

Humanities

Notes on Existentialism

When the term existentialism became current in Europe after World War II, only the name of Jean-Paul Sartre was associated with it. Since then it has become clear that the body of existential thought constitutes an authentic philosophical movement embracing (despite their diversity) a large group of contemporary Western thinkers: Camus and Marcel, as well as Sartre, in France; Jaspers and Heidegger in Germany; Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset in Spain; Berdyaev and Shestov in Russia, Bultmann and Barth in Switzerland; Buber in Israel; and Tillich in the United States. But existentialism is more than a philosophical movement. It has become the perspective from which the sensitive and concerned modern man looks at his world. Indeed, one can scarcely understand in any deep sense the general direction of literature and theology today, or the form and content of many contemporary works, (poetry, films and certain art forms) without some understanding of the existential attitude.

The roots of existentialism extend deeply into western history even beyond St. Augustine to pre-Socratic philosophers, even to the author of the Book of Job. But at no time in the past did the existential attitude have the kind of relevance it has for modern man. I suggest two reasons for this; 1) based on the writings of Sren Kierkegaard: the existentialist philosopher or artist was an isolated voice asserting the precariousness of human life in the face of a community that largely ignored or refused to listen to him. As long as the community believed, or thought it believed, in the existence of a god who offered the reward of eternity as compensation for the suffering and anguish of temporal life, his warning went more or less unheard and the existential attitude thus remained marginal and undefined.

In the middle of the 19th C. the traditional image of God expired and man was left naked to confront the truths of Huxley's biological evolution and Darwinian theories of the creations of man. The proclamation by Nietzsche of the death of God was the annunciation of the age of anxiety.

The second reason must surely be the advent of two world wars within the lifetime of most of the best known existential writers and philosophers. The first world war, a disaster of mohlithic proportions, brought to an end the somewhat innocent and optimistic Victorian Age whilst the second world war, an outrage of human conduct, ushered in the age of atomic warfare and fear for the future of mankind. It is now no longer possible for philosophers to probe the questions of life without confronting the reality of Nothingness and Absurdity; nor can theologians maintain religious systems without confronting the absence of God, nor for that matter can artists project rational microcosms without confronting the irrational macrocosm. Whether atheistic or theistic, the philosophy and art of the twentieth century constitutes largely an encounter with Nothingness and the effort to transcend the threat that it poses to man's existence as man.

9. Discuss anti-utopianism in existential literature using: The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor: by Fyodor Dostoevsky
The Massacre of the Innocents: by W.H. Auden
The Flies: by Jean-Paul Sartre
Brave New World: by Aldous Huxley
1984: by George Orwell
10. Discuss the symbolic meaning of pursuit and flight, i.e. of the Furies, from the following works:

The Death of Ivan Ilych: Leo Tolstoy
The Flies: Jean-Paul Sartre
The Family Reunion: T.S. Eliot
The Fall: Albert Camus
Cranmer of Canterbury: Charles Williams

(The latter may not be available: I am trying to find a copy at the time of writing). A recent reading knowledge of the Oresteia would be an advantage.

Here is an additional list of books which may help you in your selection for area or thematic study.

Existential Literature antecedant to contemporary works.

Drama:

The Book of Job
Wayzeck: George Buehner
Hedda Gabler: Henrik Ibsen
Ubu Roi: Alfred Jarry
Six Characters in Search of an Author: Luigi Pirandello
King Lear: William Shakespeare
The Ghost Sonata: August Strindberg
The Revenger's Tragedy: Cyril Tourneur

Novels:

The Heart of Darkness: Joseph Conrad
Great Expectations: Charles Dickens
Hard Times: Charles Dickens
The Possessed: Fyodor Dostoevsky
Anna Karenina: Leo Tolstoy
Resurrection: Leo Tolstoy
The Death of Ivan Ilych: Tolstoy
The Diary of a Lunatic: Leo Tolstoy

Contemporary existential works.

Drama:

The American Dream: Edward Albee
Zoo Story: Edward Albee
Endgame: Samuel Beckett
Waiting for Godot: Samuel Beckett
Caligula: Albert Camus

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The Visit: Friedrich Dürrenmatt
The Tunnel: Friedrich Dürrenmatt
The Family Reunion: T.S. Eliot
The Firebugs: Max Frisch
A Sleep of Prisoners: Christopher Fry
The Blacks: Jean Genêt
The Maids: Jean Genêt
The Balcony: Jean Genêt
The Deputy: Rolf Hochhuth
× The Bald Soprano: Eugène Ionesco
× The Lesson: Eugène Ionesco
× The Chairs: Eugène Ionesco
Rhinoceros: Eugène Ionesco
Look Back In Anger: John Osborne
The Birthday Party: Harold Pinter
The Room: Harold Pinter
× The Caretaker: Harold Pinter
The Dumb Waiter etc.: Harold Pinter
The Adding Machine: Elmer Rice
The Devil and the Good Lord: Sartre
No Exit: Jean-Paul Sartre
Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury: Charles Williams
Seed of Adam: Charles Williams

Novels:

Another Country: James Baldwin
The Blood of Others: Simone DeBeauvoir
The Fall: Albert Camus
The Plague: Albert Camus
The Stranger: Albert Camus
1919: John Dos Passos
The Invisible Man: Ralph Ellison
The Sound and the Fury: W. Faulkner
I'm Not Stiller: Max Frisch
Brighton Rock: Graham Greene
The Power and the Glory: Graham Greene
The End of the Affair: Graham Greene
The Sun Also Rises: Ernest Hemingway
Steppenwolf: Herman Hesse
Brave New World: Aldous Huxley
Time Must Have a Stop: Aldous Huxley
The Castle: Franz Kafka
The Trial: Franz Kafka
× The Subterraneans: Jack Keranac
Arrival and Departure: Arthur Koestler
The Royal Way: Andre Malraux
The Walnut Tree of Altenburg: Andre Malraux
Under the Net: Iris Murdoch
The Man Without Qualities: Robert Musil
1984: George Orwell
In the Labrynth: Alain Robbe-Grillet
Last Year at Marienbad: Alain Robbe-Grillet
The Voveur: Alain Robbe-Grillet
Night Flight: Antoine De Saint-Exupery

The Age of Suspicion: Nathalie Sarraute
Nausea: Jean-Paul Sartre
The Age of Reason: Jean-Paul Sartre
The Reprieve: Jean-Paul Sartre
Troubled Sleep: Jean-Paul Sartre
The Flies: Jean-Paul Sartre
Lie Down in Darkness: William Styron
The Outsider: Richard Wright

Short Stories:

The Bound Man: Ilse Aichinger
The Bucket Rider: Franz Kafka
The Great Wall of China: Franz Kafka
The Penal Colony: Franz Kafka
Metamorphosis: Franz Kafka

Poetry:

New Year Letter: W.H. Auden
Under Which Lyre: W.H. Auden
Massacre of the Innocents: W.H. Auden
For the Time Being: W.H. Auden
The Hollow Men: T.S. Eliot
The Waste Land: T.S. Eliot
The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock: T.S. Eliot
Howl: Allen Ginsberg
The Duino Elegies: Rainer Maria Rilke

Works of Existential Philosophers:

I and Thou: Martin Buber

Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith

Published by Scribner's New York, 1958.

Being and Time: Martin Heidegger

Translated by John Macquarrie

Published by Harper & Row New York, 1963.

Existence and the Existent: An Essay on Christian Existentialism
Jacques Maritain. Translated Lewis Galantiere and G.P.
Phelan. Published by Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1956

The Courage to Be: by Paul Tillich

Published by New Haven Yale University Press, 1952.

Dream and Reality: by Nicholas Berdyaev

Published by Macmillan Company, 1950.

The Tension Between Technical Mass--Order and Human Life: Karl Jaspers. An essay from: Man In the Modern Age by Karl Jaspers. Published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. (Translation by Eden and Cedar Paul)

Existentialism: by Jean-Paul Sartre
(first titled Existentialism Is a Humanism)
Translated by Bernard Frechtman. Published by Philosophical Library New York, 1947, and reprinted in several different collections of Sartre's essays.

The Concept of Dread: Soren Kierkegaard
In particular the essay from this source entitled: Dread As a Saving Experience by Means of Faith
Translated by Walter Lowrie
Published by Princeton University Press

Fear and Trembling: by Soren Kierkegaard
Particularly the essay Is There Such a Thing As an Absolute Duty Toward God?
Translated by Walter Lowrie
Published by Princeton University Press, 1941.

Here are philosophical definitions of two words which may cause some bewilderment:

Existence: proof of existence by matchless awareness, recognition and personal conviction. (concrete)

Essence: Spiritual awareness- concentrated in the area of belief (faith) no physical recognition.

Recommended Existential literature:

The Trial and The Castle: by Franz Kafka, both expressing the theme of isolation and estrangement.

The Sound and the Fury: William Faulkner and The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot: embodying the theme of Nothingness, the disintegration of meaning in the modern world.

Ulysses: by James Joyce, and The Age of Reason by Jean Paul Sartre both dealing with man's painful journey through the irrational self or world.

The Family Re-union: by T. S. Eliot and The End of the Affair: by Graham Greene, both depicting the theme of reconciliation and salvation.

Other works expressing existential vision of the human predicament;- 1) The Underground Man - exemplified by Dostoevsky as the poor suffering and persecuted in society - those for whom, in-justice is a matter of course - outcasts from society - those whose burden of anguish is so great that their lives become meaningless and absurd. (Katerina Ivanovna for example) This vision of human predicament is to be found in all the works listed below:-

Notes From The Underground:-

The Invisible Man: Dostoevsky.
Ralph Ellison

Waiting for Godot: Samuel Beckett

Metamorphosis: Frank Kafka

Rhinoceros: Eugene Ionesco

The Lower Depths: Maxim Gorki

2) The existentialist's expression of the courage to be in the face of despair:-

The Fall and The Stranger: by Albert Camus

The Death of Ivan Ilych: Tolstoy

J. B.: Archibald MacLeish

The Room and The Birthday Party: Harold Pinter

Crime and Punishment: Dostoevsky

The Power and the Glory: Graham Greene

The Waste Land: T. S. Eliot

The Elder Statesman: T. S. Eliot

Cranmer of Canterbury: and

Seed of Adam both by Charles Williams

3) More than any other aspect of the human condition, the phenomenon of death, as the existentialists observe, has always been the closest intimate of mankind. No matter how obsessively men have striven to outstrip death, the effort has been futile. Death demands that each individual face and come to terms with his mortality.

This aspect is most ably and powerfully described in the following titles:-

The Flies: Jean Paul Sartre
Saint Emmanuel the Good Martyr: Miguel De Unamuno

x The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor: Fyodor Dostoevsky
 (Taken from The Brothers Karamazov)

A Country Doctor: Franz Kafka

The Tunnel: Friedrich Durrenmatt

The Visit: Friedrich Durrenmatt

Endgame: Samuel Beckett

The Royal Way: Andre Malraux

La Padrona: Ugo Betti

The Queen and the Rebels: Ugo Betti

The Devil's General: Carl Zuckmeyer

Mother Courage: Bertolt Brecht

The Good Women of Setzuan: Bertolt Brecht

Caligula: Albert Camus

No Exit: Jean-Paul Sartre

Orphee: Jean Cocteau

The Intruder: Maurice Maeterlinck

The Ghost Sonata: August Strindberg

Peer Gynt: Henrik Ibsen

The list could be extended--of course but these should be amply sufficient to suggest the area of existential imagination and thought.

Philosophy:

Atheistic or humanistic philosophy can be found in the works of

Jean Paul Sartre

Albert Camus

Martin Heidegger

Theistic philosophy existential in attitude may be found in the works of:

Martin Buber

Gabriel Marcel

Karl Jaspers, and of course Soren Kierkegaard.

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