

RCHUMS 360 – Existentialism

Midterm Review

If existentialism seems to be a broad mass of contradictory ideas, at least part of this is because the existential subject is the very nature of life, death, existence, and how one should use their time on Earth, a topic that inspires countless answers. Here, we have studied four authors who respond to this problem, and with the exception of Tolstoy, they argue for a universe without God. Given this introduction to the existentialist tradition, let us review the texts we have read so far and attempt a synthesis of the guiding themes.

***The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy**

1. What are Ivan Ilyich's screens? Why are they no longer able to sustain him as he nears death?
2. What is the lie that everyone around Ivan participates in? How do they sustain this lie?
3. How does Ivan question his existence? What is it that he is unable to resolve?
4. What is fundamentally corrupt in the way Ivan has lived his life?
5. Ivan attempts to save his family in death. How might Ivan have acted differently in life to make everything "right?"

***Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad**

1. Why does Conrad start and end the story in Europe, on the Thames and in London?
2. What is Conrad's idea of nature? How is this expressed as Marlow travels down the river?
3. What is the horror that Kurtz encounters?
4. How can one save oneself from this horror?
5. What is the dichotomy between surface and the heart of darkness?

***Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre**

1. What is the meaning of "existence precedes essence?" What are the consequences?
2. What are the advantages/disadvantages of the journal form?
3. What is the idea of "contingency" and how does it figure into Sartre's work?
4. In what ways is *Nausea* an atheist text? How does Antoine demonstrate this?
5. Describe absurdity according to Sartre.

***The Stranger* by Albert Camus**

1. How would you describe Meursault's reaction to the mother's death?
2. Meursault-isms: What are some of his recurring habits, sensations or thoughts? How do these change throughout the text?
3. Why does Meursault kill the Arab?
4. What is the role of punishment in *The Stranger*?
5. Find an example of absurdity: what does it show about Camus' philosophy? How does it compare to that of Sartre?

Themes

Value systems and their destruction

The Absurd

The enlightened individual vs the herd

Determinism vs free will

Solutions to the existential dilemma