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Existentialist Themes in Three Works

by

Mark D. Morrison

Senior Honors Project 1989
Dr. Joseph Morse, Director
Dr. Lynne Goodhart, Advisor

PROLOGUE

The goals behind researching and writing this thesis are multifaceted and although many are outside of the scope of this paper, they express basic reasons for my choice. The paper is titled "Existentialist Themes in Three Works", and development and discussion are literary and philosophical in focus.

The first and most important reason for my choice was that, being a biology major, this project has provided the opportunity to pursue one of my minors, French. It has given me the chance to work under the direct tutelage of Dr. Lynne Goodhart, whom I would like to thank wholeheartedly. All three works were read in both French and English. Direct comparisons between the translations could then be made, greatly increasing my knowledge of French. Parallels in idiomatic language were quite interesting. Although my proficiency in French was not as I hoped or as it has been in the past, reading works in the author's own language is best because many subtleties are indeed "lost in translation". Also, I have developed a clearer understanding of one of the most debated philosophical theories of modern time, existentialism.

EXISTENTIALIST THEMES IN THREE WORKS

"Existentialism has offered a challenge to the philosophic crisis of our time, when man is engulfed by a spiritual homelessness in which everything has become questionable, even his own being."

-Kurt F. Reinhardt

The three works chosen are all by French writers, and while only Sartre professed to be an existentialist, all three novels have strong existentialist themes. The novels are: Terre des Hommes by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, (Wind, Sand and Stars Translated by Lewis Galantieri); L'Etranger by Albert Camus, (The Stranger translated by Stuart Gilbert) and Les Mains Sales by Jean-Paul Sartre, (Dirty Hands translated by Stuart Gilbert). A unifying, central theme of the works is freedom; specifically, freedom as a choice of attitude in the face of circumstances one often cannot change.

Before setting out to discuss the specific works some background on Sartre's philosophy of Existentialism is appropriate. In the scope of this paper this will be limited to the thematic structure of Existentialism. For Sartre Existentialism is based on the premise that "existence precedes essence". Man, he says, is "a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept. ...At first he is nothing. There is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it."¹ Existence then, according to Sartre, is contingency: it means simply "to be there." Man is nothing but what he makes of himself, and is alone responsible for what he makes himself. Man is

continually defining himself, creating his own "authentic self." This can then lead to anguish and uncertainty because there is no external force shaping and giving order to the universe. There is no God. Morality is only what man defines it to be. Sartre addresses this in

Defense de l'Existentialisme : " But what of anguish? ...If man is not finished, but is in the process of creating his own essence, and if in that process, he assumes responsibility for the entire species ...if in each case, we must decide alone, without guidance, and yet for all, how could we not feel anxiety?"² Each man, through defining himself, thus defines humanity and cannot escape the feeling of total responsibility. Without God there is no longer an *a priori* Good. "In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom."³ "He is free because he can always choose to accept his lot with resignation or to revolt against it."⁴ Thus, man through his consciousness recognizes that he is responsible for everything he does and is free, "but condemned every moment to invent man."⁵

Terre des Hommes is a biographical account of Saint-Exupery's life as a pilot, working for the mail delivery company Aeropostale. Much of the story recounts "the lines" or the routes flown by Saint-Exupery and his comrades. He flew for eight years, between 1926 and 1934, and the most memorable times were when he and/or his friends were grounded, usually forced down due to weather or engine failure. These were the pioneer days of aviation and the job was often quite dangerous ...exploring new uncharted areas, new wind currents and patterns as the pilots tried to find new and quicker routes over the natural barriers. There was a fraternity among the pilots, an honor, formed and bound by common experience. The mountains, the oceans and seas, and the deserts challenged them, and gave them a unique and respectful view of nature . For Saint-

Exupery it fostered a sense of awe about the universe, a profound appreciation for life and the spirit of man.

One account of Guillaumet, a pilot and a friend of Saint-Exupery's, exemplifies the depth of human will and strength. Guillaumet, who was on a solo flight to explore routes through the Andes, was downed in a winter storm. Two days later when the storm had passed Guillaumet began to walk out. His face was swollen "like an

overripe fruit". His hands were numb and virtually useless. For five days and four nights Guillaumet trudged forward, voided bit by bit of his blood, his strength and his reason. He never stopped to sleep; only to cut his shoes and massage his swelling feet. He was beginning to lose his memory. He would go for a long time and then realize that every time he stopped he forgot something. "Amid snow',he said, 'a man loses his instinct of self-preservation.'"⁶ He knew if he stopped he would fall asleep and the snow would overcome him.

Finally, on the fifth day Guillaumet was found alive! Still on his feet, walking. As he later told Saint-Exupery, "I swear that what I went through, no animal would have gone through. ...What saves a man is to take a step. It is always the same step, but you have to take it."⁷ If his body was not found, his wife and sons would be penniless. If he did not get himself to the next rock, his body would be washed into the ravines by the mud of the spring rains.

"As early as the second day, you know, the hardest job I had was to force myself not to think. The pain was too much, and I was really up against it hard. ...But I didn't seem able to control my mind. It kept working like a turbine."⁸ What Guillaumet could do though was to control what he thought. He had the freedom to choose what he would think about, and disengage his mind from his situation.

This is the crux of the existential focus. His conscious choice, and a sense of responsibility kept him alive. He possessed the courage and the will to live. It was not an appeal to God or divine inspiration that pulled him through. Guillaumet's mind had persevered over instincts in conditions in which "...no animal would have gone through."⁹

Another example of freedom of consciousness in Terre des Hommes is Bark, a slave. Among the desert people of North Africa all of the slaves are called Bark. Bark's freedom is the mental and

emotional choice of attitude. But after four years in slavery, he could not resign himself to this name. Bark never thought of himself as a slave. At Marrakech where his wife and three children were undoubtedly still living, Bark had had a wonderful job. "I was a drover, and my name was Mohammed!"¹⁰ He had been respected by people of high rank for his skill and responsibility. "The very magistrates themselves would send for him. ...'Mohammed, I have some steers to sell. Go up into the mountains and bring them down.' Or: 'I have a thousand sheep in the plain. Lead them up to the higher pastures.'"¹¹ And off Bark would stride with his olive-wood sceptre and govern their exodus. "Nobody but him could say where lay the promised land towards which he led his flock. He alone could read his way in the stars, for the science he possessed was not shared by the sheep. Only he, in his wisdom, decided when they should take their rest, when they should drink at the springs. And at night while they slept, Bark, physician and Prophet and king standing in wool to the knees and swollen with tenderness for so much feeble ignorance, would pray for his people."¹²

Many of the slaves who have lived lives with noble solitude and great love have given themselves humbly to a humdrum life. "They

find it sweet to abdicate, to resign themselves to a kind of servility and to enter into the peace of things."¹³ And yet the day will come when the slave is set free. "When he is too old to be worth his food or his cloak, he will be inconceivably free. For three days he will offer himself in vain from tent to tent, growing weaker; until towards the end of the third day, still uncomplaining, he will lie down on the sand."¹⁴ And yet each dawn the children will run to see if he still lives; they will play around the body, yet "without mocking the old servitor." In the desert it is all in the nature of things. Little by little he becomes one with the earth, shriveled up by the sun and received by the sands. "The first one I saw did not

moan; but then he had no one to moan against. I felt him an obscure acquiescence, as of a mountaineer lost and at the end of his strength who sinks to earth and wraps himself up in dreams and snow. What was painful for me was not his suffering (for I did not believe he was suffering); it was that for the first time it came to me that when a man dies, an unknown world passes away."¹⁵

Bark refused to accept a life of servitude. "Before I met Bark I had never met a slave who offered the least resistance. ... these Moors had threatened him in his very essence."¹⁶ He rejected the slave-joys that are entirely dependent on the kindness of the master. He never said "'I and Mohammed ben Lhaoussin'; he said, My name was Mohammed,"¹⁷ dreaming of the day when he would, again be free, when he could again be Mohammed. The day when the power of the resuscitation of his name and his spirit "would drive out the ghost of the slave."¹⁸ Bark's mind was still free, and eventually, Bark is able to escape to Marrakech and freedom, stowed away by Saint-Exupery. In Marrakech Bark runs through the streets, giving money to all of the children, money that the pilots had collected for

him to start his life again. To Bark, having money for himself was not important. By giving the money Bark had no ties. To Bark, a free man, the most important thing was to give to and help others. Bark, like Saint-Exupery, recognized the enormous potential vested in people, in the mind and consciousness of man. Bark, through his gifts to the children of the street, was living the dreams held by Saint-Exupery ...to be able to help others. In an existential sense Bark was helping others and thus furthering the evolution of man. Man is the future of man. Like Saint-Exupery's description of the poor, Polish immigrant child on the train, Bark understood that the children need help. Saint-Exupery saw that this "Mozart-child" held all of the hopes and brilliance of the next generation. This child, from his poor and humble beginnings, could evolve and reach a potential beyond the limits of his surroundings. He represented the

potential, and was the embodiment of the future, the inner light of man, but he needs someone with a sense of responsibility to cultivate the gifts within him.

The seven act play, Les Mains Sales, by Jean-Paul Sartre is very complex and engaging. It is the story of one man, Hugo Barine, a young intellectual who is torn between his principles and his actions. The play is set in Hungary during World War II. Having a rebellion of conscience against his comfortable, bourgeoisie upbringing, where he always had plenty to eat, Hugo joins one of the factions of the Communist Party. He is eager to help and to prove that he is true to the cause of the proletariat and the class struggle against oppression and the ruling minority. The over-riding situation is that of a three-party, political struggle. The Regent, who is currently in power has allied with the Nazis in an attempt to maintain power in the country, but as the play begins, a Soviet radio announcer tells us that the Germans are in full retreat all along the

front and that wherever possible the Illyrian troops are refusing to fight the oncoming Soviets. The power struggle between the three political parties focuses on the question of what to do to maintain national autonomy in the face of imminent Soviet invasion. The Prince, represents the interests of his father the Regent; Karsky is the head of a socialist group that holds considerable power also, but is in direct conflict with the third group, a small communist faction led by Hoederer. At this point the three men are trying to reach an agreement so that they can present a unified political front to the invading Soviets, while at the same time maintaining their own political interests.

Hugo has joined the last party, Hoederer's communist party, and he wants very badly to make a contribution to further the cause. To him the principles on which the party is based are noble and just. Unlike Hugo, however, most of the other members of this party joined because they were poor, hungry and out of work. The

situations of the others (represented by Hoederer's bodyguards, Slick and George) are much different and their belief in the goals of the party are based on need and struggle, and this further separates Hugo, since he has never known "the true struggle" as they have.

Hugo is estranged because he is an intellectual, a man motivated by his principles, not by genuine need. He is young and only knows that the life he had in his father's home was not just, and he is searching for a cause to follow, a way to change his world and rid himself of the guilt that he feels because of his youth.

In the confidence of Louis, Hugo is persuaded that the "unified front" that Hoederer is working toward is not the right direction for the party to take. Only through revolution can they seize power adequate enough to make the changes that they feel must come.

Louis convinces Hugo that Hoederer is no longer acting in the best interests of the party, and should be assassinated. To prove to Louis that his words have conviction, Hugo volunteers for the assignment and goes with his wife Jessica to live with Hoederer and be his personal secretary.

In the time that Hugo is working for Hoederer, Hugo develops a great deal of respect for Hoederer, and is very impressed by the strength of his character. Hugo (and Jessica) sense an aura of confidence, strength and insightfulness that emanates from Hoederer. Hoederer is shrewd and a good judge of character. Although he has many political enemies and knows that many would like to assassinate him for his views, Hoederer is a man who has committed his whole life to his work, the party. Hoederer stepped in on Hugo's behalf when he (Hugo) was confronted by Slick and George, and has been willing to take Hugo into his confidence. He genuinely likes and understands Hugo, possibly better than Hugo knows himself, and is willing to help him.

He has the ability to "read" people well and judge their intentions. After a few days Hoederer knows that Hugo may very

well try to kill him. Hoederer then sits down and talks to Hugo and eventually convinces Hugo that his (Hoederer's) plans for the party are well founded and sound. This, then, is the dilemma for Hugo. He must assassinate a man he respects to prove to himself and the rest of the party that he is a man who is willing to back his words with actions to further the cause of the party.

Jessica, Hugo's wife, knows of Hugo's intentions and goes to warn Hoederer. Although Jessica believes that "at the bottom of his heart he would be happy if he were prevented from carrying it out".¹⁹ Hoederer promises that he won't hurt him. Hugo has found the resolve to kill Hoederer, and to prove to himself and the party, once

and for all, that he is a man of action. Hoederer was unable to convince Hugo that what he was doing with the party was right and that it was alright to lie to his comrades. Hugo arrives in Hoederer's office, obviously upset, but blames it on a hang-over from the night before. Subtly, Hoederer starts to work on Hugo, describing the killer mentality, and that intellectuals make poor assassins because they pause at the deciding moment. Before pulling the trigger, Hoederer tells him, he would be thinking of the consequences. Hoederer, always a step ahead, aptly tells Hugo, " I prefer people who fear the death of others: it shows they know how to live. I trust you. ...You're a kid for whom the passage to maturity is not easy, but you'll make a fair enough man if somebody helps you over the hump. If I escape their bombs I'll keep you with me and help you."²⁰ Hoederer then turns to get some coffee; back toward Hugo. As he does this Hugo reaches into the pocket with the revolver, Hoederer then turns and approaches Hugo and takes the gun from his pocket and deposits it on his desk. Hugo then tells Hoederer that he hates him and that he (Hoederer) takes him for a coward and a traitor. Broken down and in tears Hugo tells Hoederer, " I missed my chance, and I know that I could never shoot you because-- because I

like you. But make no mistake about it: on the question we discussed yesterday I shall never agree with you, I shall never be on your side and I don't want you to defend me. Not tomorrow nor any other day."²¹ With that Hugo leaves, and Hoederer tells Slick to follow him to make sure he doesn't do himself any harm.

After a brief while Hugo returns and finds Hoederer embracing Jessica. Hugo, seeing the two together says " I wondered why you didn't have your men beat me up and throw me out. I said to myself: he can't be so mad or so generous. But it's all clear now: it's on

account of my wife. I like it better this way. ...What a fool I was he didn't give a damn for me."²² He then rushes to the desk and levels it at Hoederer and shoots him three times. Hoederer sinks into a chair and as his men rush in he tells them, "Don't hurt him. He was jealous. That's why he shot me. ...I've been sleeping with his wife. What a god-damn waste!"²³

At the end Hugo has been released from prison. In the confidence of his comrade and friend, Olga. Hugo hears from Olga that the party has changed direction under Louis, and she describes to him many of the plans that Hoederer, with his insight, had foreseen. Hoederer is now being heralded as a party hero. Thus Hugo killed Hoederer for nothing, his death becomes even more tragic. There is a knock on the door of Olga's apartment. It is Louis' men coming to find out from Olga whether or not Hugo can still be of any use to the party, and to assassinate him if necessary. Hugo goes to the door and as he opens it he screams "Unsalvageable!" and the curtain falls.

The scenes described above show studies of two men. Both have made many significant decisions. Of the characters Hoederer is the most intriguing and admirable. Throughout the play he showed great insight, but the scene at the end when he was dying was the most important. After having been shot Hoederer had the presence of mind to save Hugo. By telling his men that he had been sleeping with Jessica (which had not happened) he was saving Hugo. He was able,

even until the last moment to maintain control of himself and look out for Hugo who he genuinely cared for. (This scene had the single greatest impact on me out of the three works.) Amazingly, Hoederer was conscious/aware enough to understand the implications of his actions right up to his death and knew he could still protect Hugo.

Hugo was continually fraught with uncertainty. He tried

constantly to live by his principles, but when he met Hoederer he ran into conflict. For example, to Hugo it was wrong that Hoederer lied about his intentions to the party. But to Hoederer this was necessary in order to protect himself while he was still in negotiations with Karsky and the Prince. But, the most important decision dealt with the question of the assignment to assassinate Hoederer. If Hugo didn't assassinate Hoederer then he was consciously admitting that he had been wrong and that his principles were weak. If he didn't follow through he would also be openly conceding that men were of greater importance than principles. Additionally, Hugo has failed when his decision is based on conscious deliberation, and only when he is enraged by finding Hoederer and Jessica together is he able to carry out the murder. Thus, the end makes the whole play tragic for when he hears from Olga that the party is now following the plans that were conceived and set forth by Hoederer. The realization of the utter uselessness of what he has done overwhelms him. He cannot live with his own consciousness. Immediately the guilt becomes unbearable and Hugo in effect kills himself. He was "Unsalvageable!"

Meursault, the protagonist of Camus' L'Etranger, is a man drifting through life. He is indifferent to the world and it is indifferent to him. He notes facts but makes no judgement of value. Without questioning motives or reasons, Meursault recognizes all facts without mitigation. In his narrative, Meursault provides meticulous details of what he did, the events that took place, and the people he encountered. He offers no interpretations, draws no conclusions, but he is not antisocial and shows no hostility toward others. He is aware, however, of a vague sense of guilt and seems to suffer from an irrational sense of uneasiness. In the beginning he receives a telegram telling him that his mother has just died. When he goes into to his boss to ask for time off and Camus gives the following description: "I have fixed up with my employer for two days' leave;

obviously, under the circumstances, he couldn't refuse. Still, I had an idea he looked annoyed, and I said, without thinking: 'Sorry, sir, but it's not my fault, you know.'²⁴ All through the first half of the book Meursault recounts, in detail, the people and events of his life, until at the end of the first part he shoots an Arab with whom a friend of his has been arguing. This is the catalyst for the rest of the account. "But I took that step, just one step, forward. And then the Arab drew his knife and held it up toward me, athwart the sun. A shaft of light shot upward from the steel, and I felt as if a long, thin blade transfixed my forehead. ...Beneath a veil of brine and tears my eyes were blinded; I was conscious only of the cymbals of the sun clashing on my skull... ...Then everything began to reel before my eyes, ... every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on the revolver. The trigger gave... And so, with that crisp, whipcrack sound, it all began. ...I knew I'd shattered the balance of the day, the spacious calm of this beach on which I had been happy. But I fired four shots more into the inert body, on which they left no visible trace. And each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing."²⁵ The incident was meaningless to him at the time and it crossed his mind that "one might fire or not fire -and it would come to absolutely the same thing."²⁶ For this murder, which Meursault committed "because of the sun", he spends eleven months in prison. Gradually he becomes aware, conscious of himself, his feelings, and the world.

When questioned about his mother's death by his appointed attorney Meursault answered that "... of recent years, I'd rather lost the habit of noting my feelings, and hardly knew what to answer. I

could truthfully say I'd been quite fond of Mother -but really that didn't mean much."²⁷ Eventually Meursault is convicted and

sentenced to death. Slowly, day after day Meursault decided that there were those in the world who were worse off than himself. And when the jailer pointed out that he had been imprisoned to deprive him of his liberty, this was a revelation to Meursault. He noted little things like the fact that he had missed having cigarettes, but now that he had gotten used to being without them it ceased to be a punishment. For him the biggest problem was to kill time, and in this he develops a unique level of consciousness. I found that the more I thought, the more details, half-forgotten or malobserved, floated up from my memory. There seemed to be no end to them. So I learned that even after a single day's experience of the outside world a man could easily live a hundred years in prison."²⁸

His consciousness of himself continued to grow until one day, during the trial Meursault almost could not keep himself from exclaiming: "It's a serious matter for a man, being accused of murder. And I've something really important to tell you.' However, on second thoughts, I found I had nothing to say."²⁹

One day a priest comes to see Meursault and receive his confession. The priest asked why Meursault had not wanted to see the clergy. Meursault explained that he did not believe in God. Then the priest asked: "Are you really sure of that?"³⁰ Meursault saw no point in bothering to explain. It was, to him, a question of so little importance. The priest then ask if it was because he was utterly desparate that he felt like that. And Meursault explained that it wasn't dispair, but fear and that that was natural enough. The priest replied that: " In that case God can help you. All the men I've seen in your position turned to Him in their time of trouble."³¹ Meursault replied that they were free to do so if they felt like it. He ,however, did not want to be helped, and didn't have the time for things that

didn't interest him. In a last effort the priest asked him if he had no hope at all, and "'Do you really think that when you die you die outright, and nothing remains?'"³² To this Meursault said: "'Yes.'"

Meursault, when faced with his own execution had finally discovered his own consciousness. He had been transformed from a man who had not cared and was "estranged" by the world to a man who no longer felt that the world was indifferent. In prison he had found himself and felt as though he was where he should be and was one with the world. Looking out of his cell at the spectators gathered by the gallows, he hoped that they would yell and hate him so that he would know that they were no longer indifferent.

The characters in the three works all developed and were conscious of their lot in life. With this realization each was able to choose. In existentialism man is free, and man is freedom. Man through his consciousness recognizes that he is responsible for everything he does and is free, "but condemned every moment to invent man."³³ They all had the freedom of consciousness; and the freedom of consciousness to choose an attitude in the face of circumstances that were beyond their control.

Notes

1. Kurt F. Reinhardt, The Existentialist Revolt (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1960), p.175.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Defense de l'Existentialisme," in France de Nos Jours, ed. Germaine Bree, p.165.
3. William V. Spanos, A Casebook on Existentialism (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1966), p.282.
4. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Defense de l'Existentialisme," p. 165.
5. Spanos, p. 282.
6. Antoine de Saint Exupery, Wind, Sand and Stars, trans. Lewis Galantiere (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), p.39.
7. Saint Exupery, p. 39,42.
8. Saint Exupery, p. 39.
9. Saint Exupery, p. 35.
10. Saint Exupery, p. 118.
11. Saint Exupery, p. 114.
12. Saint Exupery, p. 114.
13. Saint Exupery, p. 116.
14. Saint Exupery, p. 117
15. Saint Exupery, p. 118.
16. Saint Exupery, p. 118,119.
17. Saint Exupery, p. 119.
18. Saint Exupery, p. 119.
19. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Dirty Hands," in No Exit and Three Other Plays, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 230.
20. Sartre, "Dirty Hands," p. 233.
21. Sartre, "Dirty Hands," p. 235.
22. Sartre, "Dirty Hands," p. 238.

23. Sartre, "Dirty Hands," p. 239.

24. Albert Camus, The Stranger, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), p. 1.

25. Camus, p. 75-76.

26. Camus, p. 72.

27. Camus, p. 80.

28. Camus, p. 98.

29. Camus, p. 124

30. Camus, p. 144.

31. Camus, p. 146.

32. Camus, p. 147.

33. Spanos, p. 282.

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