Existentialism

1. Who are the most influential proponents of this type of critical theory?

Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger were the most influential proponents of existentialist criticism. Nietzsche is known as a precursor to Existentialist theory and served as a major inspiration for Heidegger who conducted many lecture courses on his writings. Nietzsche insisted on the individuality of existence and the idea that there is no universal morality that governs all people. In Heidegger’s most famous work, Being and Time, the distinction between the authentic self and the inauthentic counterpart is explored. Heidegger also introduced the concept of “dasein”, being, and its confrontation with “das nichts”, the nothingness. Sartre defended, throughout his career, the individual against what he saw as a tendency in philosophy to ignore human experiences. His slogan, “existence precedes essence” remains a hallmark statement in existentialism.

2. What are some of the key ideas of this theory?
Existentialism, by definition, deals with the nature of human existence. It assumes that existence has no innate value; each individual must create the meaning in their own life by making choices that will influence their future. Sartre summarized this idea in his three-word formula: “existence precedes essence”. Existentialists, though they disagree on many things, are united in their thinking that one’s “essence”, or purpose, comes after their being in the world, both in importance, and in time. According to Sartre, the being is immutable: you cannot choose that you exist, you can only change how you exist. Similarly, one cannot change where they were born, when they were born, their ethnicity, their mother tongue, etc. This inability to change certain things about oneself, as well as things those things that one cannot change Sartre called “facticity”. To Sartre, facticity was the key to decision making: it is described as “both an essential and limiting factor of freedom” (Martin 21). It is essential in that our values, our morals, all that is contained within our essence, is built upon our facticity. That said, an individual can choose the weight that their facticity has in their decisions. To say that the entirety of an individual is their facticity is to deny their present and their future, yet to disregard it entirely is to deny their past. A balance must be struck for facticity to fulfill its purpose: to provide a context against which the self can be constructed.

As Sartre is to facticity, so too is Heidegger to authenticity. It is, as they say, “his baby”. To be existentially authentic is to, “do as ‘myself’ and [not] as ‘anyone’, so in this sense existing is something at which I can succeed or fail…. that attitude in which I engage my projects as my own” (Crowell). In simpler terms, existential authenticity means thinking and acting independently, and not as dictated by others. That is not to say that one should not obey instruction, but rather that any action taken must be done with considered intent, and not done for
the sake of doing. It is worth noting that authenticity is transient, not permanent; just as an individual is constantly evolving and changing with each decision they face, so too does an individual’s authenticity. At any given moment, an individual can make an authentic decision, or an inauthentic one, and for each individual, the authentic choice will be unique. Though it is impossible to predict the consequences of our actions, the authentic individual will still take responsibility for them, regardless of whether they were the intended consequences. Heidegger believed that only authentic actions carried any value, that it is in the taking of responsibility that value and meaning are given to existence, and if one were to perpetually live inauthentically, they would fail to construct meaning in their lives. If we do not take the risk of committing to an action, then the reward is not ours to keep. Angst, also called dread or anxiety, is the feeling associated inherent difficulty of making the commitment to action and holding one’s-self responsible. Angst is especially powerful because the individual is not able to protect themselves from the object of their fear; the individual fears their own freedom.

If one repeatedly acts inauthentically, so as to fail Heidegger’s sense of existing, they will face what Kierkegaard called “the absurd”. When the self is constructed on that which is external, it becomes vulnerable to the external no longer supporting it, at which point the perceived self would crumble, and any sense of identity lost. Without identity, the individual lacks essence, and without essence, lacks purpose. The absurd is the result of the individual searching for innate purpose, and the universe failing to provide any. The confrontation of the absurd is often a traumatic experience, ending in the individual either determining their existence has no value, or finding the value that they give existence it through experience. If an individual has lived inauthentically, they will be unable to find the value in their existence, as they have not
taken responsibility for enough of it. The external support collapsing under the perceived self has created a chain reaction, resulting in a state of despair. Kierkegaard believed that even before the external support has collapsed, the individual’s existential dependency on anything which is not the self and the mere possibility of them facing the absurd will cause the individual to live in constant fear of it, and as a result, can be considered to be in a perpetual state of despair.

3. How does one employ/use these concepts? What kinds of questions would an existential reading of a text produce/pose/employ, or kinds of explorations does an existential reading encourage?

These concepts can be employed by looking into a character’s decision and decision making process as well as the ways in which their facticity can give them angst about the future.

- Do any characters face an existential crisis?
- How do they cope with the difficulty of the search for meaning in their lives?
- What of the characters’ facticity makes their decisions difficult?
- In what way do the characters face the absurd?
- What do they do in response to the absurd?
- What is their attitude towards their mortality? Do they fear death?
- How do they react to death?
- Do the characters act authentically or inauthentically?
- Does the authenticity of their actions change over time?

4. What are the strengths of this type of reading practice?
The strengths of this type of reading practice are that it helps the reader better understand the characters’ decision making and motives behind their actions. In the absence of destiny and predetermined outcomes, the reader is left to imagine the course taken by the character as entirely a product of their freedom. For example, through the existentialist lens, we understand the Russian’s motive to leave his home, go out to sea, and explore foreign lands to expand his mind. Coming from an existentialist point of view, readers are able to understand how the character would act in current situations as well as in future circumstances.

5. Does the group see or feel that there are some weaknesses in this type of reading?

A weakness of reading from an existential viewpoint is that the assumption is made that humans have free will. In existentialism, destiny is not fixed and humans have the ability to determine their future by their choices. Reading from an existentialist lens is only effective when the assumption is made that humans have freedom of choice. Another weakness in this type of reading is that each character must be examined independently without context given by others. Characters, as people, cannot exist in a vacuum, isolated from all other factors.

**Authenticity in Heart of Darkness**

In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad highlights the importance of living an authentic life. Throughout the novel, Marlow's progression from inauthenticity to authenticity can be observed. Kurtz acts as an example of an authentic individual, and as Marlow approaches Kurtz, he becomes more authentic. Marlow starts as very inauthentic, particularly in his fear of death. He asserts "There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies,-which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world-what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something
rotten would do” (47). Following the savage’s attack Marlow’s ship, he assumes that Kurtz is dead and feels "as though I had found out I had been striving after something altogether without a substance.”(86) This confrontation with the absurd frustrates Marlow but also gives him insight into himself. He realizes that, "that was exactly what I had been looking forward to- a talk with Kurtz” (86). This showcases the inauthenticity of Marlow's decision to go into the jungle, as he didn't know what he was looking for; he simply acted on impulse.

Though both the Russian harlequin and Marlow ventured into the Congo, Marlow's inauthentic journey starkly contrasts the Russian's. When Marlow left Europe, he did so, not on a considered decision, but on an impulsive desire, the consequences of which he did not care to think of. Contrastingly, the Russian, though his actions appear reckless, "... he had run away from school, had gone to sea in a Russian ship; run away again; served some time in English ships". He had done so as a conscious decision to "see things, gather experience, ideas; enlarge the mind” (99).

I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke him-himself-his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing above or below him and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose from the earth (124)

Here, Conrad illustrates the power associated with authenticity. In this passage, Marlow realizes why Kurtz is able to have the such an incredible influence on people. In not seeing himself in terms of anything external, he has claimed his existence as his own. This is the
pinnacle of authenticity, and as a result, Kurtz is able to act entirely of his own accord; no amount of dialogue will convince him that which he does not choose to believe. As Kurtz's health declines, his authenticity is once again showcased. Shortly before dying, Kurtz says "I am lying here, in the dark, waiting for death" (130) Kurtz is able to accept that which he cannot change, and act in accordance with his facticity: that he will die, and there is nothing to be done about it. Kurtz's authenticity has a profound effect on Marlow,

I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place...without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. (131)

Marlow faces the inevitability of death, and accepts, as Kurtz did, that death is not something to be feared.

However, Kurtz is not the perfect existentialist he appears, at his moment of death, Marlow comments "I saw in that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror - of an intense and hopeless despair" (130). Conrad showcases Kurtz’s attachment to ivory countless times, and here, in his last moments, his face has become just that: ivory. The ivory face acts as a metaphor for the existential despair that Kurtz was consumed by: he had constructed his identity upon the ivory, and could not bear it to be taken from him, for it would result in the destruction of the perceived self.
In witnessing the death of Kurtz, Marlow has a profound realization about the purposelessness of life. "Droll thing life is - that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself - that comes too late - a crop of unextinguishable regrets" (133). This is one of Marlow's most existential moments. He recognizes that life has no intrinsic value, and when we die, all we have is what we have created of ourselves into.

After returning to England, Marlow is able to capture some of Kurtz’s power by removing himself from the opinions of others.

I found myself back in the sepulchre resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. (133)

However, even still, Marlow is not a perfectly authentic man, he acts upon his own accord, but he considers himself above others. As the value of an individual’s existence is entirely subjective, no individual is objectively superior to another.

Heart of Darkness follows Marlow's journey from inauthenticity to authenticity. Marlow understands the existential dilemma: that the value given to an individual's existence comes from making choices and gaining life experience, and yet, even the most valuable life is insignificant. In the end, he sees himself as an individual, who, independent of others' opinions, has his own
perceived self. His inability to explain his experience with Kurtz to his peers demonstrates the subjectivity of existence. What helps Marlow pull away from the They-self, as described by Heidegger, was the opportunity to practice an intense focus on his own existence and mortality in the Congo. It is only when he realizes that others cannot save him from the Nothingness that he starts living and making choices for himself. In the end, Marlow lives as he dreams: alone.
Works Cited


