Catcher*, 24)

Although Holden's compassionate style is less than typical of existential literature, it does not diminish his status as an existential protagonist, as will be shown in the following chapter.

5.2 Holden Caulfield – An Existential Hero?

As has been mentioned above, it is evident from the very start that Holden's story is not going to be an autobiography, but only an account of two critical days in

⁹² According to Wikipedia, "[o]ne diligent parent counted 237 appearances of the word 'goddam' in the novel, along with 58 'bastard's, 31 'Chrissake's, and 6 'fuck's" (Wikipedia: "The Catcher in the Rye," 2009).

his personal life as well as in his scholastic career. In this way, it is similar to many works of existential fiction, which frequently focus on a limited period of time in their protagonists' lives, as a symbol of our limited life time as well as in order to force the protagonists to face their situations and take action.

Of course, Holden's situation after his eviction from the posh private school Pencey Prep is not comparable to the existential contemplation of life and fate by protagonists in Camus' *L'Étranger* or similar existentialist milestones. Holden, after all, has not been sentenced to death, locked up in a room in hell, or quarantined in a town befallen by the plague. His is, so-to-speak, what in German is sometimes condescendingly referred to as "Leiden auf hohem Niveau" (suffering on a high level), similar to what has been mentioned earlier to be typical of American literature from the 1920s onwards: the "malaise of the privileged" (Finkelstein, 213). After all, Holden is the son of wealthy parents and material worries are alien to him. But ultimate, existential concerns can haunt anyone, irrespective of their social background. Sometimes they may even have more impact on people stemming from better social conditions, as the fight for pure survival, which does not leave much time or energy to even consider (socio-)philosophical questions, is usually not the most time-consuming occupation of middle- or upper-class individuals. As has been illustrated with an example from *Moby Dick* earlier,⁹³ the struggle for life reduces life to its basest functions and produces a practical rather than theoretical approach to reality. Idleness, on the other hand, frequently results in philosophical contemplation.

Despite Holden's socially privileged situation and the seemingly trivial circumstances of his crisis, there are nevertheless several thematic aspects and elements in the novel which allow to interpret Holden's story in the light of existentialism and its main concerns. For one thing, the reader learns that Holden's younger brother Allie died of leukemia at the age of eleven. The subject of death, indisputably one of the central existential questions, is a persistent one in the novel and will be examined in more detail in chapter 5.4.3.

Apart from death, Holden's narrative is marked by several other fundamental concerns and questions about society and life in general. One might venture to call

⁹³ Cf. chapter 4.2.1.

him an existential hero for sporting an acute awareness of his absurd, apparently pointless existence, and for his desperate attempts to try "to live by ethical standards in an indifferent, often nihilistic universe" (Galloway, 205). In addition, Holden has a sharp sense of personal freedom, on the one hand, and feels responsible for other people and their well-being, on the other hand. The only reason why Holden is not committed to a cause, to his own life, or to his personal advancement by making active choices – as the ideal Sartrean or Camusian hero would – is that he has not yet found his "vocation." His somewhat romantic idea of an ideal occupation is that of catching children playing in a field of rye from falling down a cliff, a notion he picked up from a wrong understanding of a Robert Burns poem.⁹⁴ This idea has a highly idealistic background, which is the wish to catch children before they fall from their innate innocence into adult experience.

Even more important than his lack of knowing what to do with his life, or perhaps a reason for this, is the fact that Holden has not found, in his personal encounters, any suitable role models who would give him the impression that it is possible to grow up, live a useful life, and still maintain one's ideals all the while. There are, however, several indications that these missing role models might be found by him later in (dead or living) fellow writers, in whom he sees kindred spirits:

What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. (*Catcher*, 18)

Writing seems to be the one thing Holden likes doing and feels he is good at, despite his own claim to be "quite illiterate" (*ibid.*) – English is the only subject in which he did not fail at Pencey Prep. Holden's increased contact at the end of the novel with his brother D.B., who is a writer in Hollywood, might indicate a conscious or unconscious decision to pursue writing more thoroughly or to work towards a career in this field.

To describe his state of mind, Holden repeatedly uses the words "depressed" or "sad," which could lead to the assumption that his is simply a phase of adolescent depression rather than a crisis of a more fundamental nature. Indeed, Holden's emotionalized style, verbalizing his dejection as well as feelings of love, is

⁹⁴ Cf. *Catcher*, 173.

probably one of the least "existential" features of the novel, because subjective as his style may be, he does not concentrate on mere sensory perceptions the way Camus or Hemingway do. Instead, his only points of reference are his own thoughts and feelings, which is an expression of his adolescent innocence – which cynics might call naïveté – and of his idealism, but also indicative of the importance of subjective experience. The grown up existential man, on the other hand, like Meursault in Camus' *L'Étranger*, does not waste his time on abstractions, but has understood that there is nothing beyond what can be seen or felt with one's senses – a subjectivity which has moved from idealistic thought to tangible experience.

It is here that a sharp contradiction of atheist existentialism comes to the light. Its focus on existence as opposed to essence has often been argued to indicate that, ultimately, nothing matters in the existentialist's universe, since there is no essence (one might say: no soul) in humans or in the world. Therefore we live, we die, we act, but in the end, it does not matter how we do so, because there will, of course, be no one judging us. This nihilistic argumentation has been rejected by all existentialists, who stressed that despite the lack of an essence, morals and social responsibility are self-evident. However, this leap from a fundamentally atheist, non-essential philosophy to a framework of moral values and responsibility, no matter how well argued, may be equally great and daring as, even if more traceable than, Kierkegaard's leap of faith.

Salinger's leap, on the other hand, resembles more closely that of the Christian existentialists, as his protagonists turn to spiritual values such as innocence, love, or Zen Buddhism – especially in his short stories – to make sense of the world, and to found their moral and social values on:

Salinger's characters feel suffocated by a world which denies innocence. Although they are critical of themselves as well as society, their concern is moral; they seldom question their own psychic health. In order to survive they withdraw into mysticism, regard the outside world with a love which is largely pity, and try to establish communication with an elite whose code is based upon attunement not to the sensual world of Hemingway, but to the spiritual world of incorruptible innocence. (Harper, 195)

The spiritual elite Holden wants to establish contact with are literary writers on the one hand, and children on the other hand. Most of the writers are out of his reach, for more than one reason: "I wouldn't mind calling this Isak Dinesen up. And

Ring Lardner, except that D.B. told me he's dead" (*Catcher*, 18). Children, however, who have not yet taken the leap over the "crazy cliff" (*Catcher*, 173) from innocence to experience, are present in Holden's life, incarnated by his younger sister Phoebe, but also by his late brother Allie, who died before coming of age and will therefore forever remain an angelic, innocent figure in Holden's imagination. The opposition of innocence and experience will be among the existential themes in the novel discussed in the next section.

5.3 Existential Themes in *The Catcher in the Rye*

5.3.1 Myth

As has been mentioned in chapter 3, three characteristic features of existential literature, according to Hazel Barnes, are the use of myth, the expression of human freedom in specific situations, and a sense of social responsibility.⁹⁵ All these features can be found in *The Catcher*, even if they may not be evident at first sight.

A "myth" does not necessarily have to be a classical story from Greek mythology, as Camus' *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* or Anouilh's *Antigone*. Myths can also be traditional, possibly deceptive notions such as the American Dream of personal fulfilment and material success, or the ideals of youth, beauty, and money as presented by many Hollywood productions.

Hollywood is indeed one of the myths used in *The Catcher in the Rye*, and it is one that Holden Caulfield detests, seeing the other side of the shiny coin and concluding that anyone who has decided to work there – for example his brother D.B. – is less respectable than before: "Now he's out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute. If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me" (*Catcher*, 2). It is not surprising that someone with a keen sense of honesty, a great weakness for childlike innocence, and an all-encompassing aversion against everything that is "phony" is not thrilled by the Hollywood machinery on the one hand, and by the fake worlds created by its movies on the other hand. However, Holden's antipathy of Hollywood cannot prevent him from being influenced by it himself, despite being aware of its negative impact:

⁹⁵ Cf. Baker, 79.

But I'm crazy. I swear to God I am. About halfway to the bathroom, I sort of started pretending I had a bullet in my guts. [...] I'd hold on to the banister and all, with the blood trickling out of the side of my mouth a little at a time. [...] Then I'd crawl back to my room and call up Jane and have her come over and bandage up my guts. I pictured her holding a cigarette for me to smoke while I was bleeding and all.

The goddam movies. They can ruin you. I'm not kidding. (*Catcher*, 103-4)

Perhaps Holden's criticism is serious, but as this scene shows, the "phony" movie world can also be a source of creative inspiration, which certainly is not a bad thing for a potential writer.

The second great myth in the novel is that of the "catcher in the rye," Holden's idea of an occupation as a catcher of children who are in danger of falling over a cliff. It is quite evident from his other encounters with and reflections on children that this idea stems from Holden's wish to conserve children's innocence from being corrupted by the adult world of phoniness, apparently an inevitable result of experience. Salinger's is a "Manichean universe of child angels and adult 'phonies'" (Baumbach, 56), and Holden, at the age of sixteen, is in between these stages. He is neither an angelic child anymore, a fact which seems to cause him grief, nor is he an adult yet, and his strong inner opposition to falseness in adults leaves room for hope that Holden will not subdue to the predominant dishonesty of the adult world even as a grown-up.

More than his own childhood, which is gone for good, Holden bemoans the imminent step from innocence to experience in children.⁹⁶ It is especially his child sister Phoebe whom he wishes to protect from a world full of phoniness and (physical, mental, or verbal) cruelty. When Holden goes to pick up Phoebe from her school, he discovers a graffiti saying "Fuck you" on a wall and rubs it out with his hand in order to protect the school children from reading it. However, he finds another "Fuck you" on another wall:

I tried to rub it off with my hand again, but this one was *scratched* on, with a knife or something. It wouldn't come off. It's hopeless, anyway. If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn't rub out even *half* the "Fuck you" signs in the world. It's impossible. (*Catcher*, 202)

⁹⁶ Cf. Harper, 67.

Holden's realization that it is impossible to erase all the bad words from all the walls in the world is a first step towards acceptance of his inability to protect children from the sometimes cruel realities of adult life. This stage in Holden's personal development is completed at the very end of the novel, when he watches Phoebe on a carousel, going around in circles and trying, along with the other children, to catch a gold ring:

All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddam horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them. (*Catcher*, 211)

Even if he tried, there would be no way to prevent children from growing up, and it is through and towards experience that this process is taking place. If the experience means falling, literally or figuratively, then it is one the child has to make itself. There is no such thing as a "catcher in the rye," and Holden cannot be one, either. Children may play in the field of rye happily, but there is no escape from the fact that they will fall over the "edge of some crazy cliff" (*Catcher*, 173) sooner or later. The fact that Holden accepts this inevitable course of life is similar, even if somewhat remotely, to the absurd man's acceptance of the meaningless and arbitrary nature of life, and of the unchangeability of the fundamental facts of life.

5.3.2 Limit Situations

Holden's odyssey through New York only lasts two nights and two days, as it is clear from the beginning that he can defer going home only until Wednesday, but he finally decides to return on Monday. As in many other works of existential literature, the limited setting of the novel provides a situation in which the protagonist is forced to confront his problems and finally draw certain conclusions or consequences. The limits in Holden's situation are temporal as well as spatial, but even social. The time frame within which his story is set are two days, and most of the action is set in his home town, New York. There are, however, also social limits which restrict his liberty. The son of a lawyer and from a wealthy family, Holden is subject to certain expectations from his family. Even if there was a profession of "catcher in the rye" – or, say, if Holden decided to be a kindergarten teacher – , it is

unlikely that his social environment, especially his parents, would accept his decision to pursue this kind of career, which is "below" his social status. We do not, of course, know for sure what Holden's parents want him to do, or whether they would maybe already be satisfied if there was anything he would like to do with his life, as they do not appear in the novel. However, even Holden's little sister seems to be aware of the pressure and authority emanating from their parents, because her sole reaction to Holden's confession that he was expelled from school again is: "Daddy's going to kill you. He's going to *kill* you" (*Catcher*, 172). After Holden's elaborate verbalization of his idea of being a "catcher in the rye," to which Phoebe listens attentively, she simply repeats: "Daddy's going to kill you" (*Catcher*, 173).

The conclusions at which Holden arrives in his limited situation are the aforementioned fact that he cannot save anyone, perhaps including himself, from growing up; the decision to go home to his parents, for their sake and his sister's; and, after another confined period in the institution where he tells his story, a willingness to give school another try in the fall. Holden tries to overcome his indecision and take action and responsibility of his own life. However, it is left to the reader's imagination whether his decisions will hold, or whether they are only the product of other people's expectations. If the latter is the case, Holden's true act of rebellion and of self-affirmation is to take place at some point in the future, as his personality makes it rather clear that he will not be able to subdue to a "phony" adult world which contradicts his personal ideals. However, his sojourn in California, despite being in another confined, institutional location, is already a step towards independence, a distancing from his parental home in New York, and an approach – physically as well as, perhaps, professionally – to his brother D.B., who is working as a writer in Hollywood.

5.3.3 Death

The most fundamentally existential themes in *The Catcher* are certainly those of death, suicide, and disappearance. After all, the awareness of our own mortality is an important one in existential thought, as it provides a limit to our existence, and it has an additional edge in atheist existentialism, where there is no hope of an afterlife. Death also plays a central role in Holden's present crisis, for it appears in

many contexts in his narration. That death should occupy the thoughts of a sixteen-year-old to this extent becomes less surprising after Holden has told the reader (or intratextual listener) that his younger brother Allie died of leukemia at the age of eleven.⁹⁷ Of course, as this event took place four years ago, it might be assumed that Allie's death is not the only reason for Holden's present condition. However, Holden's nostalgic references to Allie suggest that the former has not yet come to terms with the loss of his brother, whom he adored and whose disappearance left a gap in Holden's family, and in his life in general, which cannot easily be filled:

You'd have liked him. He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent. [...] But it wasn't just that he was the most intelligent member in the family. He was also the nicest, in lots of ways. (*Catcher*, 38)

Furthermore, Holden says that after Allie's death, his parents "were going to have [Holden] psychoanalyzed and all, because [he] broke all the windows in the garage" (*Catcher*, 38-9). The past tense in this sentence implies that this step was not taken after all, and that Holden's traumatic loss has not yet been dealt with in a professional manner.

Holden's wish to preserve childlike innocence, as outlined above, becomes much more understandable as a consequence of the death of his angelic child brother. The arbitrariness of life and fate has become painfully apparent to Holden, and it is not only for children's unspoilt innocence that Holden fears, but also for his own bare existence. In two places in the novel, Holden has a sudden irrational feeling of "disappearing." The first of these two incidents takes place on Holden's last day at Pencey. On his way to say goodbye to Mr. Spencer, Holden's history teacher, Holden runs through the streets on a cold day:

After I got across the road, I felt like I was sort of disappearing. It was that kind of a crazy afternoon, terrifically cold, and no sun out or anything, and you felt like you were disappearing every time you crossed a road. (*Catcher*, 5)

Whereas this incident can be dismissed as a minor feeling of insubstantiality or of unreality, the second one equals a major manifestation of existential anxiety. On Monday morning, Holden walks the streets of New York, perceiving their

⁹⁷ Cf. *Catcher*, 38.

"Christmasy" (*Catcher*, 197) atmosphere, remembering going Christmas shopping with his sister two years ago, when

all of a sudden, something very spooky started happening. Every time I came to the end of a block and stepped off the goddam curb, I had this feeling that I'd never get to the other side of the street. I thought I'd just go down, down, down, and nobody'd ever see me again. Boy, did it scare me. You can't imagine. I started sweating like a bastard – my whole shirt and underwear and everything. Then I started doing something else. Every time I'd get to the end of a block I'd make believe I was talking to my brother Allie. I'd say to him, "Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Please, Allie." And then when I'd reach the other side of the street without disappearing, I'd *thank* him. (*Catcher*, 197-8)

There are two ways in which a person can "disappear" from his or her own life. One is, of course, death. Holden's brother Allie died at a young age, and this type of arbitrariness of fate frightens not only adolescents, but most humans. Even though Holden has, in a certain way, a spiritual construct of his own to make sense of the world – based on innocence and love – and a framework within which to establish his place in society (integrity versus phoniness), there is an important factor missing. Holden calls himself "sort of an atheist" (*Catcher*, 99), and even if this does not imply a lack of moral values for him, the absence of God does deprive life of a predefined meaning and makes death seem all the more scary. In addition, a world without God is all the more distressing when adults cannot serve as role models anymore due to the moral corruption of society. Consequently, there is no spiritual authority to turn to in times of need, which is why Holden's late brother Allie, a prototypical "good person," serves Holden as a model and even a "saint," to whom he prays for support.

Holden's atheism is telling for the spiritual development among many intellectuals in the U.S. from the 1920s onwards, and especially after World War II. Like the existentialists, Holden does not need a religion to found his convictions and moral ideals on, feeling that personal integrity and responsibility are much more important and precious than empty rituals. He even accuses Christian ministers of his much-hated phoniness: "they all have these Holy Joe voices when they start giving their sermons. God, I hate that. I don't see why the hell they can't talk in their natural voice. They sound so phony when they talk" (*Catcher*, 100). The loss of adult role models and the loss of God as a spiritual authority may even be related (in *The*

Catcher as well as in existential philosophy), springing from the same distrust towards traditional values. Just like in Nietzschean nihilism, old thought structures – religious as well as intellectual – must be destroyed in order to install a better society and way of life. Therefore Holden's idealism virtually forces the rejection of his parents' and teachers' values, as well as of religion and its representatives as spiritual guides. This also explains why in Salinger's works, children and adolescents

believe nothing their elders tell them or, by implication, that the accumulated social knowledge of "education" tells them. The younger ones look to brothers and sisters for companionship, confidence and learning, not to their parents. (Finkelstein, 223)

However, such is the nature of nihilism that, despite its positive potential, the destruction of existing values and of the security provided by tradition is usually perceived as unsettling, even threatening. Unless one takes the initiative and transforms one's ideas and ideals into concrete action, one is in danger of "losing oneself." It is exactly at this point that Holden is stuck, because he knows his ideals but does not yet have a plan how to act them out.

This lack of direction, this missing plan and absence of action results in the second way of "disappearing," one which also threatens Clay in Ellis's *Less Than Zero*: blending into irrelevance by leading a meaningless existence. Although Holden's frequent references to death suggest that this subject is troubling him greatly, he has not yet understood that the only way to overcome it is by living for the moment and for his convictions, and living actively. Despite the fundamentals of morals and ideals which are already present in Holden's worldview, he is not ready yet to take responsibility in the existentialist sense, preferring unrealizable ideas like that of being a "catcher in the rye" to actual, obtainable goals.

Holden's fear of disappearing is, therefore, twofold: it is the fear of a life that fades to meaninglessness, and the fear of death. Especially the latter of the two is symbolized by the recurring story of the ducks in the lake in Central Park. Holden wonders over and over again what happens to them or where they go in the winter, when the lake freezes. He asks two taxi drivers, who are exasperated at what they feel to be a silly question. But to Holden, the question is central, and the connection to the question of death becomes evident especially in one scene. After having walked around the whole partly frozen lake but not finding any ducks, he sits on a

bench near the lake, feeling very cold. His thoughts therefore move from the ducks straight to the fear of catching pneumonia and to fantasies of his own funeral as well as memories of Allie's.⁹⁸ The ducks leaving the lake in the winter stand for Holden's fear of death, and for the souls of people who have passed away, like his brother. Winter is, of course, a frequent symbol of death. However, the frozen lake may also represent more generally a hostile environment, like the one Holden feels himself surrounded by, which does not provide him with the spiritual or intellectual nourishment he needs. His concern for the ducks may, therefore, also be a concern for himself, wondering what he can do or where he can go when the conditions are so unfavorable.

Finally, references to death also occur in Holden's repeated allusions to suicide. Whereas in one case he speaks of the suicide of a fellow student, at other times the possibility of suicide is a way of expressing his state of dejection: "What I really felt like, though, was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window" (*Catcher*, 104). Holden's only reason not to do it, he claims, is the fact that he does not want people to see him all covered in blood on the sidewalk – a consideration which is admirable, but also gives us an idea that his wish to die is not completely serious, unless, of course, his altruistic love of other people is indeed so much stronger than his concern for his own fate.

Another interesting context in which suicide appears is the football game he watches on his last day: "It was the last game of the year, and you were supposed to commit suicide or something if old Pencey didn't win" (*Catcher*, 2). Of course, nobody actually expects anyone to commit suicide about a football game. But the fact that the game is taken so seriously by many people, and Holden's reaction to it, is telling. Long-established "values," such as sports and ambition, have an utmost importance to the kind of society which Holden despises as "phony," and they are values and ideals for which Holden has no sympathy or understanding. Like the human activities Pascal calls "diversions," sports are utilized by many people to take their minds off our human condition of "inconstancy, boredom, unease."⁹⁹ And like many, perhaps most, other diversions, they end up having great significance in people's lives and consequently in society as a whole. Holden, however, is not

⁹⁸ Cf. Mellard, 202.

⁹⁹ Cf. Brosman, 39 and chapter 2.3.1.

impressed by such distractions. His concerns are of a much more fundamental nature, including such implied philosophical questions as: How do you grow up and still lead a life of honesty, sympathy, compassion, and love? How do you deal with death and loss? Holden's dismissive remark about "suicide or something" [my italics] shows quite plainly that he considers such base concerns to be of no importance at all, in the grand scheme of things.

5.3.4 Integrity versus Phoniness: Good and Bad Faith

Holden's archenemy in his social environment is the falseness which, to his mind, has become a second nature to most adults and which prevails in society as a whole. What he criticizes are hypocrisy and an occupation with – existentially speaking – small matters. In a philosophical sense, therefore, Holden is more mature than his elders, because he prefers to question the underlying principles and workings of life and society instead of engaging in superficialities.

In Sartre's terms, Holden turns against bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) by neglecting the responsibility to lead an authentic existence in order to please others or to live according to certain external expectations. Such inauthenticity is usually achieved by adopting behavioral patterns such as hypocrisy, role playing, lying, or denial,¹⁰⁰ and its essential feature is the pretense to be "identical to our roles or the captive of our situations" (Mautner, 550). As Sartre has argued, however, no one is truly "trapped" – on the contrary, we are always completely free, regardless of our original situation, and not acting out our freedom equals bad faith.

As has been shown in chapter 5.2, Holden cannot always articulate his fundamental, critical, sometimes philosophical views, and his collective word for all the inauthentic ways of life is "phony." Pencey's headmaster is a "phony slob" (*Catcher*, 3) for Holden – probably due to his efforts to give his school a certain high-class reputation by utilizing respective, untruthful advertising:

They advertise in about a thousand magazines, always showing some hotshot guy on a horse jumping over a fence. Like as if all you ever did at Pencey was play polo all the time. I never even once saw a horse anywhere near the place. (*Catcher*, 2)

¹⁰⁰ Cf. chapter 2.4.1.

Similarly, when Holden runs into an ex-girlfriend of his brother D.B.'s, he instantly identifies her as dishonest: "'How marvelous to see you!' old Lillian Simmons said. Strictly a phony. 'How's your big brother?' That's all she really wanted to know" (*Catcher*, 86). Her companion is not judged more favorably: "He was one of those guys that think they're being a pansy if they don't break around forty of your fingers when they shake hands with you. God, I hate that stuff" (*Catcher*, 86-7). "Phonies" are, therefore, in general people who are insincere and/or play certain roles in order to get what they want – be that social contacts, material wealth, or status and repute. Like Sartre's notion of bad faith, which concentrates on the neglect of one's personal freedom and honesty in favor of the assumption of an attitude that serves to please other people, such uncandidness is always directed at a certain goal. No matter what this goal is, even if it is only to please and to make friends, the price is always one's own personality, one's responsibility towards oneself, and frequently integrity.

Against the background of a wealthy New York family at the end of the 1940s, social adaptation is most certainly expected of Holden in order to "succeed" in life, in terms of professional as well as personal advancement. The reason why he does not feel comfortable with these expectations is that they do not correspond to his philosophical and social ideals. On the other hand, his character and self-confidence are not yet strong enough to openly oppose society and become an outsider. In addition, his social bent, which accords him compassion and sympathy for other people, includes his parents, whom he does not wish to hurt, despite his disagreement with their "phony" adult world:

[M]y parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. They're *nice* and all – I'm not saying that – but they're also touchy as hell. (*Catcher*, 1)

Quite clearly, Holden does not share his father's "touchiness," but his empathic nature makes him respect it all the same.

Holden does not only criticize people for being phony, his dislike also includes words which he considers to be dishonest, or the distortion of facts by covering or masking reality. In chapter two, his history teacher Mr. Spencer tells

Holden that his parents are "grand people," to which Holden's reaction – which he keeps to himself – is: "Grand. There's a word I really hate. It's a phony. I could puke every time I hear it" (*Catcher*, 9). And the bellboy in the hotel in New York is "one of those bald guys that comb all their hair over from the side to cover up the baldness. I'd rather be bald than do that" (*Catcher*, 61). Honesty and loyalty to one's own principles are Holden's highest ideals, and the fact that they seem to be so little esteemed among adults irritates him.

In Holden's ideal world, everything should be straightforward and honest, which is evidently a socio-philosophical utopia, similar to the boy's *idée fixe* of catching children from falling into adulthood. From the point of view of the idealist, capitalist society is, by and large, morally corrupt and, apart from children, there are few truly "good" people, as not only Holden observes, but also absurdist Joseph Heller concludes somewhat cynically in his *Catch-22*:

How many wise guys were stupid? [...] How many honest men were liars, brave men cowards, loyal men traitors, how many sainted men were corrupt, how many people in positions of trust had sold their souls to blackguards for petty cash, how many had never had souls? [...] When you added them all up and then subtracted, you might be left with only the children, and perhaps with Albert Einstein and an old violinist or sculptor somewhere. (*Catch-22*, 473)

Deciding to side with the honest and morally upright people automatically means belonging to a minority and hauling oneself to the margin of society – like the "old violinist or sculptor somewhere" –, something for which Holden is not completely ready yet. As it is, all there is for him to do is stick to his own principles and act them out to the extent of which he is capable. His integrity and loyalty to honesty go so far that he does not want to make promises which he does not know for sure he can keep:

A lot of people, especially this one psychoanalyst guy they have here, keeps [*sic!*] asking me if I'm going to apply myself when I go back to school next September. It's such a stupid question, in my opinion. I mean how do you know what you're going to do till you do it? The answer is, you don't. I think I am, but how do I know? I swear it's a stupid question. (*Catcher*, 213)

5.3.5 Alienation

Deciding not to play along with the established traditions and rules of society is an almost inevitable consequence of existential thought, as such conventions have been installed throughout history for the benefit of monetary profit, material and/or political success, or religion, rather than to encourage individual thought. Even in a society that apparently supports individuality, personal freedom is only accepted as long as it is acted out within a certain framework and conforms to certain norms. In a predominantly capitalist society, for example, anyone who opts for a non-profit way of life risks, and probably ends up, becoming an outsider. In a similar way, rejecting traditional moral values and ideals is, in general, regarded unfavorably. Individuality is promoted and supported as long as it plays by the rules, and the rules are undeniably non-individual. Existentialism, however, stresses the importance of subjectivity and personal choice, as well as the questioning of traditional values. As a result, many existential heroes are or become social outsiders. The most famous example is Camus' Meursault in *L'Étranger*, whose behavior is found to be unsuitable for a son mourning his mother and who is condemned to death not only, but also because of his indifference to standardized conduct and because of his differentness.

In American culture and literature, the effects of World War II and of existentialist thought left their marks, and many values were reassessed in this period. Unlike Twain, Lewis, or Fitzgerald, who appreciated the social values they rebuked to a certain extent even though criticizing them, many American writers of the 1950s and 60s documented a turning away from traditional American ideals and values.¹⁰¹ "The values of 'the American way of life,' if they ever existed, were now shown to be dead, irrelevant to the real human condition" (Harper, 192). *The Catcher in the Rye* was written at this exact time when old ideals like success, patriotism, or the notion of the "land of the free" were regarded with suspicion on the one hand, and were replaced by more fundamental values on the other hand. As a consequence, in many literary works of this period, the characters resigned to "permanent alienation from public values, as in [...] all of Salinger's protagonists"

¹⁰¹ Cf. Harper, 192.

(ibid., 193). Holden Caulfield is certainly the prototype of such an alienated character.

Whereas writers such as O'Neill or Styron also depict the estrangement of children from their parents in their novels, the alienation of their protagonists is largely the result of conflicts and tensions within the family¹⁰² – another example of this type of personal isolation within the context of a family would be Tennessee Williams' play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). However, the estrangement of Salinger's young protagonists is different in that it is "not rooted in any particular inter-family relation. The roots are in present-day society, and the alienation is between one entire generation and another" (Finkelstein, 223). This is not surprising when one takes into account the aforementioned change of value systems underway in postwar America. Every rejection of traditional concepts and values provokes an inevitable conflict between the generations. One consequence, and simultaneously cause, of this conflict is that, in Salinger's prose and elsewhere in similar situations, the young people

believe nothing their elders tell them, or, by implication, that the accumulated social knowledge of "education" tells them. The younger ones look to brothers and sisters for companionship, confidence and learning, not to their parents. The older ones are highly sophisticated, can analyze their parents and themselves, know that society is hopelessly corrupt and search desperately for some way out. (Finkelstein, 223-4)

Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* is in between stages, as has been stated above. On the one hand, he longs for social rapport and harmonious relationships with other people, including adults such as his teachers and his parents. On the other hand, he has a strong desire to remain individual and unblemished by social conventions which contradict his conceptions of honesty and "good faith," and he only finds moral purity in children. It is also in this respect that he is in a transitional stage, between being a child, who seeks advice and company with his siblings, and an "older one" who sees through corrupt society and tries to find a solution for his own life.

Pursuing the wish to adhere to his personal ideals by not accepting established views and values – for example by rejecting the scholastic education

¹⁰² Cf. Finkelstein, 223.

which is offered him by the adult world of "phonies" –, Holden is pushed toward the margin of society, although his development is not completed and he is not a real outsider yet. In his thoughts, however, Holden clearly perceives himself as standing apart, alone in his different view of life. The logical consequence of being an outsider of society, be it openly or inwardly, is a feeling of isolation. Holden's alienation is evident on every page, almost in every sentence of his narration. Everything he sees and every person he meets is analyzed in a detached way, evoking the impression that he is the only sane person wandering about in an insane asylum: "I'm not kidding, the hotel was lousy with perverts. I was probably the only normal bastard in the whole place" (*Catcher*, 62). Holden feels that neither his schoolmates, whom he himself regards in a parental manner, nor adults, whose values and lifestyles he either pities or despises, would understand him, and he therefore does not confide in anyone. At one point he tries to tell his friend Sally Hayes how he feels about school and a future way of life he does not wish for, but she reacts with incomprehension:

"I said no, there wouldn't be marvelous places to go to after I went to college and all. Open your ears. It'd be entirely different. [...] And I'd be working in some office, making a lot of dough, and riding to work in cabs and Madison Avenue buses, and reading newspapers, and playing bridge all the time, and going to the movies and seeing a lot of stupid shorts and coming attractions and newsreels. Newsreels. Christ almighty. [...] You don't see what I mean at all."

"Maybe I don't! Maybe you don't, either," old Sally said. We both hated each other's guts by that time. (*Catcher*, 132)

If it was not for his ten-year-old¹⁰³ sister Phoebe, Holden would have no one to share his feelings with, and Phoebe only understands his worries partially. Intellectually, she certainly cannot grasp the full extent of Holden's depression and feeling of isolation, but she is "somebody you always felt like talking to on the phone" (*Catcher*, 68) for Holden – virtually the only person with this quality in his life. Holden's alienation is the result of a lack of kindred spirits in his life. Perhaps his late brother Allie's name is a coincidence, but only two years younger than Holden, he certainly was and probably would have remained an ally of Holden's against the phony world of grown-ups.

¹⁰³ Cf. *Catcher*, 68.

Emotional estrangement becomes most obvious in many existential works in the protagonists' ways of dealing with – or not dealing with – romantic relationships. In Camus' *Étranger*, Meursault seems to enjoy being with his girlfriend Marie, but he never expresses any particular feelings for her, and on the contrary tells her that he "probably" does not love her:

Le soir, Marie est venue me chercher et m'a demandé si je voulais me marier avec elle. J'ai dit que cela m'était égal et que nous pourrions le faire si elle le voulait. Elle a voulu savoir alors si je l'aimais. J'ai répondu comme je l'avais déjà fait une fois, que cela ne signifiait rien mais que sans doute je ne l'aimais pas.¹⁰⁴ (*L'Étranger*, 51)

Meursault here shows the existentialists' aversion against abstract concepts, and "love" evidently is such an abstraction. Moreover, similar to Holden's reaction to the psychoanalyst's question whether he will apply himself at school in the future, Meursault chooses not to feign an emotion or a conviction he does not feel only to please someone, but prefers complete frankness and honesty.

Contrary to Meursault, Holden Caulfield does have strong feelings, especially for his old friend Jane Gallagher, whom his Pencey roommate Stradlater dates the same Saturday night of Holden's expulsion. Despite not being happy about this date, and despite his affection for Jane, Holden cannot make up his mind to go downstairs with Stradlater to say hello.

"Jane Gallagher. Jesus." I couldn't get her off my mind. I really couldn't. "I oughta go down and say hello to her, at least."
"Why the hell *don't*cha, instead of keep saying it?" Stradlater said.
[...] "I'm not in the mood right now," I said. I wasn't, either. You have to be in the mood for those things. (*Catcher*, 32-3)

Holden's "not in the mood" to meet or call Jane lasts throughout the novel and occurs, almost verbatim, several times.¹⁰⁵ Of course, there is some truth to the statement that "you have to be in the mood for those things" – a depressive spell may not be the best time to catch up with old friends. However, it is also evident

¹⁰⁴ "In the evening, Marie came to see me and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said that I did not care and that we could do it if she wanted to. She wanted to know then whether I loved her. I replied, as I had already done once, that it did not mean anything but that I probably did not love her."

¹⁰⁵ E.g. "Then I thought of giving Jane Gallagher's mother a buzz, and find out when Jane's vacation started, but I didn't feel like it" (*Catcher*, 59) or "I started toying with the idea [...] of giving old Jane a buzz [...]. The only reason I didn't do it was because I wasn't in the mood. If you're not in the mood, you can't do that stuff right" (*Catcher*, 63).

that Holden's feeling of alienation has led him to believe that no one, not even a formerly very intimate friend, will be able to understand him in his misery. What he opts for instead, when he is in New York, is to call another girl friend, whom he does not even like particularly:

I thought of giving old Jane a buzz, to see if she was home yet and all, but I wasn't in the mood.

What I did do, I gave old Sally Hayes a buzz. She went to Mary A. Woodruff, and I knew she was home because I'd had this letter from her a couple of weeks ago. I wasn't too crazy about her, but I'd known her for years. I used to think she was quite intelligent, in my stupidity. [...]

"Yes – who is this?" she said. She was quite a little phony. I'd already told her father who it was.

[...] Then I hung up. She gave me a pain in the ass, but she was very good-looking. (*Catcher*, 105-6)

In this scene, Holden proves to be capable of the worst faith possible, by choosing an easy, superficial contact rather than calling the girl he really likes. He is not true to his feelings, but to social convention – after all, Sally is objectively good-looking, whereas Holden's mother did not consider Jane pretty when she lived next door a year and a half earlier.¹⁰⁶ Of course, the meeting with Sally is not exactly a success, as her beauty cannot make up for her lack of intelligence and compassion. On the other hand, it is likely that superficial interpersonal relations are the only kind Holden is capable of in his state, and that any company is better than no company at all, or that bad company is even better than good company. After all, someone like Jane, with whom he was very close, would force Holden to open up and leave his isolation, and his feeling of alienation clearly does not allow him to take this step yet.

5.4 Conclusion

Despite his adolescent insecurity and his somewhat erratic thoughts and conversations, Holden Caulfield can be regarded, to a certain extent, as an existential hero. After all, not every existential hero is simultaneously a perfect existentialist – sometimes the opposite is the case, as the protagonists in Sartre's *Huis Clos* show, whose bad faith serves to illustrate existential ideals precisely by

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *Catcher*, 78; 31.

their absence. *The Catcher in the Rye* was published in 1951, at a time when French existentialism was highly popular in the U.S., and Salinger must have been aware of this philosophical movement, even if personally, he was committed to Zen Buddhism rather than to Western philosophy.¹⁰⁷ Holden Caulfield displays an uncompromising desire for honesty and for an innocence and purity, free from social expectations and affectation, that is difficult to find among grown-ups in the modern world. That is why he is reluctant to grow up himself, and as a consequence he neither recognizes his own situation, nor does he take any active steps to develop personally or work towards self-realization. He therefore serves at the same time as a good and as a bad example for existentialist notions such as good faith, freedom, choice, and responsibility. Salinger has created an existential novel – and one which has become, quite understandably, a widely read and much loved classic.

¹⁰⁷ Buddhism, however, does share several insights and principles with existential philosophy, such as the denial of a fixed "essence," or its serenity in the face of the meaninglessness of existence (cf. Glasenapp, 138).

6. *Less Than Zero* by Bret Easton Ellis – The Existential Void of the Reagan Era and the Great Capitalist Beyond

6.1 Bret Easton Ellis and his Novels

Bret Easton Ellis is certainly best known for his controversial third novel, *American Psycho*, the story of Wall Street yuppie Patrick Bateman, who has the particular hobby of killing people in nauseatingly sadistic ways and who describes his murders in equally sickening detail. Published in 1991, the novel awarded the author global renown, as well as made him the object of outraged criticism and censorship. In Germany, the novel was on the "Index" between 1995 and 2001, meaning that it could not be advertised and was sold only under the counter to readers aged 18 or older.¹⁰⁸ Critics alternately found Ellis's literature, and especially *American Psycho*, repulsive and representing "A Revolting Development" (Sheppard, 1990), undeserving of serious critical consideration, praised it for capturing the nihilistic spirit of the Reaganite 1980s and the superficial 1990s, demanded to "canonize Bret Easton Ellis" (Keats, 1999) or even called *American Psycho* "das vielleicht beste Buch der zweiten Jahrhunderthälfte"¹⁰⁹ (Jürgens, 1999).

In the wake of *American Psycho*, Ellis himself has been given many different labels, ranging from "monster" to "moralist" (ibid.). Without any doubt, his status as a moralist would be rejected by a majority of (uninformed) readers preferring to dismiss his novels as amoral. One might, however, more suitably propose that Ellis is an immoralist, in the vein of Michel in André Gide's *L'Immoraliste*: "It is important that he is called not an amoralist but an immoralist: one who recognizes conventional morality and deliberately violates it as a strategy" (Brosman, 65). After all, Ellis himself has stated repeatedly that public moralizing nowadays is inappropriately outmoded and embarrassing, and being a "moralist" perhaps altogether impossible.¹¹⁰ His method of depicting an ill society by mixing realism with scandalous exaggeration is, therefore, simultaneously an immoral and a highly moral approach to post-modern times.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Ohmer, 2004.

¹⁰⁹ "perhaps the best book of the second half of the century."

¹¹⁰ Cf. Jürgens, 1999.

Only one critic has explicitly considered one of Ellis's novels in light of existentialism so far.¹¹¹ Despite the indisputable existential dimensions present even in the mindless Wall Street world of Patrick Bateman, critics have not viewed *American Psycho* as an existential novel:

"Ihr, die Ihr hier eintretet, lasset alle Hoffnung fahren", das ist der erste Satz aus *American Psycho*; Dantes Inschrift der Hölle ist zu einem Graffito an einer New Yorker Häuserwand geworden. Am Ende des Buchs steht Bateman vor einem verschlossenen Notausgang. No exit. Alle Romane von Bret Easton Ellis spielen in der Hölle. In einer Welt, die nur aus Oberflächen und Außenseiten besteht. In der die Subjekte sich eine Identität allein durch die Labels ihrer Designersachen zuschreiben; nie erfährt man, wie jemand aussieht, nur, was er anhat. In Ellis' Welt gibt es keinen Sinn, keinen Glauben, keine Innerlichkeit und keine Liebe, in die man flüchten könnte.¹¹² (Jürgens, 1999)

Whether the last words of *American Psycho* – "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (*American Psycho*, 399) – are a conscious allusion to Sartre's play *No Exit* or not cannot be conclusively determined. Yet Ellis's many existential references – hell, no exit (i.e. confinement), lack of faith or meaning, outsiders – are telling and imply that there is a depth to his writing which many critics have tried to deny. These elements are relevant in this discussion of Ellis's first novel *Less Than Zero* in an existential context, as *American Psycho* can, or must, be read as a logical consequence, culmination, and perhaps conclusion of Ellis's preceding two novels.¹¹³

These preceding novels are *Less Than Zero* (1985) and *The Rules of Attraction* (1987). *Less Than Zero* describes protagonist and narrator Clay's Christmas holidays in L.A., a period filled with sex, drugs, music, and meaninglessness, perhaps not exactly in this order.

¹¹¹ Cf. Sahlin, 1991.

¹¹² "Abandon all hope ye who enter here," that is the first sentence of *American Psycho*; Dante's inscription of hell has become a graffito on a New York house wall. At the end of the book, Bateman is standing in front of a closed emergency exit. No exit. All of Bret Easton Ellis's novels are set in hell. In a world consisting only of superficialities and outsiders. In which the subjects ascribe to themselves an identity only by way of the labels of their designer products; one never learns what someone looks like, only what he is wearing. In Ellis's world, there is no meaning, no faith, no inwardness, and no love, into which one might escape.

¹¹³ Of course, as Ellis's forthcoming novel *Imperial Bedrooms*, which will be published in 2010, is a direct sequel of *Less Than Zero*, one might claim that *American Psycho* is not a conclusion yet. But the relevance of *Imperial Bedrooms* is yet to be seen, and in terms of existential elements, the three novels *Less Than Zero*, *The Rules of Attraction*, and *American Psycho* do constitute a useful (if imaginary) thematic trilogy.

Ellis's second novel, *The Rules of Attraction*, features three main characters, students at an East Coast college – the same as Clay's in *Less Than Zero*, and Clay also appears in the novel. The novel is a first-person narrative but contains different protagonists, the narrator changing with every chapter. The plot is roughly a continuation of *Less Than Zero's* accumulation of sexual encounters, substance abuse, violence, and nihilism, crushing all hope that life in the East might be less superficial and drained of meaning than in L.A.

Finally, *American Psycho* moves on to New York City, as did Ellis himself before writing the novel. Its protagonist, a serial killer and/or madman – as it is never cleared up whether his murders have actually been committed or only imagined – is Patrick Bateman. Bateman, for his part, is the brother of Sean Bateman of *The Rules of Attraction*. Given this intertwining of characters and plots, it is quite legitimate to assume a certain thematic connectedness of the three novels. The nature of this connection will become evident in the analysis of *Less Than Zero*.

Further works by Bret Easton Ellis are a collection of short stories, *The Informers* (1994), *Glamorama* (1998), a satirical novel about supermodels who are also terrorists, and *Lunar Park* (2005), featuring the main character Bret Easton Ellis and appearances by all his preceding novels' protagonists.

Ellis has repeatedly (in interviews taken before *Lunar Park*) referred to *American Psycho* as the "most autobiographical of [his] novels" (Bilton, 206), explaining that it reflected his state of mind and his behavior at the time of its creation, and even admitted that he had felt he "deserved to be writing a book like that" (ibid., 215). This statement was, of course, an invitation for misunderstandings and has, therefore, almost inevitably been thoroughly misinterpreted. After all, even the most benevolent critics do not question that you have to be "[s]o ein ganz bisschen wahnsinnig [...], um Gewaltexzesse mit derartiger Liebe zum Detail zu beschreiben"¹¹⁴ (Jürgens, 1999), and less benign judges might wonder "what kind of a healthy well-balanced person would come up with such stuff in the first place"¹¹⁵ (Bilton, 206).

¹¹⁴ "just a tiny bit insane [...] to describe excesses of violence with such love of detail."

¹¹⁵ N.B. This does not, of course, express Bilton's opinion, but that of some critics he mentions.

There is also an ironic dimension to Ellis's pop-culture-compatible writing which cannot be dismissed, paralleled by works such as Oliver Stone's movie *Natural Born Killers* (1994). The irony lies, of course, in the reception of such novels and films. For while they cynically portray a society addicted to the thrills of violence and voyeurism provided by the media, they simultaneously make use of the very sensationalism they satirize as a narrative and stylistic device. Even though the popularity of *Natural Born Killers* and *American Psycho* may partly actually be a result of Ellis's and Stone's critical messages, there is no denying that the appeal of the mindless violence in their works has also played a part in their cultification, which makes them, so to speak, the objects of their own criticism.¹¹⁶ "Ellis's books already seem like the products of the world he is ostensibly decrying [...]" (Bilton, 212). Of course, if a "subversive work proves unexpectedly commercial" (ibid., 198), this does not reduce that work's relevance as an expression of revolt. After all, just because originally rebellious art forms such as Dada or punk rock have been incorporated into mainstream culture, their motives, efforts, and effects certainly are not less valuable,¹¹⁷ and the same can be said of Ellis's writing.

Bret Easton Ellis's literary style has been given several labels and has been submitted to much categorization. In the mid-1980s, critics and reviewers were outwitting each other at coming up with new names for a new generation of writers, which eventually basically encompassed Jay McInerney, Tama Janowitz, and Bret Easton Ellis. The most widely used term, borrowed from a group of 1980s movie actors, was the "Brat Pack" – a designation still in use today when referring to that decade and its young writers. However, this generalization did not consider the differences in the authors' works and styles, and the only thing they actually had in common was that they were young and publishing novels during that specific period. Other labels that were conceived included "Yuppie Lit" (Sheppard, 1987) or the "MTV Novel,"¹¹⁸ and when *Less Than Zero* was published in 1985, *USA Today* welcomed it as a "*Catcher in the Rye* for the MTV generation" (Freese, 85).

Ellis's detached descriptions of people and events, as well as his protagonists who often consider themselves outsiders, recall the existentialists' literary

¹¹⁶ Cf. Bilton, 211-212.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Bilton, 198.

¹¹⁸ See Freese's note on the various appearances of the expression "MTV Novel" in Freese, 1990, 85.

embodiments of alienation. In addition, Ellis includes elements which make his novels particular mirrors of contemporary society, such as brand names, rock (pop, punk) music, TV, movies, advertisements, and pretty much every other shape – from tame to extreme – that popular culture can take.

Two writers and their impact on Ellis's work are especially interesting. The first one is James Joyce, whose *Ulysses* (1922) influenced Ellis according to one source,¹¹⁹ and was only "inspirational," but not an influence, according to another.¹²⁰ Be that as it may, traces of Joyce's style can be found especially in Ellis's first two novels. *The Rules of Attraction*, for instance, breaks away from literary convention by simply starting in the middle of a sentence, and ending in the same way. *Less Than Zero*, on the other hand, is written in a style close to Joyce's stream of consciousness – and it is certainly not Ellis's fault that the consciousness of his protagonist has so little to offer in terms of contents. Due to this lack of content and meaning, I will take the liberty of calling Ellis's style a "stream of irrelevance," reflecting the pointlessness of all effort in a similar, but much more hopeless way than, for example, *The Catcher in the Rye*. The open beginning and ending of *The Rules of Attraction* can be read in much the same way, implying that it does not really make a difference where the narration sets in or breaks off, as one day resembles the next, and no significant changes, or changes in significance, are to be expected at any point. The stream of irrelevance simply keeps flowing.

The second writer to whom Ellis is remarkably indebted is "the Ernest Hemingway of *The Sun Also Rises*" (Bilton, 215). This becomes less surprising if one recalls the passage from Hemingway quoted in chapter 3.2:

I was thinking about Brett and my mind stopped jumping around and started to go in sort of smooth waves. Then all of a sudden I started to cry. Then after a while it was better and I lay in bed and listened to the heavy trams go by and way down the street, and then I went to sleep. (*The Sun Also Rises*, 31)

It has been observed before that all action here (and in existential literature in general) is described in a detached and emotionless way, even if it actually does concern the narrator's personal emotions. A very similar phenomenon can be found in Ellis's *Less Than Zero*:

¹¹⁹ Cf. Bilton, 215.

¹²⁰ Cf. Amerika, 1994.

I think I see Julian here, leaving, and I get up from the table and go to the bar and then outside and it's raining hard and I can hear Duran Duran from inside and a girl I don't know passes by and says, "Hi" and I nod and then go to the restroom and lock the door and stare at myself in the mirror. People knock on the door and I lean against it, don't do any of the coke, and cry for around five minutes and then I leave and walk back into the club and it's dark and crowded and nobody can see that my face is all swollen and my eyes are red and I sit down next to the drunken blond girl and she and Blair are talking about S.A.T. scores. (*Less Than Zero*, 119-120)

Of course, Ellis's novels also reflect Hemingway (that is, the Hemingway of *The Sun Also Rises*) in their preoccupation with a certain lifestyle, to wit that of parties and social events and affectations. The spiritual emptiness, which Hemingway fills with bars, alcohol, dances, and bull-fights, Ellis fills with drugs, sex, and MTV. In *The Sun Also Rises*, the protagonists' malaise results from the physical and spiritual effects of war, whereas *Less Than Zero's* antiheroes have grown up in a world already drained of meaning, and where significance and feelings are only remote memories, recorded for all eternity in rock songs that nobody listens to anymore. Maybe "*The Sun Also Rises* popularized the idea of the 'Lost Generation' – but the anomie and disappointment at its heart seem to come around for every generation, sooner or later" (Grossman, 2005).

In addition to these influences, Ellis's novels *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho* have been said to represent a "minimal realism" in the tradition of Raymond Carver.¹²¹ Whereas one may agree that Ellis's style is minimalist, "realism" is a bold label to be attached to his writing, given the psychological instability, the subjectiveness, and the resulting unreliability of his first-person narrators. Narratives which largely take place in the heads of possibly insane protagonists – this, of course, mostly concerns *American Psycho* – can hardly be called realistic.

Finally, parallels can be drawn between certain types of drama and certain genres of prose fiction, as has been mentioned in chapter 4.2.3, where the Theatre of the Absurd was found to have an equivalent in the Literature of the Absurd of authors such as Pynchon or Heller. In theatre, there are three genres which are closely related:

¹²¹ Cf. Leypoldt, 236-269.

[...] Angry Theatre is topical, particular, and political, whereas Absurd Theatre is timeless, universal, and philosophical, [...] Theatre of Cruelty [...] is angry in intention and absurd in impression! (Hinchliffe, 4)

In analogy to this typification, I suggest to use the term Literature of Cruelty for Bret Easton Ellis's writing. Absurdity is reflected in all the above-mentioned stylistic features such as minimalism, detached descriptions, and the stream of irrelevance, of which the author makes use. The anger, on the other hand, is directed against a morally and emotionally degenerate society, and directed against it with full power and through the use of brutal violence. Ellis breaks open the abysses of society, dissects them carefully, and pushes the bloody pieces into the reader's face – cruelly.

6.2 Less Than Zero Meaning

Carving "V" for "vandal" on the guilty boy's head
When he's had enough of that, maybe you'll take him to bed
To teach him he's alive before he wishes he was dead.
(Elvis Costello, "Less Than Zero")

Less Than Zero has received much critical and medial attention, most of which was favorable, upon its publication in 1985. Ellis was welcomed as a new voice of the Brat Pack novelists, representing the spirit of the youth in the 1980s, and despite certain flaws quite natural for a debut novel, *Less Than Zero* has been called "an expressive cultural document" and "an accomplished narrative" (Freese, 84).

With or without the context of its two follow-up novels already mentioned, *The Rules of Attraction* and *American Psycho*, *Less Than Zero* can be read as an outcry against an increasingly indifferent and superficial materialistic society on the one hand, and as a painful illustration of the resulting personal alienation and loss of identity on the other hand. It is, of course, especially the latter aspect which is relevant in this reading of the novel in an existential context. It must be noted that *Less Than Zero* is not explicitly an existential novel. One reason for this is that the terms existentialism or existential literature are scarcely applied to writing or thought from the 1970s onward anymore, except as references, quotations, or

cultural footnotes. As has been pointed out in chapter 4.3, after the post-war traumata of the 1950s and the civil-rights and women's liberation movements of the 1960s, mainstream as well as literary America turned from questioning the fundamental questions of life to a new shape of the American Dream: unlimited consumerism. In Woody Allen's words, American society had "outgrown" existentialism,¹²² setting aside adolescent idealism for material values (or should we say, valuable materials).

But although *Less Than Zero* is set in the heyday of this new America, to wit the Reaganite years, its protagonist Clay – who is simultaneously a victim and an agent of his time – is constantly aware of a depth to existence which he cannot quite grasp. Due to the superficiality of his environment, however, he has no one to turn to for guidance or even understanding and, as will become evident, he is too weak to face his existential dread like the Camusian "absurd man." He certainly is not an existential hero, who meets his absurd fate of meaninglessness with courage and responsibility, and Ellis himself states quite clearly that Clay is not a "hero" at all:

That would always bother me when people would say, "the hero of the novel". He isn't a hero at all to me. He's like this big void. He troubles me more than any other character that I've written about. (Amerika, 1994)

Whether Ellis consciously made use of existentialist themes in the novel is unclear, as he does not name any existentialists or existential writers (with the exception of Hemingway) as influences in his various interviews and statements. But as Nicki Sahlin remarks, it can be expected that Ellis was at least familiar with specific existentialist concepts when writing *Less Than Zero*, thanks to his "liberal arts education" (Sahlin, 25). Moreover, as has been stressed before, a writer does not need a theoretical, philosophical background in order to address deeply existential concerns in his works. Sociocritical and moralistic, *Less Than Zero* indisputably has more than one theme and "function,"¹²³ but its existential dimension cannot be neglected.

¹²² Cf. chapter 4.3.

¹²³ Provided one adopts a pragmatic rather than an aesthetic approach to literature and claims that it actually does fulfill a certain purpose.

Before turning to the discussion of the novel's layers of existential meaning (and meaninglessness), it is necessary to underline that *Less Than Zero* is not an adolescent or "initiation" novel, either. Like *The Catcher in the Rye*, its protagonist is young. However, in *Less Than Zero* there is no innocence to be lost, no moral values to grow up to, no adult world to be initiated into – seeing that the worlds of adolescents and adults are more or less identical – , and even if there is something to be learned, Clay refuses to find it and learn it. Much more so than with Salinger's Holden Caulfield, there is no sign of any kind of psychological or emotional growth in Clay's character during the few weeks covered in the novel.

The plot of *Less Than Zero* can easily be summarized in a few lines, as the events throughout the novel are repetitive, and the characters are largely interchangeable. 18-year-old Clay, a college student in New Hampshire, is back in his home town Los Angeles for the winter break. In L.A., he catches up with his old friends and acquaintances, almost exclusively the sons and daughters of Hollywood producers, actors, music producers, and the like. Among these friends are Blair, his ex-girlfriend, and Julian, formerly his best friend. However, Julian has become a drug-addict who has to sell his body in order to be able to afford his addiction, and although the relationship with Blair is unresolved, Clay is reluctant to change that situation. Instead, he takes part in the L.A. party life, which includes unmeasurable amounts of drugs and indiscriminate sex with girls and boys alike – a lifestyle the L.A. youth has obviously inherited from their parents. When he is at home alone, Clay invariably turns on MTV and takes either cocaine to push him up, or Valium to calm him, or both in succession. The novel ends with another breakup with Blair, and Clay's resolution to return to the East Coast.

The novel is written in the present tense, and narrated by Clay in the first person. It is divided into 108 short chapters, "geared to the limited attention span of both the drug-impaired narrator himself and the readers he addresses" (Freese, 71) and also imitating, as has often been observed, the "rapid sequence of video clips" (ibid., 71-2). Thus the term "MTV Novel" not only refers to its contents, but also to its form. Within this framework, there are several passages, chapters, and characters, which stand out and break the rhythm of its stream of irrelevance.

Firstly, there are 12 chapters in italics, in which Clay remembers singular events or short periods in the past. In general, they refer to happier times, more cordial relationships, and more intact family ties. However, these passages are already tainted by indications of the disintegration of social structures and of the decay of personal interaction. In addition, the flashbacks introduce traumatic and key events which account, at least partly, for Clay's present obsession with death¹²⁴ and his situation with Blair. Blair herself is also a "break" in the narrative, because although she participates in the superficial party lifestyle, she seems to be capable of actual emotions, which are unfortunately wasted on Clay. However, Blair's special status is evident not only in the novel but also in Clay's life, as he mentions her name more frequently than others', sometimes even more frequently than grammatically necessary:

I'm sitting with Blair in an Italian ice cream parlor in Westwood. Blair and I eat some Italian ice cream and talk. Blair mentions that *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is on cable this week. (Zero, 141)

Thirdly, Clay's three conversations with his psychiatrist stand out from the flow of the novel's indifferent tone, because they reveal Clay's otherwise drugged and repressed unhappiness with his situation. Finally, there are two events which provoke Clay to show open aversion against his friends' desensitized ideas of "a good time." The first one is a snuff movie watched by some of Clay's friends at a party, showing the apparently real torturing and possibly murder of two teenagers. Blair and Clay are the only ones who leave the room where the film is shown.¹²⁵ The second event is the rape of a twelve-year-old girl in Rip's apartment, which makes Clay walk out and actually protest verbally, but he does not intervene.¹²⁶

The details and the significance of these "breakers" will be disclosed in the following sections on existential elements in the novel.

6.3 Existential Themes and Features in *Less Than Zero*

Despite and because of Clay's incapability to deal with his social environment, his nihilistic perspective on life, and his existential fears, *Less Than*

¹²⁴ Cf. *Zero*, 75-77, where Clay (age 15) and his sisters pass the scene of a car accident.

¹²⁵ Cf. *Zero*, 153-154.

¹²⁶ Cf. *Zero*, 188-190.

Zero can be interpreted as an outcry against the meaninglessness of a materialistic, capitalist society, which is obsessed with appearances and which lacks emotions and social depth. However, the novel "is more a lament than an attack. Clay, the narrator, witnesses life around him with an increasing unease and alienation" (Battersby, 1999). The following sections will explore the existential elements which can be found in the novel.

6.3.1 Myth

It has been stated that existential literature frequently deals with myth in various ways, by utilizing mythological figures or concepts in order to symbolize human existence or specific situations within it, or by exposing myths which are generally believed to correspond to reality. In *Less Than Zero*, this misleading "reality" is the shiny surface of the affluent life of Hollywood tycoons, music producers, and their children in Los Angeles. Seen from the outside, their lifestyle seems extremely desirable. "Beautiful people," professional success stories, money in abundance, parties, promiscuous sexual encounters, the radiant presence of the rich and the famous: at first sight, there is nothing left to be desired in this advertiser's dream come true.

However, perfect worlds have the habit of harboring hidden pitfalls. Clay's apparently detached portrayal of the society of his former home town soon uncovers the downsides of a lifestyle in which material goods and physical beauty are the only points of reference. The glamorous appearances are soon stripped of their pretense, and what lies behind them are less than appealing prospects. Family ties are practically nonexistent, and so are real friendships. The very first sentence of the novel, "People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles" (*Zero*, 9), remains in Clay's thoughts throughout his stay in L.A., and is reduced to the recurring phrase "People are afraid to merge." A society where people do not "merge" – that is, do not feel responsible for one another –, and where there are no values beyond material ones, loses its perspective and its depth. In addition, the lack of emotional or spiritual values results in an amoral culture, which operates on similar principles as those of a godless society: "Without God, there is no ground for morality [...]. If God does not exist, 'everything is permitted'" (Brosman, 15),

concludes Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov. If one replaces the word "God" with "social responsibility," one arrives at the heart of the Reaganite 1980s. After all, the conservative politics of the Reagan administration (1981-1989) strengthened the economy while abandoning social security, a policy which naturally also set an example for the population, who concluded that it is acceptable to pursue personal and financial goals by disregarding the "greater good." It is therefore not surprising when Gordon Gekko, the great anti-hero of Oliver Stone's movie *Wall Street* (1987), formulates the spirit of his time in the legendary phrase: "Greed is good."

It is, on the other hand, ironic that this exact attitude is also verbalized and practiced by the youth of (reputedly) happy, sunny, traditionally liberal Los Angeles in *Less Than Zero*. When his friends are preparing to rape a twelve-year-old girl, Clay objects weakly that he does not think it is "right," to which Rip replies: "What's right? If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it" (*Zero*, 189). Incidentally, the myth of total freedom is also put to the test in this situation, as it shows that the individualism advertised by the capitalist machinery as "unlimited" cannot exist unless at the expense of others.

Further dark sides of the shiny L.A. coin brought to the light in *Less Than Zero* are anorexia, abortion, prostitution to pay for drugs, or the loss of individuality by identical looks. It is here that the myth of Hollywood as a "dream factory" is dismantled to the core and exposed to be the site of nightmares rather than of dreams. In the last chapter of *Less Than Zero*, Clay expresses a deeply dismal feeling about Los Angeles:

There was a song I heard when I was in Los Angeles by a local group. The song was called "Los Angeles" and the words and images were so harsh and bitter that the song would reverberate in my mind for days. The images, I later found out, were personal and no one I knew shared them. The images I had were of people being driven mad by living in the city. (*Zero*, 207)

In Ellis's second novel, *The Rules of Attraction*, this idea is fortified when Clay insinuates that Blair's sanity may have suffered in his absence: "[I]n a tape Blair sent me she was positive that [Rip] had been murdered. She also told me that she had seen Jim Morrison at the Häagen Dazs in Westwood" (*Rules of Attraction*, 183).

Finally, Hollywood and its films – an entirely mythological world in itself – also function as a metaphor of life in the novel:

[...] I ask the film student, "Didn't it bother you the way they just kept dropping characters out of the film for no reason at all?"

The film student pauses and says, "Kind of, but that happens in real life. . . ." (Zero, 132)

The "real life" referred to here by the film student is the only one he is familiar with and grew up with, one without individuality or personal attachments. Whereas looks, appearances, and lifestyle have become central, they have all assimilated and identity is vanishing. It is difficult to tell one person from another, even for Clay himself:

There are mostly young boys in the house and they seem to be in every room and they all look the same: thin, tan bodies, short blond hair, blank look in the blue eyes, same empty toneless voices, and then I start to wonder if I look exactly like them. (Zero, 152)

Clay appears to be one of the few people who are bothered by this uniformity and by the indifference towards the individual, because he feels that it affects him personally and that, unless he is careful or makes an effort, he will drift off into a meaningless existence and disappear in this mass culture. This is the reason why he shows unexpected interest in the fate of an eighteen-year-old stuntman who died during the filming of a movie:

My grandfather looked down, sadly. "What was his name?" he asked.

"What?" The director glanced up.

"What was his name? What was the kid's name?"

There was a long silence and I could only feel the desert breeze and the sound of the jacuzzi heating and the pool draining and Frank Sinatra singing "Summer Wind" and I prayed that the director remembered the name. For some reason it seemed very important to me. I wanted very badly for the director to say the name. The director opened his mouth and said, "I forgot." (Zero, 145)

Similar to Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye*, who "prays" to his brother Allie to keep him from "disappearing" at each street corner, the otherwise atheist Clay suddenly "prays" (even if in a figurative sense) for the director to remember the stuntman's name. This clearly implies how strongly Clay identifies with the young man and hopes that his name is not forgotten, which would prove that individual lives are not meaningless in the Hollywood universe. The director's reply, however,

shatters this hope and exposes a glimpse of the true nature of the entertainment business and, by extension, the society which Clay finds himself to be a part of.

6.3.2 Freedom and Responsibility

Two of the most fundamental topics of existential philosophy, freedom and responsibility, are closely related. As has been shown in the theoretical section on French existentialism, especially Sartre stressed the total freedom of the individual, regardless of his or her initial situation. In other words, no matter who, what, or where one is, there is always room for choice and action. As a consequence and an imperative of complete freedom, however, one is always completely responsible for one's own actions as well as for other people.

In *Less Than Zero*, this crucial combination of personal freedom and social responsibility is also blatantly present – by its absence. Even though, at first glance, freedom seems to be unlimited in the novel's self-obsessed show-business high society, it is no more than a shadow of the "real thing." For despite the huge potential and countless possibilities which the characters' social situation and financial independence hold, their activities are immensely limited due to a lack of constructive ideas what to do with their time. In addition, the reckless, egoistical world they have been "thrown" into and now constitute a part of has only one point of reference and goal: private pleasure and material wealth. A "freedom" that is so strictly defined is not actually deserving of that label.

Too much freedom, exercised only to pursue such exclusively self-centered goals, inevitably leads to spiritual and emotional vacuity, satiety, and finally boredom. Neither Clay, nor anyone he encounters during his visit in Los Angeles, actually makes use of their personal freedom to act according to their own specific situations and needs. On the contrary, the predominant sentiment is one of being trapped in a predefined way of life, and despite recurring feelings of unhappiness, unease, or existential fear, everyone continues to play along with the unwritten rules of this society:

"See ya later tonight, right, Clay?"

I want to say no, but I have the feeling somehow that I will be seeing him later tonight and I nod and say, "Yeah" and try to sound convincing, like I mean it. (*Zero*, 171)

Of course, the dilemma of existentialism is that once the lack of an essence and the meaninglessness of life are recognized, one may ask oneself: What is the point of doing anything, if life is meaningless and then we die? However, like Camus' absurd man, the existentialist then proceeds to see the vast range of possibilities and the freedom to create one's very own meaning resulting from this "meaninglessness." In order to gain this positive view and make use of it, it is necessary to be aware of one's situation and to be willing to take active steps. It is here that *Less Than Zero's* protagonist Clay is exposed as an anti-existentialist antihero par excellence, because even though he feels that his passive behavior towards others as well as towards himself only feeds his dissatisfaction, he lacks the will or the power to fight his nihilistic attitude.

Existential anxiety works in two directions. The first one is the conclusion that because existence is inherently meaningless and fate coincidental and arbitrary, everyday life and all action are insignificant as well. But very frequently, the opposite deduction is made: since everyday life and social encounters are shallow and lack substance, existence must be meaningless. Clay's life is certainly marked by such shallowness and triviality, because he does not make use of his freedom of choice and action. Consequently, life and death equally become a threat to him, symbolized by his numerous references to natural disasters and his fear of them.¹²⁷ In addition, Clay's awareness of his passivity and *mauvaise foi* results in his inability to confront himself, which is reflected in his recurrent feeling of being watched by the Elvis Costello poster in his room, and which is also evident in other situations:

It was strange to drive down 110 at one or two in the morning. There wouldn't be any cars out, and if I stopped by the side of the road and turned the radio off and rolled down the windows, I couldn't hear anything. Only my own breath, which was all raspy and dry and came in uneven gasps. But I wouldn't do this for long, because I'd catch a glimpse of my eyes in the rearview mirror, sockets red, scared, and I'd get really frightened for some reason and drive home quickly. (*Zero*, 69)

Hazel Barnes states that existentialist literature "must concern itself with the basic situations in which human freedom affirms itself" (Baker, 79) and in *Less Than Zero*, Ellis confronts Clay with several such situations. Clay, however, does not

¹²⁷ Cf. chapter 6.3.4.

recognize the potential of any of them and only continues to feel threatened and depressed. The most obvious basic situation in which Clay finds himself is the closed system of his friends and family in Los Angeles. Within this system, however, no matter how confined it may be, there does not seem to be any limit or any need to take action or affirm one's freedom, as all values are material and, therefore, neither personal nor social commitment are required or expected. Freedom has become a perversion, limited to the right (or, worse, the duty) to satisfy one's material needs and greed – including sexuality, which is deprived of any personal or emotional dimension and consumed as randomly as TV or drugs:

I realize for an instant that I might have slept with Didi Hellman. I also realize that I might have slept with Warren also. I don't say anything. They probably already know. [...]

Blair thinks about it for a moment and then says slowly, evenly, "If Cliff slept with Didi, then he must have slept with . . . Raoul." [...]

I open my menu and pretend to read it, wondering if I slept with Raoul. Name seems familiar. (Zero, 28)

To complete this distorted version of freedom, all actions in the novel are self-centered to the extent that other people's feelings or well-being are of no importance, and the concept of responsibility is virtually unknown. On the one hand, the situations of others are simply not registered, like that of an old lady who collapses in the street in front of a café where Clay and Rip are sitting: "There are people standing over the old woman and an ambulance comes, but most of the people in La Scala don't seem to notice" (Zero, 105). On the other hand, as a result of never having been taught moral courage, nobody knows how to react to critical situations and they are therefore simply ignored or shut out: "[...] I'm pretty sure I can hear someone screaming in the house next to us, down the canyon, and I close my window" (Zero, 78).

As there is no moral or legal authority to question the excessively selfish use of freedom, Clay and his friends are in no limit situation where there would be the need to face or fear any consequences of their actions. In a way, one might say that the capitalist, Reaganite America of the 1980s even encouraged social irresponsibility. After all, a society based on consumerism depends on people being careless, at least to a certain extent. Responsibility harms business, because a conscientious approach to the economy would exclude many potential contractors

and businesses. Therefore, consumers must also be led to believe that everything that serves one's pleasure and that can be bought is permitted. Responsible customers are this system's nemesis, because if everything that is morally questionable, such as goods from companies with dubious methods or from countries with intolerable political systems, was boycotted, the market would break down and the capitalist system would collapse.

Clay's environment is shaped by this political and economical background, which is reflected in an irresponsible social behavior that only seeks pleasure and disregards moral principles. However, his friends' combination of freedom and lack of responsibility goes even further, as it becomes perfectly justified to harm others even actively in order to have "fun." The well-known aphorism that one person's freedom ends where someone else's begins does not apply here, as anything is allowed to satisfy any conceivable desire. Two incidents in particular illustrate this attitude, which has already been introduced in the previous sub-chapter: "If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it" (Zero, 189).

The first incident is the watching of a snuff movie at a party. This movie supposedly is real, showing someone being tortured and possibly killed by cutting off various parts of the body. The second one is even more serious, as some of Clay's friends themselves are going to rape a 12-year-old girl. In both situations, Clay reacts by walking out. Whereas in the case of the snuff movie, he simply contents himself to close his "mental window" and wait outside until the film is over, he untypically feels the urge to actually openly oppose his friends in the second case. He tries to intervene verbally, but he is not courageous enough to see his opposition through to the end, and all he manages to utter are weak questions and mild objection:

"Why?" is all I ask Rip.
"What?"
"Why, Rip?" [...]
"It's . . ." my voice trails off.
"It's what?" Rip wants to know.
"It's . . . I don't think it's right." (Zero, 189)

Back in the bedroom, Clay makes a final attempt to get his friend Trent to leave with him:

"Come on, Trent," I say. "Let's get outta here."
He looks over at me and then at Spin and the girl and says, "I think I'm gonna stay."
I just stand there. [...]
I close the door and walk away [...]. (Zero, 190)

Clay does not stand up for his beliefs, perhaps because he is only vaguely aware of them, and he does not intervene rigorously and stop his friends from committing their cruel crime. And the following chapter clearly shows that Clay does realize how grave his friends' deed is, as he remembers the story of a girl who was raped, killed, and mutilated in the house of an acquaintance. In this light, one deeply shares Bret Easton Ellis's feelings about his protagonist and antihero:

The reason why he troubles me more than the other characters is because at least he has a bit of a conscience. Yet he still refuses to break out of his passivity. He still allows evil to flourish around him. That bothers me more than Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho*, who I can look at as a stylized villain or a big metaphor for a ton of stuff [...]. (Amerika, 1994)

The little bit of conscience and feeling Clay possesses but does not know how to use is going to waste, and part of the reason for this is that he is let down by the only safety net in his society to which he has access: his psychiatrist. Perhaps because he is used to cliché L.A. clients who – cynically speaking – only come to sessions to talk about bad haircuts and failed plastic surgery, Clay's psychiatrist is superficial himself and only interested in his own life. He suggests that Clay should help him write a screenplay he has in mind, pretending to think of Clay's well-being:

"You know, Clay, that you and I have been talking about how you should become more active and not so passive and I think it would be a good idea if you would help me write this. At least a treatment." (Zero, 109)

Clay chooses to ignore the psychiatrist's proposition, but during the next session, he seriously tries to deal with his own psychological condition, crying, wondering out loud what is wrong with him, whether his malaise has to do with his family, or his friends, or drugs. The reaction of his psychiatrist is telling: "At least you realize these things. But that's not what I'm talking about, that's not really what I'm asking you, not really" (Zero, 122). And he continues to ask Clay whether he has seen Elvis Costello in concert and whether he likes his latest album. Clay responds by trying to turn the conversation back to himself:

"What about me?"
"What about you?"
"What about me?"
"You'll be fine."
"I don't know," I say. "I don't think so."
"Let's talk about something else."
"What about me?" I scream, choking.
"Come on, Clay," the psychiatrist says. "Don't be so . . . mundane." (Zero, 123)

Here Clay's difficult effort to move away from superficiality, to admit to his profound anxiety, to face his true self and thereby affirm his personal freedom, is hopelessly shattered by the fact that the one person who is there to listen to him – and only because he is paid to do so – is even more superficial than himself. However, the psychiatrist at least prompts Clay to actually make an active decision and to speak his mind in an unusually clear and determined manner. He calls his psychiatrist on the phone to tell him that he is not coming anymore.

"I see. Um, why not?"
"I don't think that you're helping me all that much."
Another pause. "Is that really why?"
"What?" [...]
"I think I'm going to call your mother."
"Go ahead. I really don't care. But I'm not coming back, okay?"
"Well, Clay. I don't know what to say and I know it's been difficult. Hey, man, we all have –"
"Go fuck yourself." (Zero, 162)

Clay's strong words are extremely satisfying to read, as they indicate that he, too, has had enough of the would-be attitude of his shallow social environment, and one realizes that there is a potential for revolt. Unfortunately, it is Clay's only rebellious act in the novel – possibly because the psychiatrist is, apart from Blair, the only one who is (or should be) personally interested in Clay.

Nicki Sahlin suggests that Clay's "final choice" to return to the East Coast is one in favor of "survival rather than oblivion" (Sahlin, 41). However, although his leaving L.A. could be interpreted as an act of freedom, it has to be noted that his return to New Hampshire was never really in question and is, therefore, a passive choice at best. Nevertheless, the fact that Clay first leaves the setting of the rape and shortly afterwards Los Angeles offers a slim ray of hope, insinuating the possibility of escaping the madness and, especially, stressing Clay's will to do so. There is also hope that Clay might, at some point, renounce his *mauvaise foi*, his

weakness, passivity, and irresponsibility, which provides the novel with an ending that although far from upbeat, is not completely bleak.

6.3.3 Absurdity and Nihilism

The title *Less Than Zero* already hints at a negative perspective on life, one that is not only meaningless and absurd, but even less than that. An obvious argument would therefore be that the true nature and mood of the novel is not existentialist, but nihilistic. Nihilism is a close relative of existentialism and is often difficult to tell apart from existentialism. But as Sartre outlines in his defense of existentialism as a form of humanism (see 2.4.1), the true spirit of existential philosophy is not a negative, but a positive outlook on life. Sartre confirms this in his argumentation that by defining oneself in the here and now, by one's acts and by what is feasible and palpable, one defines oneself positively,¹²⁸ and Camus concludes that the absurd man, incarnated by Sisyphus, must be imagined as a happy man.¹²⁹

Thus it is easy to see the difference between existentialism and nihilism, and it is also obvious that Clay is closer in spirit to the latter. Lacking the motivation and the positive energy or activity that his apparently meaningless situation could inspire, he becomes caught up in the unhappy nothingness – a state below zero – of his existence, becoming as a manner of speaking an image of existentialism perverted. He is an image of Sisyphus despairing at his situation instead of deciding that the existential void and the absurd condition have to be confronted with courage, rebellion, and action.

In addition, Clay's approach to existence is far from Nietzsche's happy nihilism which serves as a starting point for something new. According to Nietzsche, nihilism is not an end but a means, but in *Less Than Zero*, there is an undeniable atmosphere that "nothingness" is indeed an end – and a dead end, for that matter. Of course, existence can be described as a dead end street, too, a one way road which inevitably leads to death, and death is the end in a universe where God is dead. However, there are two ways to deal with this journey. One possibility is to

¹²⁸ Cf. *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, 58.

¹²⁹ Cf. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 168.

question the significance of making the journey in the first place, if there is no goal. And the second, existentialist, approach is to simply be there, make of it whatever is possible while it lasts, and not worry about the outcome. Interestingly, this exact opposition is expressed in a dialogue between Clay and Rip:

And later when we got into the car he took a turn down a street that I was pretty sure was a dead end.
"Where are we going?" I asked
"I don't know," he said. "Just driving."
"But this road doesn't go anywhere," I told him.
"That doesn't matter."
"What does?" I asked, after a little while.
"Just that we're on it, dude," he said. (Zero, 195)

This exchange takes place just after visiting the site of several accidents along the winding Mulholland Drive: "Rip told me about friends of his who died on that curve; people who misunderstood the road. People who made a mistake late in the night and who sailed off into nothingness" (Zero, 195). Clay, too, is misunderstanding the road of his life and is in danger of disappearing into nothingness. The mistakes he makes are not acting, not making use of his freedom, and not listening to his conscience, and the result is an irrelevant existence.

The feeling of meaninglessness and absurdity in the novel is also expressed by irrelevant or absurd conversations and remarks, like the following dialogue between Kim and Clay:

"Don't ask me about my mother."
"Why not?"
"Don't say that."
"Why not?" I say again.
She finds the vest. "Here."
"Why not?"
"What do you do?" she asks, holding out the vest.
"What do you do?"
"What do you do?" she asks, her voice shaking. "Don't ask me, please. Okay, Clay?"
"Why not?" (Zero, 149)

In Clay's final conversation with Blair before leaving for New Hampshire, he verbalizes the reasons for his superficial approach to life and relationships for the first, and only, time:

"Did you ever care about me?" she asks again.

"I don't want to care. If I care about things, it'll just be worse, it'll just be another thing to worry about. It's less painful if I don't care." (Zero, 205)

What Clay does not realize is the fact that no attachment, no relationships, no involvement, and nothing to "worry about" equals complete meaninglessness. Neither does he realize that a life drained of significant values is much more painful than worrying about "things" could ever be. However, when Blair asks him what makes him happy and what he cares about, he can only reply: "'Nothing. Nothing makes me happy. I like nothing'" (Zero, 205). Sahlin calls Clay's response to Blair's question a "triple affirmation of nothingness" (Sahlin, 40) and interprets his "I like nothing" as "I like nothingness" (ibid.). Yet it must be noted that the reason why Los Angeles threatens to drive him mad is just this mental, spiritual, and moral vacuum, and contrary to what Sahlin claims,¹³⁰ staying in L.A. would not be the easier way for him.

The result of Clay's nihilism is an existential void which results in extreme anxiety and which is reflected in his repeated references to death and disappearing.

6.3.4 Disappearing

A persistent theme in *Less Than Zero* is Clay's fear of "disappearing," which is not unlike Holden's in *The Catcher in the Rye*. In Ellis's novel, however, this theme appears much more frequently and thus adds a note of urgency as well as of danger which is not present in *The Catcher*.

The first time the word appears in the novel is when Clay is on his way home early in the morning after sleeping with a boy called Griffin. He is driving through the empty streets when he sees a billboard that says "'Disappear Here' and even though it's probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little and I step on the gas real hard" (Zero, 38). Subsequently, the slogan keeps coming back to haunt Clay and takes on different meanings in the different contexts where it appears.

One of these meanings certainly is the fear of disappearing as a result of meaninglessness, which can also be found in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Due to a lack of personal relationships, the inability to care about other people and a passive lifestyle without significant events, Clay's presence is practically irrelevant. This

¹³⁰ Cf. Sahlin, 40.

insignificance is caused, on the one hand, by the superficiality of the society surrounding him, and on the other hand by his own inactivity. According to Sartre, we create meaning by action, but instead of being someone who acts, Clay is – as a consequence of his social education and of his decade – a consumer. He consumes TV, movies, drugs, and sex, but he does not actually do anything:

I tried to keep a datebook one summer, but it didn't work out. I'd get confused and write down things just to write them down and I came to this realization that I didn't do enough things to keep a datebook. (Zero, 72)

On some level Clay is probably aware that as someone who does not act, his life is meaningless and that he himself, as a human being, is disappearing into irrelevance. Someone who makes no effort, takes no active decisions, and does not care about anything is not only leading a meaningless existence, but also dissolves to something which resembles a ghost, a shadow, or even a "zombie" (Gray, 1985). He is someone who cannot be grasped anymore, neither by himself nor by others:

"Did you ever love me?" I ask her back, though by now I can't even care. She pauses. "I thought about it and yeah, I did once. I mean I really did. Everything was all right for a while. You were kind." She looks down and then goes on. "But it was like you weren't there. Oh shit, this isn't going to make any sense." She stops. I look at her, waiting for her to go on, looking up at the billboard. Disappear Here. (Zero, 204)

Clay's passivity not only causes Blair to claim that he is not really there, it also makes it impossible for her, or for anyone else – including the author or the reader – to sympathize with him: "You were never there. I felt sorry for you for a little while, but then I found it hard to. You're a beautiful boy, Clay, but that's about it" (Zero, 204). If someone does not commit himself to anything, not even his own life, it is certainly difficult to pity him. Clay's own awareness of his "not being there" is evident in the return of the phrase "Disappear Here" in this context.

However, in this situation as well as in others, the slogan might also suggest something closer to its original intention, that is: "Get out of here." Clay clearly feels that Los Angeles and its morally corrupt society is a bad place for him to be, despite or perhaps because of his own moral bankruptcy.¹³¹ He understands that if he wants

¹³¹ Cf. Ellis's description of Clay as being "morally bankrupt" (Amerika, 1994).

to save himself and find a way to charge his spiritual batteries, so to speak, he must get away, leave L.A., and "Disappear [from] Here."

A more subtle hint at Clay's wish to escape is given during a visit of a cinema, where he is watching a movie with Kim and Blair: "My eyes keep wandering off the screen and over to the two green Exit signs that hang above the two doors in the back of the theater" (*Zero*, 97). Although this is only a passing remark, the Exit sign bears strong symbolic connotations – especially the green Exit signs in buildings, which guide the way out in cases of emergency. The signs symbolize the urgency of Clay's wish to leave his situation and social environment, to disappear from here. The image of the Exit sign becomes even more pointed in *American Psycho*, which closes with the words: "This is not an exit" (*American Psycho*, 399). Whereas Clay is still checking for ways to escape, Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* has learned that there is none. All hope of change has died and Patrick Bateman, Wall Street broker and serial killer, cannot escape his material world anymore. He has accepted to live in his hostile, superficial society, but on his own terms: by taking his own secret revenge. Clay, on the other hand, still believes that fleeing L.A. might save him and feels that if he does not, he is likely to "disappear here" not only into irrelevance, but also literally. For in this socially hostile environment he is not going to endure and might either be killed by the inimical forces surrounding him – including the L.A. climate of heat, rain, and storms¹³² –, or pushed towards an act of self-destruction. The destructive force emanating from the "hellishness of aimless lives" (Gray, 1985) is perceptible not only to Clay, but also to others:

[...] "Hair looks good," he tells Ronnette.

"Did it myself. I had this dream, see, where I saw the whole world melt. I was standing on La Cienega and from there I could see the whole world and it was melting and it was just so strong and realistic like. And so I thought, Well, if this dream comes true, how can I stop it, you know?"

[...]

"How can I change things, you know? So I thought if I, like pierced my ear or something, like alter my physical image, dye my hair, the world wouldn't melt. So I dyed my hair and this pink lasts. I like it. It lasts. I don't think the world is gonna melt anymore."

[...] We pass the billboard on Sunset. Disappear Here. Wonder if he's for sale. (*Zero*, 103)

¹³² Cf. chapter 6.3.5.

The problem is that Ronnette, as well as everyone else living the Hollywood way of life, is trying to counter existential fears with purely material, instead of spiritual or moral acts. "Wonder if he's for sale," another sentence which haunts Clay, adds to this capitalist, consumerist approach to existence. Ronnette dyes her hair, feeling that this trivial but concrete act provides her world with the "substance" it needs to remain stable, and Clay's psychiatrist only offers Elvis Costello or his own ambitions to write a screenplay as an antidote to Clay's misery. The fact that it takes more profound actions and choices to keep people from disappearing and the world from "melting" does not occur to any of the characters in the novel.

The first sentence Clay hears from Blair when she picks him up at the airport is "People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles" (Zero, 9). Later, one of his sisters makes a remark about a boy: "I wonder if he's for sale" (Zero, 23). These two sentences and "Disappear Here" form a recurring set of phrases which reappear throughout the novel in a mantra-like fashion, "[f]unctioning like a refrain of a pop song to which some new meaning accrues after every stanza" (Freese 1990, 78). When Clay watches his formerly best friend Julian sell his body to a businessman, he comments: "I don't close my eyes. You can disappear here without knowing it" (Zero, 176). The "you" who disappears here may be Clay, but maybe also Julian, who was not careful and lost himself in the L.A. drug scene and ended up having to prostitute himself, and who is now "for sale." The sentences pop up again and again in Clay's mind, a mantra of irrelevance and meaninglessness, personal dissolution, and moral destruction – a chorus to the song of Los Angeles.

Critic McElroy observes that "loss of self is the greatest calamity which can befall the individual, because only the man who is completely and authentically himself can be said to be truly alive" (McElroy, 6). Clay realizes that he does not lead such an authentic existence, and also feels that he is the kind of "zombie" mentioned above, undead, but also unliving. In this in-between state, he fears actual death and annihilation, which would destroy all remaining grains of hope for change or meaning. As in the case of the death of a stuntman with whom Clay identifies, he also seems to attribute a certain personal dimension to the death of a coyote Blair hit with her car a few days before the following conversation with Kim:

"What do you do?" she asks.

"Things, I guess." I sit on the mattress.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Things." My voice breaks and for a moment I think about the coyote and I think that I'm going to cry, but it just passes and I just want to get my vest and get out of here. (Zero, 148)

At the moment of considering his passive non-existence, Clay remembers the dead coyote and feels like crying. He is clearly making a connection between himself and this dead animal, and feels sorry for both their destinies. In addition, the sudden death of the coyote brings to mind the arbitrary and unexpected power of death, which is especially frightening if one does not lead one's life to the fullest, as has been illustrated by Sartre in his play *Huis Clos*, where Garcin complains that he has not had time to do everything he wanted to.¹³³ To Clay, this realization must come as a hard blow, as he certainly is aware that he is not acting out his potential. That is why Clay is obviously scared of death, which is especially evident in his fear of natural disasters, for example when he worries about storms or houses sliding down hills after a hard rain:

I read about the houses falling, slipping down the hills in the middle of the night and I stay up all night, usually wired on coke, until early morning to make sure nothing happens to our house. (Zero, 114)

Clay's staying awake to keep the house from slipping is similar to – and equally futile as – his manner of keeping himself going in order not to "disappear." Struggling to stay alive is equally useless as trying to "make sure nothing happens to [a] house," because if the house slips, there is nothing he can do, and neither is there anything he can do about the inevitable truth of death.

Finally, being afraid of death also implies having spent some thought on the subject. In addition, despite Clay's dread of death and of "disappearing," his habit of collecting newspaper clippings about accidents and crimes is also an indication of a certain fascination with death. After all, "Disappear Here" also has the possible meaning of wanting to get out, and perhaps not only out of L.A., but out of a meaningless existence altogether.

¹³³ Cf. chapter 2.4.1.

6.3.5 Alienation

"People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles" (Zero, 9). This is the first sentence of *Less Than Zero*, and apart from returning repeatedly throughout Clay's monologue, it also sets the tone and the theme of the novel right away. In Clay's thoughts, it is soon reduced to "people are afraid to merge" and consequently assumes a more universal meaning, reflecting the isolation of individuals in an urban environment.

Alienation and a lack of social interaction are not always the result of existential insight, as it is the case in many works of existentialist literature, for example Camus's *L'Étranger*. It can, on the contrary, also be the reason for existential fears or crises. In *Less Than Zero*, Clay and his friends' nihilism does not primarily have its roots in existential contemplation, but rather in the absence of interpersonal ties. In a society obsessed with consumption and entertainment, social rapport with others that extends below the surface is rare. The logical consequence of this lack of bonds is that it is impossible to share one's thoughts or feelings with others and ends up feeling isolated.

As in the cases of *L'Étranger* or *The Catcher in the Rye*, not even Clay's family is exempt from this alienation. On the contrary, they appear to be part of the problem, as there is hardly any real communication, let alone warm feelings, between the family members. Clay's father only writes checks as Christmas presents, and even though his mother is trying to make contact, Clay does not respond to her apparent interest in him:

"You look unhappy," she says real suddenly.

"I'm not," I tell her.

"You look unhappy," she says, more quietly this time. [...]

"You do too," I say, hoping that she won't say anything else.

She doesn't say anything else [...]. (Zero, 18)

Clay's lack of interest in his family is most obvious when he talks about his two sisters, whom he does not even care about enough to tell one from the other or to know the most basic facts, as when he mentions "the older of my two sisters, who I think is fifteen" (Zero, 23) or "the other one [...] I think she's thirteen, maybe" (Zero, 24). Their names are never mentioned and one wonders whether Clay even knows them, as he only refers to them as "one of them" or "the other one" (ibid.).

Of course, it is left unclear whether the lack of rapport is Clay's family's fault or his own, as the result of his drug-induced indifference, on the one hand, and his feeling of unease and alienation, on the other. Yet there is no doubt that the lifestyle of sex and drugs is also practiced by his family, because when he finds his sisters watching a porn movie in his mother's bedroom, he wonders whose film it is: "my mom's? sisters'? Christmas present from a friend? the person with the Ferrari? mine?" (*Zero*, 75). And when Clay says that he locks his room so that his sisters will not be able to steal his cocaine, his younger sister replies: "That's bullshit. I can get my own cocaine" (*Zero*, 25).

Thus Clay's family obviously is not different in any way from the other people he meets in Los Angeles and is, therefore, not a "safe harbor" to hide from the blinding reality he abhors. They do not even seem to be particularly interested in his return, because like the city itself, and like its drivers, the family welcomes him back from the East by "not merging": "Nobody's home. [...] There's a note on the kitchen table that tells me that my mother and sisters are out, Christmas shopping" (*Zero*, 10). The result of this indifference is that Clay does not feel he can relate to his family anymore, and he even struggles to face his parents. During a dinner with his mother, who asks him what he wants for Christmas, he is "surprised at how much effort it takes to raise my head up and look at her" (*Zero*, 18). However, he is not as resigned in his estrangement yet as Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, who is having an almost identical conversation with his mother and remarks: "I'm not surprised at how much effort it takes to raise my head and look at her" (*American Psycho*, 365, my italics). Again, there is still hope for Clay, but the prospects are not too bright.

Emotional alienation from one's family is not the most unusual thing in the world, and neither does it have to be a disaster – provided that there is a social network which can serve as a substitute for family ties and as an emotional safety net. However, even Clay's friends are alienated from each other, as everyone is only interested in the pursuit of their own interests, addictions, or sexual adventures, and other people's well-being is not a primary concern. Clay himself is no different in this respect. When his former best friend, Julian, needs money, Clay lends it to him, but he asks him what he needs it for, "[b]ecause that's a lot of money." Julian

asks back why he gave it to him then, and Clay replies: "'Because you're a friend?' It comes out sounding like a question. I look down" (Zero, 104). Clay finally finds out that Julian needed the money for his drug dealer and is only going to be able to pay him back by selling his body, and he asks Julian,

"Why didn't you tell me the money was for this?" and Julian, his eyes all glassy, sad grin on his face, says, "Who cares? Do you? Do you really care?" and I don't say anything and realize that I really don't care and suddenly feel foolish, stupid. (Zero, 172)

Despite the unhappiness with his life and the anxiety Los Angeles and its people cause him, Clay behaves exactly like everybody else and is, consequently, jointly responsible for his and others' prevailing feeling of isolation and alienation. After all, "[i]t seems easier to hear that people are afraid to merge rather than 'I'm pretty sure Muriel is anorexic' [...]" (Zero, 9). Responsibility and emotional attachment are not the easy way, and therefore everyone, including Clay, avoids them. The estrangement from his family and friends and an inclination towards social distance is, incidentally, also reflected Clay's identification with complete strangers, such as the aforementioned nameless stuntman, or a person at the Hard Rock Café: "There's a man sitting at the table next to ours whose eyes are closed very tightly. The girl he's sitting with doesn't seem to mind and picks at a salad. When the man finally opens his eyes, I'm relieved for some reason" (Zero, 125).

Nicki Sahlin claims that Clay is "embodying Camus's 'absurd man' who is keenly aware of the meaninglessness around him, while others go on acting as if everything makes sense" (Sahlin, 26). This is, in short, completely inaccurate. Firstly, Clay is not "keenly" but, at best, *vaguely* aware of the meaninglessness and the absurdity surrounding him. Secondly, Camus' absurd man is not only aware of meaninglessness, but also (re)acts accordingly: with an existential revolt that includes fully accepting one's situation and not giving in to despair. And thirdly, even though Clay's thoughts are the only ones we have access to as readers, there are several indications in the novel that others are by all means equally aware of the suboptimal state of affairs in their society and lifestyle. For example, after having an abortion, Alana talks to Clay and "she comes over to me and puts her arms around my back and says something like 'I think we've all lost some sort of feeling'" (Zero, 158). Shortly before he leaves, he meets her again "accidentally," and their

conversation is still superficial, but Alana seems to have withdrawn from party life, and the dialogue has a new edge of honesty to it:

"I haven't seen you around," I told her.
"Yeah, well, I haven't been around too much."
"I met someone who knows you."
"Who?"
"Evan Dickson. Do you know him?"
"I'm going-out with him."
"Yeah, I know. That's what he told me."
"But he's fucking this guy named Derf, who goes to Buckley."
"Oh."
"Yeah, oh," she said.
"So what?"
"It's just so typical."
"Yes," I told her. "It is."
"Did you have a good time while you were here?"
"No."
"That's too bad." (Zero, 196)

Even though the topics addressed are not discussed in detail – a chance encounter in the shopping mall would not be the place for such a conversation, even in the best of cases –, at least a certain dissatisfaction with their situations is verbalized. "It's just so typical" and the outright "No" are almost revolutionarily honest statements, compared to the vague and trivial conversations throughout the novel.

Another person who senses that all is not well in the state of California is Clay's dealer Rip, who advises Clay to return to his college in the East:

"Don't fuck off. Don't be a bum."
"Like you?" I regret saying this. It comes out wrong.
"Like me, dude," Rip says, missing a beat. (Zero, 33)

Furthermore, Clay's friend from New Hampshire, Daniel, expresses the wish to "go back" very early in the novel, although he cannot say what he really means by that: "I don't know. Just back" (Zero, 18). Although he may mean New Hampshire, it is also possible that he wants to go back in time, back to a state of more meaningful relationships and a society of more valuable interests than material status and small talk. The same wish, this time Clay's, is evident in the twelve flashback chapters in italics in the novel, especially those in which Clay recalls happier times or more significant events than the ones he experiences presently.

One day during his senior year, for example, he skips school and goes to his family's old house, which is now abandoned:

The pool was drained and all these memories rushed back to me and I had to sit down in my school uniform on the steps of the empty pool and cry. I remembered all the Friday nights driving in and the Sunday nights leaving and the afternoons spent playing cards on the chaise longues out by the pool with my grandmother. But those memories seemed faded compared to empty beer cans that were scattered all over the dead lawn and the windows that were all smashed and broken. [...] I guess I went out there because I wanted to remember the way things were. (Zero, 44, emphasis in the original)

But like Holden's impossible wish to preserve childlike innocence in *The Catcher in the Rye*, going back to more innocent and less alienated times is also an illusion in *Less Than Zero*.

The memory chapters are one indication of Clay's nostalgia, and there are two more specific moments which juxtapose the present and the past. The first one is in Blair's room, where she and Clay have just slept together and where he notices stuffed animals – which, of course, symbolize childhood and innocence – before he gets up to leave.¹³⁴ Secondly, when Julian is about to have sex with the businessman for money while Clay watches, the latter suddenly has "[a]n image of Julian in fifth grade, kicking a soccer ball across a green field" (*Zero*, 175). However, there is no more innocence in any of their activities or personal relations. Clay is leaving Blair's house without the intention of calling her. Their days of intimacy are past, days in which they did not have sex but would "make love" (*Zero*, 59, 60, emphasis in the original). Incidentally, but certainly not by coincidence, Clay remembers this time of closeness with Blair right after his encounter with her stuffed animals. Finally, after watching Julian and the businessman, Clay accepts the inevitable truth that the untroubled past is over:

I look at Julian's face and remember mornings sitting in his Porsche, double-parked, smoking thinly rolled joints, listening to the new Squeeze album before classes started at nine, and even though the image comes back to me, it doesn't disturb me anymore. Julian's face looks older to me now. (Zero, 177)

Although it may seem inappropriate to compare this situation with Holden Caulfield's comparably mild carousel epiphany, the moment when he understands

¹³⁴ Cf. *Zero*, 58.

that children cannot be saved from growing up and "falling" from innocence, there is a definite connection. Clay also accepts the "facts of life" – much more cruel than in Salinger's New York of the 1950s though they may be – and realizes that there is nothing he can do to alter them. He suddenly sees Julian as an adult, not a child, and does not let this reality bother him anymore. However, the only way for Clay to achieve this kind of acceptance is a detachment from (his own as well as other people's) feelings and from personal bonds.

Alienation, in philosophy as well as in literature, is not only a social phenomenon, but also one that affects the relationship between man and nature, the universe, and (possibly) God. Camus stated that the Absurd is neither in man, nor in the world, but in their common presence.¹³⁵ We fear nature because behind its beauty, there is something profoundly inhuman, a primitive hostility.¹³⁶ As a result, the natural world is alien to us, and we become strangers to, as well as estranged from, it.

This alienation from nature is a recurring motif in *Less Than Zero*, where Clay frequently feels threatened by natural phenomena or disasters, such as storms, earthquakes, landslides,¹³⁷ or the California heat. Even the mere presence and silence of nature takes on a hostile and potentially dangerous aspect:

I watched a rerun of "The Twilight Zone" that night and took a walk. No one was out. The palm trees were trembling and the streetlights were very bright and if you looked past the house and into the desert, all there was was blackness. No cars passed and I thought I saw a rattlesnake slither into the garage. The darkness, the wind, the rustling from the hedges, the empty cigarette box lying on the driveway all had an eerie effect on me and I ran inside and turned all the lights on and got into bed and fell asleep, listening to the strange desert wind moan outside my window. (Zero, 138, emphasis in the original)

This description of nature clearly reflects Clay's alienation from nature, as well as a certain respect for and fear of it. Returning to the house and turning on the lights is Clay's way of shutting out the "primitive" danger emanating from the natural world, by concentrating on the only "safety" he knows: civilization and

¹³⁵ Cf. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 50.

¹³⁶ Cf. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 30.

¹³⁷ Cf. also 6.3.4.

technology. A very similar idea has been captured by Bill Watterson in a strip of his popular comic *Calvin and Hobbes*:



(Watterson, 172)

Man's reaction to his insignificance in the context of nature and the universe – especially, of course, after God's death – is illustrated pointedly by Calvin and Clay turning on all the lights in the house. Even Heidegger already noted that "[t]he modern cult of 'technology' [...] is itself an expression of nihilism, the only philosophy left for a metaphysical ambition that has come to grief" (Mautner, 269). Science and technology are modern man's way of making sense of the world, as well as of trying to feel he has power over nature or can protect himself from its merciless force. But "[n]ature cannot be domesticated and will lash back at the thoughtless humans who exploit and ruin it" (Freese 1990, 76). It cannot be measured by human standards, or squeezed into "numbers and patterns" – an approach which science has been pursuing for centuries, only resulting in a lack of a real understanding of the world.¹³⁸ Another result of this approach is a feeling of not being part of nature anymore, and a dread of the primitive, untamed side of nature. In *Less Than Zero*, Clay refers to storms damaging houses, a rattlesnake floating in the pool, or coyotes howling in the night and endangering the family's cats, who must therefore be kept in the house during the night.¹³⁹ The perfect, rich, civilized and "domesticated" world of Jacuzzis and Porsches cannot keep nature at bay – it always finds its way in.

Apart from speaking of the realistic dangers and forces of nature, however, Clay also expresses more irrational fears. For example, some people claim to have seen "some kind of monster" (*Zero*, 77), possibly a werewolf, in Bel Air. The same day, Clay hears on the news that "there were four people beaten to death in the

¹³⁸ Cf. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 30-31

¹³⁹ Cf. Freese 1990, 76

hills last night and stay[s] up most of the night, looking out the window, staring into the backyard, looking for werewolves" (Zero, 78). Shortly before leaving, Clay mentions a magazine article about apparitions of Indians along a street in Hollywood, throwing tomahawks, "moaning incantations" (Zero, 206), or causing accidents by blocking the street.¹⁴⁰ Such haunting images of werewolves and ghosts of vengeful Indians may be partly the consequence of Clay taking too many drugs and watching too much television. However, they are also a manifestation of his extreme alienation from nature and his uneasy feeling that the "uncivilized" part of the world is capable of producing the most unlikely hostile creatures.

The most hostile natural force in California is, however, the heat. Clay remembers his previous Christmas in Palm Springs, when the temperature rose to 115 degrees Fahrenheit (\triangleq 46°C):

[...] *I'd look across the desert and a hot wind would whip my face and the sun would glare down so hard that my sunglasses couldn't keep the shine away and I'd have to squint to see that the metal grids in the crosswalk signs were twisting, writhing, actually melting in the heat [...].* (Zero, 68-9, emphasis in the original)

Again, it is made quite clear that manmade objects, symbols of civilization, cannot sustain the heat and have to give in to the stronger power of nature. Finally, the forces of nature and their destructive power also symbolize the threat posed by Clay and his friends' lifestyles, placing Los Angeles on the edge of the literal and figurative abyss, as Peter Freese observes:

An earthquake is the most obvious reminder of the fact that Los Angeles is situated on the San Andreas Fault and that the pleasure-seeking activities of its rich denizens are a dance on the volcano. (Freese 1990, 76)

6.4 A "Catcher in the Rye for the MTV generation"?

The back cover of the Vintage edition of *Less Than Zero* quotes a review from the *USA Today*, calling the novel a "Catcher in the Rye for the MTV generation." Peter Freese goes on to claim that this comparison is "unwarranted" (ibid., 84), as Clay "is

¹⁴⁰ Cf. *Less Than Zero*, 206.

definitely no new Holden Caulfield but rather a latter-day male Sally Hayes" (ibid., 68).

It is certainly true that one cannot simply equate two novels reflecting different times and backgrounds. However, there are several parallels between *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Less Than Zero*. Both novels stand for the specific spirits of their times, speaking through adolescent protagonists. As a result, both have frequently been dismissed as "adolescent" novels, irrelevant for "serious" cultural or critical consideration. And both authors make use of a very down-to-earth, colloquial language in their narratives to simulate authenticity and convey a sense of realism.

Less Than Zero certainly is no *Catcher*, and Clay certainly is no Holden Caulfield. But even if his behavior may indeed be similar to Sally's, his role as a protagonist and symbolic figure in the novel, and by extension in its cultural context, is indisputably similar to Holden's. Clay represents his generation, as Holden stands for his. Both protagonists feel dissatisfied with and are uneasy in their social environment, and despite their different reactions to the resulting alienation and unhappiness, they function as mirrors of their society. That these societies, and therefore the novels as well, are very unlike in many fundamental aspects is only natural, considering the time span which lies between them. Even Freese concedes that the comparison between the two novels "can alert us to the enormous and frightening changes that have occurred in the less than four decades between the appearances of Salinger's and Ellis' novels" (Freese, 84).

In addition to the novels' importance as cultural documents of their respective times, there are some parallels as regards contents as well, be they intentional or coincidental on Ellis's part. One example is a conversation between Clay and his old school friend Julian, in the course of which Clay "feel[s] kind of sad" and then tells Julian: "I've missed you" (*Zero*, 48). Outspoken declarations such as this one are rare in *Less Than Zero* and recall Holden's conclusion that he "sort of miss[es] everybody [he] told about" (*Catcher*, 214, emphasis in the original). Moreover, Clay goes on to ask Julian about dropping out of U.S.C., which Julian comments: "Oh yeah. Couldn't deal with it. It's so totally bogus. [...]" (*Zero*, 48). Julian's "bogus" is strongly reminiscent of Holden's "phony," especially as Holden

also uses the word to refer to a school. The idea of missing, incidentally, is taken up again in Ellis's follow-up novel *The Rules of Attraction*, where Clay, now at his East Coast college, concludes his chapter with the words: "' . . . I'd be safe and warm if I was back in L.A. . . . ' I miss the beach" (*Rules of Attraction*, 184, emphasis in the original). Like Holden, who even misses his egoistical or downright repulsive roommates at the end of the novel, Clay finds himself having warm feelings about his home town, even though it was threatening to drive him mad while he was there.

Another similarity to *The Catcher* is the special status of Clay's on-and-off ex-girlfriend Blair, who is the only person in Clay's life to have known him more intimately and to have been really interested in him. In *The Catcher* there are also Holden's siblings with whom he shares an emotional connection, but outside his family, there is only one girl called Jane Gallagher who seems to matter to him. However, Holden never calls her, although he frequently thinks of her. Likewise, Clay does not take up his relationship with Blair again, although she is obviously interested, and Clay himself also mentions her more often than he does anyone else. Both boys prefer superficial encounters or sexual adventures with girls and boys they do not really like to the intimacy of a deep friendship.

Finally, there are two other noteworthy parallels between the two novels: both are set just before or around Christmas, and both have a sentimental aspect. Ellis himself, speaking about *Less Than Zero* in a 1999 interview, admits: "oh – biggest cliché [*sic!*] of them all, L.A. at Christmas" (Battersby, 1999). In addition, he "now [...] feels it is sentimental" (*ibid.*), a feeling that many readers and critics probably would not share. However, the sentimental dimension is certainly there, most perceptible, of course, in the memory chapters. *The Catcher's* New York City just before Christmas, on the other hand, is no less of a cliché, and Holden's sentimentality cannot be questioned, either, as it sets the tone of the entire novel and is expressed on every page. To quote just one example, after an encounter with two nuns, Holden comments: "It made me so damn sad when I thought about it, their never going anywhere swanky for lunch or anything. I knew it wasn't too important, but it made me sad anyway" (*Catcher*, 114).

In terms of the existential dimensions in the two novels, there are some similarities, but mainly harsh differences, which also illustrate the development of American society from the 1950s to the 1980s. Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher*, despite being surrounded by what he considers "phonies," still has ideals, principles, and especially the wish that people were more honest and that innocence could somehow be preserved. Although his coevals largely seem to have given in to *mauvaise foi* already – that is, hypocrisy, lying, and role playing – , the mere presence of characters such as himself, Jane Gallagher, or his child sister Phoebe indicates that all is not lost in terms of social responsibility and honesty. In *Less Than Zero*, on the other hand, there is no more innocence, not even in children. Society has "outgrown" existentialist concepts such as responsibility and freedom, or perverted the terms into ideas such as a responsibility to have a good time or the freedom to pursue self-centered pleasures. There is no more quest for truth or meaning, and one might say that society has evolved and "grown up" but not matured, neither morally nor spiritually.

However, ignoring existential questions does not make them go away, and therefore they keep coming up even among the youth of an extremely superficial society like the consumerist America of the 1980s. In *Less Than Zero*, such existential concerns are Clay's nihilism, his fear of death and of disappearing into personal irrelevance, and his alienation from society as well as from nature. Despite his awareness of all these questions and fears troubling him, Clay does nothing to counteract or confront them. It is here that the greatest difference between Holden and Clay in terms of social and existential themes can be found.

Holden's dissatisfaction stems from his strong feelings, combined with his wish to have a direction and a meaningful existence or occupation. In addition, he has a good reason for his personal crisis, which is the trauma of losing a beloved member of his family. In fact, in spite of his indecisiveness and passivity, Holden represents a positive existential attitude. He criticizes and loathes what he calls "phony" and what Sartre would have called *mauvaise foi*, he wants to be honest, free, and not pretend to be someone else. *Less Than Zero's* Clay, on the other hand, is an existential antihero. He personifies passivity, lack of social responsibility, and nihilism. Instead of acting, he does not spend his time constructively but simply lets

it pass him by. His only act is that of leaving Los Angeles at the end of the novel, but chances are low that he will live differently in New Hampshire. After all, if the will and the power are not in him already, and if he is already morally corrupt, other people or places will not be able to change him.

An additional indication of this difference between Holden and Clay is their language. Holden frequently uses concrete and convinced expressions such as "really" (practically on every page), "[n]o kidding" (*Catcher*, 58), or even "I swear to God" (e.g. 68). Clay's monologue, on the other hand, is marked by vagueness and uncertainty: "I'm beginning to wonder" (*Zero*, 50), "trying to remember" (*ibid.*), "get the feeling" (*ibid.*, 51). Thus, whereas Holden is at least certain of his beliefs, convictions, and views, Clay is not sure of anything at all. In the same way, his feeling that something is going wrong in his life and his society is vague, and therefore he cannot do anything to change it.

Taking into account all these parallels and oppositions, it is justified to conclude that *Less Than Zero* can by all means be interpreted as a 1980s equivalent of the *Catcher in the Rye*, despite the protagonists' quite different dispositions and outlooks on life. For both novels function as cultural documents of their times, utilizing their adolescent protagonists as symbols and mouthpieces of their respective contemporary societies. While expressing a malaise with regard to their immediate environment and circumstances, Holden and Clay also address more general social and existential topics. The fact that in *Less Than Zero* the tone is tougher and feelings are less naïve than in *The Catcher* is only another indication of the way times and society have changed in the three decades between the two novels. According to Heidegger, "every thinker thinks from his own historical situation" (Mautner, 269), and the same is true of writers. And like Hemingway, who once "wondered [...] what Henry James would have done with the materials of our time" (Killinger, 97), we may wonder what Salinger would have done with the materialistic American society of the late 20th century. Perhaps he would have written a novel like *Less Than Zero*.

7. Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to provide a rough survey of existential philosophies and literatures up to their zenith in post-World War II France, in order to be able to examine two 20th-century American novels for existential contents and themes. In the course of this overview it has not only become evident that existentialism as a philosophy encompasses many different branches and approaches, but also that the range of literary works that can be read from an existential point of view is immense. The reason for this lies in existentialism's key concepts, such as Kierkegaard's ideas of subjectivity, anxiety, and authenticity, Nietzsche's ideal of a superhuman based on entirely newly defined values, or Sartre's stress on man as a project, the importance of action, freedom, and responsibility. All these subjects constitute fundamentally humanistic concerns and therefore affect the lives of all individuals, whether they are conscious of them or not. Consequently, they inevitably also find their way into literature.

In American literature, early writers dealing with existential themes were Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, and Ernest Hemingway. Whereas the 19th century and its literature were still marked by religious or spiritual values, Hemingway clearly took a more Nietzschean approach, in which God is dead and where "[I]f life is only an infinite succession of nows" (Killinger, 27).

Finally, French existentialism found its way to the U.S. after World War II, via Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir's writings as well as their visits to America. Writers who were directly influenced by their philosophies and literary styles include the African Americans Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, who appreciated the existentialists' demand for social responsibility. Yet French existentialism was so omnipresent in popular culture, as well as in school and university curricula, that it certainly helped shape American culture between the 1940s and the late 1960s. However, this influence waned with the rise of new philosophical schools, on the one hand, and an orientation towards more economical values on the other, leaving existentialism a cultural footnote. Nevertheless, its impact can still be felt even now, and its ideas

and ideals still occur in contemporary literature or films, most famously in the movies of Woody Allen, who cites existentialism with light, good-natured irony.¹⁴¹

The universality of existential themes such as death, anxiety, alienation, freedom, and responsibility has been illustrated by and in the discussion of the two novels *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Less Than Zero*. Even though neither of the two is explicitly existential, they both address, or make use of, many of existentialism's key concepts. When J.D. Salinger wrote *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in 1951, he must have been aware of French existentialism, which had just arrived in the U.S. and begun to attain great popularity. However, no direct references are made in the novel. But Holden's alienation from society and his malaise resulting from it brings "into consciousness a new psychology shaped by contemporary history" (Finkelstein, 219) and reflects the gap between the young and the old generation, the latter of whom is "in another world, mentally and spiritually" (ibid., 221). Similar to Nietzsche's rejection of traditional values handed down by past generations, Holden's dislike of the adult world echoes his wish to live in a new form of society, one which is built on empathy, innocence, and honesty. In addition, his constant attacks on everything he refers to as "phony" are reminiscent of Sartre's condemnation of *mauvaise foi* (or bad faith), which encompasses dishonesty, the assumption of certain roles, and, generally, all forms of inauthenticity.

By contrast, Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, published in 1985, is certainly more nihilistic than existentialist in outlook and tone. The novel's protagonist Clay can be described not only as an antihero, but also as an anti-existentialist, as he embodies virtually every single act and feature of *la mauvaise foi*. He refuses to be honest with others or himself, plays along with social rules that he abhors, and even though he has some conscience left, he does not take on any responsibility. Moreover, in spite of his awareness of the absurdity of life, he does not recognize any potential in this apparent "meaninglessness," choosing the un-Camusian reaction of despair and the un-Sartrean path of passivity. It is precisely Clay's being such a perfectly bad example of all existentialist ideals which makes the novel an

¹⁴¹ Cf. chapter 4.3.

existential statement, an outcry against this type of behavior which troubles not only the author,¹⁴² but also the reader.

Finally, a comparison of the two apparently unrelated novels within and without the existential context has been provided in chapter 6.4, concluding that *Less Than Zero* can be regarded as an updated *Catcher in the Rye*, as proposed by a newspaper review upon its publication.

The wide range of existential ideas and works introduced in this thesis, as well as the analysis of the two novels, all point to the great influence of existentialism on American thought and literature. After all, the questions which existential philosophy deals with are questions that affect all human beings, regardless of their era, their culture, or the currently predominant philosophical schools. The different ways of approaching these topics, however, do provide useful insights into the specific characteristics and lifestyles of the respective times. Therefore, both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Less Than Zero* are not only literarily valuable and enthralling novels, but also significant documents of two different periods in America's sociocultural history.

¹⁴² Cf. chapter 6.2.

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German Summary

Das Ziel dieser Diplomarbeit ist es, den weitreichenden Einfluss des Existenzialismus, insbesondere auf die amerikanische Literatur, aufzuzeigen. Zu diesem Zweck wird einerseits ein Überblick über die Entwicklung des Existenzialismus und über seine wichtigsten Vertreter geboten, andererseits wird gezeigt, dass eine eigene Tradition existenzieller Literatur in den USA existiert. Der zweite Teil der Arbeit konzentriert sich dann auf zwei amerikanische Romane des 20. Jahrhunderts, *The Catcher in the Rye* (*Der Fänger im Roggen*) von J.D. Salinger aus dem Jahre 1951 und *Less Than Zero* (*Unter Null*) von Bret Easton Ellis, erschienen 1985. Die beiden Werke werden anhand von existenzialistischen Thematiken und Inhalten analysiert, und die Relevanz der Romane im Kontext amerikanischer existenzialistischer Literatur wird aufgezeigt.

Die philosophische Schule des Existenzialismus wird zu unrecht häufig auf ihre französischen Protagonisten Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus und mit ihnen befreundete Schriftsteller wie André Malraux beschränkt. Während es zwar der Wahrheit entspricht, dass diese Schriftsteller und die Epoche, in der sie aktiv waren – besonders die Jahre nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg bis Ende der 60er Jahre –, eine zentrale Rolle für den Existenzialismus spielten, so ist diese Philosophie doch weiter verbreitet und facettenreicher als allgemein bekannt. So reichen ihre Ursprünge bis in das 17. Jahrhundert zurück, wo Blaise Pascal in seinen *Pensées* als Erster die inhärente *misère* des Menschen formuliert, bestehend aus Unbeständigkeit, Langeweile und Unwohlsein, die er mithilfe von *divertissements* – also Zerstreuungen – zu vergessen sucht. Während Pascal als Weg aus der Misere noch Gott vorschlägt, teilte sich die Existenzialphilosophie später in zwei Zweige: einen christlichen und einen atheistischen. Weitere Vertreter der Existenzialphilosophie und existenzieller Thematiken waren, im engeren und weiteren Sinne, Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche und Martin Heidegger.

Seine Blütezeit, sowie die Namensgebung selbst, erlebte der Existenzialismus im Nachkriegsfrankreich des 20. Jahrhunderts. Maßgeblich geprägt von den politischen und sozialen Ereignissen der 30er und 40er Jahre, sowie von einem fundamentalen Atheismus, wurden die französischen Existenzialisten häufig eines profunden Pessimismus oder gar des Nihilismus bezichtigt. Aber besonders Sartre, Beauvoir und Camus legten großen Wert darauf, das positive Potenzial des Existenzialismus hervorzuheben. Obwohl diese drei Philosophen nicht die ersten waren, die die Existenzialphilosophie in die USA brachten – Übersetzungen von Nietzsche und Kierkegaard hatten schon zuvor in intellektuellen Kreisen Aufsehen erregt –, lösten ihre Schriften und ihre Besuche in den USA eine wahre Modewelle dort aus. Der Existenzialismus wurde in Amerika einerseits aufgrund seiner

zutiefst humanistischen und soziokritischen Aspekte mit offenen Armen begrüßt, andererseits sprach der französische Lebensstil und der damit einhergehende gewisse "Glamour" die breite Masse an. So wurde die amerikanische Kultur, und damit auch die Literatur, von ihm geprägt.

Jedoch verfügt die amerikanische Literatur auch über eine eigenständige, von europäischen Schulen unabhängige existenzielle Tradition. Diese beginnt mit Autoren wie Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne oder Ernest Hemingway, die sich in ihren narrativen Werken mit grundsätzlichen Fragen der menschlichen Existenz wie Leben und Tod, der Sinnlosigkeit des Daseins oder Moral beschäftigen.

Auch die beiden besprochenen Romane beweisen die Universalität existenzieller Konzepte, jeweils in einem ihrer Epoche entsprechenden sozialen Kontext. Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* fühlt sich von der älteren Generation unverstanden und entfremdet und orientiert sich deshalb an einem eigenen Wertesystem, basierend auf Ehrlichkeit, Menschlichkeit und kindlicher Unschuld. Sowohl Nietzsches Weigerung, althergebrachte Traditionen und Werte blind zu übernehmen, als auch Sartres Ablehnung von Heuchelei und jeder Art von Unaufrichtigkeit finden sich in Holdens Überzeugungen wieder. Clay, der Protagonist von *Less Than Zero*, hingegen ist ein existenzialistischer Antiheld, zumal sein Verhalten all das verkörpert, was der Existenzialismus ablehnt: einen negativ-destruktiven Nihilismus, Passivität und fehlende soziale Verantwortung. Gerade dadurch aber zeigt Autor Bret Easton Ellis die Wichtigkeit der existenzialistischen Werte und Ideale auf, sowie die weitreichenden persönlichen und sozialen Konsequenzen, die ihr Fehlen zur Folge haben.

Den Abschluss dieser Arbeit bildet ein Vergleich der beiden Romane, der die Behauptung der Zeitung *USA Today*, *Less Than Zero* sei ein neuer *Catcher in the Rye*, untersucht und bestätigt.

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