**Existentialism and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead***



**Existential Crisis**

Most of us don't walk around every day asking these questions -- we just go about our day, simply existing -- but for nearly everyone, there will be times in our lives when the surface meaning is stripped away, usually by some tragedy, separation from those we love or our daily routines, from our normal "identities" and/or by confronting "the destroyer": death.

For example, if you have defined yourself as an athlete, and therefore being an athlete is what gives your life meaning, you'd probably face an existential crisis if you were injured -- or you simply grew old -- and could no longer compete in your sport.  Or maybe you are deeply, deeply in love and have planned the rest of your life around someone...only to learn they don't love you at all. The same happens for those who define themselves -- find their deepest meaning in -- as a parent, and then the children all move out and don't need you anymore.  Or you are a soldier fighting a war for what you were led to believe was a people who would greet you as a liberator and hero, but you learn they actually hate and want to kill you.

Perhaps your religion taught you that your god rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked, and so you lived your life righteously, only to have every member of your family wiped out in a meaningless genocide or accident etc. or you yourself or even your newborn child are visited by a terminal disease.

So existential crises force us to ask ourselves what our true nature is, our true meaning, our true *essence* as a human being, when the surface meaning has been removed.  In other words: if being an athlete is what gives your life meaning, what does your life *mean* when you can no longer be an athlete.

**Existential Questions**

The word "existential" combines the two words "existence" and "essence"  ("exist-ential"), and this etymology tells us what an "existential question" is:  a question concerning the essence of what it means to be alive, such as:

What is the meaning of life? = What is the meaning (essence) of existence?

Who am I (essentially)? What is my true nature/essence? What is my true identity?

What is my greater purpose? How should I live my life?

What is death? What happens when we die?

Is there a god, and, if so, what is his or her nature?

**Existential Literature And Film**

For the Existentialists, confronting the inherent meaninglessness of life leads to the question: why should I go on living? "To be or not to be...?"  
In Existential literature (and film), characters usually [suffer an "existential crisis" and are thus forced to answer existential questions](http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/engl_258/lecture%20notes/existential_questions.htm).  Often they are forced into utterly meaningless or hopeless situations, such as to be condemned to eternity to push a rock up a hill (Camus' Sisyphus), or being condemned to death and, worse, watch all you love suffer and die, in a death camp (such as during the Holocaust), or to be isolated in a plague ridden city (Camus' *The Plague*) or a timeless "Hell" (Sartre's No Exit), or to be scripted into a play ([*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761579723/Tom_Stoppard.html)*),* or to have survived the nuclear holocaust (Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*).

In each of these cases, ***the so called "Existential Hero" is he or she who can will, or create, his or her meaning in these absurd, doomed situations, and then still act in accordance to an internal morality.   The Existential Failure or anti-hero, or loser, in contrast, is he or she who is paralyzed by the situation or his or her own intellect and unable to rise above meaninglessness.***

**Existential Heroism: All or Nothing**  
For Camus, the Existential Hero is one who, like Sisyphus, grasped the absurd pointlessness of his task (existing) and chooses to *embrace it anyway.* In many ways, this simply serves as a metaphor for our common fatal-fate: we cannot really appreciate what life *is* until we appreciate and accept death -- death, that thing that lays waste to our lives, erases their meaning -- you cannot be grateful for being alive only when you are happy but not when you are sad; you cannot, as it were, only love your family when they are kind to you.   Sisyphus overcomes his fate or doom by choosing a ***heroic attitude*** toward life's apparent meaninglessness; in this way he proves man can *will* meaning into any situation;  Sisyphus finds it in simply reforming his *attitude* toward his fate...something that eventually nearly all of us must do.

Thus, in Camus' *The Plague* the Catholic Priest, Father Paneloux realizes one cannot "honestly" or actually love God (or life, existence) unless one accepts that this God created a world of meaningless, terrible suffering; only the terror of the plague and witnessing children dying can teach the priest the true nature of charity and love and, thus, God. Put another way, if there is a God, He or it is the God of the Holocaust -- a god that allows evil and suffering to exist.  To love that God is to love that suffering -- this is the message of the Book Of Job:  as Satan tells God: untested faith is no faith at all, and it's easy for a rich, happy man to love you (or existence);  true faith is the love of suffering -- just as true love in a marriage or relationship is not loving the better, but the worse ("for better and for worse").  In this way Father Paneloux, like Sisyphus, rises above the meaninglessness of the plague: he embraces the entirety of creation in all its absurdity and pain.

Identically, in *Man's Search For Meaning*, Jewish Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl shows us that even in the most absurd, terrible, demeaning and powerless situations -- a concentration camp waiting to be condemned to death -- a man can still maintain or *create* his own human dignity and thus *rise above* his fate: *"...everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" ... "in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result on an inner decision and not the result of camp influences alone."*

In The Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind (also a great Postmodern film), the protagonist must finally choose whether he is willing to experience the pain of love.  If you knew how much love would hurt, would you still choose it?  If you knew all of your lover's problems *before* you dated her, would you still choose to date her?

The Existential Hero -- Sisyphus, Father Paneloux, Frankl -- all rise above life's meaninglessness by a) facing that meaninglessness face on (the rock, the plague, the prison camp = death) , b) accepting it, and b) *creating meaning and virtue where there is none.*..knowing full well this meaning is fleeting and will not last eternally.

**Achilles As The Original, Prototypical Existential Hero**  
Homer's *The Iliad*, centers around Achilles' recognition that:  
a) If he stays to fight against Troy he will surely die, and to die is to forsake the most valuable thing he will ever have, the one and only life we are ever given (more valuable, he tells us, than women, or riches and gold).

b) If he chooses not to fight, he can return home and live a happy life into old age.

c) This choice is entirely his own.  He is free to make it.  He alone *must* choose.

d) But such a choice will determine more than his life; it will determine the war itself (whether the Acheaens or Trojans win) and his *legacy* -- how he is remembered by others, or whether he actually is remembered by others: to return home is to live, yes, but to live without honor, and to die in battle is to die, but to die as a hero and thus to define himself *as a hero.*

Unfortunately, perhaps like Hamlet, he chooses a bit late, reminding us that we are all condemned to choose, now. And so he learns, as we all do, that his choices also effect those he loves most.

**Existential Hell, Existential Failure**In contrast, an "existential Hell", metaphorically speaking, is therefore a place where one is no longer free to choose one's own meaning. Existentialist failures are those who refuse to create their own meaning and instead blame others for their choices, paint themselves as "victims" of circumstance, and define themselves as others see them, rather than how they choose.  These are the themes treated in Sartre's play, *No Exit.*  *Hell is not a place but a state of mind*, one in which we do not accept and embrace responsibility for our own choices and accept our lives or circumstances *as they are.*

We can see Victor Frankenstein's Creature as an Existential failure -- or an Existential Monster -- because he allows *others to define him,* rather than defining himself or choosing a path that does not confirm the evil others associate with him:  he fails, and his failure leads to suffering, *because he adopts others' perception of him -- as monster -- as accurate.* In Sartre and Camus' philosophy, there is no room for this type of justification or escape from responsibility.  As Sartre says, "the alcoholic alone is responsible for his alcoholism" and cannot blame his childhood or genetics or fate etc.

Hamlet, and *Hamlet*, represent Existential tragedy; Hamlet is consumed by the larger Existential questions and unable to choose a course of action; *he thinks, but he cannot act*.  His failure to act eventually destroys not only himself, but all those he loves. His obsession with seeking answers to the big questions allow his immediate fate to get the better of him: "to be or not to be"; "alas poor Yorick"; failure of choice; the meaninglessness of romantic love.

Similarly, in Beckett's [*Waiting For Godot*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waiting_for_Godot) and Tom Stoppard's [*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761579723/Tom_Stoppard.html) the characters are caught in absurd hypothetical situations where they are always waiting for meaning to arrive (in the shape of Godot = God) or they waste their time trying to answer to the question "what does it all mean?"

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are, like Frankl and Sisyphus, caught in a situation they cannot act on or physically change: their fate is sealed because they are simply characters in a scripted play.  Because of this, they cannot define themselves as Frankl and Sisyphus do.  Logic and science do not help them answer the big questions, and yet they cannot help but ask them.  They're situation is absurd (they exist inside a play; it is not realism/realistic) and represents a Postmodern Existential comedy.  It's important to realize, though, that although their situation is absurd, hopeless, and eventually doomed, *we learn much about our Existential questions by watching the play, or, from watching* ***them play****.*  Their purpose is lost on them, but not on us.  They are Existential clowns in a Postmodern world.  But perhaps laughing at life's absurdity is itself the logical, heroic, rational response.

Thus, hell is despair itself (or perhaps clinical depression).  Hell is the failure to *create meaning,* to create moral or ethical values and then live in accord with them, or to confront the fact that others have created worlds that collide with ours and obliterate our attempts to live meaningfully.  Thus, hell is ourselves, or hell is other people.

From lectures by Tom Drake at the University of Idaho.

http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/engl\_258/Lecture%20Notes/existential\_literature\_and\_film.htm