

FREEDOM FIGHTERS:
THE VIOLENT PURSUIT OF EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM
IN SELECTED 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN NARRATIVES

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Freedom Fighters:

The Violent Pursuit of Existential

Freedom

in

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Narratives

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Abstract

This project undertakes a study of the representations of violence in a number of twentieth century American narratives. Traditional approaches to violence, both real and fictitious, frequently focus on causal analysis in an attempt to divide the violent from the non-violent. Such analysis precludes the shared human experiences that form the basis of existential philosophy. Approaching violent narratives from the perspective of philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, my study considers certain acts of violence as originating from a distorted search for freedom and autonomy.

“Freedom Fighters” is divided into five chapters, four of which focus on a series of texts from different eras, different authors, and different social settings. Their commonalities result from the characters’ use of violence, in one form or another, to attempt to give a sense of meaning and freedom to their human existence. In so doing, they confront a diversity of social circumstances, sometimes successfully, and sometimes not so successfully. Chapter One introduces the basic theories of violence and explores the philosophical concepts of existentialism that illuminate such theories. Part One includes Chapters Two and Three; it reflects on the desperation produced by the need to escape *from* threats to freedom. Chapter Two considers the fear provoked by racial intimidation as particularized in slavery; it explores texts by William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison. The first three authors have particular significance to this work because of their own affinity for the

philosophical writings of Sartre. Chapter Three in Part One deals with the responses to a new form of slavery, perhaps as pernicious as the old: that of corporate capitalist domination. Part Two, which includes Chapters Four and Five, deals with the freedom *to* become self-realized--to individuate. Chapter Four explores the movement towards individuation in novels by E.L. Doctorow and Walker Percy. In Chapter Five, the issues surrounding the struggle for subjective freedom in the face of gender dynamics are analyzed. The thesis concludes with a further consideration of the implications of Sartre's philosophy for a more complete and constructive understanding of violent behaviour.

"Freedom Fighters" offers a new critical approach to the understanding of violence in texts, and subsequently perhaps in reality. Introducing the ideas of Sartre into such analysis opens up a new field of inquiry that will, one hopes, lead to innovative critical approaches. Reading the philosophy of existentialism with a more affirmative gaze offers the potential to shed new light on traditional concepts of individualism, freedom, and violent action.

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Introduction

Existentialism and Violence in Literature

The artwork presents itself to me as an absolute end, a demand, an appeal. It addresses itself to my pure freedom and in this way reveals to me the pure freedom of the Other.

Jean-Paul Sartre

The subject of art has been extended from psychology to the human condition.

Albert Camus

Sartre asserts that literature is an excellent method of comprehending his philosophy of existentialism. Efforts to establish an existential psychoanalysis are particularized in his biography of Gustave Flaubert, *The Family Idiot*. Sartre's plays, such as *The Flies* and *No Exit*, offer further realizations of his unique form of humanistic analysis. Hazel E. Barnes, the American professor who initially brought Sartre's philosophy to the English world with her translation of *Being and Nothingness*, explores his theories in *Humanistic Existentialism: The Literature of Possibility*. Few philosophic concepts more singularly both refer to, and lend themselves to interpretation of, literary narratives.

One aspect of Sartre's conceptual analysis that has received little attention is his concern with violence. Of late, studies by philosophers Tony Stigliano and Ronald E. Santoni attempt to rectify this lack. It is with this concern in mind that the following study was written. "Freedom Fighters" is grounded in Sartre's

opus, *Being and Nothingness*, wherein he devotes a short section to the violence in William Faulkner's *Light in August*. Sartre's text is devoted to ontological considerations of individuals and their relationships. As he discusses Faulkner, the philosopher elucidates a connection between the individual's desire for freedom and the potential to resort to violent behavior against the Other who is perceived as a threat. From this page or two of Sartrean analysis grew the present literary approach. It offers a fresh perspective on American culture, literature, and the violence inherent in both.

The obsession with violence in American culture has been well documented by such critics as Patrick Shaw, Michael Kowalewski, Kathryn Hume, and James Richard Giles. Society's increasing concern with violence is reflected in contemporary American literature, providing an imaginative resource for authors. Literary criticism, in turn, has become engaged in a search for terms to describe and deconstruct these violent narratives in ways that seem to parallel "the activity in which American authors themselves have been personally engaged" (Kowalewski 100). "Freedom Fighters" seeks to enter the critical discourse with a theory that speaks to the connection between violent and liberating desires. Grounded in philosophic existentialism, this study considers aspects of violence that reflect the ongoing search for individual identity and freedom, a search that navigates between conflicting considerations of race, gender, and social identity. My thesis argues that such narratives enable

resolutions to emerge that reveal, and sometimes even dissolve, the gap between the victimizer and the victim's conflicting demands for individual freedom.

I depart from previous perspectives in significant ways. Although existential treatments of literature are not new, critical focus has often been on nihilism, angst, and alienation. My focus explores the positive aspects of a philosophy that emphasizes individual responsibility and chosen action as escape from alienation. My work sees the novel not as a mere presentation of an existential problem, but rather as the initial first step in framing a solution. To see "into violence", argues Tanner, "is a form of resistance when what is exposed before the reader/viewer is the dynamics of violation...the power dynamics upon which the violator's force depends" (Tanner 104). Along with critic James Giles and others, I reject critical positions that "cannot serve the purpose of assuming an ethical function for literature as well as recognition of the political realities of the cultures in which individual works of literature are written" (Giles 113). French existentialism, as propounded by Jean Paul Sartre and others, takes a strong ethical position that always attempts to consider the political milieu of the individual. Nevertheless, I do not attempt to deal with large scale social violence in this thesis, but I maintain focus on individual violent responses.

Critical studies of violence in American literature begin with Frohock's study, *The Novel of Violence*, in the 1950s. He considers the work of early 20th century novelists, such as Dos Passos, Hemingway, and Faulkner. Since that

time, various literary critics have turned their attention in that direction and most at least mention William Faulkner. None, though, explore Faulkner's narratives of violence as illuminated in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre's analysis challenges us to critically consider the *nature* of power, both individual and collective. In fact, such considerations are essential to a meaningful, authentic human existence. Failure to accept the individual and social responsibility outlined by existentialism results, according to Tony Stigliano, in "the loss of authorship over one's actions [that] may well be so threatening to one's sense of being the author of one's life that only an extreme action can overcome one's being objectified in and by one's situation" (60). Certain novelists, such as E.L. Doctorow, explore in their writings ways to reassume such authorship and establish authentic realizations of freedom without the need for violent action.

Not all novels of violence result in such redemption. In *American Psycho* Bret Easton Ellis brutally presents a contemporary man for whom money and commodities are the essence of life. His main character's attempts to narrate himself are fragmented; one might say of this serial killer that he "attempts to glue together his fragmented self with blood" (Gomel 60). Ellis draws a picture of an "everyman" who is essentially "no-man" in a world where all subjects are interchangeable and equally objectified. If post-modernism offers no unified self as subject, *American Psycho* reveals the nightmarish quality of such a world. This postmodern moment is devoid of a humanizing moment; its center is a void.

Beginning with Sartre's treatment of Faulkner, my thesis originally focuses upon an exploratory narrative style that seeks to escape the limitations of time and space, subject and object, victim and victimizer. Writing in the shadow cast by Faulkner, Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright articulate a black man's perspective on the struggle for recognition, freedom and visibility. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* enters this discourse with a presentation of the power/exclusion dialectic wherein sexual sadism is utilized by power figures to attempt the complete appropriation of the Other's freedom. Morrison directs her narrative gaze on a revisioning of the past that allows future possibilities to open up for her characters. As horrifying as the events in the text are, the main character lives to become free and to move freely, if painfully, in the direction of self-realization. The novels studied here show the gradual emergence of the black subject, from the relatively impersonal early slave narratives to Morrison's *Sethe*, who chooses death for her baby rather than slavery.

Narratives such as Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out Of Carolina* demonstrate the challenges to freedom that can result from socially restrictive gender prescriptions. Such subjects, although superficially free, are not at liberty to realize their subjectivity in ways that are socially acceptable. In contemporary Western culture there are various impediments to self-realization. Critical theorists such as Mark Currie and Elana Gomel define subjectivity as primarily a narrative construct: "the only way to explain who we are, is to tell our own story [...] we learn how to self-narrate

from the outside, from other stories” (Currie qtd. in Gomel xv). Characters in Allison, Palahniuk, Doctorow, and Percy have much insight to offer concerning the road to subjective freedom and the violence that can accompany it.

All of the texts chosen for this study shed some light on Sartre’s concepts of freedom and violence. Hazel E. Barnes clearly expresses the significance of such an original perspective:

For almost a century now, prevailing psychologists and the literature written under their influence have agreed that men cherish the illusion of freedom while in fact being determined by heredity, by environment, and by early childhood experiences. Humanistic existentialism challenges this doctrine and claims that exactly the reverse is true: every man is free, but most men, fearing the consequences and the responsibilities of freedom, refuse to acknowledge its presence in themselves and would deny it to others. [...] The literature which shows that men are free presents to the world a new philosophy of man. (Barnes 3)

Such a philosophy requires a shift in perspective, a new appraisal of the human situation. The novels explored below reveal the consequences of evading and of embracing one’s individual freedom of choice. Man is more than his history and more than his biology. As in the myth of Eden, man’s self-consciousness begins with an act of choice. Some choices come with serious consequences, such as expulsion from the Garden. Death at one’s own hands is a rational choice in certain circumstances acknowledged by Sartre, Camus and other existentialists. Whatever the choice, one is free to make it, if one is prepared to accept the consequences. This is the understanding implied in Sartre’s well know phrase, “dreadful freedom.” “Freedom Fighters” researches the relationship of concepts of freedom and violence with narratologies of the self.

The novels, philosophic works, and literary criticism that I have chosen to approach in this work are limited, of course, by necessity. Selected texts treat individuals as ontologically free, and confront the issues that result from that basic grounding. Violence, as one possible exercise of that freedom, is explored to ascertain its success or failure as an existential mode of being. In later works, such as *Notebooks for Ethics*, Sartre considers counterviolence as a justified social response to restraints such as colonization, but this is not the focus of *Being and Nothingness*, or of “Freedom Fighters.”

Chapter One

The Discourse of Violence and Freedom: “Raiding the Inarticulate”

[T]he ominous escalation of violence on both the interpersonal and the global level represents one of the central social and political challenges for the dawning twenty-first century.

Violence and Its Alternatives

1.1 Putting Violence to Words

Violence in America has increasingly been the subject of critics and novelists during the advance of the twentieth century. In fact, says Patrick Shaw, “Violence is at the heart of the American culture” (108).¹ Haunted by the ghosts of slavery, civil unrest and major wars, America finds itself hostage to terror both at home and abroad. American literature has come to reflect society’s increasing concern as authors seem, almost obsessively, to turn violence into an imaginative resource. Literary criticism finds itself engaged in a search for terms to describe and deconstruct these violent narratives in ways that seem to parallel “the activity in which American authors themselves have been personally engaged” (Kowalewski 100). Grounded in philosophic existentialism, this study considers aspects of violence that reflect the ongoing human search for individual identity and freedom, a search that spans considerations of race, gender, and social identity. My thesis argues that such narratives enable resolutions to emerge that reveal,

¹An important resource for this study is Patrick Shaw’s *The Modern Novel of Violence in America*. Troy, N.Y.: Whitston Pub, 2000. Also significant is the ground breaking work of W.M. Frohock in *The Novel of Violence in America*. Boston: Beacon P, 1950.

and sometimes even dissolve the gap between the victimizer and the victim's conflicting demands for individual freedom.

There are numerous definitions of violence offered by theorists; many agree that the violent act is an evil act, albeit sometimes a necessary evil, to be avoided if possible. As Arendt states, "Violence can be justifiable, but it will never be legitimate" (Arendt 9). In her accessible account of the narrative construction of the violent subject, *Bloodscripts: Writing the Violent Subject*, Elana Gomel offers some interesting and controversial insights. The act of murder, she claims, shatters the integrity of the self because the perpetrator is caught in the dichotomy of both acknowledging and denying the humanity of the victim. This vacillation, this inevitable splitting of the perpetrator's self-hood in the act of violence, is how Gomel accounts for the shattering impact of killing on the coherence of the self. This shattering of the self is seen in texts that will be discussed below, such as *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*. This shattering, says Gomel, is mistaken by the narrativized self as *liberation* from the "prison house of language". Violence, argues Gomel, *appears* as a communion with the Real that seems to carry one beyond the shifting illusions of the Symbolic. Gomel asserts that this 'communion' is the greatest illusion of all (198).

Certain of Gomel's concepts in *Bloodscripts* are comparable with conclusions arrived at in this thesis, although she mentions neither existentialism nor Sartre. The perspective which I assume here defines the dichotomy of the violator as one vacillating between the attempt to obliterate the freedom of the Other, while simultaneously coming to the realization that he needs this freedom to acknowledge his power. For Gomel, the

motivating force of violent action is what she terms the “violent sublime”; for Sartre, the motivation of the violent subject is to reduce or eliminate the threat to his own freedom that the Other presents. Nevertheless, Gomel recognizes violence as one aspect of freedom: “The desire for violence is part of human freedom and thus it can never be eliminated, only confronted” (Gomel 205). Once violence is acknowledged as one possibility of action, it must also be accepted as a possibility of language and therefore of narrative. Arguing against the position that violence is some form of contagion, with representations of violence serving as “vectors of transmission,” Gomel asserts that we must accept violence as embedded in the subject and therefore rooted also in narratives of subject construction. She perceives the desire to inflict pain as grounded in the individual’s need to transcend the limitations of his own embodied self. This bears a relation to my own thesis, which argues that the violent act is based on the need to defend one’s freedom in the face of a threat perceived from the Other. I agree with Gomel’s conclusion that violence “delivers nothing but what is available to every human being anyway: mortality” (208). I discuss this argument in detail as I explore Sartre’s explication of Faulkner in Chapter 2 of this work, “Dying to be Free”.

Although much of my research revolves around physical violence, there is another manifestation of violence that informs my study. In his article entitled “Cultural Violence” Johan Galtung offers this definition: “By ‘cultural violence’ we mean those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence [...] that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence” (Galtung 40). Any study of violence, says Galtung, must consider both the use of violence and the justification of that use. Direct or

structural violence he defines as “avoidable insults to basic human needs” (40) which are listed in this article as four: 1) survival, 2) well-being, 3) identity, and 4) freedom. This type of violence has “exploitation as its center piece,” with some members of the structure (the top-dogs) getting more from the interactions than the others (underdogs) (Galtung 42). Two of those basic needs with which this work concerns itself primarily are the needs of *meaning* - the deprivation of which produces *alienation* - and *freedom* needs - the deprivation of which produces *repression* and resulting *violence*. Galtung includes a notion of “cultural violence” which he defines as “any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form” (*Violence and Its Alternatives* xvi). The ultimate violent structure, says Galtung, has exploitation at its center, with those at the top getting much more from the exchange than those at the bottom: “A violent structure leaves marks not only on the human body but also on the human spirit” (Galtung 42). In the vicious cycle that he describes: “the culture preaches, teaches, admonishes, eggs-on, and dulls us into seeing exploitation and/or repression as normal and natural, or into not seeing them (particularly not exploitation) at all. Then come the eruptions, the effort to use direct violence to get out of the structural iron-cage, and counter-violence to keep the cage intact” (43). Exploitation results in repression, which is essentially the deprivation of freedom. One potential response to this deprivation is direct violence. With this conclusion, Galtung’s argument is aligned with my own as well as those presented by Tony Stigliano in “Jean Paul Sartre: On Understanding Violence.”

When we speak of the need for liberation we generally consider the liberation of the working classes, the downtrodden, and the poor underclass. There is, however, in the western world of our time, the need to be liberated from “a relatively well-functioning, rich, powerful society” (Marcuse 264). Such a society, taking the U.S. as the model, is characterized by the “apparently inseparable unity...of productivity and destruction, of satisfaction of needs and repression, of liberty within a system of servitude” (Marcuse 268). Such servitude in the face of the possibilities of freedom, says Herbert Marcuse, “activates and intensifies in this society a primary aggressiveness to a degree, I think, hitherto unknown in history” (268). The need for change is suppressed, both by the apparent satisfaction of superficial, created needs, and by the ‘liberating’ scientific knowledge of psychology and psychiatry. Dissatisfaction is treated with therapy or Prozac. What is there to complain about when living in the best, the freest society in the world? There can be no improvement in our system, according to Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, until we develop “a self-punishing enumeration of all the blocks that make the reimagining of utopia today a difficult, if not to say a well-nigh impossible task” (111). If we are to explore these blocks, and if we are to perceive violence as emerging from threats to freedom, it is necessary to explore the concept of violence and thus the concept of freedom itself.

1.2 Sartre and Violence

I recognize that violence under whatever form it may manifest

itself is a setback. But it is an inevitable setback because we are in a universe of violence; and if it is true that recourse to violence risks perpetuating it, it is also true that it is the only means of bringing an end to it.

Jean-Paul Sartre

At the center of this reality [industrial societies] is conflict and violence, not merely as a social contingency in times of economic upheaval, but necessary to the attempt to preserve subjectivity, to prevent the formation of unknowing, thing-like, working but inert "persons" who would be nothing more than proletarian and bourgeois: nothing human.

Tony Stigliano

We live in violent times, yet I suppose this might be said of any age. For Americans, it is certainly true that the infamous events of what is termed 9/11 have manifested that nation's vulnerability to unimaginable violence. Awareness of that vulnerability has been intensified by the rise of random school shootings across North America, along with an increase in serial killings. Taken together, these events threaten the individual's sense of safety. In such circumstances it would appear more than ever before that the world needs to come to terms with the philosophical issues surrounding violent action. How is such action to be understood and can it ever be justified? "Is it ever morally defensible, in an unjust world shamefully divided between the privileged and the 'least favored,' to employ violent means in order to rectify injustice and create what some have called a 'new humanity' and more humane world?" (Santoni x). These complex issues demand attention; unlike many current thinkers, Sartre has been consistently engaged with these issues. They are pervasive motifs in all of his work, both literary and

philosophic. This dissertation addresses, in some small way, my interpretation of Jean-Paul Sartre's dialectic of freedom: a dialectic which sheds light on the issue of violence. I confine myself to fiction that expresses existential concepts of freedom, wedded to violent imagery. I do not attempt to deal with the larger political issues that concerned the great French thinker, issues that surround WW II, the Algerian war of independence, or his changing views on Marxism. As Sartre himself believed, it is essential to understand human existence from the individual perspective before addressing the collective. The individual subject is a necessary moment, as Hegel would argue, in the comprehension of humanity at the sociopolitical stage. Literary texts generally approach their themes from the position of the individual subject.

The tendency of our time to reduce theories of violence to empirical theories of causality is anathema to the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. His perspective, on a social level, is more in line with Foucault's analysis of power in *Discipline and Punish*. They both perceive that the control of asocial behaviour is one way in which the dominating powers manipulate their underlings in order to achieve predictable results. Today's methods may be less blatantly cruel than torture, but the prison system, chemical castration, behaviour modification, etc. can be violent to the spirit. In his article, "Jean-Paul Sartre on Understanding Violence," philosopher and critical theorist Tony Stigliano explains:

For a philosopher like Sartre, causal analysis precludes the idea that social reality is constituted by "sensuous human activity", by shared practices of work, understanding and discourse. If violence is "explained" by gene structures, we remove from our analysis the person, his/her habits and culturally received practices to the point

where self-expression and self-affirmation are reduced to a manipulable etiology. Hence, we no longer would be concerned with the way a person "makes" the world he/she inhabits, and we are caught up in the fruitless search for the variable dividing the pacific from the violent. (52)

Sartre's social theory is, of course, primarily informed by the work of Marx. His much publicized disillusionment with the Communist Party, one shared with writers Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, had more to do with the political policies of the USSR than with the philosophy of Karl Marx, and Marxist socioeconomic theory always informed his ideology. For Sartre, individual actions are generated from a demand for meaning, grounded by the need to survive in the face of artificially generated scarcity. Sartre was in sympathy with the rights of the colonized to violently seize their freedom from the colonialist; this constituted his famous feud with his old friend Albert Camus. "Freedom Fighters" does not attempt to address the political forms of violence, except indirectly. My primary concern is with acts of violence perpetrated on or by the individual. Although resulting from individual choice, violence can be viewed as "a distorted way people seek meaning and autonomy in their lives" (Stigliano 52). Since man exists as freedom in the existential sense, therefore all perceived threats to freedom are interpreted as threats to that same self.²

One's choices are based upon, or are related to, the concept of self which the individual holds. Such self-concepts, in turn, are rooted in race, class, gender, etc. To understand violence one needs to attempt to comprehend the ideologies that inform these

² For ease of reading and translating from Sartre, I use the masculine noun "man" and the masculine pronoun "he" to refer, in a general way, to persons or beings.

relevant categories. No being is ever simply an individual, according to Sartre, but is

“universalized by his period.” Stigliano offers this analysis of Sartre:

In Sartre the terror and boredom of modernity is clearer than in the work of the more conventional scientist. The criminal is seeking ways of breaking free, thus his situation holds, in an ironic twist, the “secret” of a way out for society as a whole. The criminal forces upon us the question of the nature of liberation. (53)

Sartre’s own forays into fiction, as well as his interest in other writers, indicates that the narrative is an excellent method of comprehending an individual in life process.

To begin to understand violent action, or indeed *any* existentialist action, one must start with the dialectics that make up Sartre’s ontology—self/other, material/praxis, etc. Moving outwards from the conscious self, termed by Sartre *being-for-itself*, we encounter the Other, whom we perceive as a threat to our sense of self, and to our individual freedom to define ourselves as we wish. The material world presents us with another threat, against which we attempt to assert ourselves through our actions. We overcome this threat “only to discover the lack, the threat again... [since] material reality and the relationships arising from that reality shape the different ways need is limited...” (Stigliano 58). All subjects confront these outside forces; the response of each is, of course, unique. The violent individual has the same self-actualizing needs as everyone else and may give the appearance of being conventional, such as I will later argue is the case with the narrator of Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*. However, “the loss of authorship over one’s actions may well be so threatening to one’s sense of being the author of one’s life [which *surely is freedom*] that only an extreme action can overcome one’s being objectified in and by one’s situation” (Stigliano 60). A subject or group who

feels stripped of their subject-hood may act in such a way as to objectify an Other. In fact, Stigliano maintains that there are only two possible ways to overcome the scarcity in the world that confronts us: one is class struggle and the other is individualist violence. While I disagree that Sartre's philosophy is this nihilistic, Stigliano's position certainly accounts for the increasing violence in our post-modern world. The latter philosopher views the violent criminal as analogous to an 'acting-out' child; he/she acts out the anger and frustration that is passively experienced by the rest of us. This theory implicates all of us in the violent behaviour to which society then becomes victim. Such a sense of implication is frequently considered in reader-response theories to violent narratives. Sartre's position, as translated from his *Notebooks* by Ronald E. Santoni, is clearly expressed when he argues that there "are no witnesses to violence, only participants" (59).

Philosopher and Sartre scholar Ronald E. Santoni has written extensively on Jean-Paul Sartre's complex perspective on violence.³ He summarizes the philosopher's ideology thusly: "Violence is 'pure exercise of freedom' appropriating either the world or human being by destruction" (Sartre cited in Santoni 23). Sartre's first great philosophic treatise, *Being and Nothingness*, owes much to the German idealist G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel's famous dialectic of the Master-Slave relationship had profoundly influenced Karl Marx. Sartre invokes this analysis in his own account of

³ See *Sartre on Violence: Curiously Ambivalent* for an in-depth study of the evolution of Sartre's ideology on violence in all of his philosophic works. Santoni deals with hitherto unanalyzed material, such as Sartre's later lectures, as he explores Sartre's search for a philosophy grounded in the ontological and social freedom of humanity.

relations between the self and Others. In Hegel's account, one becomes truly human only when one is prepared to risk everything: it is "only through the risk of life that freedom comes to light" (cited in Santoni 8). The Hegelian struggle does not end in death, but rather in the subservience of one to the Other; each begins by demanding self-recognition by the Other. The resolution of the conflict results in one who is prepared to risk life becoming the Master, while he who is prepared to submit becomes the slave; he has chosen "dependent consciousness" rather than "autonomous consciousness." This is only what Hegel calls the first "moment" in the dialectic. In the next "moment," the Slave is revealed as the only one of the two who is ready for transformation or change from his present situation. The Master is fixed in his position and cannot accept another Master:

The slave is the secret of change in history and his desire for freedom from oppression is the ground of man's becoming more human. [...] In "overcoming" his Master as Master, the Slave "overcomes" himself as Slave and reveals reality; in surpassing Slavery, he achieves satisfaction, authentic freedom, and self-transformation. So if History is, as Hegel claims, a "dialectic between Mastery and Slavery", then this "overcoming" by the Slave starts a new "period" in History in which the postfight domination of the Slave by the Master is replaced by the Slave's "determination" of human existence. (Santoni 9)

Human existence will not be satisfied until the resolution of this dialectic; when and how this transformation will occur becomes the issue for those, like Sartre, Marx and others who were influenced by this Hegelian analysis.

This dialectic informs Sartre's account of intersubjectivity and the difficulty of establishing authentic human relationships as given in *Being and Nothingness* and later in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Husserl's phenomenology, along with Hegel's influences the premise on which the "self" is established. Phenomenology points to two

divergent beings, for which Sartre uses the Hegelian terms—"being-for-itself" (*l'être-pour-soi*) and "being-in-itself" (*l'être-en-soi*).

Being-in-itself is "object" being or thing being: it *is* what it is, has "identity," is not conscious, cannot refer to itself, has no possibilities or projects (human reality has projects for it), coincides with itself, is one with itself. In radical contrast to being-in-itself, *being-for-itself* is conscious, self-aware, self-referential being. As distinctive human reality, being-for-itself is *not* what it is and *is* what it is not. It is not a "what" or object or thing. [...] in a word, being-for-itself, or human reality, *is* freedom. (Santoni 11)

This being-for-itself, this conscious subject encounters the Other in his "look" or "gaze." This gaze reveals the subject as now an object: as an "in-itself" for the Other and for the world. Desiring a world wherein he is no longer controlled or defined by the "gaze of the Other," the violent individual considers that he has the right to destroy the Other in order to achieve that goal. Of course, violence is an alienating enterprise, doomed to fail in its purpose. It is an act which Sartre terms "mauvaise foi," or bad faith; it dehumanizes the perpetrator as it dehumanizes the victim. Such violence, in Santoni's view, destroys Sartre's system of rules for being authentically human (28). In his famous lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism," since published as *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre responds to those who have misinterpreted his doctrines. Of human relationships he explains the following:

Thus the man who discovers himself directly in the *cogito* also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence. He recognizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense in which one says one is spiritual, or that one is wicked or jealous) unless others recognize him as such. I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is *indispensable to my existence*, and equally so

to any knowledge I can have of myself. Under these conditions, the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the *other as a freedom which confronts mine*, and which cannot think or will without doing so either for or against me. Thus, at once, we find ourselves in a world which is, let us say, that of “inter-subjectivity”. It is in this world that man has to decide what he is and what others are. (*Italics mine* 45)

We ourselves decide what we will make of what we are “made of.” It is through our actions in the world that present us with limitations that we posit ourselves as subjects. Whether our actions are successful or not, they determine who we are. All human purpose consists of attempts to deal with given limitations in one of these ways: we try to surpass or expand them, or we attempt to deny or accommodate them (*Existentialism is a Humanism* 46).⁴ That *is* the essence of our existential freedom. “Obviously,” Sartre says, “freedom as the definition of a man does not depend upon others, but as soon as there is a commitment, I am obliged to will the liberty of others at the same time as my own” (E&H 52). Violent action which is not in the clear defense of one’s freedom, and which denies the freedom of the other, is an action of “bad faith.” The issue to which we now turn is the concept of freedom itself, as the Western world generally understands it.

1.3 Historical Freedom

Dating from the Enlightenment, freedom has emerged as an important concept in the liberal democracies of our Western culture. Theorists for whom freedom was a cultural concern, such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Stuart Mill used

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*. Trans. Philip Mairet. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1948. Hereafter cited in text as “E&H.”

freedom and equality as foundational ideas for their theories of human nature.⁵ The rise of individualism, as we know it, began with the writings of John Stuart Mill. The humanism of the Enlightenment led to an emphasis on the human ability to make choices. Theorists concerned themselves with how such choices would or should be decided upon. Mill recognized the human right to be independent, acknowledging the rights even of women, a revolutionary perspective in his time. He did, however, distinguish between what an individual *wanted* and *believed* would make him happy and what one *should* want and *would truly* result in happiness. Mill's Utilitarianism aligned with the Kantian position in one respect: that true freedom follows from allowing the will rather than desire to determine our actions.

1.4 Freedom: Negative and Positive

In the negative sense, freedom is the absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice; it represents the opportunity to act. Positive liberty is concerned with the presence of conditions required to take advantage of freedom – conditions that an individual cannot create on his/her own. Considering the situation of welfare recipients, one frequently hears the comment that “No one is preventing them from getting a job.” They may have liberty in the negative sense (or they may not). However, are conditions beneficial to allow them to take advantage of the choices available? Do they have the

⁵ There are many excellent books that offer detailed histories of freedom in the United States. Such a broad discussion is, of course, outside the scope of this thesis. I refer the reader to one such extensive study by Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 1998.

clothes, the transportation, or the babysitter required to take on a job? Beyond such external conditions, there are often internal barriers to the exercise of choice. There might be fears, addictions, etc. If this hypothetical person on welfare is addicted to alcohol or drugs, are there provisions for help? Has he/she been given the educational, social, and cultural advantages necessary to develop as persons? "People must exercise their full capacities if they are to be free" (Hirschman 8). By this definition, few are free.

Freedom includes, and significantly so, the ability to govern or master oneself – an issue recognized by various religions. In a secular society, where advertisers constantly appeal to our "second order" desires, and there seems no motivation to attain self-control, one might wonder how there can be *true* freedom. If autonomy, the capacity to govern oneself, is a prerequisite for freedom then the lack of same clarifies a crisis of freedom amidst one of the "freest" societies in the world. Erich Fromm, psychoanalyst, humanist, and freedom researcher, suggests that the Western world confuses the escape from external restraints with the far more complex nature of true freedom. The "abolition of external domination seemed to be not only a *necessary* but also a *sufficient* condition to attain the cherished goal: freedom of the individual" (*The Fear of Freedom* 2 italics mine).⁶ The events of WWII, Fromm argues, have "compelled [us] to recognize that millions in Germany were as eager to surrender their freedom as their fathers were to fight for it; that instead of freedom, they sought for ways to escape from it; that other millions were indifferent and did not believe the defense of freedom to be worth fighting

⁶ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956. Hereafter cited in text as "FF."

and dying for.” (FF 2-3). Fromm’s arguments demonstrate affinity with Sartre’s own ideology; freedom is both a blessing and a curse. We both seek it and run from it. My study is divided into sections that approach freedom *from* restraints and freedom *to* self-realize. Our human nature is often immersed in a dialectic that involves both running towards and running away from our individual freedom. Having largely achieved freedom from restraints in our society, we are free to pursue our individual wants. If only we knew what they were!

We cannot minimize the importance of negative liberty, of individual rights to safety within a social system. The first chapter in Part One establishes the horrors of slavery in America. As Cyrus Patell points out in his text *Negative Liberties*, there are still many places in the world where a Hobbesian ‘state of nature’ prevails, where “the strong prey upon the weak with impunity and without remorse” (186). In refusing to reflect on, or question the nature of the country’s freedom, Patell asserts that Americans blind themselves to the dangers inherent in a system that is so entrenched in the psyche that it remains largely unchallenged and unexplored. Dichotomies must be explored; hypocrisies must be revealed. In the words of Toni Morrison: “living in a nation of people who decided that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom and mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular landscape for a writer” (quoted in Patell 10). These inherent dichotomies in the American national narrative, I will argue, provide fodder for the culture of violence that plagues the country today. Refusing to recognize threats to individual freedom leaves Americans open to the type of violent perpetrators described by philosopher Tony Stigliano, whose frustration at their

powerlessness is expressed in violence. This 'emancipated' situation is more pernicious than "the old slavery because one now believes that the new chains represent freedom" (Stigliano 62). Efforts, such as those of Cyrus Patell, to deconstruct freedom ideology are significant and enlightening.

In his analysis of the conceptual bedrock of American liberty, Cyrus Patell asserts that "some of the most important philosophizing that is going on within late twentieth-century U.S. culture can be found in works of fiction" (xv). Literature, he maintains with Sartre, brings philosophy to life. Concerning himself with the negative consequences of individualism as it appears in contemporary American thought and fiction, Patell explores the work of Morrison and Pynchon, as they deconstruct the official narratives of freedom and self-reliance: "Philosophers like Emerson, Rawls, and Kateb make compelling cases for the potential of individualism as the basis for an ideal democratic society, but as Pynchon and Morrison so dramatically depict, this potential has yet to be realized in American culture, let alone elsewhere in the world" (xviii). However, neither novels nor critical deconstructionists have made much of an impact on the American love affair with the concept of individualism as an *a priori* reality.

The American national narrative of individual freedom contains within it various undifferentiated concepts such as those of liberalism and individualism. The latter has become part of the national American identity since the nineteenth century and is largely attributed to the writings of Emerson. Individualism extols the virtues of non-conformity and self-reliance; the individualist is the 'Adam,' the self-made man who figures so often in American literature. Patell, however, argues that the concept is misunderstood: "from

the time that the term became part of the American vocabulary in the early part of the nineteenth century, Americans-including Emerson and his followers-have always conceived of individualism as a social formation. Herein lies the genius of the ideology and perhaps the reason for its efficacy: it enforces conformity at the very moment that it extols conformity" (xii). Emersonian liberalism, so popular in U.S. thought, is centered on this false concept of self-reliance. The rugged individualist, the Indiana Jones version, is an example of wish fulfillment. Readers or viewers can fantasize that they are masters of their own fate even as they succumb to the mind-numbing bureaucracy that defines their lives. Indeed, few persons have any belief in the ability of the average individual to be master of his own fate. Such freedom exists only in popular culture. Even on-screen rugged individualists like Indiana Jones or Batman never seem to deviate from actions which society has determined are in the general best interest. The anti-heroes, the anti-social psychopaths, are the only characters who seem able to act in their own best interests even when these do not align with those of society. Perhaps this is why we are so fascinated with them.

1.5 Freedom and Existentialism

Many contemporary critics argue for a new conception of philosophic existentialism. K. Sangari confronts the issue in Ruby Chatterji's frequently referenced collection of essays, *Existentialism in America*. Previously, says Sangari, the philosophy has been for American critics merely "a handy means for maintaining their own value

systems" (179). It might be better employed, he argues, as "a critical response to the contemporary situation as well as a philosophy which contains the potential for being transformed into an instrument for buttressing that very situation" (179). Central to the existentialist is the concept of man as freedom. Such concerns have long been a major motif of American literature. Freedom is a recurring theme in such texts as *Moby Dick*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and in the writings of Thoreau and Emerson. Existential freedom is also a focus in the works of African American writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison. These authors might well be expected "to respond to certain elements in existentialism, particularly the sense of alienation and protest, by the very nature of [their] social constraints" (Chatterji 13). That same concern can be found in the works of many contemporary American authors, for example, Ellis, Percy, Doctorow, Auster, Ford, and various others. They confront an increasingly threatening world of globalization, urbanization, and bureaucratization in which the individual seems insignificant and manipulated by forces beyond his/her control.

By paradoxically making the ineffectual individual both creator and arbiter of his own values, existentialism allows him to retain the last vestiges of his human dignity through a neo-stoic affirmation of the self in metaphysical revolt. (Chatterji 14)

Many of the novels considered in this thesis are such self-affirming fictions. The following section, Part One, encompasses the struggle against chains – both the old and the new.

Finally, as we begin to explore French Existentialism in American literature, it behooves us to remember that its gradual emergence into significant critical theory has

diverse roots. The European climate from which the French movement arose and flourished had little impact on America in the first half of the twentieth century. Emerging factors, certain of which this study shall address, came to threaten the individual in American society. No study could even begin to concern itself with all the challenging forces which the individual must battle, either in fiction or in reality. Multinationals, mass media, home-grown and global terrorism, all have arisen to replace American optimism with European *angst*. One might argue that these are growing pains, which reveal only that America is growing up. One might assert that a more complex society requires a more complex philosophic system: Sartre replaces Mill. "Freedom Fighters" strives to show that, regardless of the threats to freedom that rock her shores, existentialism can provide a lighthouse to illumine the way home.

PART I

FREEDOM *FROM*

Chapter Two: Dying to be Free: Escaping Racial Oppression in the
Works of Faulkner, Wright, Ellison and Morrison

Chapter Three: Corporate Raiders: Violence on Wall Street in the
Works of Tom Wolfe and Bret Easton Ellis



Chapter Two

Dying to be Free: Escaping Racial Oppression

No one can treat a man like a dog without first regarding him as a man. The impossible dehumanization of the oppressed, on the other side of the coin, becomes the alienation of the oppressor. It is the oppressor himself who restores, with his slightest gesture, the humanity he seeks to destroy; and, since he denies humanity in others, he regards it everywhere as his enemy. To handle this, [he] must assume the opaque rigidity and imperviousness of stone. In short, he must dehumanize himself, as well.

Jean-Paul Sartre

2.1 Faulkner's Existential Gaze: Black Man as Oppressed Freedom

Nobody has better portrayed the power of the victim's look at his torturers than Faulkner has done in the final pages of *Light in August*.

Jean-Paul Sartre

In his unique study of the author's works, *Existential-Phenomenological Readings on Faulkner*, William J. Sowder remarks that the previous critical approaches have been too restrictive to deal with the complexity of Faulkner's characters: "Existential phenomenology can change this. As a philosophy of consciousness it covers the whole human spectrum" (Sowder xiii). It is somewhat surprising, then, that in his analysis of *Light in August* Sowder fails to consider the brilliant light shed on the main character by the father of existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*. It was this brief but insightful analysis that started my exploration of the connection between freedom and violence. For whatever the reason, although Sartre is often credited with vaguely defined

existential concepts, his work has rarely been given the careful study it requires, even by philosophers. As recently as 2006 David Sherman remarks on this lack in *Philosophy Today*:

Although Horkeimer had wanted the Frankfurt School to undertake a comprehensive analysis of Sartre's philosophy, the only consideration of it that was anything more than superficial was Marcuse's 1948 article "Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'être et le Neant*." (198)

For these reasons I feel that a close reading of Sartre's concepts of freedom as they apply to interpersonal relationships is long overdue.

Much has been written about the central character of Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August*.⁷ Not one of these critical works considers Sartre's scrutiny of this existential anti-hero, encased as it is in the dense Part Three of *Being and Nothingness*, "Being-For-Others."⁸ In his preliminary discussion of sadism, Sartre states:

What the sadist thus so tenaciously seeks, what he wants to knead with his hands and bend under his wrists is the Other's freedom. The freedom is there in that flesh; it is the freedom which is this flesh since there is a facticity of the Other. It is therefore this freedom which the sadist tries to appropriate. (*Being and Nothingness* 522)⁹

⁷ For a complete consideration of the criticism on Joe Christmas see William J. Sowder's *Existential-Phenomenological Readings on Faulkner*. Conway, AR: UCA Press. 1991.

⁸ In Part Three we see the introduction of the basic concept of freedom as it concerns human relationships. This is further elucidated in Part Four of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1977.

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square, 1956. Hereafter cited in text as "BN."

Violence becomes the means by which the violator attempts to enslave the Other's freedom for himself and he seeks proof of this enslavement through humiliation and torture of his victim: "this distorted and heaving body is the very image of a broken and enslaved freedom" (BN 524). However, this attempt to appropriate the victim's freedom is doomed to failure because his/her transcendent freedom is, on principle, out of reach. Once the Other is treated as an object, his freedom is not transcendent but rather a dead thing. "The sadist discovers his error when his victim *looks* at him; that is when the sadist experiences the absolute alienation of his being in the Other's freedom" (BN 525). This reality is nowhere better portrayed, says Sartre, than in Faulkner's *Light in August*.

One important aspect of Sowder's criticism is that he writes of Joe Christmas as violator rather than victim. Indeed, as a rapist, a murderer *and* a murder victim, he is both in the novel. Sartre's analysis begins with the moment of Joe's death, for the philosopher's interest is in the *gaze*, the *look* in which the violator comes to realize the failure of his attempt to appropriate his victim's freedom:

But the man on the floor had not moved. He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow, about his mouth. For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring face of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. *It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatening, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant.* Again from the town, deadened a little by the walls, the scream of the siren

mounted toward its unbelievable crescendo, passing out of the realm of hearing. (BN 526) ¹⁰

Looking into the Other's eyes that are "empty of everything save *consciousness*," the men recognize the continued presence of the freedom which they sought to enslave.¹¹ The sadist fails in his goal on two levels. Once the Other is objectified, forced into the immediacy of the flesh by pain, the transcendence is no longer present. As he/she recovers this transcendence in the moment of death, the freedom is seen in the final gaze that is "of itself alone triumphant." In his victim's gaze the violator again becomes the objectified Other, moving from the "being-in-the-act-of-looking" to the "being-looked-at" (BN 527). It is likely this fear of being objectified by the Other's gaze that prompts certain serial killers to blind or blindfold their victims. Sartre explains this issue rather succinctly in these words: "Such is the origin of my concrete relations with the Other; they are wholly governed by my attitudes with respect to the object which I am for the Other" (BN 473). In his final moments Christmas chooses his black heritage, "where life has already ceased before the heart stops and death is desire and fulfillment" (*Light in August* 496).¹² He chooses his victim status as "crouched behind that overturned table [he] let them shoot him to death, with that loaded and unfired pistol in his hand" (LIA 496).

¹⁰ The italics are Sartre's and the quotation is directly from Barnes' translation rather than from *Light in August*, since I wanted to be certain that I was looking through Sartre's own gaze, so to speak.

¹¹ See also Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death*: "[T]his conscience that looks death in the face is another name for freedom" (15).

¹² William Faulkner, *Light in August*. 1932. New York: Vintage, 1990. Hereafter cited in text as "LIA."

In his other aspect, Joe Christmas is also a violator. Sartre explains that both sadism and masochism are two sides of the same primitive, mistaken effort to relate to others:

Everything which may be said of me in my relations with the Other applies to him as well. While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me[...]Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others. (BN 475)

This resembles Hegel's famous and often quoted section in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* on the master/slave dialectic, the section Hegel calls "Lordship and Bondage." This primitive state in which two beings with conflicting needs confront each other to the death is often taken as evidence of Hegel's fascism. It is, though, only one moment in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, a moment which must be overcome by a developing consciousness: "[Man's] freedom is not to be found in any legendary state-of-nature, but evolves out of his effort to disassociate himself from his state of primal savagery" (Hegel 102). All efforts to assimilate the freedom of the Other are doomed to failure, yet they are the source of much violent behaviour of individual subjects. Such failure, both for victim and violator, is revealed by Faulkner's text. Deeper analysis of the character of Joe Christmas offers a more complete picture of the dialectic.

Joe Christmas is a man who is on a search for his identity, an identity which can only be revealed in the act of being, that is to say through consciously chosen action. Sowder argues, rightly, that any analysis of his character must begin "with the uncontested fact that Christmas was incapable of forming a satisfactory relationship

with any other human being" (41). As a result of Joe's own fragmented sense of self, he seeks to wrest from others what the self feels it is lacking. He vacillates between identifying himself as white, with all that entails in his environment, and identifying himself as black, with its negative consequences. His sense of himself is caught up in the object status given him by the Other. He is at one time called a "nigger bastard" by white children, and named a "white bastard" by a Negro man. The only constant in this identity is the pejorative term, "bastard." Christmas rejects both of these designations thrust upon him by others, albeit in different ways and with very distinct social implications.

The reader does not know the reality of Joe's heritage, and this says John L. Longley, is one of Faulkner's strokes of genius (166). It is not visible to the others he meets: "He dont look no more like a nigger than I do" says one of the deputies sent to track him down. The Negro yard boy tells him: "You'll live and you'll die, and you wont never know" (qtd. in Longley 167). He needs to know though, or at least "because he is free, he cannot let others tell him how or what to be" (Longley 167). Having tried to live in both roles, Christmas is finally enraged by Joanna Burden's insistence that he embrace the black struggle to live as white men live. He will insist on his right to be free simply by virtue of his existence or being.

Joe begins his efforts towards self-empowerment in his relationships with women. As he approaches a Negro prostitute, after the other boys have done so, his rage explodes in violence towards the "womanshenegro": "it seemed to him that he could see her--something prone, abject; her eyes perhaps" (LIA 172). Feeling, rather

than seeing her gaze, he must assert his own being the only way he feels able: through violent submission of the Other. Santoni explains Sartre's position: "To be human...any exploited native must be violent" (Santoni 50). On other occasions Joe seems to seek to surrender his own being to the Other, as a masochist does: "with something of the exaltation of his adopted father he sprang full and of his own accord into the stranger's fist [...] he just lay there with a profoundly contemplative expression, looking quietly up at the two men, and the blonde woman still as immobile and completely finished and surfaced as a cast statue" (LIA 240). This scene foreshadows Joe's passive acceptance of his own death, as he lies beneath the table with a gun that he refuses to shoot. The passive acceptance of pain also mirrors his relationship with his adopted father, and his stoic tolerance of the beatings received from him. He expected nothing more, but was threatened by "the woman: that soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever victim of and which he hated more than he did the hard and ruthless justice of men" (LIA 185-6). This soft feminine kindness he sees as a tool to take from him his own masculine identity, his only freedom: "She was trying to make me cry. Then she thinks that they would have had me" (Ibid).

Joanna Burden's kindness is perceived as a familiar threat and he needs to make her feel his masculine power. Raping her, he is angered by her masculine stoicism: "'My God,' he thought, 'it was like I was the woman and she was the man'" (LIA 258). When he returns to her house later, he is surprised to find the door is not locked:

When he found that it was not locked it was like an insult. It was as though some enemy upon whom he had wreaked his utmost of violence and contumely stood, unscathed and unscarred, and contemplated him with a musing and insufferable contempt (261).

“In fact, his victim's passivity appears to fuel Joe's rage because he needs to terrify Joanna, a white woman, to feel power” (Bush 121). Although she resists, it is with what he considers to be masculine rules of combat (LIA 259). What he cannot tolerate is for others to discover the control that Joanna, a white woman, maintains between them: “He would have died or murdered rather than have anyone, another man, learn what their relations had now become” (271). As the sexual relationship gains in intensity, Christmas fears the loss of his identity: “He began to be afraid. He could not have said of what. But he began to see himself as from a distance, like a man being sucked down into a bottomless morass” (285). Sartre's analysis reveals love as a non-violent attempt to appropriate the freedom of the Other; subjects such as Joe Christmas, who have a weak sense of self, are threatened and overwhelmed by even this innocent feeling.

Once he has decided to kill Joanna he does so with recklessness that reveals little concern for getting caught. In Sowder's words: “In pride he will act or in shame be acted upon, but either way the initial action is rooted in fear, fear that if he does not attack, the other will, fear that if he does attack, he will lose” (53). What Christmas fears to lose, I assert, is the basic freedom that comes with existence as a human being. Without it, there can be no subjective sense of identity. He seeks it throughout his tragic life, but in such a racist environment he has few ways to assert

it. Finally, as in childhood, he finds that the only way to express this existential freedom is by confronting and consciously choosing the fate that seems to pursue him. He murders, first his adopted father and then Joanna Burden, in an attempt to liberate himself from their attempts to define him, to dictate his identity. He finds, though, that this does not work; the ghosts of his victims still haunt him and his sense of alienation is increased. He sets out to meet his fate, to choose it as his own. Like any modern existential hero, Joe Christmas accepts the responsibility for the choices he has made. Only this final action, this final choice, gives him the freedom he has sought.

Sartre affirms that in certain circumstances the only freedom available is in the relinquishing of one's life. For the existentialist, one of the fundamental characteristics of the authentic man, termed *Dasein* by German existential philosopher Heidegger, is his acceptance of the ownership of his death. In his Heideggerian study of Richard Wright, *The Death-Bound-Subject*, Professor Abdul JanMohamed of the University of California argues "that it is precisely the slave's ability to 'actualize' his potential death that permits him to find the exit that leads to his freedom" (15). The choice that Joe Christmas makes leads the other characters to reason that he must, in fact, be a Negro. According to Jean Weisgerber, "Christmas has only the preposterous freedom of choosing his own defeat, a particle of freedom bent by the environment towards evil and death".¹³ His crime is to attempt, through

¹³ Jean Weisgerber's text, *Faulkner and Dostoevsky*, is an interesting study of the influence of the Russian existentialist writer on the ideology of Faulkner. (See especially

violent means, to regain the freedom which has been threatened on all sides since his birth. He must choose a death of either the spirit or of the body: to live in servitude or to die in freedom. This dreadful choice is one that appears often in novels of slavery and of racially determined violence, and one that provides a major motif for our next author, Richard Wright.

2.2 Richard Wright's Existentialism: Violent Self-Assertion

But if a selfish West hamstring the elite of Asia and Africa, distrusts their motives, a spirit of absolutism will rise in Asia and Africa and will provoke a spirit of counterabsolutism in the West. In case that happens, all will be lost. We shall all, Asia and Africa as well as Europe, be thrown back into an age of racial and religious wars, and the precious heritage, the freedom of speech, the secular state, the independent personality, the autonomy of science - which is not Western or Eastern, but human, will be snuffed out of the minds of men.

Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!*

Wright's relationships with the famous French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus are well documented.¹⁴ In fact Wright had already read the Germans Heidegger and Nietzsche, along with the Scandinavian Kierkegaard, before he was introduced to the French thinkers by Ralph

pp. 203-217 on *Light in August*) Trans. By Dean McWilliams. Athens: Ohio UP, 1968. Unlike my analysis, Weisgerber's view of Christmas has him steeped in determinism. This refuses the basic tenets of Sartrean existentialism: man always and everywhere exists in a terrible freedom.

¹⁴ Fabre gives an interesting account of the social and political connections between Sartre and Wright during this time. They collaborated on many different journals, committees, etc. for the anti-colonialist cause. Although certain writers, such as Jeffrey Atteberry, see *The Outsider* as a critique of Existentialism, this is not a position with which I agree.

Ellison. He developed a personal relationship with Sartre and de Beauvoir in Paris, a city which had become a center for American writers in the early part of the 20th century. The political issues that developed from Algeria's fight for independence from French colonialism, a cause that much occupied Sartre and Camus, created a milieu that African Americans found sympathetic to their own struggles against racism. Sartre was a literary force, as well as a political force. He wrote extensively on American writers such as Dos Passos, Hemingway and Faulkner. These 'new' writers had their reputations established in Europe before they became well known in the U.S.A. Jean-Francois Fourny, in the introduction to his edited collection, *Situating Sartre in Twentieth-Century Thought and Culture*, demonstrates this point: "In his conception of the novel and narrative structures, Sartre accorded a central role to the American novel, which he enthusiastically promoted in his critical and theoretical writings" (7). Literature, as defined by Sartre, is an action for which the political dimension is essentially paramount. In this also, his ideas were in sympathy with the African-American authors. Fabre asserts of Wright and Sartre that they represent "the confluence of two minds preoccupied with the same problems of human existence, freedom and responsibility, oppression and revolution" (47).

In his comprehensive and illuminating study of Wright's philosophy, *The Death-Bound-Subject*, JanMohamed asserts that Wright's literary works have the deployment of death as their constant subtext. Articulating this subtext, JanMohamed explores the existential choices open to slaves and blacks in the Jim Crow South. Wright's narratives consist of "a thorough archeology of what I will call the 'death-

bound-subject', that is of the subject who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death" (JanMohamed 2).¹⁵ Actual death, as a constant threat, induces terror in the subject and results in a social death whereby the subject is denied socio-political standing including protection from summary execution. Only by confronting the fear of actual death can the subject negate the social death and achieve some semblance of choice. This results in what JanMohamed refers to as symbolic-death: "a political and existential moment of sublation" that constitutes a revision of Hegel's "valorization of work as the singular avenue through which the slave can supposedly find his salvation" (JanMohamed 13).

The essential questions that Wright explores concern ways in which the constant threat of death permeates and affects every aspect of the individual's subjectivity. This threat did not end with abolition of slavery, for "the one feature that links the two periods [ante- and post-bellum] is the reliance of both societies on the threat of death and the systematic use of lynching to coerce subject populations" (JanMohamed 5). The progressive 'subjectivity' of African-American literary tradition extends from early, rather impersonal, slave narratives to the incredibly moving, first-person account given in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In this gradual shift, JanMohamed claims that Wright occupies an important median point (4). Wright

¹⁵ This book is an interesting perspective based primarily on Heidegger's *Being and Time*; its focus is *Dasein*'s (Heidegger's name for man) being-towards-death. He also gives import to Hegel's master/slave dialectic from *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. JanMohamed sees Wright as implicitly anti-Hegelian, having significantly revised Hegel's concept of work as the slave's route to salvation.

reflects a relation between the individual and his milieu in which that “subjectivity never feels authorized to be, to do, or to possess anything; it is a subjectivity that can never feel securely grounded in the myriad social, political, and cultural values, rules and procedures that ‘normal’ society takes for granted: *the bareness of bare life permeates its finest capillary structures*” (Emphasis in original, JanMohamed 10). Thus, we understand through Wright’s narratives that, even after the Emancipation Proclamation, the black subject still experiences the most direct threats to his freedom and to his very life. This is not, in any real way, a subject who is free *from* violence or free *to* realize his/her human potential.

The issue of freedom is, for the blacks in the narratives we are considering, closer to that of Sartre’s victim of the sadist. He can approach his freedom only in his confrontation with his own death, as a choice that the master cannot appropriate:

We can begin by saying that if freedom is the recognition of necessity, then the slave’s road to freedom lies through death, for the threat of death and the possibility of death together define the fundamental condition of the slave. The road to freedom is revealed precisely by the slave’s ability to recognize that while the master can appropriate the value of his labor and, by confining him to the realm of *social-death*, even the value of his *life*, the only thing that the master cannot appropriate is the use-value of his actual-death. (JanMohamed 18)

Actual death is the only available escape from the Other’s appropriation of his freedom; through it he negates the master’s power as exercised in social-death and exerts his freedom of choice. The death becomes voluntary, as we saw above with Joe Christmas: “they imply that they die with *a deliberate consciousness* of their action and, that thereby, their deaths are concretely affirming their freedom” (JanMohamed 19). Thus, as Joe

Christmas gazes at his murderers, he reveals to them a consciousness which still exists in opposition to their own.

Wright's 1953 novel, *The Outsider*, follows in the existential tradition of Albert Camus' *L'Etranger*, and like Camus, Wright's narrative considers the limits, possibilities, and consequences of human freedom. Beginning his work with the words of Soren Kierkegaard, Wright establishes his existential theme: the fear and dread that are part of the human experience of what Sartre calls a dreadful freedom. Feeling trapped by the choices he has made, central figure Cross Damon finds himself free to begin again when others are led to believe he has died. Cross finds that the new life he creates out of his struggle to be free is as terrifying as the previous one in which he felt trapped. He breaks all social laws of responsibility to others and becomes a murderer. When asked at the end of the narrative to explain his choices, Cross responds in the discourse of the existentialist:

"Damon, you were an outsider. You know what I mean. You lived apart...Damon tell me, why did you choose to live that way?" [...] I wanted to be free...to feel what I was worth...what living meant to me. (*The Outsider* 404)¹⁶

In pursuing his freedom, though, Cross flees from the responsibility that accompanies it; with no opportunity to develop a sense of self, Damon comprehends freedom only as freedom *from* external restraints. There is no well defined subject who is able to embrace a freedom *to* self actualize.

¹⁶ Richard Wright, *The Outsider*. New York: Harper, 1953. Hereafter cited in text as "TO."

The overt existential theme is “clearly predicated on Cross’ symbolic-death, but another part reveals that his symbolic-death opens up a tangle of repression that permits a deeply embedded death drive to manifest itself in the most gruesome way possible” (JanMohamed 175). This subtext allows the exploration by the author of the destructive powers of the death drive over the constructive life force. Cross Damon’s name unites the two opposing forces of good and evil: his mother names him Cross after the cross of Jesus. Damon, originating from the Greek *daimon*, can be aligned with the name of the satanic power, and Cross refers to “the demoniacal” in him (124). His friends refer to him, at the opening of the narrative, as “Mr. Death” (TO 2) and also as one who “feels like God” (7). Thus Cross, in his all-encompassing nature, is “human, all too human,” and he echoes those words of Kierkegaard with: “I’m simply too *damned* human” (TO 37). His existential subjectivity is revealed by his reading material: Kafka, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, etc. Ironically, these books reveal him to his hunter, as the philosophers reveal man in all his “fear and trembling.” From the opening of the novel, his life is “situated at the intersection of social-death and potential suicide [and] is circumscribed and entirely permeated by death” (JanMohamed 177). Confirming his manhood by calling on his willingness to die by his own hands, Cross manages to eke out an existence on the margins of society.

How does one reconcile the actions of Cross Damon with the tenets of philosophic existentialism, in particular with the existential concept of freedom? Beginning with a chapter named “Dread,” Damon establishes his Heideggerian being-towards-death, which was “conferred upon him in his childhood [and] staining

all the future that he was to embrace even to that lonely grave which he would some day have to fill alone" (TO 110). He resents the Roman Catholic priest he meets on the train because of the moral simplicity that Cross believes the priest's faith confers. Unlike the religious, including his mother, Damon's atheistic philosophy entails that he alone is responsible for his moral code:

Cross had to discover what was good or evil through his more exacting than own actions, which were the edicts of any God because it was he alone who had to bear the brunt of their consequences with a sense of absoluteness made intolerable by knowing that this life of his was all he had and would ever have. For him there was no grace or mercy if he failed. (114)

With this dread of his responsibility for his own life, Cross Damon flees from his own freedom and attempts to start anew, "responsible for nothing" (126). In existential terms, he is living in "bad faith."

The knowledge of his own existence, as essentially this freedom, pursues him into his new life. Man, he tells the white, hunch-back 'outsider' he meets on the train, "is nothing in particular" (125). It is this knowledge of his *becoming*, this task of creating himself in every moment, which man both *knows* and is *afraid* to acknowledge. The void at the center of being is man's nature; freedom is this nothingness to which man is condemned to give shape. In *Humanistic Existentialism: The Literature of Possibilities*, Hazel Barnes' insightful and illuminating study on Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, she addresses the existential human condition: "Man

is freedom, and freedom is a lack of being” (Barnes 41).¹⁷ Man *is* nothing, but he is always *about-to-be* whatever he chooses. Man’s nature is in his becoming, but this responsibility is accompanied by fear and dread. If, in his dread he refuses to face this realization, then he lives in what Sartre calls “mauvaise foi” or “bad faith.” This is a state of self-deception in which man refuses to accept the responsibility which is thrust upon him by virtue of his existence or being. “Bad faith is an evasion of man’s essential freedom” (Barnes 156).

Society is, within the parameters of existentialism, both the product of man’s freedom and the site for possible forms of alienation.¹⁸ As an outsider by virtue of his race, Wright’s Cross Damon suffers from social alienation, or what JanMohamed calls social-death. As such, his subjectivity is in revolt against any system or persons who try to enslave him. Gladys and Dot identify him primarily as father/provider/husband. His mother identifies him as son and husband substitute. Society acknowledges his lower working-class Negro identity. What Houston, the other outsider, realizes is that this social alienation forces the subject to confront the truth of his existence:

¹⁷ Hazel Barnes, the well-known English translator of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, addresses this issue with particular clarity in *The Literature of Possibility: A Study in Humanistic Existentialism*. The sudden awareness of this totality of freedom can, and in literature often does, result in negative effects. Barnes explains that “the immediate consequences of man’s discovery of himself as a free nihilating being are almost inevitably shattering - or at the very least, extremely depressing” (42).

¹⁸ In his article published in the journal *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, “Existentialism and Existentialisms”, Mikel Dufrenne of the University of Paris, explicates Sartre on this subject. For Sartre the main forms of social alienation are: “class or race struggle, colonialist oppression, and capitalistic ferocity” (61).

‘The negro *has* to know this [that man “is nothing in particular”]. How could he escape knowing it? He looks right at it every day of his life, every hour...’ Houston paused, smiled cynically. ‘All my life I’ve been haunted by the notion that this life we live is a pretense, and all the more deadly because it is a pretense. And woe to the man who dares to reveal that pretense! He is the criminal...’ He pulled deeply at his cigarette and laughed softly. ““Man’s nothing in particular””, he repeated Cross’s words. ‘I think you’re pretty close to something there.’ (125)

In his position in American society, which is essentially a non-position, the Negro is forced into social-death by the threat of actual death, which continues for the African-American long after slavery’s abolition.¹⁹ It is this coercion, however, that constitutes the very authenticity remarked upon by Houston. One demand made upon what JanMohamed refers to as the ‘death-bound-subject’ is the repression of his desire for a life full of possibilities (19). He is in the unenviable position of being caught between avoiding death and avoiding life; he exists in the shadows.²⁰ Cross expresses the desperation this half-life engenders: “Goddam! To swap the burden of this sorry consciousness for something else!” (TO 126).

¹⁹ JanMohamed writes that “there exists a powerful, if somewhat submerged, tradition within African American literature and culture that continually and systematically mediates on the effectivity of the threat of death as a mode of coercion” (3). The continuation of certain socio-political conditions of slavery, such as powerlessness, social-death, and lack of honor, indicate that “the effective practical, if not legal, continuation of slavery” still exist in the U.S. (5). Although Wright experienced certain sorts of freedom unavailable to his slave ancestors, “in spite of this relative freedom, he *felt* as if he were a slave” (6). In this way he constitutes a perfect “witness” to slavery, says JanMohamed, as “someone who is simultaneously within and outside the experience of slavery” (6).

²⁰This metaphor is more fully explored by Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, which will be discussed in a following section.

The existential truth regarding all our encounters with the Other is that such encounters are a necessary part of the dialectic of being. Joe Christmas realizes this truth as he tentatively begins to approach people at the conclusion of his lonely race from the murder scene. Correspondingly, Cross Damon also reaches such an epiphany; he cannot live in isolation. He must eventually re-enter the human community:

[H]e avoided looking into the faces of the passers-by, feeling instinctively that he did not have the right to do so. He was without a name, a past, a future; no promises or pledges bound him to those about him. He had to become human before he could mingle again with people. Yet he needed those people and could become human only with them. Dimly he realized that his dilemma, though personal, bore the mark of the general. (127)

Unfortunately for Damon, the person he approaches is so horrified by what she perceives in him that she makes the choice to die herself. "A person who came to the knowledge of himself through murder, Cross has no place in the human society" (Denissova 245). Exploring the limits of his freedom, Damon finds that nothing outside can restrain him if he does not learn self-restraint. This wish for external limits is the motivating force behind the anti-social behaviour of many criminals, as the D.A. Houston remarks early in the novel: "Most of them almost beg you to punish them. They would be lost without the law. The law's vengeance is what gives meaning to their lives" (TO 124). In the final pages of the narrative, Cross echoes this attitude; Houston informs him that his murders will go unprosecuted, and he must be his own judge, as he was his own law:

I'm alone, he said to himself. He felt dizzy. Terror wrapped him around in a sheet of flame and his body wept tears... The prop had gone; the world against which he had pitched his rebellion had pitied him, almost forgiven him[...] He had broken all his promises to the world

and the people in it, but he had never reckoned on that world turning on him and breaking its promise to him too! He was not to be punished! Men would not give meaning to what he had done! Society would not even look at it, recognize it! That was not fair, wasn't right, just...the ludicrous nature of his protest came to him and he smiled wryly at his own self-deception. (TO 396)

Damon realizes, in this moment, that he has refused the responsibility that freedom brings to live authentically; he has been living in "bad faith." For Damon, deprived of the social recognition essential to selfhood, violence becomes a distorted way to search for meaning in his life. The ultimate tragedy for him is that even in this goal he is thwarted. Human beings, Sartre tells us, are fundamentally identified with their actions. Refusal to punish Cross Damon for his actions is tantamount to a refusal to acknowledge his existence.

2.4 Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: Freedom as Recognition of Possibility

The struggle of the individual to realize and test his freedom could be named as the theme most common to Dostoevsky, Wright, and Ellison.

Lynch

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a quintessential existential work. As with Wright's *The Outsider*, this narrative incorporates the ideology of literary existentialism; Ellison's muse appears to be Dostoevsky in the novel, *Notes from Underground*. Almost in response to the lack of responsibility exhibited by Wright's anti-hero, Ellison has his character address this responsibility issue early in the narrative:

Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it,

it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you can't see me? (*Invisible Man* 16)²¹

What options does he have, he seems to suggest, but to rebel by way of anti-social behaviour? Given no socially approved identity, like Cross Damon he seeks acknowledgement from society in the form of social penalties. Like Wright's Damon, he finds that even his anti-social actions are often overlooked; he remains invisible. The question that arises for him concerns the degree of freedom available to one whose position in society is so marginalized as to be almost nonexistent.

"What once looked tame or apolitical in Ellison's work--his emphasis on identity, freedom, and the vast potential for diversity in American life--has come to seem more radical than the political criticism that rejected it; this too has become part of our revised view of the postwar years" (Dickstein 33).²² In his article on Ellison, Morris Dickstein argues that the narrative of *Invisible Man* was "far more personal than Wright's, more metaphysical, more concerned with individual identity, including sexual identity" (30). Ellison never disputed the depiction of the difficulties faced by black Americans that were central concerns of his mentor, Richard Wright. For his part, though, his interest was in a broader picture of American life than one of victimization and limited possibilities.

²¹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*. 1947. New York: Vintage, 1990. Hereafter cited in text as "IM."

²² In his article in *Raritan: A Quarterly Review*, Morris Dickstein explores the detailed criticisms that accused Ellison of being a traitor to the cause of black nationalism as espoused by his mentor, Wright. Perhaps Ellison was too well accepted by the conservative literary culture to please critics like Irving Howe. Ellison himself seemed undisturbed by this criticism, but Howe accuses Ellison of ending his only novel with a "sudden, unprepared and implausible assertion of unconditioned freedom" (Qtd. in Dickstein 31).

He aspired to write the great American novel and that involved a broader range of encounters than previously prevailed in African-American literature. The issue of freedom, says Dickstein, became the cornerstone of Ellison's opus and "of his radical rethinking of the role of race and culture in American life" (31). The message for African-American readers was one that encouraged self-reflection: "When I discover who I am, I'll be free" (IM 185). The narrative moves the invisible man through various roles, created by others, towards a holistic sense of identity that he creates for himself. In this way, the novel points towards a postmodern, anti-essentialist notion of identity (Dickstein 36).

Elements of universality, found in Ellison's novel, direct us to the European ideas of existential theory that grounded the work of his mentor, Wright, and are evident in *Invisible Man*. Freedom is a central motif for both authors, but Ellison has been criticized for what some see as an unrealistic portrayal of the American Negro's transcendence over racism and exploitation. His interest as an author is to present the development of the individual consciousness in the face of challenging external circumstances and this is an existential theme. "One objective of his writing was to point out how black Americans [...] found ways to exercise their liberty as people free by nature but constricted by racial discrimination" (Morel 68). The narrator of *Invisible Man* exclaims at the conclusion that his world "has become one of infinite possibilities" and he identifies this recognition with freedom (IM 576).

This is not to imply that Ellison was not concerned with racism and its effects. However, he saw the possibilities open to the victims of racism as a result of their

invisibility. They seemed less hindered than the dominant white race by the fears of looking foolish to others, since what they did was insignificant in the eyes of the prevailing culture. Consequently, they could experiment with music, dance, and language, getting to know their identities in ways that the whites never could. Michael Lynch, in *Creative Revolt*, asserts that *Invisible Man* “shows folk traditions and values as the key to blacks’ self-awareness and strength to overcome their environment” (69). What the invisible man discovers is how to make use of his cloak of invisibility to explore the possibilities inherent in his existential freedom. Unlike Cross Damon, who seeks to flee responsibility, Ellison “uses the word ‘responsibility’ quite often in *Invisible Man*, stressing it as the corollary of possibility and freedom” (Lynch 171). Ralph Ellison’s emphasis, in this text, on the responsibility of the individual for his own fate, for his own choices within his environment, is analogous to that of Sartre. Ellison’s close relationship with Wright makes it almost certain that he was made familiar with the ideas of French existentialism. Lynch quotes from an essay of Ellison’s:

The hero’s invisibility is not a matter of being seen, but a refusal to run the risk of his own humanity, which involves guilt. [...] It is what the hero refuses to do in each section which leads to further action. *He must assert and achieve his own humanity.* (171, italics mine)

With this narrative we begin to see a movement in African-American fiction towards the individual’s *freedom* to develop his talents and his personality; in short we see a development towards self-realization. Ellison criticizes Wright for developing black characters as primarily victims, having no possible release from entrapment except in death. However, one might argue that the more positive, humanistic narratives were only

made possible by the changing attitude towards civil rights for African Americans.²³

“Unlike the narrator of *Notes From Underground*, who remains stalled in his neurosis, the invisible man unifies his personality by choosing to accept the weight of freedom and the lightness of possibility” (Lynch 184). This is indeed a significant existential moment in African-American literature. “It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen” (IM 3). In Ellison’s narrative, says Todd Lieber, he elevates the condition of invisibility from a metaphor for the cultural and social situating of blacks in America, to a metaphor for all mankind (Lieber 100).

Hazel Barnes, in her major study on the implications of Sartre’s philosophy, *Humanistic Existentialism: The Literature of Possibility*, the original translator of *Being and Nothingness* relates the positive importance of the existential vision:

Because it presents to us a new picture of man, and because this picture is one which includes the view that man is free to determine future portraits of himself, the existentialist [position] is concerned above all else with pointing out to us what are the possibilities of man (37).

An understanding of these possibilities involves knowledge of the psychological and social, as well as the metaphysical, situations with which the subject is confronted.

²³ For more detailed description of the disagreement in artistic perspective and ideology, see Lynch’s *Creative Revolt: A Study of Wright, Ellison, and Dostoevsky*, Chapter Two. Also, as mentioned in the footnote above, Morris Dickstein discusses this issue in great detail in his article in *Raritan*. One who argues for Wright as an equally enlightened author is Todd M. Lieber in his *American Quarterly* article, “Ralph Ellison and the Metaphor of Invisibility in the Black Literary Tradition”. He persuasively demonstrates that Bigger Thomas, of *Native Son*, also explores the possibilities of “the power and freedom that lie within invisibility” (89). The difficulty with Wright’s characters is that they are only able to come to a sense of identity through anti-social, violent action.. They never reconcile the dichotomy between individual needs and those of the social group.

Nowhere does Sartre ever suggest that the sociopolitical aspects of life are irrelevant. He is, after all, well known as an anti-colonialist who supported the use of violence as one method by which the colonial subjects might gain political freedom. On this issue, and its relevance to Algerian independence, he engaged in a prolonged disagreement with his old friend Albert Camus. The philosophical discourse of *Being and Nothingness* is the discourse of the individual subject. His freedom, and the responsibility that goes with that freedom, constitute the major focus of that work. Man *is* freedom, in fact, and freedom is a lack of being. It is every man's task to define and give substance to that nothingness: "He must set himself apart from the totality of Being in order to assign significance to the particular Being which he confronts and to the relationship which he establishes with it" (Barnes 41). If he is to live an authentic existence, to be in good faith with himself, then he must be constantly about the process of defining himself and giving meaning to his existence.

Sartre's existentialism is an atheistic one, as are certainly that of Wright, and probably that of Ellison and Faulkner. In a god-free universe, man's particular way of being is always in flux and never guaranteed. As Houston says to Damon, in *The Outsider*, "You've made yourself your own law, so you'll be your own judge..." (TO 396). This is the origin of the aloneness that Cross experiences (397). Existential man has to recognize, in every moment, that he is nothing but what he makes himself with every choice. At the level of the subject, the being-for-itself (or consciousness) is responsible for his responses to the being-in-itself, which means to the given world that he confronts. Even as a prisoner, says Sartre, being-for-itself can choose to respond to the given

situation in a way that defines him. The life situations of the African-American characters in the novels chosen for analysis have political significance, but the exact nature of that significance is not directly addressed in *Being and Nothingness*, a text primarily concerned with the particular rather than the universal. What Sartre considers here is the freedom that defines man: the freedom to realize himself in every moment. The reality of the milieu in which one finds oneself, what Heidegger terms “throwness,” presents the experiences to which being-for-itself responds, thereby determining itself as free subject. As such, man is half in love with death, as the one certainty in his otherwise uncertain life.

It is the gaze of the Other that simultaneously threatens the freedom of the for-itself, and yet it is the mirror by which consciousness knows itself as subject. Invisibility is then a frightening thing, particularly for one whose sense of self is already threatened by racism. The narrator in Ellison’s novel responds with anger to this threat to his own existence, his own freedom as *being*:

It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then, too, you’re constantly being bumped against by those with poor vision. Or again, you often doubt *if you really exist*. You wonder whether you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It’s when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you’re a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it’s seldom successful.
(IM 3-4)

He describes a violent attack he makes on a man who bumps into him on the street, a man he almost kills in his outrage at the fact that he feels ignored. He stops himself from slitting the man's throat only when he realizes that the Other probably experiences him as a waking nightmare: "Would he have awakened at the point of death?" the invisible man wonders (5). Nevertheless, he reasons, "[m]ost of the time (although I do not choose to deny the violence of my days by ignoring it) I am not so overtly violent. I remember that I am invisible and walk softly so as not to disturb the sleeping ones" (5). He recognizes the inherent bad faith of those around him, and continues to fight surreptitiously so that he can "feel my vital aliveness" (7). Freedom is "a hard job, son," the old woman from his dream tells him (11). It lies not in hating, but in loving.

Sartre describes various ways in which consciousness as subject can deal with the threat to his freedom obviated by the gaze of the Other. One way, as explored in Sartre's analysis of Faulkner presented above, is by violence or by surrender to violence: masochism or sadism. In the masochist's case, the subject surrenders his freedom, while yet asserting it through his voluntary acceptance of death. The position of the sadist is to appropriate the Other's freedom by reducing him to *being-in-itself*, that is to say to a body as object for the sadist. For the masochist, the subject is objectified and may lose his own life. The sadist realizes his failure to appropriate the Other's freedom when that self as freedom is revealed in the victim's death gaze. One might define these positions as essentially hate motivated: the masochist is motivated by self-hate, and the sadist by hatred of the Other. In *Invisible Man* the protagonist, or the existential hero, spends the major part of the novel trying to live within the roles proscribed for him by Others.

Norton, Bledsoe, and the Brotherhood all attempt to impose some kind of identity on the hero. In this process he becomes for them an object; as long as he tries to please, to see himself mirrored in the gaze of the Other, his freedom as subject eludes him. Attempting to live according to the dictates of others, he cannot realize his true identity, and he feels lost in a world whose rules are unfamiliar to him:

My doubts grew. Perhaps all was not well. I remained in my room all the next day. I grew conscious that I was afraid; more afraid here in my room than I had ever been in the South.[...] In the evening I went out to a movie, a picture of frontier life with heroic Indian fighting and struggles against flood, storm and forest fire [...] I forgot myself (although there was no one like me taking part in the adventures) and left the dark room in a lighter mood. But that night I dreamed of my grandfather and awoke depressed. I walked out of the building with a queer feeling that I was playing a part in some scheme which I did not understand. (171)

Fearful of the responsibility of defining himself, Ellison's character accepts the identification given him by others, however absurd or demeaning it might be. In the early pages of the narrative, he describes the feeling that came over him as he listened to the music of Louis Armstrong, singing: "What did I do/ To be so black/ And blue?" The words filled him with fear, because "this familiar music had demanded action, the kind of which I was incapable, and yet had I lingered there beneath the surface I might have attempted to act" (IM 12). In spite of all his disillusionment the invisible man still has belief in the power of action, in the power of individual freedom. This is what makes this narrative a more hopeful one than either Faulkner or Wright conceived. The underground home of the character is, he tells us early on, a temporary state: "A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" (IM 13).

We are never told what actions the character has in mind, only that his isolation has a purpose: “Here, at least, I could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet” (571). His narrative has shown “me the hole I was in, if you will—and I reluctantly accepted the fact” (572). Accepting his own “facticity,” as Sartre terms it, he comes to understand that he is the creator of his own life:

You go along for years knowing something is wrong, then suddenly you discover that you’re as transparent as air. At first you tell yourself that it’s all a dirty joke, or that it’s due to the ‘political situation’. But deep down you come to suspect that you’re yourself to blame, and you stand naked and shivering before the millions of eyes who look through you unseeingly. That is the real soul sickness. (IM 575)

The basic ontological problem outlined in *Being and Nothingness* is this dilemma faced by all human beings.²⁴ “Alone, I can see myself as pure consciousness in a world of possible projects; the Other’s look makes me see myself as an object in another perception” (Davis 325). According to Davis, when the subject is confronted with this threat to his being, to his freedom as consciousness, the task becomes to absorb this other: to make the Other an object for the self. As the quotation from Sartre at the onset of this chapter states: by denying the humanity of the Other, I deny my own humanity. This is the complex nature of subject-object relations; being-for-itself both receives its freedom (as action potential) and has its freedom threatened by the presence of other beings. The

²⁴ This issue is clearly, if briefly explained by Cynthia A. Davis in her analysis in *Contemporary Literature*, “Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction”. She explores elements of Jean Paul Sartre in Morrison, and although she does not directly discuss Ellison, the pages devoted to Sartre have an admirable clarity about them. Her focus is primarily on the issue of “bad faith” and its relationship to racial identity in black characters from *The Bluest Eye* and *The Song of Solomon*.

resolution of this problem leads onward towards the freedom to pursue the endless possibilities of life, to go with Stephen Daedalus to “create the uncreated conscience of my race.”

The invisibility of the main character in Ellison’s novel is a metaphor for the marginalized and the dehumanized ‘outsiders’ in society.²⁵ Lieber describes Ellison’s contribution to this literary theme as a groundbreaking synthesis of two previous approaches. The first deals with invisibility as inherent and involuntary, resulting from society’s refusal to acknowledge the subject’s humanity. The second metaphor deals with the issue of mask-wearing; here the mask wearer consciously adopts a false identity to hide the true self underneath the mask:

Each of these metaphors has received full and complex treatment by black writers; in the dialogue centered about them, each has yielded a sense of both positive and negative potential; but in work prior to *Invisible Man* both metaphors have been essentially vehicles for an expression of anguish and despair. Ellison’s primary contribution lies in the recognition that mask-wearing and inherent invisibility are related aspects of the same problem. With this insight he is able to fuse these two approaches, which for the most part have been treated separately, into a new imaginative synthesis and move beyond despair to an affirmative resolution of the difficulties and paradoxes involved in being an ‘invisible man.’ (Lieber 59)

Richard Wright’s Cross Damon consciously chooses his invisibility by feigning his own death. He assumes various masks, but he is never certain of the identity which lies beneath them. He experiences himself as primitive consciousness--as freedom unfettered

²⁵ For an enlightening and comprehensive study of this motif, see the article by Todd Lieber mentioned in a previous footnote: “The Metaphor of Invisibility in the Black Literary Tradition.”

by relationships with the world around him. If Others do not see him, it is because he has chosen to hide his true identity. Their blindness to the truth about him is symbolic; the real difficulty is his own blindness to the truth about himself and about his need for relationships. Not until his death confronts him does he come to *see* reality about existence. In the impetus to grab his freedom, appropriating it by any means available—flight from his family, murders, etc.—he misunderstands the truth. His own humanity lies in recognizing the humanity and freedom in those around him. Lieber is correct in recognizing the advances made by Ellison’s narrator. His isolation has been a preparation to return to the world and participate in it with his new awareness. He does not have the “bad faith” of characters like Damon who ignore the truth central to existence. He loves light, he informs us in the early pages of the narrative, light “gives birth to my form. [...] Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one’s form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility” (IM 7). Light is symbolic, as it often is, of truth: “The truth is the light and the light is the truth” (7). The entire narrative is this search by the invisible man for the truth about himself and those around him, and part of this truth is the acceptance of his own responsibility: “I do not *choose* as I once did to deny the violence of my days by ignoring it” (italics mine, IM 5). He comes to embrace life, with all its unknown experiences, in a Joycean moment in the Epilogue:

So it is that now I denounce and defend, or feel prepared to defend. I condemn and affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no. I denounce because though implicated and partially responsible, I have been hurt to the point of abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility. And I defend because in spite of all I find that I love. In order to get some of it down I

have to love. I sell you no phony forgiveness, I'm a desperate man—but too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you approach it as much through love as through hate. So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love. (IM 580)

He goes forth, like Joyce, to take up the responsibility for giving form to the chaos, the nothingness of Being, not only for himself as individual but for his world “since there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (581). Of course it is only a beginning, but a more positive beginning than we have seen so far. It remains for the invisible man to decide what shape this life of his will take as he tries “belatedly to study the lesson of my own life” (572). His authentic existential awakening establishes the movement away from a life of “bad faith” and toward positive relationships with others. “Once we grant that the best life for man is a life in good faith, a life in which he does not hide from himself the reality of what he is, a life in which he will assume the responsibility of his freedom, then the fact that we both need others and recognize a duty toward them is inescapable” (Barnes 229).

2.5 Morrison’s *Beloved*: A Feminist Revisiting of Racial Oppression

“Memory believes before knowing remembers”
Light in August

In her article "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction," Cynthia A. Davis addresses the issue of invisibility in Morrison's narratives.²⁶ "The theme of invisibility is, of course, a common one in black American literature, but Morrison avoids the picture of the black person who is invisible in a white community by immersing "the reader in the black community; the white society's ignorance of that concrete, vivid, and diverse world is thus even more striking" (323). Blacks are visible to white culture only, Davis says, when they serve a particular need and fit a pattern of identity defined for them by whites. In this process they lose any sense of an individual identity; this is the innate invisibility that Todd Lieber elucidates. The issue is an existential one. As subject, each being comes to know himself through the gaze of the Other. As we have discussed previously, this encounter with the Other is at once a confirmation of one's existence as freedom and a threat to that freedom. "Alone, I can see myself as pure consciousness in a world of possible projects; the Other's look makes me see myself as an object in another perception"(Davis, 324-5). The tendency of some subjects to define themselves literally through the eyes of others is strengthened in inverse proportion to the sense of power in one's own identity. Like the invisible man on his journey towards enlightenment, the subjects who allow others to define them are living in Sartrean "bad faith."

²⁶ Although this article was written before Morrison published *Beloved* it is significant to the topic of existentialism and therefore demanded consideration in "Freedom Fighters". Davis criticizes the fact that Morrison has not created a strong female heroine at this point; one wonders how she might respond to *Beloved*, but no article could be found on the topic.

Some characters, and that would include all of the black characters we have so far considered, fall into bad faith “by internalizing the ‘Look’ of the majority culture” (Davis 325). As we are about to discuss a female protagonist, for the first time in this study, it is relevant to note that this is particularly true of female subjects, whose objectification in our culture has been well documented.²⁷ Characters, such as Morrison’s Sethe, that are black *and* female face particular challenges in any attempt to lead an authentic existence. One possible response to gain power is forbidden to them: they cannot even meet the eyes of the Other who threatens them with object status. Sartre explains this subject-object dialectic thus:

It may be that I choose at the moment of my upsurge into the world to look at the look of the Other (whereupon the look and its objectifying power disappear, leaving only the eyes) and to build my subjectivity on the collapse of the Other’s freedom (that is, therefore, on the Other-as-object). (quoted in Streller 43)

One common circumstance of black experience is the prohibition against staring directly at a white person. JanMohamed describes various cases where whites responded violently when a black “did not display the expected humble demeanor” (7). In fact, he states “that in the racialized relations between whites and blacks in the South nothing short of the absolutely *total* subservience of blacks was, in practice, demanded and, most important, policed by the threat of death” (7). Forced into subservience, it would seem that mask-wearing is the only alternative open to such subjects. Resolution of the subject-object

²⁷ This issue will be more fully discussed in a Chapter Five. Various authors have dealt with this as it applies to existentialist thought, including the famous French philosopher and friend of Sartre—Simone de Beauvoir.

conflict, in a mutual recognition of freedom, power, and need is not in the realm of possibility for these characters. How do they respond?

“Power relations can have a similar effect on the community as a whole” (Davis 327) as they do on the individuals within that community. The strength of the white ideology and of the white “Look” brings all blacks together in their objectification. Fredric Jameson, using the existential language of Sartre, explores this experience.

It is only when I feel myself become an object along with someone else under the look of such a “third” that I experience my being as a “we-object;” for then, in our mutual interdependency, in our shame and rage, our beings are somehow mingled in the eyes of the onlooker, for whom we are both somehow “the same”: two representatives of a class or a species, two anonymous types of something, two workers or intellectuals or Americans or whatever. Then my being is outside me, inextricably involved with that of my partner and his with mine, in that we share a common situation, face a common enemy, and submit to a mutual alienation or reification. (*Marxism and Form* 249)²⁸

In attempting to make the self more pleasing to the white gaze, some characters try to make themselves into whatever image they feel is expected of them. Davis explores this response in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*. Although strictly speaking these characters are in “bad faith” by defining themselves, as Davis says, through the eyes of others, I cannot agree that it is accurate or fair to assert that “they use others to escape their own responsibility to define themselves” (325).²⁹ When the dominant Other is

²⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1971. Hereafter cited in text as “MF.”

²⁹ Davis claims that Morrison’s novels are “full of characters who try to live up to an external image—Dick and Jane’s family, or cosmopolitan society, or big business. This conformity is not a disguise, but an attempt to gain power and control” (325). Attempting to live up to another’s image of you, when that Other holds the power of life and death over you, does not appear much of a choice. “Mauvaise foi” involves a

permitted, by society's laws and mores, to establish rules by which one must live, one lives by them or risks death. As JanMohamed persuasively argues in his chapter on "The Culture of Social Death," the processes of subject formation of African-Americans are constantly affected by the terror of reprisal. This applies whether one considers actual slaves or those in the post-emancipation era, where there exists "a fundamental continuity in the process of coercion" (JanMohamed 5). His understanding of what he refers to as "the death-bound-subject" has been greatly informed by the works of Morrison. He admits:

I would like to note that this tradition of African American *literary* meditation about the death-bound-subject evinces a fascinating transformation – from relatively "impersonal" meditations of the early slave narratives, such as those of Jacobs and Douglass, to progressively more "subjective" presentations of the fundamental experiences. This gradual shift, in which Wright occupies an important median point, reaches its climax generally in the work of Toni Morrison and most particularly in *Beloved*, which, by focusing so relentlessly and unsentimentally on an instance of infanticide that is fueled by undeniable maternal love, raises that aporetic structure of the death-bound-subject to its excruciatingly painful and profoundly illuminating climax. It is impossible for me not to read and understand the entire tradition retrospectively through the lens of *Beloved*, and I must confess that I would probably have been unable to understand and analyze Wright's archaeology of death quite in the way that I have without the retrospective illumination provided by *Beloved*. (4)

conscious refusal to face the truth of one's own existence. For some characters, such as Faulkner's Joe Christmas, living in good faith involves making the choice that freedom is more important than life. He voluntarily chooses death. Damon Cross also chooses death, although indirectly, and for the reason that he is unable to handle the responsibility that his freedom brings to him. Morrison's characters are, in general, less free—as females—than either Christmas, Cross, or the "invisible man".

It is not possible to explore the depth of JanMohamed's argument here, since it constitutes his entire work. In short, the position of the black³⁰ subject in a white dominated society is a complex one wherein the paradox of forced choice plays a substantial role in the process of subject formation. Participating in his own objectification, as he must under threat of death, this very participation asserts his own subjectivity. His coming to self-awareness, that is to say overcoming "bad faith," will be slow and painful, if it occurs at all. "In short, he will have to annihilate his old self and (re)form another one" (JanMohamed 22). Caught between despair and a desire for liberation, the black subject faces an intolerable position that leaves little room for choice. With Morrison's *Beloved* we can see how violent aggressive action in these situations can be seen as a form of working through resistance to this subjective process. The strength demanded of such subjects is poignantly suggested in these words of Wright: "*What quality of will must a Negro possess to live and die with dignity in a country that denied his humanity?*" (quoted in JanMohamed 34; emphasis by JanMohamed). Such a black character of strength and dignity is created by Toni Morrison in Sethe.

Davis recognizes that "[t]he temptation to Bad Faith is immensely greater in a society that forcibly assigns subject power, the power to look and define, to one person over another" (326). This temptation to deny the truths about past and present are acknowledged by Morrison herself. In an interview given to *Time* magazine in 1989, the author comments that slavery is "something that the characters [in *Beloved*] don't want to

³⁰ JanMohamed uses the terms black and slave interchangeably, since for his purposes in discussing subjective positions, they are analogous. See p. 5 for a complete explanation of this approach.

remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember" (Holden-Kirwam 120). Yet, she rewrites the black subject with this revisioning of the female slave's fight for freedom and dignity, for herself and for her children. In *Beloved* Sethe is forced to confront her horrific memories as well as those of her relatives: "While the end of slavery sought to transform objects (slaves) into subjects (free men and women), the characters in *Beloved* find the passage into subjectivity somewhat elusive" (Holden-Kirwam 416). This painful process, the search for the self, is the focus of Morrison's narrative. Having lived as a slave all her life, Baby Suggs has no sense of her identity as a mother, a daughter, a wife, or anything except an object belonging to her Master. Stripped of her identity as a mother, Sethe tries with ferocious intensity to hang onto whatever aspect of it she can grasp. Deprived of a relationship with her own mother, Sethe was denied the subjectivity of daughterhood. The absence of the mother's presence, of the mother's mirroring gaze, is destructive to the child's creation of identity. Lacan's mirror-stage affirms the significance of this to the development of the subject. As an adult, Sethe tries to assert her subjectivity through her own children, as a mother. She comes to realize, partially through the horrible scene of her lashing when they take her baby's milk from her breasts, that as a slave she has no rights as a mother. It is for the children that Sethe seeks her freedom, and for her right to identify herself as their mother. When she kills her child rather than see her taken into slavery, she simultaneously asserts her freedom as maternal subject and her child's freedom as offspring subject.

JanMohamed explains the text's infanticide as "the reflective subject's desire for freedom from his historical, determinate psychopolitical formation as a subject" (221). For Sethe the threat to her children's freedom is simultaneously a threat to her subject status as maternal protector, to the part of her she sees as "her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing" (*Beloved* 251).³¹ As she tries to persuade Beloved that killing the baby was an act of love, she recalls the scene where Schoolteacher is inculcating in his students the belief that blacks are more animal than human. This belief, supported by the works of various Enlightenment philosophers, made it possible for whites to rationalize their treatment of blacks, despite the ideals of liberty and equality for all.³² Sethe will not allow her children, or herself, to lose the hard won subject position:

And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no. Maybe Baby Suggs could worry about it, live with the likelihood of it; Sethe had refused—and refused still. (B 251)

Her struggles to begin to see herself as a human subject will not be in vain, she determines. The process allows her to love her children in a new way: "Looks like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love" (B 162). The killing of her child presents itself as the only way to prevent their return to object status: "I couldn't let all that go back to

³¹ Toni Morrison. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987. Hereafter cited in text as "B."

³² Cyrus R.K. Patell, a Professor at New York University, deals extensively with this topic in his informative work, *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology*. He quotes from Morrison that slavery is the "anodyne of individualism" (84). "If individualism is the product of the Enlightenment, then for Morrison it is also the product of what she calls the Enlightenment's 'twin, born at the same time, the Age of Scientific Racism'" (84).

where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out" (B 163). She chooses freedom for herself and her children; making the choice for them that they are not able to make for themselves. She makes a tentative move forward towards her own being when Paul D. tells her at the end of the narrative: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." She responds with a query full of incredulity, but touched with the stirrings of hope: "Me? Me?" (273).

2.6 Writing Identity

In his seminal work, *What Else But Love: The Ordeal of Race in Faulkner and Morrison*, Philip Weinstein asks the following valuable question: "What light does the [literary] practice of the white male Faulkner and the black female Morrison shed upon their culture's ways of understanding self and others" (157). He answers this question primarily from an aesthetic perspective, but the query itself raises issues which the theme of "Freedom Fighters" can address. One can hardly disagree with Weinstein's rather transparent claim that each novelist offers us a relational truth.³³ Occupying different times and different spaces, as well as different racial experiences, they come from opposing perspectives. Yet Morrison has acknowledged her debt to Faulkner in a way that neither Wright nor Ellison was able to do. She

³³ Weinstein's analysis of the two authors and their selected works is informed by Kantian ideology based upon Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. The Kantian concern is with the justification of an aesthetic claim; the appeal needs to be a universal one and at the level of form. This discussion, while philosophically interesting in itself, has little bearing on the intent of this thesis; it does raise some interesting questions, however.

wrote her doctoral thesis on the white writer who expressed the dilemma of African-Americans so eloquently that Jean-Paul Sartre chose Faulkner's words to illuminate his own philosophy of appropriated freedom. As *Light in August* reveals to the reader, subjects are defined in part by events they do not remember. Joe Christmas never becomes fully aware of the early events that shaped his personality and his responses to life events. Called a "little nigger bastard" by the dietitian at the orphanage and by other children, neither he nor we, as readers, ever know if he *is*, in fact, black. Accepting this view of himself, based on the gaze of the Other, Joe becomes exactly this by the conclusion of the narrative. He embraces this identity, in the way in which blacks in that society are forced to accept this outside determination. His freedom comes only from accepting it willingly and voluntarily approaching his own death.

Not until Morrison, JanMohamed points out, is the black slave given true subject position in a narrative. Early slave narratives are too impersonal, he argues. No white person could provide that insight, not even Faulkner. I agree with him up to a point, but I would affirm that Ellison's *Invisible Man* marks the fictional development of the black self-identified subject. Can such a subject, born with only object status, be free in the existential sense of the word? Is he/she in "bad faith," as Davis claims, due to the willingness to accept the Other's definition of himself as object? Answering these questions involves a consideration of Sartre's later work - the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. As critical theorist Fredric Jameson suggests, in *Marxism and Form*, most misinterpretations of Sartre's philosophy proceed from a

failure to see the *Critique* as a logical development from previous work. There is no contradiction between early and later works Jameson asserts:

It is clear, however, that [...] it will not logically be possible to describe the *Critique* as a radical break with the position of *Being and Nothingness*. The fact is that in genuinely Sartrean fashion the new book has changed the old; *Being and Nothingness* can no longer be read in the same way after its appearance. The idea of logical inconsistencies between the two positions is a static one: it is more satisfactory to think that the *Critique* comes to complete *Being and Nothingness* in certain basic areas where it remained abstract or insufficiently developed; and this act of completion, lifting all the problems onto a higher dialectical plane, ends by utterly transforming the very appearance of the earlier system. (209)

Jameson's commentary invites us to reconsider the concept of choice for the African-American characters under discussion. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* is essentially concerned with the subject rather than with his interaction in the community. The *Critique* concerns itself with "the collectives in and through which our individual lives are pursued" (MF 209). Sartre is laying the groundwork for the existential analysis which he promised at the end of *Being and Nothingness*, combining Freudian and Marxist ideas with his own existential philosophy. What appear to be class (or racial) conflicts, he confirms, will eventually be translated into the individual's psychological reality. "Clearly, the child is vitally absorbed in last year's social conflicts; *his choice of self in the present takes place on the basis of the realities of the previous generation, namely that of his parents*" (MF 219; italics are mine).

Clearly, then, the ability of the black individual to come to subjectivity is informed by the experiences of a racially determined childhood. Deprived of parents who know themselves as subjects, the process of coming to know oneself as

freedom, in the *existential* sense, must be virtually impossible. Sethe observes to herself, having escaped from slavery: "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (B 95). Although it is true that the Other can *limit* one's experience of one's freedom in his definition of "me" as object, Sartre discusses the result of this situation in different terms.

We must recognize that we have just encountered a *real* limit to our freedom—that is a way of being which is imposed on us without our freedom being its foundation. Still it is necessary to understand this: The limit imposed does not come from the *action* of others. In a preceding chapter we observed that even torture does not dispossess us of our freedom; when we give in we do so *freely*. In a more general way the encounter with a prohibition in my path [...] loses its peculiar force of compulsion only within the limits of my own choice and according to whether under any circumstances I prefer life to death or whether, on the contrary, I judge that in certain particular cases death is preferable to certain kinds of life, etc. (BN 672)

The limit on the choices available to the individual makes the pursuit of freedom difficult, and probably violent, but not insurmountable. From Sartre's perspective the most violent action would be that of the white racists, and readers of the narratives discussed in this chapter will surely agree.³⁴

Sartre's discourse on colonialism provides us with an opening to further consider his position on racism. Ronald Santoni, respected philosopher and Sartre scholar, offers

³⁴ For a comprehensive analysis of Sartre's position on racism, colonialism, etc., see Aron's *History and the Dialectic of Violence*. Aron, who had been a fellow student with Sartre at *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, explores the philosopher's Marxism and discusses the various attacks on his position as represented in *Being and Nothingness*.

enlightenment on this subject in his evaluation of *Critique I* and its chapter on “Racism and Colonialism.”³⁵

Given his [Sartre’s] profound sympathy for the oppressed, alienated, and disadvantaged, and his intense lifelong commitment—ontologically and politically—to human freedom, it is hardly surprising that he would, in certain circumstances, ‘endorse’ [...] revolutionary movements that aim to dislodge oppressors and undo oppression, even if their activities suppress the freedom of capitalist, colonialist, bourgeois oppressors. (Santoni 167)

It was this attitude expressed toward the Algerian War of Independence, as previously mentioned, which caused the rift between Sartre and his friend Camus. The rationalization and self-justification of the oppressors, evinced by the pseudo-scientific dehumanization of the Africans, ensure that they are, in Sartre’s terms, in “bad faith.” When the Other refuses to acknowledge you as subject, there can be no valid form of reasonable communication. This involves a mutual respect for the freedom of the Other. Without this, both self and Other are objectified and dehumanized. Within this situation, violence may be one of the few choices available to the self who endeavors to assert himself as subject. The other possible choice is love. It was love that Joe Christmas sought but never found. It is love which Cross Damon came close to finding at the end of his life. It is love towards which the invisible man turns out of sheer desperation. This love Paul D. longs for, as he recalls the words of the dead Sixo: “She is a friend of my mind. She gathers me, man. The pieces that I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It’s good you know when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind” (B 273).

³⁵ Santoni’s Book, *Sartre and Violence: Curiously Ambivalent*, is at present the only comprehensive work on the subject.

Morrison's *Beloved* differs significantly from the other texts discussed here. Critics offer various perspectives on this variation, and since the novel is a complex one, there is surely some element of truth in each interpretation. For the purposes of the present thesis, though, what seems strikingly significant is the motif of love that runs through the novel and endows it with its title. The ghost that haunts the text is the fragmented subject, at once daughter and mother, dead and yet alive, past and present, and loving and angry all simultaneously. The narrative opens with the famous words of the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, words which speak of unification between people who hitherto were adversaries.

I will call them my people,
which were not my people;
and her beloved,
which was not beloved.

Romans 9:25

This suggests that the text which follows will be one of redemption and unity.

Nicole Coonradt, in an insightful article based on the character of the white indentured servant, Amy Denver, carefully explores the relationship between Sethe and Amy. On her escape from Sweet Home, Sethe hides as she perceives what she thinks is a white boy approaching. This boy is in fact Amy, a servant girl who has experienced many of the same abuses as has Sethe, and is also attempting to escape her cruel existence.³⁶

³⁶ Coondart explains that such servitude was abolished with the same Amendment with which slavery was abolished, revealing the analogous lack of freedom each girl shared.

Amy saves the life of Sethe and that of her unborn baby, whom Sethe names Denver, after her Good Samaritan. It is this relationship with a caring white person which allows for some lessening of the hatred naturally engendered by the treatment at the hands of Schoolteacher and his men. Coonradt reminds us that Amy, from the French “Aimee,” also means Beloved. Her kindness and her humanity enable Sethe to remain alive in spirit as well as in body:

It was the voice full of velvet and Boston and good things to eat that urged her along and made her think that maybe she wasn't, after all, just a crawling graveyard for a six-month baby's last hours. (B 34)

Sethe later affirms to Paul D: “When I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to” (162). Amazingly, she has escaped with her ability to love still intact. Surely, this symbolizes the future integration, and eventual healing, of the subject. When being-for-itself seeks to know itself as freedom through the Other, and yet without violence, love is the medium.

Nicole Coonradt offers this timely quote from Morrison:

Actually, I think, all the time that I write, I'm writing about love or its absence. Although I don't start out that way... But I think that I still write about the same thing, which is how people relate to one another and miss it or hang on to it...or are tenacious about love. (4)

Love is the theme, then, that provides Morrison's *Beloved* with a character-subject who is engaged in the healing process. There is revealed a possibility of a bridge between the races, a connection based on the recognition of the Other's freedom and humanity. It will be difficult, painful, and fraught with violence; “[a]nything dead coming back to life hurts” (B 35). In Denver's words, this is a truth for all times.

The question posed by Weinstein and quoted at the opening of this section, asks what Morrison can teach about the African-American search for identity. One central lesson is that often asserted by Sartre: when one refuses to accept the humanity of the Other, one dehumanizes oneself as well. Respect for, and recognition of the freedom of the Other is central to experiencing such freedom in the self. Morrison's Amy Denver stands as a white person who teaches Sethe that such recognition of humanity, across the races, is possible. Seeing her humanity, reflected in Amy, Sethe rejects Schoolteacher's identification of her as an animal. She embraces herself as subject, as mother, and accepts her "terrible freedom" to choose for her "crawling already? baby." With her "too thick" love, she affirms her child's right, as human being-for-itself, to be free from enslavement.

Every individual is always more than his/her history, for in existential terms the subject exists as a "becoming." Human conflict is defined by the dialectical struggle between the concepts of fraternity and violence. The hard won liberty of the African-American race, the right to be free *from* slavery, instantiates the essential nature of human freedom and brotherhood. Without the conscious awareness of such freedom, man is, in the words of Rousseau, "everywhere in chains." More insidious threats to human freedom have arisen in the last century, threats that are all the more dangerous because they frequently go unrecognized as such. It is to these new chains that my thesis now directs itself.

Chapter Three

Corporate Raiders: Violence on Wall Street

It is the violence of the majority's need that is the rich man's necessity for counter-violence.

Santoni

In a capitalistic economy dominated by multinational corporations where the profit is supreme, where decentralized decision-making diffuses responsibility, where the quest for economic success and security are managerial imperatives, and where a company engineer or corporate manager is more absorbed by the constraints of carrying out his or her specific tasks than by the probable results of those tasks, evil takes on a certain banality.

Hills

3.1 Freedom *from* Consumer Capitalism

To turn from fictional representations of the horrific violence perpetrated against African Americans and begin to speak of a less corporeal violence seems almost irreverent. Yet there is a very different sort of violent behavior that itself engenders physical rage and ferocity. In her article on the incorporeal aspects of violence, the philosopher Eleanor Kaufman briefly draws attention to "the abstract and less overtly corporeal violence of a state or a multinational class that dominates those who are less powerful" (14). In Kaufman's view, the two manifestations of violence are analogous to distinctions drawn by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison System*. Foucault expands on these dissimilarities as different mechanisms of organizing power. The sovereign power over the life and death of subjects, held by the old monarchs, might be compared to the direct forms of violence described in the texts considered in the

foregoing chapter. The modern disciplinary structures, such as prisons and schools, can be compared to the more indirect, although no less violent, control exerted by the consumer culture of late capitalism.

Consumerism is so entrenched in our society that we rarely reflect on its consequences. We know that the capitalist system requires consumers to purchase the items that seem indefatigably produced, we laugh at the advertisers' efforts to stimulate our acquisitiveness, yet rarely do we consider the effects on ourselves as individuals or on our social systems. Were a survey done to inquire into the root cause of violent crime in North American society, most responses would point a finger at the poverty among racial minorities. Sue McGregor's article, "Consumerism as a Source of Structural Violence", pinpoints consumerism itself as the source of much of the violence in America. When the identity of self as subject depends on the ability to purchase 'things', what happens to the freedom so integral to man's existence? What is created by the system is a new form of slavery—*slaves of the market*. How does one escape from this form of slavery?

When one speaks of the need for the liberation of a group of people, the general assumption is that the group in question consists of the working classes, the downtrodden, racial minorities, or some other underclass. Famous philosopher from the Frankfurt School, Hebert Marcuse, addresses the need for liberation from "a relatively well-functioning, rich, powerful society" (Marcuse 264). Such a society, taking the U.S. as the model, is characterized by the "apparently inseparable unity...of productivity and destruction, of satisfaction of needs and repression, *of liberty within a system of servitude*" (Marcuse 268; italics are mine). Such servitude in the face of the *possibilities*

of freedom, says Marcuse, “activates and intensifies in this society a *primary aggressiveness* to a degree, I think, *hitherto unknown in history*” (Marcuse, 268; italics are mine). Considering the increase in almost anonymous violence, such as we see in school shootings, perhaps the time has come to reconsider some of the warnings made by Marcuse and others.

In his comprehensive and often quoted critique of American capitalism, *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch considers the cultural consequences of subjects who determine themselves not only by the Other’s gaze, but by possession of things. “His apparent freedom from family ties and institutional constraints does not free him to stand alone or to glory in his individuality. On the contrary, it contributes to his insecurity, which he can overcome only by seeing his ‘grandiose self’ reflected in the attentions of others, or by attaching himself to those who radiate celebrity, power, and charisma” (Lasch 10). Furthermore, says Lasch, this insecurity and its repression lead to individuals who are outwardly “bland” and sociable but who “seethe with an inner anger” for which there are few outlets. Denial and rationalization are rampant, and psychiatry, at least as presently practiced in North America, offers people any number of excuses for their asocial behaviour.

From Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* to E. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* writers have portrayed the evils of capitalist consumerism in their narratives. The characters of these novels possess a restlessness, and an acquisitiveness, that results in death and in the destruction of ideals. Novels of the late 20th century reveal the changing culture of what Jameson calls “late capitalism.” Characters are still acquisitive, in fact

ever more so, but the restlessness has been replaced by alienation, anxiety, and ennui. Death becomes a central motif in these "blank fictions," a term I borrow from James Annesley. Such texts concern themselves chiefly with violence, inter-textual mass-cultural references, and with meaningless sex.³⁷ The postmodern moment often appears devoid of a humanizing moment.

American consumer culture has constructed commercial desire not as an index of "real" consumer needs but as a dynamic produced by commercial institutions bent on reproducing capital. Contrary to original assumptions, commercial advertising didn't generate the freedom of choice typically ascribed to American capitalism - it precisely foreclosed it. The advent of commercial culture, Lasch argues, denied "the American people access to insight into other ways of organizing and conceiving life, insight that might have endowed their consent to the dominant culture (if such consent were given at all) with real democracy" (xv). Cultural critics of the Frankfurt School, such as Marcuse and Adorno, were open critics of the commodity form.³⁸ The artificial needs created by the commodities market are never satisfied and result in a cynicism and discontent with the culture. We see the literary result in the "blank fictions" of the day; we see the social

³⁷ For an interesting discussion of the central self-absorbed themes of late 20th century fiction, see James Annesley's *Blank Fictions: Culture and the Contemporary American Novel*.

³⁸ Shane Gunster offers an inclusive exploration of the critical theory of Culture Studies in his seminal work: *Capitalizing on Culture*. Acknowledging the profound influence of commodity forms on all contemporary forms of culture, this book offers a particular focus on the ideology of Adorno, issues of political economy and "the evolving relationship between culture and capitalism".

result in the aimless, destructive violence that has become a regular part of contemporary existence in America.

Neurotic repression through repetition does not always succeed in completely managing the rage, frustration, and disappointment aroused by the broken promises of the culture industry and capitalism itself. [...] Horkheimer, Adorno, and Benjamin are fond of citing the tortures of Tantalus and Sisyphus as reborn in a never-ending circle by which desire is invoked by capitalism only to be denied. When the rage and frustration inspired by this contradiction break through the barriers erected by the repetition compulsion, they are redirected away from that which causes them toward more helpless targets. (Gunster 61)

The subject, “lost in the funhouse,” seeks outlets in the form of socially directed anger, frequently in some act of socially accepted prejudice, or through individual acts of violence.

3.2 Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities*: A Tale of Two Cities

The “banality of evil” phrase, referenced above, originates with philosopher Hannah Arendt and is chillingly portrayed by the ‘anti-hero’ of Bret Easton Ellis’ controversial novel, *American Psycho*. It is heralded, though, by Tom Wolfe’s capitalist hero in *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Each narrative presents a character firmly ensconced in the upper echelons of the corporate world, each of them “working” on New York’s Wall Street. Here the god of profit is worshipped above all others and humanity is buried under his sacrificial ashes. Although willing to believe almost anything about senior executives in the financial world, most readers find the extremes of these characters are only partially credible. Yet a perusal of real-life situations in the world of high finance reveals how realistic these narratives actually are. In his book *Corporate Violence: Injury and*

Death for Profit, Stuart Hills asserts that senior positions in corporate America seem to demand what Hills refers to as “non-demanding moral codes”(194). The same forces that generate pressure to achieve profit by *any* means create individuals who are immune to the normal considerations of humanity, who have no empathy or conscience - who are in fact psychopaths. As one auto executive claimed, as he explained his refusal to use safety glass to reduce injuries: “We are not a charitable institution...we are trying to make a profit for our stockholders” (191).

Bonfire of the Vanities is a novel about the fact that “[p]rosperity and freedom can lead, in the same moment that it [sic]shines this brilliant light, to tremendous excesses and to extreme forms of individualism, one form being vanity” (Wolfe “Interview with Moyers” 274). Identifying this moment as a relatively benign form of money fever, novelist Tom Wolfe himself seems to be unaware of the corruption and inherent danger that his novel reveals. During an interview with Wolfe, Bill Moyers argues with the author on this issue: “But it’s more than vanity, and it’s more than money. It’s utter amorality that pervades that picture of New York” (275). Wolfe responds that “there is no corruption in the broad sense of people being bribed”; Moyers tartly reacts: “That’s the old fashioned kind [of corruption].” One cannot help but sense that the reality portrayed in the novel is more clearly understood by the reviewer than by the novelist. However, the novel speaks - even shouts - its message of capitalist corruption, with or without the author’s awareness. Wolfe set out to write a novel of *realism* in the manner of Emile Zola or Henry Miller, a sort of documentary of life in America’s New York City during the 1980s. He seems to channel the reality without grasping its implications.

This narrative is what Liam Kennedy refers to as “a novel of urban decline.”³⁹ “In the 1980s and 1990s the discourse of urban decline has served to focus anxieties about the dissolution of the national culture, about citizenship and about race relations” (Kennedy 4). Also of major concern is the fate of the white individual, besieged by crime, violence, delinquency, etc. associated with the urban ghettos. “Applied to the underclass, the metaphor of urban decline associates spatial deprivation and decay with the pathological separateness of black ghetto poverty” (Kennedy 5). It is, Kennedy suggests, a new form of ‘spatial apartheid’ obsessed with social security systems and other boundaries to keep the Other out. The dominant feeling of subject-subject encounters is one of fear; the response is to avoid contact, producing increasing isolation. Early in *Bonfire of the Vanities* we see this attitude in Sherman McCoy, as he walks to a phone booth at night to call his mistress:

All at once Sherman was aware of a figure approaching him on the sidewalk, in the wet black shadows of the town houses and the trees. Even from fifty feet away, in the darkness, he could tell. It was that *deep worry that lives in the base of the skull of every resident of Park Avenue south of Ninety-sixth Street—a black youth, tall, rangy, wearing white sneakers.* (*Bonfire of the Vanities* 17; italics are mine)⁴⁰

³⁹ Kennedy’s important sociological study of racial issues in American cities, *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture*, is useful for anyone wishing to understand this complex issue. Its focus is on the creation of identities-individual, social, and national. It explores “the ways in which changed subjectivities are being articulated in literary and cultural texts, themselves subject to change.” Although my main interest lies with a section in Chapter 1, “‘It’s the Third World Down There’: *The Bonfire of the Vanities*,” the entire text informs my understanding of the issues.

⁴⁰ Thomas Wolfe, *Bonfire of the Vanities*. New York: Farrer, Straus, and Giroux, 1989. Hereafter cited in text as “BV.”

Nevertheless, McCoy thinks aggressively to himself that it is, after all, *his* territory. This defensive aggression defines the events that take place in the narrative. Through these intersubjective encounters, the characters' identities are constructed and revealed. One aspect of Sherman's identity, in contrast to the literary characters of the previous chapter, is that of whiteness.

"Drawing attention to 'whiteness' in narrative representation has become a common interest in literary, film, and cultural studies in recent years"; this 'whiteness' "functions as the invisible norm of dominant cultural values and assumptions while concealing its dependency on racialised others" (Kennedy 17). As Sartre remarked in a discussion concerning prejudice, "If the Jew did not exist, the anti-semite would have to invent him" (Barnes 66). The determination of white Americans to view African Americans as Other persists after the abolition of slavery, and even after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The perspective of existentialism accuses such a prejudiced subject of living in "bad faith," which is essentially a refusal to recognize the truths of one's own existence. Such a subject, says Sartre, is seeking for some final and absolute justification for his existence; there is none, of course, and this engenders fear and rage. This fear is projected onto the Other:

He is afraid of himself, or more accurately he is afraid to face the fact that he does not have a self in any final sense but that he is a limitless freedom which is constantly making a self. This endless pursuit of a self with which he can never quite coincide is too much for him. Moreover, he is afraid of the truth, not of any particular truth, but of the very nature of truth, 'an indefinite approximation.' (Barnes 69)

Unable to accept the responsibility for his own self-identity, the racist seeks for some immovable sign of his superior identity, something that is permanently his without effort. For many of the white characters considered in my thesis, the colour of their skin becomes this defining, unalterable mark of the self's superiority.

Wolfe, says Kennedy, constructs not a realist novel of New York's urban totality, but "a narrative of two cities - represented by the black Bronx and white Wall Street/Park Avenue—and focalizes all the action through the consciousness of white protagonists" (22). The novel begins with the speech of the white Mayor of the city to the black Harlem audience. As they begin to heckle him, the Mayor becomes increasingly panicked and allows his bodyguards to lead him off the stage. He thinks angrily of all the whites who depend on him to keep them safe:

Do you really think this is your city any longer? Open your eyes! The greatest city of the twentieth century! Do you think money will keep it yours? Come down from your swell co-ops, you general partners and merger lawyers. It's the Third World down there! (BV 7)

Everyone else is expecting him to hold off the barbarians at the gate.

The white elite are the central subjects of this narrative, as they are with most of Wolfe's writings - fiction and non-fiction. Central to the novel is the conflict between wealthy white Americans and what Joshua Masters in "Race and the Infernal City" refers to as "the increasingly racialized Other" (209). The focus on whiteness as a threatened minority is personified by Sherman McCoy, the "beleaguered white male" who must resist the onslaught of the minority races, identified by the racial stereotypes that signify the system such as Weiss, the Jew, and Bacon, the black. Threatened by the "Other," the

Third World that is the city, Sherman eventually becomes the savage Other “appropriating the savage’s brutish violent behaviour and embracing the law of the ‘Jungle’” (Masters 223). Perceiving himself as persecuted and oppressed, Sherman changes from a liberal who gives the Black Panther salute at the beginning of his trial, to a new white warrior taking up the fight “to reclaim his ‘birthright’ from the ‘ungodly’ hordes” (Ibid).

Such a narrative, while pronouncing the supposed end of white urban dominance, may pronounce, as Masters fears, the advent of a new order of violent white response to these threats from the “barbarian hordes.” The presentation of a white male as a fragile and besieged identity, as Sherman appears in Wolfe’s novel, is the inversion of the black male’s literary presence as terminally threatened subject. Little has been written about this aspect of racial construction, and my present work can do no more than acknowledge its existence and point to its significance. “The critical study of whiteness and white privilege is a relatively new phenomenon, stemming largely from the emergence and development of critical race theory” (Brown 3).⁴¹ Liam Kennedy, in recognizing Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities* as a novel of urban decline in America, asserts that the narrative holds whiteness to function “as the invisible norm of dominant cultural values and assumptions while concealing its dependency upon racialised others;” it is both everything and nothing (17). Kennedy sees the paranoia that is revealed in American

⁴¹ Although a thorough discussion on whiteness as a constructed concept is beyond the scope of this thesis, a study is available in *The Literature of Immigration and Racial Formation: Becoming White, Becoming Other, Becoming American in the Late Progressive Era*, by Linda Joyce Brown. New York: Routledge. 2004.

novels of urban decline as representative of the breakdown, in Freudian terms, of subject-object boundaries. He explores this theme through the spacial trope, whereas I consider the breakdown of boundaries as the impetus that threatens individual freedom, resulting in a corresponding need to appropriate the freedom of the Other. Consumerism contributes to this fragmentation.

In his article, "Tom Wolfe: Material Boy," Richard Cooper Rand sums up Wolfe's opus in these words:

No other writer-living or dead-can touch Wolfe on his subject. What his characters wear, what they drive (or wish they drove), where they went to school (or didn't), how much they earn (and why it's never enough), their beer of choice, music of choice, living room furniture of choice: he engages the hermeneutics of status with the crazed comprehensiveness of an idiot savant (or a Ph.D. from Yale). So too the narcissism, megalomania, and general churning anxiety that comprise the personal pathology of status. (13)

Tom Wolfe, Rand reports, is not really interested in complexities; he does not "write the whole person." In this he is definitely a forerunner of the postmodern novel, where everything exists on the surface and the subject is fragmented.

The shallowness of the postmodern subject might partially result from the loss of any sense of shared identity with the past. Walter Benn Michaels, in *The Shape of the Signifier*, outlines the difference between two novels, Morrison's *Beloved* and Ellis' *American Psycho*; the distinction he explores is centered on the relationship between generations. Michaels maintains that in the former narrative, identity is transferred from one generation to another, whereas in *American Psycho* the only inheritance is one of property rather than a sense of generational identity. Michaels' remarks can be extrapolated to include Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Sherman McCoy inherits, along

with money, merely a sense of entitlement; he is “as imperious as his daddy” (BV 10). What is not transmitted, in Ellis or Wolfe, is the sense of a shared and significant past such as Morrison’s Denver receives from her mother Sethe’s stories of slavery. Ellis, one is led to suspect, is following in Wolfe’s shadow: pursuing the subject to the extreme fragmentation wherein he no longer exists as an identity at all.⁴² Wolfe’s Sherman exhibits an obsession with status, with his own superiority, and with his inalienable right to his own narcissistic morality. Contemplating the moral dilemma of having both a mistress and a wife, he thinks to himself “that I, a Master of the Universe, a young man still in the season of the rising sap, deserve more from time to time, when the spirit moves me” (BV 13). He exists in a world of signifiers; the origin of a new narrative begins to make its appearance. This style is heralded in Walter Benn Michaels’ description of Ellis’s *American Psycho*:

It’s this interest in money and class rather than culture and race that establishes *American Psycho* as the novel of manners (rather than mores) it declares itself [...] what people interested in these questions belong to is a class instead of a culture—what brings them together is their money. (Michaels 150)

The threat to these capitalist characters, like Sherman McCoy and Patrick Bateman, lies in the scarcity around them and the conformity required of them. Tony Stigliano expounds on this position: “Violence is pervasive, for Sartre,

⁴² In an interview with Jaime Clarke, Bret Easton Ellis discusses his literary influences at length. A prodigious reader, he does not cite Wolfe as one of those he has particularly admired. Nevertheless, my thesis suggests various unmistakable similarities between *Bonfire of the Vanities* and *American Psycho*.

because it is characteristic of the process by which individuals spontaneously organize themselves in the face of scarcity or threat” (53).

Bonfire of the Vanities, similarly to *American Psycho*, is replete with all the consumerism one might expect from a story focused on a wealthy stock-broker on Wall Street. We are treated to frequent and extensive descriptions of clothes, of furniture, and of the physical attributes of different characters. Sherman thinks of his father as having “a manly chin, a big round chin such as Yale men used to have in those drawings by Gibson and Leyendecker, an aristocratic chin, if you want to know what Sherman thought. He was a Yale man himself” (BV 11). He describes his wife coldly, while rationalizing his affair with a younger woman:

But the smile on her face was obviously genuine, altogether pleasant... a lovely smile, in fact...*Still a very good-looking woman, my wife...*with her fine thin features, her big clear blue eyes, her rich brown hair...*But she's forty years old!*...No getting around it...Today *good-looking*...Tomorrow they'll be talking about what a *handsome* woman she is...Not her fault...*But not mine either!* (BV 10).

His apartment has “twelve-foot ceilings...two wings, one for the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who own the place and one for the help.” It is, he knows, the sort of place “the mere thought of which ignites flames of greed and covetousness under people all over New York and, for that matter, all over the world” (BV 10). Surrounded by scarcity, by the “third world down there,” Sherman senses that his privileged position is decidedly threatened. It is a hunt-or-be-hunted existence, as he sees it, and he does not intend to lose.

The title of this narrative, *Bonfire of the Vanities*, offers insight into the author's vision for his work. It is informed by the edict pronounced by the prophet Savonarola during the Renaissance. Savonarola of Florence was a prophet of doom and repentance. Disgusted by the decadence which the residents of Florence exhibited, he ordered the destruction by fire of personal adornments considered signs of *vanity*, signs which he believed to reflect the decadence of the times. From this choice of title, Joshua Masters infers that Wolfe's "novel shares a similar prophetic vision of the city, one capable of illuminating the corruption and decay of contemporary American values, beliefs and practices" (209). However, Wolfe's novel offers no redemption, claims Masters, but rather illuminates the triumph of the apocalyptic city. In Savonarola's Florence the people repent and willingly sacrifice their adornments to the bonfire, whereas Wolfe's city is set aflame by jealousy from without and greed from within. Class domination is depicted by the prophet of Florence as a form of vampirism, wherein the corpulent bodies of the wealthy feed on the blood of the poor. In *Bonfire* the fear of being devoured, expressed by the paranoia of McCoy, masks the actual desire to devour the Other. In the end Sherman is himself devoured by the system, a powerful commentary on the capitalistic system which feeds on its own. Made into a sacrificial offering to the "barbarian hordes," he finds that "[t]here's no such thing as loyalty on Wall Street...I don't exist at Pierce and Pierce anymore" (BV 550). He realizes that his sense of self has been determined by the "gaze" of the Other and by the objects which he owns. In a discussion with his lawyer, he attempts to explain the sense of loss that results when all that he has taken for granted is suddenly stripped away from him: "It's damned sobering how fast it goes when it goes"

(BV 550). Without the status that defined him, people he assumed were friends will no longer respond to his calls:

I can't explain the feeling. All I can tell you is that I'm already dead, or the Sherman McCoy of the McCoy family and Yale and Park Avenue and Wall Street is dead. Your *self*—I don't know how to explain it, but if, God forbid, anything like this ever happens to you, you'll know what I mean. Your *self*...is *other people*, all the people you're tied to, and it's only a thread. (BV 551)

In the capitalist system, one misstep can lead to a fall that results in being trampled by the herd of opportunists racing for their piece of the urban pie. As Sherman McCoy finds, it is too easy to be consumed by the fires ignited by oneself.

Masters sees no redemption in this novel. On the contrary, for him, the message is one that evokes white supremacy. He draws our attention to Sherman's violence at the end of the narrative, when he has accepted that all is lost and joins in the brutish behaviour of the underclass. No longer fearful of the Other, he now openly confronts him: "Sherman sought out their faces, as if to obliterate them with his very eyes" (BV 685). His gaze now threatens the freedom of the Other. Masters remarks that this is the most dangerous message of the novel:

Sherman, The Great White Defendant rising phoenix-like from the ashes of the smouldering city, evokes a similar longing for a "new order" of stronger, fiercer white males willing to accept the urban apocalypse as a utopian field of battle. Thus while the novel announces the end to an era of "white" supremacy, it also marks the beginning of a new urban struggle, sure to be just as terrifying as the last. (Masters 224)

Masters might well be right. In the next novel that centers on a stocks-and-bonds trader in New York City, the main character is not on the defensive, but on the attack.

3.3 Ellis's *American Psycho*: New Notes from Underground

Sexuality and violence, in life and in literature, have themselves become a significant part of the cultural system, as commodified as any other source of capital. Contemporary novelists like Bret Easton Ellis incorporate into their work the violent sexuality that surrounds them. The controversial novel by Ellis, *American Psycho*, created quite an unusual furor on its initial release. Despite two previous successful novels, Ellis' publishers (Simon & Schuster) canceled this third work on the eve of its release in 1990, due to corporate pressure. Organizations such as the National Organization of Women demanded a general boycott of the novel following its eventual release by Knopf in 1991. After publication there were continued calls for censorship, sometimes accompanied by a demand for the author's castration. As one might expect, keeping in mind the dictum that no publicity is bad publicity, such responses simply increased the book's desirability as a trendy consumer item, its hyper-violence making it so much grist for the corporate mill. I argue, with others such as Alex E. Blazer, that our society must assume some responsibility for the appearance, textually or otherwise, of a character such as the novel's anti-hero. In this chapter I explore both the capitalist critique and the existential position put forth in *American Psycho*. Ellis' epigraph from Dostoevsky explains the novel as an effort "to clarify the reasons why he appeared and was bound to appear in our midst" (AP 3). The first section will consider the issue of psychopathy in today's society and its

implications for Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*. Inherent in this consideration is the novel's critique of consumer culture in late capitalism. The final section considers the philosophy of existentialism and its dominating role in this piece of fiction. My thesis is that, far from being a gratuitous collection of sadistic pornography, Ellis' novel contains powerful observations regarding a social system that can spawn such a violent, narcissistic character. As Jean-Paul Sartre has observed there are "no witnesses to violence, only participants" (Santoni 39). Reactions from readers of this novel imply that they do indeed feel implicated in the violence as presented in the text. This must be reason enough to grant Ellis' work more than the cursory condemnation it has generally received in the critical literature.

3.4 Psychopaths, the Real and Hyperreal

Serial killers have long fascinated the North American reading/viewing public. Ellis's central character and narrator is named Patrick *Bateman*, an obvious allusion to the infamous Norman *Bates* of the Hitchcock classic, *Psycho*. Norman is a psychotic who functions normally on the surface, and might unknowingly be your neighbour. Patrick Bateman (bait-man) is a serial killer who might, unbeknownst to you, be your yuppie stockbroker. These works reveal the advancement of 'psycho' portrayals from the management of a small family Inn (*Psycho*) to managing millions of dollars on Wall Street (*American Psycho*). He's come a long way, baby! Other variations between these works include the detail that the *psych* in psycho no longer stands for psychotic: the new buzzword is psychopath. There are no Freudian suggestions of an oedipal fixation, no

mother issues for our new psycho. We are never given any obvious explanation as to why Bateman feels the need to kill. In a world made all too familiar with psychopathic killers via the media - recall the recent BTK horrors - we accept that this is simply what psychopaths do. Psychiatry is still struggling to understand the predisposing factors that may contribute to the development of such monstrous persons, while ruefully admitting that there is no form of treatment known to alter their personalities.

One contributing factor, which cannot be ignored, is consumerism. In an article on *American Psycho* and postmodern thought, Alex E. Blazer suggests that “[o]ur obsession with consumerism is psychologically fatal; underneath the narcissist lies...the sociopath.” Where in society are the most intransigent narcissists certain to be found? The foremost specialist on psychopaths knows. Dr. Robert Hare from Vancouver B.C. is the author of *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us*. He half-jokingly claims that, had he not been able to study psychopathy in the penal system, the Vancouver Stock Exchange would have been his second choice. Quite a few white-collar criminals are psychopathic, says Hare. Since psychopaths love chaos and hate rules they are naturally comfortable in the fast-moving world of the modern corporation:

[T]hey flourish because the characteristics that define the disorder are actually valued [in the corporate environment]. When they get caught, what happens? A slap on the wrist, a six-month ban from trading, and don't give us the \$100 million back. I've always looked at white-collar crime as being as bad [as other crime]. (Hare 222)

Hare defines psychopathy as “a socially devastating disorder defined by a constellation of affective, interpersonal, and behavioural characteristics, including egocentricity; impulsivity; irresponsibility; shallow emotions; lack of empathy, guilt, or remorse;

pathological lying; manipulateness; and the persistent violation of social norms and expectations” (188). Of the cluster of distinctive personality traits described as psychopathic, the one most often in the foreground of forensic psychiatric discussion is an utter lack of conscience. In today’s cynical world, we expect very little in the way of ethics from lawyers, politicians, or especially businessmen, often with good reason. We have been shown repeatedly that ‘looking out for number one’ is often the prevailing professional goal; profit margins have replaced any humanistic concerns on the Wall Streets of the Western World. “In a capitalistic economy dominated by multinational corporations where the profit is supreme, where decentralized decision-making diffuses responsibility, where the quest for economic success and security are managerial imperatives, and where a company engineer or corporate manager is more absorbed by the constraints of carrying out his or her specific tasks than by the probable results of those tasks, evil takes on a certain *banality*” (Hills 8).

This dullness is chillingly obvious in Ellis’ anti-hero. Much of the novel’s discourse is presented in a tone expressing *boredom* with even the most horrifying events. During a particularly brutal murder Patrick says:

I can already tell that it’s going to be a characteristically useless, senseless death, but then I’m used to the horror. (*American Psycho* 329)⁴³

Bateman and his acquaintances pride themselves on their imperviousness to shock. When people ask Patrick what he wants to do while out on the town he responds with some disgustingly vile and violent fantasy; “Well, yeah, but besides that,” they quip (AP 313).

⁴³ Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1991. Hereafter cited in text as “AP.”

Responding to his girlfriend's whining query as to why she could not come to his place the previous evening, Bateman yawns and says, "Because your neighbor's head was in my freezer" (118). Even the beauty of the natural world cannot reach Patrick: "I keep studying her face, bored by how beautiful it is..." (125). Nothing registers. No one listens. No one cares. No one seems to be there at all. No wonder that our narrator feels himself invisible. He exists in a postmodern world of images, slipping and sliding across a sea of signifiers (Blazer 98). He spends the novel alternately drowning in this sea of signifiers, of television talk shows, clothing stores and porn videos, and fighting in his own desperate way to swim to the surface.

This banality and lack of affect is typical of the psychopathic personality, and such personalities are typical of our consumer culture. Some sociologists believe that such behaviour is the only sane response to a sick society. Various forces within contemporary society contribute to an increase in the aggressive or destructive instinct to the detriment of the creative, life affirming instinct. One such influence is the dehumanization of the processes of production and consumption; the interests of the capital machine absorb the needs of the individual. Any sense of meaningful individuality is lost, a blatant theme in *American Psycho*. Patrick and his peer group all dress essentially the same, wearing designer labels, fashion salon haircuts and trendy eyeglasses (non-prescription, worn only for effect):

Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam...and it seems a logical faux pas since Marcus works at P&P also, in fact does the same exact thing I do, and he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses and we share the same barber at the same place, the Pierre Hotel,

so it seems understandable; it doesn't irk me. (AP 89)

They go to the same tanning places and exercise gyms, all based on the dictates of the world of media fashion. Fundamentally, they themselves are interchangeable mannequins of the corporate world, and with slapstick absurdity they are constantly being mistaken for each other. In a climactic final scene Patrick confronts his lawyer and demands to know if he has listened to the message Patrick left on his machine, during which he confessed to many murders. Ironically, the lawyer thinks the phone call was a joke, thinks Bateman is either Davis or Donaldson, and claims that he had dinner last week with one of Patrick's supposed victims. After a brief argument Patrick retreats in defeat:

After we stare at each other for what seems like a minute, I finally have the nerve to say something back to him, but my voice lacks any authority and I'm not sure if I believe myself when I tell him, simply, "No, you...didn't." But it comes out a question, not a statement. 'Now Donaldson,' Carnes says, removing my hand from his arm. 'If you'll excuse me'". (388).

Despite his extreme efforts through violent crime to assert himself in the face of anonymity, he remains unseen, his existential anxiety as overwhelming as ever.

Postmodern thinkers such as Baudrillard suggest that the distinction between the real and the unreal is rapidly disappearing in contemporary society. For Bateman this sense of unreality haunts him, permeating even his confession. One question often raised about the novel is whether Patrick actually committed any murders. The central point, of course, is that *he does not know either!* "“Sometimes, Jean,’ I explain, “the lines separating appearance-what you see-and reality-what you don’t-become, well, blurred’” (378). He

spends much of the novel absorbed in the effort to establish some sense of distinction between the two; the effort is doomed to fail. The murders themselves, real or unreal, are attempts to force his way into some form of reality, a desperate kick at the darkness that engulfs him.

Underscoring this blurring of reality's boundaries, this confusion of signifier and signified, the novel's characters are constantly checking themselves out in mirrors and attempting to assert some individuality, with no apparent success. Patrick and his 'girlfriend' discuss Price, someone that he suspects might be her lover:

'Why don't you just go for Price?' ...
'He's rich,' I say
'*Everybody's* rich', she says, concentrating on the TV screen.
'He's good-looking,' I tell her.
'*Everybody's* good looking, Patrick,' she says remotely.
'He has a great body,' I say.
'*Everybody* has a great body now,' she says (AP 23).

In the ultimate triumph of the unreal, Patrick is unable to consummate sex with Evelyn and eventually masturbates alone, fantasizing about a Calvin Klein model.

The crimes in the novel, alleges James Annesley, are those for which "an increasingly commercial and materialistic society must take the ultimate responsibility" (Qtd. in Bilton 209). Much of the text reads like a Saks catalogue, taken up as it is with descriptions of clothes, music tapes, and other accoutrements of the yuppie lifestyle. Patrick Bateman is the ultimate consumer who lives in a world where all excesses are indulged. In a drugged haze, he and his 'friends' elegantly slouch from one expensive restaurant or bar to another, looking bored and carelessly spending money as they go. The only emotional reactions are elicited by failed dinner reservations, unavailable cocaine, or

being bested by a peer. Surrounded by poverty in the streets, they remain unmoved. Price cruelly asks a beggar if he takes American Express, and walks away whistling “If I Were a Rich Man” (AP 7). The power that money gives them permits a certain freedom from restraint; for Bateman this license becomes expressed in vicious murders. Like an out-of-control aggressive adolescent, our anti-hero continually pushes the social limits, often shocked when no one cares enough to stop his killing spree. Returning to the apartment where he has disposed of three bodies, he finds a real estate agent, aptly named Mrs. Wolfe, who refuses to acknowledge that anything has happened there. Patrick is confused and lost:

All frontiers, if there had been any, seem suddenly detachable and have been removed.... This is not a game, I want to shout, but I can't catch my breath although I don't think she can tell...I turn my face away. I need rest. I don't know what to say. 'Don't make any trouble', she says quietly. (AP 370)

Our narrator makes bizarre obscene phone calls that underscore the merger of sex and capitalism: “‘I'm a corporate raider,’ I whisper lasciviously into the phone” (206). Ellis consistently juxtaposes these supposed polarities of the criminal and the business world. When asked his occupation, Bateman, instead of responding with “mergers and acquisitions” as his co-workers do, replies “murders and executions” (206). His audience is either totally nonplussed or completely indifferent. Even his obscene phone calls often fail to shock. As he whispers to yet another young girl that he is a “corporate raider...,” the response he receives is disappointing. “‘I orchestrate hostile takeovers. What do you think of that?’ ...Most of the time I could tell they were frightened and this pleased me

greatly ...until one of the girls asked, unfazed, 'Dad, is that you?' and whatever enthusiasm I had built up plummeted" (206). The violence of Wall Street has become merely mundane, even familial. One can almost hear Patrick scream: What do you have to do around here to get a reaction?

Despite the boredom and the lack of affect, Patrick is not without the form of suffering common to all protagonists of existential novels. Alienated and frightened he cries out to us from the depths of his existential hell, "a world where innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were *things*, emotions that no one really felt anymore...*evil is its only permanence*" (AP 375; italics are mine). As the novel opens, Ellis' epigraph offers a quotation from Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, emphasizing his text's philosophical theme:

Nevertheless, such persons as the composer of these *Notes* not only exist in our society, but indeed must exist, considering the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed...this personage describes himself and his views and attempts, as it were, to clarify the reasons why he appeared and, was bound to appear in our midst. (AP 1)

Like Dostoevsky's underground anti-hero, Ellis presents one who is buried alive, who is also imprisoned although the prison walls are gilded. Dostoevsky has his protagonist assert that man has lost touch with the natural world and lives in his world of ideas, no longer able to tell "where this 'real life' lives nowadays..." (*Notes from the Underground* 91).⁴⁴ Patrick is drowning in a world of signifiers, or in Plato's ideology, at the third

⁴⁴ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes From Underground*. Translated by Michael Katz. New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 1989. Hereafter cited in text as "NFU."

remove from reality. His connections, such as they are, must be mediated through television talk shows, videos, or horrific acts of violence. Unlike some other literary anti-heroes, both Dostoevsky and Ellis present characters that do not represent an oppressed class, but rather they offer us educated intelligent men. Each possesses some degree of self-knowledge; each reflects on his situation. Patrick Bateman realizes what he is: your classic psychopath:

Patrick is not a cynic, Timothy. He's the boy next door, aren't you honey?
No I'm not, I whisper to myself. I'm a fucking evil psychopath. (AP 20)

What makes him tick? Self-interest only. The saddest song he knows is "You Can't Always Get What You Want." Underneath this obsession with material possessions, though, is a void: "I feel empty, hardly there at all" (AP 300). Unlike Sherman McCoy in *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Patrick Bateman does not lose his possessions, nor does he go to jail for all his crimes. His conscience is not his punishment as it is for Cross Damon in *The Outsider*. He has no unique identifying traits, such as a Yale man, husband, etc. There is no gaze of the Other to define him. Like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, he is transparent; no one really sees him at all. He does not lose himself, because he has no sense of self to lose.

3.5 Existential Angst: Underground Man

American Psycho is a novel that presents its existential themes very directly. It is framed by Dostoevsky in the epigraph and existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre in the conclusion. The epigraph invites us immediately to draw an analogy between Patrick

Bateman and other classic existential heroes. The “underground man” of Dostoevsky is desperately seeking some attention and acknowledgement of his existence. Like Bateman, he recognizes his own moral depravity: “I am a sick man...I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man” (NFU 3). He too, wallows in his narcissism: “Now, then, what can a decent man talk about with the greatest pleasure? Answer: about himself” (NFU 5). “I slavishly worshipped convention in all external things”, he informs us (NFU 31). His literal prison is symbolic of the imprisonment of man’s psyche, his lack of freedom. His response to this lack, albeit on a much smaller scale than that perpetrated in *American Psycho*, is to intrude himself onto his environment with cruelty. So removed from reality are we, maintains this protagonist, that “we’re all cripples, everyone of us, more or less. We’ve become so estranged that at times we feel some kind of revulsion for genuine ‘real life’, and therefore can’t bear to be reminded of it” (NFU 91). No one will wish to read his *Notes* due to their unpleasant impression, he feels, and because they prefer not to engage with reality (91). It is rather startling how relevant these words remain for the existential novel of today. Problems of alienation, lack of freedom, and the resulting need to strike out with violence: all are recognized by the Russian author.

At the end of Ellis’s novel, in response to a questioned “Why” that seemingly relates to nothing, Bateman reiterates this position on life as he sees it:

Well, though I know I should have done that instead of not doing it, I’m twenty-seven for Christ sakes, and this is how life presents itself in a bar or in a club in New York, maybe anywhere, at the end of the century and how people, you know me, behave, and this is what being Patrick means to me...so, well, yup, uh....[sigh, shrug, another sigh].
(AP 399)

We are then directed to the sign in red block letters above a door that simply states: THIS IS NOT AN EXIT. The allusion to one of Sartre's most famous plays, *No Exit*, is obvious. For Patrick, or for the *anyman* that he represents, there is no escape from being Patrick in this self-defining moment. One of the most famous lines from *No Exit* warns that "Hell is other people." Patrick is trapped inside his own individual hell by his inability to have meaningful communication with other people. Bateman reveals this location from the opening lines of the novel: "'Abandon hope all ye who enter here' is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank..." (AP 3). Reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's epigraph at the beginning of "The Wasteland," Ellis also has his character call to us from the depths of his hell. No one can be reached; no one actually listens, even when he confesses to multiple murders. Buses displaying advertisements for *Les Misérables* continually flash before the dead, uncaring eyes of the characters. Meanwhile, in the real world of the heartless city, the homeless beggars are abused, tormented and killed: they are the true miserable ones. Their pleas for help also fall on deaf ears; no one is paying attention:

"My life is a living hell," I mention off the cuff..."And there are many more people I, uh, want to ...want to, well I guess **murder**," I say this emphasizing the last word, staring straight into Armstrong's face... Armstrong is still eating, cutting into the perfectly square slices of calf's liver, and he keeps talking while I become increasingly mournful. (AP 141)

Bateman's attempts to shock others out of their self-absorption become ever more outrageously absurd. Towards the novel's conclusion he tells his fiancée, over a wedding-planning lunch, that he wants to bring an AK-47 assault rifle to the wedding:

“Or an AR-15. You’d like it Evelyn: it’s the most expensive of guns, but worth every penny.” I wink at her. But she’s still talking; she doesn’t hear a word; nothing registers...*My essence is eluding her.* (AP 124; italics are mine)

Ellis presents us with an individual who is as invisible as Ellison’s narrator in *Invisible Man*. In the narcissistic world that Bateman inhabits, it is each man for himself. The epigraph offers yet another quote, this time from the *Talking Heads*, that speaks of social chaos and destruction. It echoes “The Second Coming” by Yeats:

And as things fell apart
Nobody paid much attention. (AP 1)

In *The Culture of Narcissism* Lasch addresses the effect that this powerlessness has on the individual:

When it finally occurs to the new Narcissus that he can ‘live not only without fame but without self, live and die without ever having had one’s fellows conscious of the microscopic space one occupies on this planet’ he experiences this discovery not merely as a disappointment but as a shattering blow to his sense of selfhood. (22)

Threats to our sense of selfhood are as visceral, as biologically determined in the response elicited, as are physical threats. Violence in the face of such a threat is one possible, and not at all unlikely, response. Patrick Bateman is enraged by this sense of powerlessness and externalizes this rage, using people as things to be overpowered, as capitalism has taught him.

Interposed throughout the work are various other existential references. Bateman sends a box of flies to the girlfriend he has abandoned, and frequently makes reference to buzzing sounds around his head. Here again we have an obvious allusion to another existential play of Sartre, *The Flies*; this drama itself harks back to the ancient Greek

tragedies and the Furies that followed the tragic hero as punishment for indiscretions. In Patrick's world, though, there is no external punishment. "My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. *In fact I want my pain to be inflicted on others*" (AP 377; italics are mine). When Patrick stops to purportedly 'help' a young girl holding out a coffee cup, assuming that she is begging, she berates him for ruining her coffee; he notices that she is reading a book by Sartre. The presence of such pervasive existential references demands an existential reading of the text that goes deeper than surface discourse on alienation and angst.

So what, one may wish to ask, does existentialism suggest apart from the conditions of anxiety, fear, dread and yawning voids? Many contemporary critics argue for a new understanding of philosophical existentialism, which has suffered neglect in recent years. No longer considered trendy, its potential for enriching the understanding of contemporary literature has gone largely untapped. As a critical response to the contemporary situation, its philosophic approach might allow for the possible transformation of that very situation. Sartre himself saw the tremendous capacity for change that might be wrought by literature. Both his works of fiction and of literary criticism aim to "empower readers to act and to extend the limits of human freedom" (Lancaster 53). The philosophic concept of freedom, as understood by existentialists, can illuminate the current need for violence, both real and mediated.

Bateman is *preoccupied* with freedom, although he has little belief in it. As he and his fiancée make a toast, she asks: "To what [should we drink]?" "Freedom?" I ask tiredly." Sartre first drew a connection between violence and the pursuit of freedom in the

philosophic work *Being and Nothingness*. As discussed in Chapter one, Sartre affirms that human existence and human freedom are simultaneous. I begin to see myself as Object, rather than Subject, when I encounter the Other; his look transforms me into the Object of his gaze. My possibilities now become limited by the Other's regard and I am enslaved by the Other's freedom: "the objectifying look of the Other...causes me to experience the freedom of the Other" (BN 270-1). In attempting to recover my own freedom, my individual possibilities, the fundamental project is to absorb the Other. There are two ways in which I can attempt to break his hold on me. The central and authentic mode is through love and empathy wherein, by identifying with the Other's freedom as the foundation for my own, I am impelled to treat him with respect. We saw the stirrings of this in Morrison's *Beloved*. This option is not open to the psychopaths of this world, whose response to the Other is always mediated through their own needs:

It did not occur to me, ever, that people were good or that... the world could be a better place through one's taking pleasure in...receiving another person's love or kindness. (AP 375)

The other option is to objectify the Other, denying his freedom, and violence/sadism is one means to attempt this. Of course this is Sartrean *bad faith*, a form of inauthentic existence that violates *being-for-itself* (the free conscious being as Subject). Violence as an exercise in pure freedom depends upon the recognition by the Other of the legitimacy of the violence. Bateman's gratuitous violence is *bad faith* and does not aim at the full realization of our humanity (BN 147). It does aim, however, to help the violent Subject escape his unbearable feeling of aloneness. For Bateman it does not work:

Some kind of existential chasm opens before me while I'm browsing in Bloomingdale's...and I decide [it] has some connection with the way I treated Evelyn...though there is always the possibility it could just as easily have something to do with the tracking device on my VCR...(AP 179-80)

The ever-increasing violence of the murders is not sufficient to allow him an escape from this existential chasm:

Though I am satisfied at first by my actions, I'm suddenly jolted with a mournful despair at how useless, how extraordinarily painless it is to take a child's life...I feel *empty, hardly here at all*. (AP 300; italics are mine)

His attempts to reach inside the Other, figuratively as well as *literally* by cutting into them, are futile:

As usual, in an attempt *to understand these girls* I'm filming their deaths (AP 304; italics are mine).

I can already tell that it's going to be a characteristically useless, senseless death, but then I'm used to the horror (AP 329).

Through *the gaze* of his victim, he encounters only himself as *inanimate Object*:

I can imagine that my virtual absence of humanity fills her with mind-bending horror (AP 327).

A sense of individuality, of self-consciousness, is developed from our encounters with others. There are no orthodoxies to speak of to reconstruct one's freedom, so we really are in that existential state that Sartre calls "dreadful freedom." In contemporary postmodern culture, in which the Other is undifferentiated (is simply *not-me*), then violence in response to freedom-threats becomes equally undifferentiated and indiscriminate. Any target will do! The serial killer chooses victims arbitrarily, usually from among strangers. Bateman kills those vulnerable Others, such as prostitutes, the

homeless, children, and criminals that no one seems to miss. His anger is directed at those to whom society does not offer its protection.

In a society such as America, that hails its freedom at every opportunity and holds itself forth as a beacon to the world, it seems incongruous to speak of direct threats to freedom. The absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice is only a *negative* freedom, as previously discussed: what Erich Fromm refers to as a “freedom from.” *Positive* liberty, on the other hand, is concerned with the provision of conditions required in order for one to take advantage of freedom, conditions which the individual cannot create on his/her own. This type of freedom depends largely on social conditions. Of the homeless beggars, Bateman and his friends ask, “Why don’t they get a job?” They do not consider what barriers, internal or external, those indigents might face in an effort to exercise choice. Such thoughts might be too frightening for Bateman, reminding him in turn of his own existential fears and lack of freedom. Viewing the homeless, the objects of poverty and discrimination, as lacking freedom is not that much of an imaginative stretch for most of us. Taking the position that a wealthy, young, handsome WASP male has his freedom curtailed is a rather more difficult sell.

As mentioned above, Bateman mouths the discourse of consumerism; the clothes, the music he listens to, all are needs created by the ad industry. His world, like that of the ‘underground man,’ is circumscribed. John Walsh explains it well:

In his murky vision, a *skewed and suicidal materialism* is the sole currency of his [Ellis’s] young metropolitans, the only stuff of conversation, the single realm of thought, the measure of personal wealth and social health. (qtd. in Bilton 209; italics mine)

Saturated in consumer capitalism, he cannot see beyond it. He is analogous to Plato's cave dweller, chained in his cave and able only to see the flickering reflections of a counterfeit reality. When he gains some reflected light of truth, "a flood of reality," he is truly dazzled and terrified (AP 379). In the most intimate of moments, during sexual encounters for example, his mind cannot shut off the flood of images from movies, television, and violent videos. He is unable to live in the moment; it is already occupied with the detritus of the inert. For him there is no sense of autonomy, no capacity to govern oneself; this is a prerequisite for true freedom. Battered about by an instilled demand for immediate gratification, he is ruled by factors outside the self. His life is "a blank canvas that reconfigures itself into a soap opera" (AP 343).

Erich Fromm, philosopher and psychoanalyst, elucidates postmodern man's situation thus:

[T]his man-made world has become his master...He seems to be driven by self-interest, but in reality his total self with all its concrete potentialities has become an instrument for the very machine his hands have built...His relationships have assumed a spirit of instrumentality and manipulation...he does not only sell commodities he sells himself and feels himself to be a commodity. (FF 103)⁴⁵

Objectified himself, another commodity to be consumed, his only recourse is some primitive act that aims at getting in touch with what is real: flesh and blood. Without

⁴⁵ Erich Fromm, the famous psychoanalyst, reveals significant parallels with the ideas of Sartre in several of his works on freedom. Although we know that he did read some of Sartre's literary work, as well as the published notes of his lecture, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, by his own account he was not familiar with Sartre's main philosophical opus. I feel justified in drawing my comparisons between the two thinkers on freedom since Sartre's translator, Hazel Barnes, also perceives a strong philosophical connection. For more on her position, see her explication of Sartrean ideology in *Humanistic Existentialism: The Literature of Possibilities*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P. 1962.

evolution from the burden of “freedom from” to the more positive “freedom to,” man’s urge will be to escape from the burden of what Sartre calls “dreadful freedom” by whatever means presents itself.

Objectified himself by the capitalist system, another trader from Pierce and Pierce, Bateman objectifies his victims in a futile attempt to appropriate their freedom for himself. Incapable of self-mastery, he struggles to gain mastery over them. With no connection to his own humanity, he attempts to grasp and hold theirs. Naturally, as readers, we see ourselves as far removed from Patrick’s craziness and violence. Yet we feel complicit. One way in which we reject our complicity in the world’s violence is by projecting responsibility onto the criminal psychopaths. In his essay “On Freedom,” Sartre describes an evildoer as “a man whose situation makes it possible for him to present to us in broad daylight and in objective form the obscure temptations of our freedom” (quoted in Santoni 134). The good man has the clearest conscience in war time, he says, adding sarcastically “[But] from time to time there must be peace” (135). For these times we have our professional evildoers, our BTK killers, our Robert Batemans. Sartre argues that we all act on a demand for meaning, and violence is one distorted way in which *some* subjects seek meaning and autonomy in their lives. In the manner of an acting-out child in a dysfunctional family, these characters express the anger, tension and fear that seethes below the smooth social surface of our world.

The criminal forces us to consider the question of liberty in the American society where individuals believe themselves to be fully free. For the violent individual the feeling of powerlessness inherent in postmodern society may well be so threatening that

only the most extreme action can overcome the feeling of objectification. Ellis seems to ask us to consider what it might take, in our very jaded culture, to *pierce* (figuratively or literally) our mask of complacency. We focus on serial killers in the news while striving to ignore the killing of millions through poverty. This dichotomy is revealed in the novel by the constant appearance of beggars and homeless, juxtaposed with violent excess. Patrick may be the one to literally kill these derelicts, but all of his acquaintances engage in less direct forms of cruelty, such as offering money only to take it back with a laugh. The evening news confronts us simultaneously with destructive violence and celebrity divorces; our responses are correspondingly flattened. Patrick sees all this, and believes himself to be alone with this knowledge:

surface, surface, surface...nuclear warheads, billions of dollars, the total destruction of the world, someone gets beaten up, someone else dies... life played out as a sitcom...It's an isolation ward that serves only to expose my own severely impaired capacity to feel. I am at its centre... and no one ever asks me for any identification. (AP 343)

This denial or self-deceit, Sartre's "mauvaise foi" (bad faith), permeates our social structures and is deliberately utilized by parts of the system. As Hare remarks above, internal corporate culture fosters a psychopathic attitude of deceit toward the general public. This attitude allows businesses to do such things as sell dangerous products and pollute the earth for corporate gain, all the while preaching their altruism. They actually seem to believe their own propaganda; in the words of Jerry Seinfeld's friend George: "It's not a lie if you believe it." It would seem, then, that the most important person one needs to convince is oneself. Patrick Bateman can no longer buy into this hypocrisy. He

may be a murderer, but he is open about it. He can't help it if no one believes him. He lives by another pop dictum: *tell them the truth and they'll never believe you!*

What are we to make of the vision of the artist Bret Easton Ellis? The idea of the objective vision, so significant to the modern artist, is no longer possible today. How does one attack social taboos when there are none? How can one disturb a social order, which gobbles up all resistance, regurgitating it for the commercial market? Everything is, as Bilton says, incorporated (198). It is no longer possible for an author to directly condemn the social culture because it is difficult to see outside the Cave and imagine another reality. According to Bilton, this is the impression with which Ellis leaves us:

It is this idea of distance, of being outside of things, which no longer seems tenable to us today. Nobody illustrates this better than Brett Easton Ellis. 'This is not an exit' he writes at the end of *American Psycho* and this motto could be seen as emblematic of the Postmodern dilemma: there's simply no way out of the mall. (Bilton 198)

Ellis's implication is that we are all trapped here in this consumer Hell--author, reader and characters all complicit in this "dangerous text". If any moral values are to be inserted, in true Sartrean fashion, we have to choose them. Much of the novel's prose is decidedly boring, creating a type of suspense or longing for the violent action that follows. Many critics, as I have previously mentioned, focus only on the violence to the exclusion of the blatant critique of commercialism inherent in the text. Ellis, like Patrick Bateman, struggles with the issue of how our banality might be shaken. It would seem that even he has not been offensive enough to shake us from our traditional knee-jerk responses. Yet we compartmentalize the character of Patrick at our own peril. One can

imagine Ellis warning that not only the *movie* might be coming soon to a neighbourhood near you. “One could argue that Ellis’s work is a kind of homeopathic medicine, inoculating the diseases, curing us by making us aware how sick we really are” (Bilton 212).

Does Ellis suggest that there is any hope for the Batemans of the world or more importantly for the world in which he flounders? Towards the end of the text Patrick does evince a spark of humanity in response to the love offered him by Jean. Determined to live an authentic existence, she tells Patrick that “a lot of people seem to have... lost touch with life and I don’t want to be among them” (AP 375). During their conversation, she is the only one truly present; Patrick floats on the plane of hyperreal, absorbed in images from the media. Throwing a rope to a drowning man, she tells him that people need each other. It almost seems as if he might at least accept the rope; he begins to feel something real:

[There is] a flood of reality. I get an odd feeling that this is a crucial moment in my life and I’m startled by the suddenness of what I guess *passes for an epiphany*...I am moved that I might have the capacity to accept, though *not return* her love...And though the coldness I have always felt leaves me, the numbness doesn’t and probably never will. (AP 379; italics are mine)

Although the moment passes and he realizes that the relationship with Jean is going nowhere, there is the hint of a movement outside of himself. He admits to fear of the unknown, but “I also know that one day, sometime very soon, she too will be locked in the rhythm of my insanity” (AP 378). He is not totally without altruism; he walks away from Jean, and this is her salvation.

Imagine a society in which true freedom is made possible, in which “the individual, his growth and happiness, is the aim and purpose of culture, in which life does not need any justification in success or anything else, and in which the individual is not subordinated to or manipulated by any power outside himself...”(FF 233). This sounds, indeed, like an updated version of the American Dream. The innocence is gone, but as Patrick reminds us, “This is no time for the innocent” (AP 382).

PART TWO

FREEDOM *TO*

Chapter Four: On the Road to the Self: Slouching Towards Freedom in the
Works of Doctorow and Percy

Chapter Five: *En-Gendering* Violence: Pitfalls on Freedom Road in the
Works of Allison and Palahniuk



Chapter Four

On the Road to the Self: Slouching Towards Freedom

Twentieth century peoples have erected so many psychological barriers against strong emotion, and have invested those defenses with so much of the energy derived from forbidden impulse, that they can no longer remember what it feels like to be inundated with desire. They tend, rather, *to be consumed with rage...*

Christopher Lasch

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of everyone of its members... Whoso must be a man, must be a nonconformist.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

4.1 The Struggle for Individuation

Individuation, defined by psychoanalyst Erich Fromm as "the growing emergence of the individual from his primitive social and natural ties," is at the centre of man's awareness of, and striving towards his own freedom (FF 23). This growth of the individual is marked not only by increasing strength but also by an increasing sense of aloneness. The dialectical nature of individuation is met, as one might assume, by a corresponding ambivalence in the individual. Wanting freedom, the individual is yet frightened by the implications of what Sartre referred to as a "terrible freedom."

Beginning in childhood, Fromm explains it this way: "The child becomes freer to develop and express its own individual self unhampered by those ties which were limiting it. But the child also becomes more free from a world which gave it security and reassurance" (FF 24). We see the early positive and negative aspects of freedom: freedom *from* and freedom *to*. Like Sartre, Fromm sees human existence and freedom as essentially

inseparable because it involves freeing mankind *from* the instinctual determination of his actions. What this freedom is *for* is what the individual must determine for himself, and this is the meaning of life, as existentialism defines it. If economic, social, and political conditions do not support the individual in the full realization of his/her possibilities, then freedom from external ties becomes merely an "unbearable burden" (FF 30). The result is a life without meaning or direction, accompanied by a sense of *alienation* that has frequently been the subject of literary, philosophic and psychological discourse.

4.2 Alienation: The Quest for Authenticity

"Although the term *alienation* or *self-alienation* originally derives from Stoic philosophy, Hegel gives the category its uniquely modern definition," asserts philosopher Mark Taylor in his cogent study, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard* (7). In the journey to selfhood, various forms have been explored, most significant for our discussion is the existential quest for authenticity. In the words of Walker Percy's character in *The Moviegoer*:

The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life... To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair. (qtd.in Taylor 8)

Both Hegel and Kierkegaard were philosophers who were concerned with the spiritlessness of their time. "Hegel insists that modern man faces the difficult task of finding the way from fragmentation and disintegration among and within individuals to a

harmonious intra- and interpersonal unification or integration” (Taylor 12). Hegel’s concern with the reconciliation of the concepts of “self” and “other” can offer guidelines for the community/individual dichotomies we have outlined above. Taylor proposes that Hegel’s cure for the sickness of the spirit, a sickness that he diagnosed in his own time, might lead the way out of our present dilemma, our “unhappy consciousness,” and towards a more fully realized selfhood (32). The evil of the time, writes Hegel, is the result of “*caprice of subjective feeling and its opinions associated with the culture of reflected thought* which has proved to its own satisfaction that spirit is *incapable of knowing the truth*” (Qtd. in Taylor 41; italics Taylor). Reflection, Hegel defines as the activity of mind that sets up oppositions and goes from one to the other without ever realizing their essential unity (42). This analytical activity of the mind, typical of Cartesian rationalism, separates categories without the final integration, or synthesis, which is an essential aspect of Hegelian philosophy. In this system, typified in Hegel’s day by Kant’s philosophy, subject and object are unknowable to each other. “If subject and object remain antithetical, the object becomes an unknowable other...” (Taylor 44); it is this dualism that Hegel finds so disturbing, a dualism which postmodernism seeks in its way to deconstruct. Such dualisms result inevitably in the *alienation* of the self, since no reconciliation of self and other is possible. We cannot live authentically, to use Sartre’s terms, in solipsism. We can only know ourselves as freedom through the Other; the challenge is to accomplish this without destroying self or Other in the process.

If, as Hegel argued, the *evil* of the present time reveals the *need* of the time, then the need of our time is to answer the question “How can we exist as free subjects without

losing our concern for humanity?” In fact, this is not a very different question from that posed by Schiller and related by Mark Taylor: “How are we to restore the unity of human nature?”(50). “The malaise of spiritlessness can be cured only by the mediation of all the opposites fragmenting the self” (Taylor 226). To see the self as identity within the difference between subjectivity and objectivity is to know the self in all its fullness. This subjectivity cannot be given by the Other, but relationships in the world are an essential part of the dialectic. The fullness of this deliverance from solipsism, accomplished through the meeting of self with itself in the other, is experienced thus:

As existing for self, this deliverance is called I; as unfolded to its totality, it is *free spirit*; as feeling, it is *love*; as enjoyment, it is *blessedness*. (Hegel, qtd. and italicized Taylor 228)

As Sartre would explain it, our responsibility to ourselves is forever connected with our responsibility to Others. To understand our freedom, we must acknowledge the freedom of all mankind.

The responsibility towards all those who might be affected by our deeds is, according to Sartre, an integral aspect of all human action. The importance of action to the development of the self is expressed in these words of Hegel, which are echoed by Sartre: “In so far as I act I determine myself” (Qtd. in Gordon 89). In an insightful thesis, R. Hallon Gordon explores the relationship between freedom and the self’s sense of identity. The value we place on freedom in our society, asserts Gordon, is in direct relation to our sense of self-identity and to our ability to forge our own identity through our actions. “Human beings are concerned, in a profound and fundamental way, with

making ourselves, with building an identity” (Gordon 9). There are, says Gordon, three aspects of freedom that connect to our sense of personal identity: 1. our capacity for self-rule; 2. our capacity to act or choose; 3. our experience of existing relatively free from undue external constraints. Human freedom must be viewed in its totality, argues Gordon, rather than from the one-sided position often taken by classical liberalism.

4.3 Individualism as a National Narrative

In fashioning myself I fashion man.
Jean-Paul Sartre

Cyrus Patell asserts that “some of the most important philosophizing that is going on within late twentieth-century U.S. culture can be found in works of fiction...” (xv). Literature, he says, brings philosophy to life. Concerning himself with the negative consequences of individualism as it appears in contemporary American thought and fiction, Patell explores the work of Morrison and Pynchon as they deconstruct the official narratives of freedom and self-reliance. “Philosophers like Emerson, Rawls, and Kateb make compelling cases for the potential of individualism as the basis for an ideal democratic society, but as Pynchon and Morrison so dramatically depict, this potential has yet to be realized in American culture, let alone elsewhere in the world” (xviii). However, neither novelists nor critical deconstructionists have made much of an impact on the American love affair with the concept of individualism as an *a priori* desirable reality.

The American national narrative of individual freedom contains within it various undifferentiated concepts such as *liberalism* and *individualism*. The latter has become part of the national American identity since the nineteenth century, and the concept is largely attributed to the writings of Emerson. Individualism extols the virtues of non-conformity and self-reliance; the individualist is the “Adam,” the self-made man who is figured so often in American literature. Patell, however, argues that the concept is misunderstood: “from the time that the term became part of the American vocabulary in the early part of the nineteenth century, Americans—including Emerson and his followers—have always conceived of individualism as a social formation. Herein lies the genius of the ideology and perhaps the reason for its efficacy: it enforces conformity at the very moment that it extols conformity” (xii). Such a social ideology, suggests Patell, creates a false sense of liberty by enforcing beliefs, advantageous to the goals of the ruling majority, which support such a delusion. Emersonian liberalism, so popular in U.S. thought, is centered on a false concept of self-reliance. The rugged individualist, as symbolized in media characters such as Indiana Jones, is an example of wish fulfillment. Readers or viewers can fantasize that they are masters of their own fate even as they succumb to the mind-numbing bureaucracy that defines their lives. Indeed, few persons have any belief in the ability of the average individual to be master of his own fate. Such broad individual freedom exists only in the projections of popular culture. Even on-screen rugged individualists, like Indiana Jones or Batman, never seem to deviate from socially sanctioned actions, often to the detriment of their own interests. The anti-heroes, the anti-social psychopaths, are the ultimate individualists: characters that seem able to act in their

own best interests even when these do not align with those of society. Perhaps this is why we are so fascinated with them.⁴⁶ Cultural theorists have directed their interests to these conflicting ideologies that comprise the American national identity.

Pursuant to such analysis is the frequently referenced work, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, authored by Bellah et al. This text explores the difficulties inherent in the American myth of individualism. Well-known theorist Fredric Jameson describes *Habits of the Heart* as “a powerful onslaught on ... ‘therapeutic’ values and ideologies” (ONHH 98),⁴⁷ and a backlash against the rampant individualism described in Christopher Lasch’s “culture of narcissism.” From Jameson’s perspective, one primary difficulty with the analysis presented in *Habits* is its failure to distinguish between an individualism born of a culture, which he refers to as biblically grounded, and that resulting from economic forces (“market type” 99). Jameson deplores the failure of *Habits* to consider, correctly, what he identifies as the “decentering of the centered subject” (ONHH 100). Such consideration, he maintains, would lend depth to the discussion of the therapeutic character of the individualist. As the work stands,

⁴⁶ For a fascinating and thorough study of individualism as it permeates American culture, see *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Bellah, Robert N. et al. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986. Although the information gathered there has informed my work, allowing for an understanding of the basic ideology and development of American individualism, much of it is not directly relevant to my current thesis. Its series of essays offer alternatives to the radical individualism portrayed in Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism*, and promote a return to a communal spirit in America. Some critics, Fredric Jameson for example, view the work as dangerously allied to the American Religious Right.

⁴⁷ Fredric Jameson, “On *Habits of the Heart*.” *Community in America: The Challenge of “Habits of the Heart*.” Eds. Charles H. Reynolds and Ralph V. Norman. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988. Hereafter cited as “ONHH.”

Jameson views the essays as perhaps more pernicious than the false belief in the power of the individualist.

Using concepts from Jean-Paul Sartre, Jameson maintains that the social characters described in *Habits of the Heart* are examples of Sartre's *practico-inert*: "a scar left in the present by the outmoded and forgotten practices of the past" (102). Such characters show a persistence of traits that were once necessary, but have since lost their function. Jameson argues that the problem with two such diverse approaches to social problems, that of the individualist and that of the communalist, is their failure to include the dialectic that needs to be overcome; both the needs of the individual and the needs of society must be included in any discussion of freedom. Jameson addresses one such dialectical moment that needs to be engaged, when he describes the current culture's loss of historicity. This "loss of a sense of the past (as well as a sense of the future)" (104) is one which we discussed in our analysis of *American Psycho*. Such waning of a distinct sense of identity with the past prevents us, Jameson argues, from achieving a sharper sense "of the uniqueness of our own present" (104). He links the current obsession with *simulacra* as a form of a Freudian return of the repressed. The juxtaposition of present and past, inherent in Bellah's text, may not be possible any longer, Jameson suggests. Any analysis that makes use of the history of ideas is fraught with problems that Jameson believes can only be avoided by the discourse analysis method, which views struggles as taking place "within language" (108). The best critique of individualism is founded "in its limits as a language of discourse" (105). As such a discourse individualism has us locked into a way of perception that "deflects and deforms everything that passes through it,"

leaving us with no true understanding of social reality (ONHH 105). The authors of *Habits of the Heart* attempt to make us aware of these limits using the word *community* as a focus, yet, according to Jameson, they merely offer us a second mode of discourse also marked by the past. *Habits of the Heart*, from this socialist perspective, offers the reader no deeper understanding of the concepts of freedom, as they apply to the dichotomous needs of society and the individual. The beginning of a new improved society, suggests Jameson, must begin with “a self-punishing enumeration of all the blocks that make the reimagining of utopia today a difficult, if not to say a well-nigh impossible task” (111). Although Jameson alludes to Sartre, he fails to consider that the latter’s philosophy might have much to impart to the realization of such a new improved society. “Our point of departure is, indeed, the subjectivity of the individual, and that for strictly philosophic reasons. It is not because we are bourgeois, but because we seek to base our teaching upon the truth, and not upon a collection of fine theories, full of hope but lacking real foundations” (E&H 44). The self-conscious subject is, for Sartre, the foundation of any successful society. The next concern is the development of such a grounded subject.

4.4 The Psychological Process of Individuation

Suzanne R. Kirschner sheds light on this self-development process in her broad and interdisciplinary work, *The Religious and Romantic Origins of Psychoanalysis: Individuation and Integration in Post-Freudian Theory*. Developmental psychology is concerned with the liberation or freedom of the individual (Kirschner 107). The goal is a

greater sense of autonomy, and “a movement towards freedom from external constraint and internal conflict” (108). Implicit in this goal is the ongoing dialectic between the self’s needs and the demands of the others one must relate to, between the ‘me’ and the ‘not-me’. “Self and object constancy, developed in the first three years, ensure that the reawakening of feelings derived from the symbiotic phase do not bring with them a loss of the sense of self” (Edward, Ruskin, Turrini 107). Firm self/object boundaries make it possible to become involved in a love relationship without losing oneself to the Other. When these boundaries are not sound, the self can feel its identity threatened by the relationship and respond in violent or self-destructive ways. Without a sufficient degree of self-object differentiation, feelings of closeness that threaten the self’s independence can be pushed away by rage reactions. Relationships then become a power struggle, such as revealed in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic.

R. N. Goodwin, in his article entitled “Power and the Individual,” puts forth this position: “Power is central to individualism, for without real power choice is meaningless” (251). Goodwin discusses the sense of powerlessness that is eating away at our social structures today, “evoking an aimless unease, frustration, and fury” (251). This fury, Goodwin asserts, is primarily found among the middle classes rather than among the poorer groups, where one might expect to find such anger. It might be the case that the minority groups, those most often marginalized, have a stronger connection to the past. As expressed above, this connection can provide grounding to a socially floundering subject. Lacking strong familial, racial, or other ties, such a decentered subject might be

blown about by the winds of the social system. Christopher Lasch, in *The Culture of Narcissism*, has this to say about the plight of the powerless individual in America today:

Today Americans are overcome not by the sense of endless possibility but by the banality of the social order they have erected against it... Twentieth century peoples have erected so many psychological barriers against strong emotion, and have invested those defenses with so much of the energy derived from forbidden impulse, that they can no longer remember what it feels like to be inundated with desire. They tend, rather, *to be consumed with rage*, which derives from defenses against desire and gives rise in turn to new defenses against rage itself. Outwardly bland, submissive, and sociable, they seethe with an *inner anger* for which a dense, overpopulated, bureaucratic society can devise few legitimate outlets. (italics mine, 11)

Lasch is describing a form of emotional repression that, one could argue, is particular to the middle classes. He intimates that serious self-reflection is required before attempting to resolve the polarities of individual and community requirements that haunt the American social system. We need, suggests Lasch and others, a new understanding of individualism and liberty.

If a new concept of individualism is needed in America, it needs to balance the individual's rights to freedom with society's right to safety. As explained by philosopher Bertrand Russell's article, "The Role of Individuality," the conflict is between "too little liberty [which] brings stagnation, and too much [which] brings chaos" (4). One of the difficulties in contemporary life, says Russell, is that "society is centralized and organized to such a degree that individual initiative is reduced to a minimum" (12). Subtle, but nonetheless powerful constraints have been placed on the individual, despite the prevailing belief that America is the freest nation on earth. J. W. Gardner's essay,

“Individuality and Its Limits,” succinctly articulates the problems encountered by the emerging individual subject:

In the process of growing up the young person frees himself from utter dependence on others. As the process of maturing continues he must also free himself from the prison of utter self-preoccupation. To do so he need not surrender his individuality. But he must place it in the voluntary service of larger objectives. (Gardner 22)

Although we have largely learned how to accomplish the former, the latter task is one we have not mastered. The result, says Gardner, is youth who do not understand their place in a complex societal web and are inclined to “flee the responsibility of individual choice” (23). This flight from facticity defines Sartre’s inauthentic mode of living. *The Book of Daniel*, by D.L. Doctorow, is the next narrative under discussion. Through the struggles for individuation experienced by its central character, we will explore this phenomenon of fear of individual choice and the potential resolutions. If ideology cannot offer dialectical synthesis, perhaps one might emerge from existential narratives.

4.5 Breathless: Images of Anxiety and Individuation in Doctorow

And the Lord God formed man of the slime of the earth:
and breathed into his face the breath of life, and man
became a living soul.

Genesis 2:7

The use of somatic metaphors is as common in literature as it is in ordinary discourse. We speak of being ‘breathless’ with anxiety, of ‘holding our breath’ in

anticipation, of 'choking with rage' or of 'choking back tears.' Doctorow's novel, *The Book of Daniel*, a fictional account of the infamous Rosenberg executions, contains recurrent images of breathing and breathing difficulties. Surprisingly, this constellation of images has not been addressed in the critical literature. If one considers expiration or exhalation as metaphors of expression, the narrative may be viewed as a physiological act of telling: a 'getting it off the chest'. Breathing becomes the physiological metaphor for the act of narration itself.

God the Creator, in the book of Genesis, breathes life into Adam; so Daniel Lewin creates and breathes life into this story of his search for the truth about his biological parents. It is simultaneously a spiritual odyssey for Daniel, and an act of individuation that results in a successful confrontation with the ghosts of the past. Just as breathing is essential for the life of the body, so Daniel decides that the telling of his story is essential to his psychological and spiritual existence. Unlike the biblical Daniel, who, although grieved in his spirit, "kept the matter in [his] heart" (12), Daniel Lewin decides that such suppression is not wise: "But I, Daniel was grieved ...and I do not want to keep the matter in my heart" (*The Book of Daniel* 17).⁴⁸ As his sister lies in hospital following a suicide attempt, he begins his exploration of the facts surrounding his parents' execution. All of the images that this "criminal of perception" has taken in (or inhaled, if you will) over the years are now finally released in a fusion of experiences, letters, conversations and historical data. Images of breathing, from Daniel's frightening 'spells' (159,238 etc) to the fear of suffocation that he and Susan share, frame the novel. By

⁴⁸ E.L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel*. 1971. Toronto, Plume, 1996. Hereafter cited in text as "BD."

analyzing these images, I hope to produce a richer understanding of the narrator and his journey. In so doing, I also cast light on the existential issues that permeate the novel. Daniel's *freedom* to become his own person is initially frightening to him, but once finally embraced it becomes exhilarating.

The character that Doctorow creates here has distinctive elements of sadism, as described by Sartre. Critics have pointed out a fact that is often true of characters in novels which have an existential motif: Daniel is not a very sympathetic character. Brian Dillon, for example, asserts that Daniel "has extremely unappealing personal characteristics that serve to distance his audience from him" (375). Many readers seem to share this negative view of the narrator. Confronted by an interviewer with this perspective, Doctorow offers this amplification of his character:

Suffering doesn't make people virtuous, at least in my experience. But I see his "sadism", as you call it, in a slightly different way. I see the scene where he abuses his wife, for instance, as the same kind as the scene in which he throws his son up in the air. The act has *existential* dimensions. Daniel is over-tuned to the world. He doesn't miss a thing. He's a hero-or a criminal-of perception...Daniel gives himself to the act of perception and opens himself to it- much as all writers must - and he survives that way, survives by however cold and frightening an embrace with the truth. This is perhaps his only strength. Of course, it would take a tremendous act of the will to accept the very idea of a family after this kind of thing has happened to you as a child. Daniel recognizes this, and in acting out the terrible conflicts within himself between giving in and not giving in...he is enduring - by letting in as much truth about himself and his life as he can. (Morris 86-7)

The author directs us to an existential significance of Daniel's actions. The following sections will consider this in its various dimensions.

Approaching the novel with Doctorow's allusions to existential philosophy as a guide, the character of Daniel can be further illuminated by reflecting upon the persistent breathing imagery in the novel. *The Book of Daniel*, seen from this perspective, is an inquiry into the role of anxiety in the individuation process. I assert that Daniel's anxiety, primarily somatized through breathing difficulties, is in direct relation to his fear of his existential freedom. Doctorow explores breath imagery from three perspectives: first as a somatization of anxiety, second, as reference to a ghostly 'haunting' of Daniel by 'spirits' from the past that help to ground him; and finally, as an expression of Daniel's spirit or soul, as he comes to embrace his freedom. This character struggles through the difficult circumstances of his life, and learns to make his own decisions despite the consequences. In this way, Daniel comes to emulate his parents, and finally to accept his subjecthood, with all its dangerous freedom.

Breathing problems, if without a physical etiology, are often associated with anxiety. Anxiety and fear are central to this narrative, so it seems safe to hypothesize that the breath imagery is associated with anxiety in *The Book of Daniel*. As Michelle M. Tokarczyk contends, E. L. Doctorow's novel is much more than a fictionalization of the Rosenberg case; it is about the legacy of survivors, defined as those "who have come into contact with death and remained alive" (3). This approach allows us to consider Daniel Lewin as a survivor, with all the anxiety that accompanies such a role. Having experienced the arrest and eventual execution of his parents by the government, fear becomes a part of life for the boy and his sister. Daniel's upbringing has taught him to see

himself as aligned with his parents in the fight against capitalism, a fight which has had fatal consequences for them:

‘The battle is not finished, the struggle of the working class is still going on. Never forget that, Danny.’ And it seemed to me then that I was marked. Because *they* had a lot more power than *we* had...that power of theirs to destroy and put down and take vengeance on the ideas in my head, on the dangerous information put in my head by my reckless father. (36)

Daniel is frightened of his father, and of his dangerous ideas. He comes to associate passion, or strong emotion, as analogous in its menacing nature to these same ideas: “In our house there could be a laying on of words like lightening. Dispensed outrage, the smell of burning in the mouths of our mother and father” (61). This image, linking his parents’ words with electricity, seems to suggest that perhaps his mother and father had precipitated their own deaths by their discourse. Daniel wants to make no such mistake and he chooses, at first, to renounce the radicalism of his parents. A choice dictated by fear is no existential choice; rather, Daniel is fleeing from the facts of his childhood. His own struggle with his anxiety absorbs him as he tries to hold back the flood of feelings and memories. Daniel’s relationships with the Others in his life, such as wife, child, and sister, bear witness to the effect of his anxiety.

One of the first remarks that Daniel makes about his wife is that she has the ability to assuage fear in others (4). This observation provides some insight as to why he has married her, despite the fact that neither his family nor her family finds the match appropriate. As the book opens, he, his wife and baby are traveling to see his sister who is hospitalized following a suicide attempt. Daniel is clearly anxious, as he watches exhaust

fumes from a nearby car: “Daniel imagined it curling around his ankles, his waist, and finally his throat” (5). Sitting silently in the patient’s lounge with his sister, Susan, he tries to understand her emotional pain:

He thought he knew what it was, that sense of being overcome. You *suffocated*. The calamity of it. He had had such spells...Something was torn, there was a coming apart of intentions, a forgetting of what you could expect from being alive. You couldn’t laugh. You were in dread of yourself and it was a dread so pure that one glance in the mirror *scorched* the heart and *charred* the eyes. (9)

In his own way, Daniel Lewin, like his biblical counterpart, has also suffered through the fiery furnace.

Doctorow’s Daniel shares, as we saw above, a sense of complicity with his parents’ leftist beliefs. All of them have refused to worship at the altar of capitalism as demanded by their government: “And whoso falleth not down and worshippeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace” (Daniel 3:4). The importance of this quotation is demonstrated by its inscription at the opening of the novel. Daniel continues to worry about his fate, and he believes that government agents are continually watching him. Tokarczyk remarks that: “On the American Left, many feared this execution [of the Rosenbergs] was only the beginning” (5). Daniel’s fear, like his indoctrination in Marxist beliefs, begins early, and is disclosed in the following episode.

Daniel is only seven years old when his parents take him to a ‘concert,’ which is more like a peaceful political demonstration. His realist mother fears danger and doesn’t want to take him, but his idealist father argues that “there’s a court order protecting the thing, for God’s sake” (46). Pleased to accompany them, the young boy feels safe and cozy on the bus: “I sit on her lap at the window. Next to me my father sings...The window

of the bus is streaked with dried rain” (47). But of course the day ends in fear and disaster. The bus is attacked and the cries of the passengers leap “out from throats of perception.” Now they and Daniel perceive the truth of how things are. Daniel finds himself buried in the skirts of his mother, while his father makes a solitary attempt to subdue the angry crowd and is attacked by them. A wonderful day with his mother and father turns into a nightmare: “I am in an intoxication of fear,” the boy remembers (50). It is unlikely that the child could ever feel safe again.

With this new insight into the world, his perceptions alter. The curses of his grandmother, previously assumed by Daniel to be the ravings of a mad woman, are now seen as the “exact and potent introjection of measures of doom into our lives” (51). His new sense of vulnerability haunts him, along with an awareness of “the quality of calmly experienced, planned revolutionary sacrifice” in his father (52). He feels that there is an evil threatening them of which he has previously been unaware. The sense of some unknown threat that seems to loom over them, and his helplessness in the face of it, is omnipresent. His father’s actions are not explicable in the ordinary way: “what he did was mysterious and complicated and not anything like what people were saying” (52). He begins to sense, vaguely, that his father is on some self-destructive mission and that he, Daniel, is along for the ride. He cries for the loss of his innocence and for the fate of all of them.

Sadism: The Effort to Appropriately the Other’s Freedom

From this scene in the narration we go directly to the “sadistic” episode with Daniel and his wife. Immediately we can see the parallels: mother, father, and son are riding together in a car on the highway, off on a family adventure. It is raining and Daniel feels secure with his family: “The rain has the effect of a cocoon, it encapsulates us” (56). Suddenly, perhaps because of his wife’s expressed concerns for their child, Daniel seems to become angry. He knows, none better, that any sense of safety is illusory. Then, as if neurotically compelled to repeat a previous pattern, he forces his wife to assume the crouched position similar to the one assumed by himself and his mother on that bus. As he drives in the rain without wipers, demanding that she remove her pants, Phyllis echoes Daniel’s earlier fears: “You’re going to kill us!” his wife screams (59). “We are all going to die,” the young Daniel believes (50). No one dies in either case, but the car ride, similarly to the bus ride, ends in pain and humiliation. The reader is not told any further details of the occurrences between husband and wife, but is left in mystery as was Daniel in the primary situation. He recalls: “I cannot see what is happening outside. There are frightening sounds” (50). In the current experience, Daniel refuses to explain exactly what he does to his wife, although there is a suggestion that he burns her with the lighter: “Do you believe it?” he demands of the reader. “On the other hand the only thing worse than telling what happened is to leave it to the imagination” (60). We, too, are now haunted by the unknown and by our inability to intervene, as Daniel was unable to prevent the attack upon his father during the fatal bus ride.

The theory of sexuality presented by existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre helps illuminate these events. Normal sexual desire is a mutual attempt to appropriate the

freedom, the individuality, of the other. The sadist, “in perpetual flight from his own facticity” (BN 518), attempts to deny his own nature by forcing the Other to recognize her facticity. In this way, the sadistic act is simultaneously a rejection by the sadist of his own ‘thrownness’ into a world where freedom has factual limits, and an attempt to remove consciousness of freedom in the Other whom he torments. It is a blind alley:

What the sadist thus so tenaciously seeks, what he wants to knead with his hands and bend under his wrists is the Other’s freedom...it is born from **anxiety** in the face of the Other...The sadist discovers his error when his victim *looks* at him; that is, when the sadist experiences the absolute alienation of his being in the Other’s freedom. (BN 524-25).

In a continuous state of anxiety, Daniel spends his life running from the events that have defined him. He is attracted to his wife’s innocence and “overassumption of life,” and concurrently angered by it. His sadism is an attempt to appropriate her sense of comfort and freedom: to make her share in his Sartrean “anxiety in the face of the Other.”

Daniel is not the first family member to suffer psychosomatic anxiety. When Daniel asks his grandmother’s ghost why in life she ‘blew her mind’ in a way so frightening to children, she responds that “it begins with the fear of not being able to breathe” (BD 70). In post-WWII America, with the Cold War intensifying, a family such as the Isaacsons would have much to fear. Daniel’s difficulty breathing first appears in the novel following Mindish’s arrest. He hears his parents’ worried conversations late at night, and begins to dream that he is suffocating:

I was afraid to go to sleep. I had terrible nightmares which I couldn’t remember except in waking from them in *terror and suffocation*. I was terrified that if I went to sleep, the house would burn down, or that my parents would go away somewhere without telling us. For some reason, the second of these possibilities came to seem more likely. I would lie in the dark and think that I couldn’t fall

asleep because the minute I did, they would leave me and Susan and go somewhere they had never told me about...I could feel now in everything since Mindish's arrest, a coming to stay in our lives of the worst possible expectations. The world was arranging itself to suit my mother and father, like some mystical alignment of forces in the air; so that frictionless and in physical harmony, all bodies and objects were secreting the one sentiment that was their passion, that would take them from me. (BD 109-10)

When his father is finally arrested, Daniel stands impotently watching: "The cold of the morning had driven itself into his chest. It filled his chest and his throat. It pressed at the backs of his eyes. He was frightened of the way he felt" (115). As his father is led away, "Susan was hysterical, sobbing with great gasps for air. We have none of us ever had *enough to breathe*" (my emphasis 116). I will return to the existential implications of this statement, but here emphasize that the anxiety is transparent.

By the time both parents are in jail, and the children are with their reluctant Aunt Frieda, Daniel has developed serious behavioural problems:

I put the newspapers I stole into the garbage. I often had spells of difficult breathing. These frightened me. I found that if I ran around and waved my arms like a windmill, I could breath better for a moment. I knocked over a lamp and broke it...I found that when I couldn't breathe well I became manically active. I did not speak, I screamed. I did not walk, I ran. I couldn't keep still. I made a game of spying on Aunt Frieda. (BD 159)

His aunt is less than understanding, and the children are sent to a Shelter.

Meanwhile, Daniel struggles to be a big boy and care for his sister, as the media paints a frightening and unfamiliar picture of his parents as master spies. He is confused, alone, and guilty. The father who had defined his world "was being transformed before my eyes and he wasn't there to stop it from happening. If he was in jail maybe he *was* an atomic ringleader" (160). As Daniel's fear for himself and his family increases, so does

his disturbed, asocial behaviour. In striking contrast to the nurturing behaviour he demonstrates towards his sister, Susan, Daniel begins to show deliberate cruelty to others. An autistic child becomes the object of his cruel mimicry as he desperately attempts to assuage his anxiety and alienation: "I was under some kind of compulsion to prove myself to the other unreclaimed kids in the hardcore...Leaders are the only ones who ever feel at home. The rest are displaced by the anxiety of trying to make it with the leaders" (170). The cruelty towards the "Inertia Kid" becomes outside his control: "I even forgot to breathe. I listened for my heart to stop. My guts strained for air while I tried to remember how to breathe. I was blacking out trying to remember what the light was for" (171). All that seems worth living for is his family, so he takes his sister and runs back to his old house. This solution, of course, doesn't work. Daniel does not stop running for years.

There are other images of Daniel's breathing difficulties that are linked to anxiety provoking situations. During the car ride to visit their parents in jail, he asks Ascher to open a window because there are gas fumes. The lawyer is surprised: "Fumes? There are no fumes," he claims. Daniel responds: "'Just a little.' I was having trouble breathing" (238). He is ashamed of this weakness and tells no one about it. It arises, as we have seen, when he goes to visit Susan in the opening of the novel. Other episodes appear in childhood remembrances. As Daniel begins to face his fear of political involvement, his breathing problem grips him with the old intensity. During his first activist demonstration, he feels again "the first whispers of death by suffocation" (254). He has, however, made

the decision to confront his past and this means confronting his anxiety. It takes a great deal of courage for Daniel to take this step and to live through temporary imprisonment:

And I will tell you now how one boy in the big cell, in this grand community of brotherhood bust, how this one boy is unable to share the bruised cheery fellowship of his companions...but sits in the corner, unable to stretch out full length, a spasm of wariness bowing his spine knotting his fingers to his palms, his knees to his chest, his head to his knees. He cannot enjoy such places. They are too familiar. He cannot survive such places in careless courage. He is sensitive to the *caged air...* (257)

This is the last reference to Daniel Lewin's breathing problems associated with anxiety. By the final section, "Christmas," he is symbolically reborn as Daniel Isaacson who no longer feels alienated but at home in California. "I was exhilarated. I took deep breaths of the balmy air" (264). Prior to reaching this place of relative peace, Daniel has to come to terms with the cause of his anxiety - the ghosts of his past.

Ghostly Haunting

"Daniel's narrative is a posthumous recovery of not only his parents but also his sister" (Dillon 373). What precipitates this recovery is Susan's attempt at suicide, her movement towards the ghostly world, inhabited by his parents and grandmother. As Susan appears to be drawn in this direction, Daniel is fleeing from it. He remarks, "To be objective, the weaker her signals the stronger mine become" (BD 209). The old fear that his death will be demanded, as was that of his parents, still haunts him: "To be objective, they are still taking care of us, one by one" (209). His guilt results in part from his own determination to survive. In childhood he is not able to face the facts of his parents'

deaths. Holding his breath, he holds or represses the memories of his biological parents so that he can be comfortable with his adoptive family. "It seemed so easy to break free because it was what the world wanted of you...The world did not want to visit the sins of the fathers" (63). The past, however, refuses to stay buried; instead it haunts Daniel in the form of dreams, images, his sister's presence, and the ghost of his grandmother.

In the book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery F. Gordon establishes a language to describe the social and political effects of the dead upon the present. Haunting, she asserts, is a "special instance of the merging of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present..." (24). Literary fiction has a significant role to play in bringing attention to the issues of invisibility and exclusion. Such issues were portrayed more directly in Ellison and Morrison. As Gordon indicates, and the narratives illustrate, that which seems to be dead is, in fact, very much alive and still affecting the present. Although Daniel avoids becoming involved politically, he is nevertheless tainted by the political actions of his parents:

I am not applying for a fellowship because if I sign a hundred loyalty oaths, I still won't get it...I live in constant and degrading relationship to the society that has destroyed my mother and father. I will never be drafted. If I left school today my classification would still be 2-A, which covers any situation not in the national interest. Listen, Professor, I could burn my draft card on the steps of the Pentagon and nothing would happen. Nothing I do will result in anything but an entry in my file. (72)

Even as he tries to run from his past, he realizes that it is always with him in some sense.

The ghost, says Gordon, is primarily a symptom of what is missing (63). When Daniel first sees his sister after her suicide attempt, he thinks that "without saying much of anything, without even caring if he was there, Susan could restore in him the old

cloying sense of family..." (9). In her ghostly state, she conjures up this remembrance of their mutual loss, that of their original family. It is the experience of seeing Susan half-dead that shocks her brother out of his apathetic denial:

He was thankful to Susan for relieving the dangerous tedium of his graduate life. She would be alright. In the meantime there was drama, a sweet fatality, a recharging of the weak diffused impulses of giving a shit. (15)

This shock is analogous to what Benjamin refers to as "blasting" (262-3). Gordon redefines this concept of Benjamin's as "a method of dialectics that reconstructs a lifework by following the scrambled trail the ghost leaves, picking up its pieces, setting them down somewhere else" (66). It represents a constructivism based upon associations and correspondences rather than upon a conventional linear, temporal mode. Unlike the "monstrous sequence" of history that has found his parents guilty, Daniel's narrative seeks to reconstruct the oppressed past and breathe new life into it in the present. However, this reckoning with the past also involves a self-reckoning "with how we are in these stories, with how they change us, with our own ghosts" (Gordon 22).

Such is Daniel Lewin's task: to confront his own ghosts. This he sets out to do from his sister's hospital bed: "'They're still fucking us', she said. 'Goodbye Daniel. You get the picture'" (9). He tries to figure out exactly what Susan means by these words and sets out to unravel certain subjects that seem to relate to them. Although he feels guilty as he begins to explore his feelings about the past, he knows that he does not "want to show Susan how it's done" (16). He wants to survive and in order to do so he must take up the

subjects of his relationships with his biological parents, with his sister, with his grandma and with his adoptive parents:

IS IT SO TERRIBLE NOT TO KEEP THE MATTER IN MY HEART, TO GET THE MATTER OUT OF MY HEART, TO EMPTY MY HEART OF THIS MATTER? WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH MY HEART? (17).

So Daniel is *summoned* to his sister's car. "The feeling that crept upon me was of being summoned. They're still fucking us. That somehow it wasn't the old pain-burn across Susan's eyes that was important..." (29). The most significant meaning about Susan's message to him was that it was an attempt at communication:

Susan had communicated with me; just that; and if now in our lives only extreme and dangerous communication was possible, nevertheless the signal has been sent, discharged, even from the spasm of soul that was required - and that was the sense of summons I felt sneaking up over the afternoon like a blanket of burned space around my ears. Susan and I, we were the only ones left. And all my life I have been trying to escape from my relatives and I have been intricate in my run, but one way or another they are what you come upon around the corner...(30)

Susan points her brother to the rest of his family relationships and to the troubling visions in his head.

The picture *we* get is of a little boy desperate to protect his younger sister in the midst of the crisis surrounding them after their parents are arrested. When the lawyer becomes impatient with Susan, Daniel poignantly reminds him: "Just a minute, Mr. Ascher...She's only a little girl, you know" (19). He learns to disregard his own feelings as he becomes responsible for nurturing his sibling. As they grow, he helps her with homework, teaches her to ride a bike, and otherwise assumes the tasks of a parent. He was "the mother, the father, the brother, the family. And it was painful and they had

some terrible fights" (62). Finally, in their last Christmas together, Susan rejects him because of his opinions concerning their parents: "You think they are guilty. It's enough to take someone's life away" (77). The letter she writes, and he receives after she is hospitalized, informs Daniel that: "You no longer exist" (77). He himself has now become a ghost, joining the land of the non-existent as he has often feared he would. Holding his breath has not prevented it. "If this boy is breathing make a ghost of him" (168). His existence, denied by the Other, must now be forged by Daniel alone. To do so, he needs to confront all the ghosts of the past that he has so indefatigably tried to escape.

As he approaches the memory of his parents, the Isaacsons, Daniel is struck by the elusive nature of reality. "You've got these two people in the poster, Daniel, now how are you going to get them out?" (43). How are all the different and invisible aspects, that lurk in the shadows of his parents' picture, to be integrated? How, in turn, is he going to integrate all the fragments of his self, of which his parents are a central part? He does have the picture, in the literal sense; he has the poster of his parents left in Susan's car. The figurative picture is not so easy to access. It begins to take shape, to become visible, through Daniel's narrative reconstruction. Doctorow's novel offers narrative as one potentially successful path to individuation. It begins, as usual, with childhood.

During the boy's childhood, the past is always before him in the figure of the grandmother who lives with them. She is bothered by breathing difficulties herself, as she suffers from asthma: "It begins with the fear of not being able to breathe," she tells Daniel (70). Her appearance, after her death, is remarked upon matter-of-factly by her grandson: "Occasionally, after her death, she liked to visit me and press a penny into my palm and

bless my head, and call me a good boy” (69). His grandmother recognizes the compassion in him as well as “the strength and innocence that will reclaim us all from defeat” (70). Although this vision of hers is frightening to Daniel, it also gives him the encouragement for the self-reckoning he needs to do. The images that arise in his consciousness, as he allows his mind to move backwards, “are essentially instruments of torture exploding through the individual’s calloused capacity to feel powerful undifferentiated emotions full of longing and dissatisfaction and monumentality” (71). The pain caused by the memories has no social purpose he believes, but he is wrong.

Unfortunately for the Isaacson children, their new adoptive parents, the Lewins, have their own difficulties adjusting to the children’s past:

These ghosts were not strange sounds in the attic, nor were they mists who moaned in the midnight garden. These ghosts were ironies. These ghosts were slips of the tongue. They were the brutal meanings in innocent remarks. (BD 75)

Daniel, the ever-observant “criminal of perception,” realizes the nearness of these ghostly presences that demand to be confronted. Yet Daniel is afraid of the emotional confrontation, as he suggests when he remarks of the biblical Daniel: “His is a life of confrontations...not a job for a man sensitive to loud noises or bright light” (12-13). He longs to feel “the flesh of the soul healing” in the peaceful milieu that his new parents have provided (30). Simultaneously, he feels that enjoying himself is, in some way, a betrayal of his birth parents. Not until Susan’s suicide attempt does he realize that he must confront his past and the memories haunting him. “Indeed to fight for an oppressed past is to make this past come alive as the lever for the work of the present...ending this history and setting in place a different future” (66). As Daniel deals with his past, he comes alive

to his present. As he confronts the fear of his freedom, the terrible freedom to take responsibility for his own life choices, he faces the existential dilemma of all men. Daniel begins to find ways to exist authentically in a world where one is “being-towards-death.”

Setting the Spirit Free

There is ample evidence to support the connection between self-expression, or self-actualization, with the expiration of breath. Concepts of soul and spirit are frequently interchangeable in mythical and religious stories. God, reveals the lines from Genesis, *breathed* life into man and he became a “living soul” (2:7). *The Jewish Encyclopedia* informs us that, in the Talmud, the words ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’ are interchangeable, for the most part (472-76). Along with the Christian, the Jewish tradition owes much to the ancient Greek philosophers and their ideas on spirit. The development of the Kabala, in particular, shows the influence of the Neoplatonists. The individual soul or spirit exists as an incarnation of the “universal soul,” later called “Absolute Spirit” by Hegel. The association of breath with soul or spirit originates in ancient, primitive societies. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* explains the ancient belief that the soul must be protected from leaving the body suddenly, for example during a sneeze: “The soul is commonly supposed to escape by the natural openings of the body, especially the mouth and nostrils (125). This clarifies the custom of saying, ‘God bless you’. It follows that the images of air or breath informing Doctorow’s novel may be taken as references to spirit.

In his major study of the Bible, *The Great Code*, Northrop Frye describes the ancient concept of spirit thus:

Even Aristotle's *De Anima* describes a complex soul. But the nearest to the purely metaphorical conception is perhaps the word "spirit," which, with its overtones of "*breath*," expresses the unifying principle of life that gives man a participating energy with nature. (emphasis mine; Frye 19)

Creation began with light and air, the two symbols of spirit, according to Frye (124).

When we conceptualize things that we know exist, but that we cannot see, we usually think of air. In another sense we do not actually 'see' light, either, but "what we see is metaphorically fire, a source or reflection of light" (Frye 124). By these elements of the invisible world, are we able to see. The Bible presents the invisible world as the medium by which the material world becomes visible. The spirit of man is the medium by which the material world is interpreted, or made actual for him. In accordance with the strength of his spirit, a man is able to understand and come to terms with what the existentialists call facticity. Daniel's spirit has been damaged and it begins to heal in the process of narration. Whatever truth he cannot let in is symbolized by breathing difficulties.

Daniel informs us from the beginning that he is "grieved in spirit" and does not wish to keep the matter in his heart (17). *The Jewish Encyclopedia* explains that the soul "has its seat in the heart" (474). His memories from childhood explain this *dis-spiritedness*, while the act of narration is itself an *inspiration*, an act of spiritual recovery. The relationship that Daniel describes between himself and his father is primarily one of the spirit:

He wrestled society for my soul. He worked on me to counteract the bad influences of my culture. That was our relationship - his teaching me how to be a psychic alien. That was part of the training. He had to exorcize the influences, the "bad spirits." (BD 34)

Merely a boy who wanted only his father's love, the adult Daniel realizes that he "listened because that was the price I paid for his attention" (35). His resentment of radical politics stems, in part, from this jealousy of the father's passion for his principles. With his parents in jail, Daniel is lost, spiritually as well as emotionally. An alien in his own culture, he has no father to create the world for him: "I tried to work things out the way he used to but I couldn't summon up that power" (160). He wanders aimless and alienated until the narration begins. Shocked into recalling *his* strength and *his* spirit by the fading of Susan's spirit, Daniel takes up his odyssey to find and reclaim his self.

Revelations concerning the father, Paul Isaacson, unfold from passages that deal with his breathing. Images that relate to him allude to breath as spirit rather than as anxiety:

Nothing he did was obscure - how beautiful that is to contemplate. Even his *breathing* was noisy. Bending over those radios. You could hear the concentration of the job in his release of *breath*...I would stand at his worktable and listen to him *breathe*, the twist of a screw or the soldering of a wire allowing him to reward himself with another exhalation. It was just the way he existed in the space he occupied. Right out to the edges. (my emphasis 33)

His father's spirit was strong enough to hold out against the *zeitgeist*, to strain against the socially imposed limits. His "elaborate breathing" (39) becomes a metaphor for willingness to move out into the world, to take risks. Unfortunately for all of them, this is not a time conducive to the expression of the human spirit, of individuality and freedom. Groups are at work that attempt to confine and limit this freedom: "Their intent is to stifle and intimidate the forces of progressivism in this country, to turn back the tide of history, which is of course futile" (BD 86). These groups do, however, serve to temporarily stifle

or suffocate the spirit, the self-expression, of Daniel. After Paul Isaacson's arrest, Daniel notices changes in the way the family inhabits space: "Our lives are shrinking. The Isaacson family exists now only to the edges of its own domesticity" (121).

Simultaneously, as their real world diminishes, their existence in the media takes on an expanded dimension. Confused by this intermingling of real and unreal, Daniel fears the experience of moving out into an unknown world. The children's first attendance at a protest, after their parents are arrested, brings an alarming sense of being crushed to death. "'I don't like this,' Susan said. 'I can't move!'" He and his sister feel suffocated and "alone in the Cold War" (173). There are far too many deterrents of self-expression. With his individual freedom curtailed, Daniel attempts to appropriate some sense of power and control from Others.

After Daniel relates the events surrounding the arrest of his parents, he follows with a description of another episode of his sadism; this time, it involves his baby son. The family is in the park feeling intimate: "we were tight" (131). Daniel is doing what fathers do: throwing his son in the air to make him laugh. Suddenly, Daniel feels conflicted by this fearful pull of family:

I tossed my son higher and higher, and now he laughed no longer but cried out. Still I did not stop and I threw him higher and caught him closer to the ground. Then Phyllis was begging me to stop. I can't bear to think about this murderous feeling...I can't remember my thoughts. I think his weight, the heft of his little body freaked me. (131)

His feeling here echoes the words of his grandmother's spirit:

And my curses are my love for them whom I curse for existing at the mercy of life and God and for the dust they will allow themselves to become for having

been born. And my complicity in their being, the fruit of my womb, that I could have tricked them this way outrages me. (70)

The existential dimensions of this episode are easier to discern than that of the episode with Daniel's wife. Here, it is clear the sheer weight of the responsibility for another being "freaks" him. Sartre explains existential anguish or anxiety in these words:

When a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind – in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility. (E&H 30)

As he sees himself mirrored in that of his child, Daniel experiences the full weight of this freedom.

From another perspective, one might regard this incident as Daniel's experimentation with setting himself free. His son looks at him with "my Isaacson face" locked in terror of "the breath-taking flight," just as Daniel is afraid of moving forward into life without his father to clarify things for him (BD 131). This fearful approach to existence begins to alter in the last section of the novel. It symbolically begins with Daniel Isaacson on a plane. "Often the soul is conceived as a bird ready to take flight" (Frazer 124). Daniel's spirit was sent forth into life, without parental guidance, long before he was ready for this freedom. The circumstances of his parents' early death left him with a sense of the dangerous responsibility of freedom, before his subjective self was prepared to confront such an existential challenge. Daniel's words towards the end of the novel suggest this:

It is the kind of day the crocuses get fucked, exposing their petaled insides of delicate hue, yellow and white, lavender and flesh, to the spring. And it is too soon. It's a miscalculation. (300)

The Isaacson children were not grounded enough to sustain themselves in the aftermath of their parents' deaths. It was too soon for them to take metaphoric flight.

The existentialist perspective reveals Doctorow's narrative as the revelation of Daniel's efforts to come to terms with his own facticity, to finally stop running. The German existentialist philosopher Heidegger defined the experience of finding oneself in a particular world gestalt as "thrownness." This experience alone results in anxiety about the world itself and the possibilities it holds. In his opus *Being and Time*, Heidegger also aligns this fear with respiration. The individual, asserts the philosopher, does not truly comprehend this anxiety, which "is so close that it is oppressive and stifles one's breath..." (Heidegger 231). Until Susan's suicide attempt, Daniel has avoided all serious involvement. Afterwards, he alters rapidly as he moves through his self-expression, his self-articulation: "I was learning how to be an Isaacson...My face now bearded, my hair longer than it has ever been, I careen through my changes at an accelerating pace. The sense is of running too fast downhill. But why not, why the fuck not?" (BD 207). He moves out into his world, starting the Foundation, interviewing people regarding his parents' case, and generally taking a stand. Susan's world continues to shrink until, in the final analysis, it is totally self-enclosed. Action is essentially spatial, for "to act is to modify the shape of the world..." (BN 559). As his father's loud breathing reflects his assumption and consumption of space, so Daniel finally moves out to occupy his space via action. He comes to know himself, to define himself with every moment as an individual subject.

Of the novels included in my thesis, I maintain that the *Book of Daniel* is both the most clearly expressed and the most positive exploration of the philosophy of existentialism. Making use of the breath imagery metaphor, Doctorow allows us to track the movement of Daniel through anxiety to individuation. The reborn Daniel Isaacson sets off on a flight much like that of Joyce's Stephen Daedalus, symbolizing the soaring forth of his self into life. In stasis, as can be seen in Susan's deterioration, there can only be death, not security. Daniel has come to realize that life means movement outward, and he chooses life with all its risks. The act of narration itself is the first choice forward.

The awareness of the body, the somatizing that is revealed as central to self-knowledge in *The Book of Daniel*, is illuminated again in the novels of Walker Percy. In works such as *The Moviegoer* we are introduced to a philosophy that places its central importance on the relationship between subject and object, or between the 'for-itself' and the 'in-itself.' The pursuit of individual freedom is posited as essentially linked with the well being and freedom of the Other, a resolution of the primary problem of existence.

4.6 Walker Percy's Grail Quest in *The Moviegoer*

The specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair.

Kierkegaard

The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in

the everydayness of his own life... To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.

The Moviegoer

Existentialists are often accused of being nihilistic and depressing. Sartre speaks to this criticism in his lecture, published as *Existentialism and Humanism*:

The essential charge laid against us is, of course, that of over-emphasis upon the evil side of human life [...] In the light of all this, what people reproach us with is not, after all, our pessimism, but the sternness of our optimism. If people condemn our works of fiction, in which we describe characters that are base, weak, cowardly and sometimes even frankly evil, it is not only because those characters are base, weak, cowardly or evil. For suppose that, like Zola, we showed that the behaviour of these characters was caused by their heredity, or by the action of their environment upon them, or by determining factors, psychic or organic. People would be reassured, they would say, "You see, that is what we are like, no one can do anything about it." But the existentialist, when he portrays a coward, shows him as responsible for his cowardice. (42-3)

We can recall the failure of our different characters to rationalize their violent actions.

That is one element that readers often find most disturbing about Ellis' *American Psycho*.

We have also considered novels such as *Invisible Man*, *Beloved*, and finally *The Book of Daniel*, which present us with the possibility of self-realization. Walker Percy belongs to the latter group, whose view of life seems focused on the potential of individuation.

Percy's search for meaning led him to explore the works of philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre and Marcel, as well as the literary works of Dostoevsky and Camus.⁴⁹ He differs from the French school of existentialism by virtue of his

⁴⁹ There are several studies on Percy's philosophy. In *The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel's Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy's Novels*, Mary Deems Howland offers a comprehensive inquiry into Percy's distinctive form of existentialism.

religious belief; he was a devout Roman Catholic. In her comprehensive study of the works that inspired Percy, *The Gift of the Other*, Howland explores the philosophic basis for Percy's existentialism. His ideology is closest to the writings of Gabriel Marcel, says Howland, because they both place focus on the reconciliation of the subject/object dichotomy. All existentialists acknowledge the significance of the synthesis which Hegel made central. This issue of constructive relationships with the Other was one which Sartre alludes to in his works, but never fully develops. Such an affirmative vision is a vital part of Walker Percy's literary approach; he states in an essay: "The psychical forces presently released in the postmodern consciousness open unlimited possibilities for both destruction and liberation, for an absolute loneliness or a rediscovery of community and reconciliation" (*The Message in the Bottle* 112). His narratives focus on embracing liberation, rather than on destruction, as did Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*.

His first novel, *The Moviegoer* (1961), develops around the alienation experienced by the narrator and his growing awareness of the importance of human relationships in allaying this angst. In light of the previous chapter, it is interesting to note that Percy's central character, John Bickerson Bolling, is a young white male stocks-and-bonds broker. Unlike the characters found in the novels by Wolfe and Ellis, "Binx" resides in the Southern city of New Orleans rather than in New York City. Although he enjoys his money and his casual affairs, his life is essentially an "exercise in cultivating different sensations" (Howland 24). Since the narrative reveals the events of only eight days in his

Based primarily on Marcel, Percy's position is that coming to self-awareness is a continuous process: a journey, not a destination.

life, days that are marked by dramatic change, one can call the novel an experience of epiphany. As the novel opens, Binx tells the reader that he chooses to live in a basement apartment in a suburb, a detail which has caused several critics to compare him to Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*. He has decided on this simple, "peaceful" existence because of his previous experiences living in the center of the city:

But whenever I try live there, I find myself first in a rage during which I develop strong opinions on a variety of subjects and write letters to editors, then in a depression during which I lie rigid as a stick for hours staring straight up at the plaster medallion in the ceiling of my bedroom. (*The Moviegoer* 6)⁵⁰

This vacillation between rage and powerlessness, between action and inaction, is analogous to the description of the individual given by Christopher Lasch at the beginning of this chapter. Percy, as well as Lasch, gives a clear picture of alienating powers of the big city.

Now away from the city, Binx enjoys carrying out "the duties of a citizen and to receive in return a receipt or a neat styrene card with one's name on it certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist" (M 7). He lives, in short, a life stripped of all extremes of passion, an inauthentic life full of "quiet desperation." Not unlike Ellis' Patrick Bateman, he relates all his real world experiences to some movie or other: "The fact is I'm quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie" (M 7). Any form of escape will do nicely, from

⁵⁰ Percy, Walker. *The Moviegoer*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1967. Hereafter cited in text as "M."

movies or television to a series of dead-end relationships with the succession of secretary/girlfriends that he refers to as “my Lindas.”

A Southern Catholic writer who believes in redemption, Percy is often compared to Flannery O'Connor, with whom he shares a Southern and a Roman Catholic heritage. Violence is certainly redemptive in O'Connor's work, but as with many of the narratives I have considered here, redemption for O'Connor's characters frequently comes accompanied by death. What is positive about the novels of Walker Percy is that the violence itself becomes the vehicle for transcendence beyond the despair inherent in what he refers to as “everydayness,” a term from Heidegger. Another distinction of Percy's narratives from those of other authors discussed in this thesis is that the *physical* violence that occurs in *The Moviegoer* is not subject-to-subject; it is the impersonal violence of wars and car accidents. As a situation, it holds within itself a secret for the survivors. It is this secret which marks the onset of the main character's movement away from his “peaceful existence” and onto a quest for the meaning of existence. The narrative represents the journal of this particular journey, which actually begins in the past and extends into the future. It spans eight days leading up to the narrator's thirtieth birthday, which is symbolically Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent in the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar. Lent, in turn, marks the beginning of the movement towards the rebirth and resurrection of Easter Sunday.

The event that precipitates the novel's self-quest occurs in the immediacy of a war trauma memory:

But things have suddenly changed. My peaceful existence in Gentilly has been complicated. This morning, for the first time in years, there occurred to me the possibility of a search. I dreamed of the war, no, not quite dreamed but woke with the taste of it in my mouth, the queasy-quince taste of 1951 and the Orient. I remembered the first time the search occurred to me. I came to myself under a chindolea bush. Everything is upside down for me, as I shall explain later. What are generally considered to be the best times are for me the worst times, and that worst of times was one of my best. My shoulder didn't hurt but it was pressed hard against the ground as if somebody sat on me. Six inches from my nose a dung beetle was scratching around under the leaves. As I watched, there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search. Naturally, as soon as I recovered and got home, I forgot all about it. (M 11)

In this moment Binx confronts his own past, his facticity. Previously, he has been defining himself by reference to different movie characters: he loves like Clark Gable, or he seduces girls like Cary Grant. In the present moment, by means of this very evocative real memory, our narrator finds that his life begins to feel real. He begins to be present to his own life. Looking at his belongings, the accoutrements of his existence, he reflects: "A man can look at this little pile on his bureau for thirty years and never once see it. It is as invisible as his own hand. Once I saw it, however, the search became possible (M 11). The entire search involves, he tells the reader, simply "what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life" (M 13). Not to be involved in this search is to be in despair. Binx is onto something, and therefore he is moving away from his despair.

Trauma or catastrophe is essential, Percy believes, to permit an individual to become self-aware. It is the first step towards accepting the burden of choice inherent in existential freedom. The work of theologian Jerome Taylor, *In Search of Self: Life, Death & Walker Percy*, is an exploration of the quest for selfhood in all of Percy's central

characters⁵¹. In his analysis of the moment described above, the precipitating moment of Binx Bolling's search, Taylor explains its significance to selfhood:

The essential moment of catastrophe is obviously present here: Binx is lying wounded. He does not fight it or rail against it. There he is; he accepts it. And then something happens: his interest is caught by a dung beetle scratching around among the leaves. He *sees* it as he has not seen things before, as a kind of "revelation of being." (Taylor's italics, 98)

Kierkegaard's injunction to "choose despair" is offered by Taylor to explain the resolution of this catastrophe. In the midst of suffering or death man as being-for-itself still can assert his freedom by choosing to own the moment, rather than attempting to escape it. Thus did Faulkner's Joe Christmas choose his death, although he could not have prevented it. This coming to himself, as Taylor terms it, as one who is aware in the immediate sense is the first step of a responsible, acting agent. From this first step of self-recovery the individual "will begin a search for an answer to the question of who he is, where he came from, and where he is going" (Taylor 101).

The eight-day search which constitutes this narrative is merely the beginning of what is a life process. Man is responsible for creating himself in every moment, according to the precepts of existentialism. Like a movie actor, man creates his role, but without the direction provided for the performer. "The movies are onto the search, but they screw it up. [...] They like to show a fellow coming to himself in a strange place-but what does he do? [...] In two weeks time he is so sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be

⁵¹ This work by Jerome Taylor, theologian, is a study of Percy's philosophy, which he sees as mainly Kierkegaardian, and his religion, which is Roman Catholic. Of the text Percy himself asserts: "[It is] quite brilliant, both in its unerring dead aim on my characters, but also in his treatment of Kierkegaard" (cover of *In Search of Self*. Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications. 1986.).

dead” (M 13). Binx however, rejecting the “reality” he has found in movies, is on his way towards authenticity and away from “bad faith”. He carefully seeks out the truth in ordinary experiences. Going to his aunt’s home, he is greeted by the black servant:

For some reason it is possible to see Mercer more clearly today than usual. Ordinarily it is hard to see him because of the devotion. He worked for my grandfather in Feliciana Parish before Aunt Emily brought him to New Orleans. He is thought to be devoted to us and we to him. But the truth is that Mercer and I are not at all devoted to each other. My main emotion around Mercer is unease that in threading his way between servility and presumption, his foot might slip. (M 22)

Recognizing the humanity in the Other, a servant whom he has taken for granted in the past, Binx begins to relate with those around him as reflections of his own subjectivity and freedom.

Binx is good at making money, and he acknowledges that he enjoys money, but unlike the protagonists of Wolfe and Ellis this trader does not place a great deal of significance on material things. His aunt speaks ironically of “barbarians at the inner gate” with “Mr. Bolling the stockbroker” as defender of the spoils (M 33). However, Percy’s character does not see himself, like Wolfe’s McCoy, as a “master of the universe.” He is not obsessively engaged, as are the characters of Ellis, in a game of ‘keeping-up-with-the-Joneses.’ Binx is able to resist the attempt to seduce him to return to the prosperous and prestigious company of his Uncle Jules. In his search for authenticity, though, Binx Bolling finds that few others are interested: “People often ask me what is wrong with the world...and I always try to give an answer...I have noticed, however, that no one really wants to listen to an answer” (M 39).

“Percy’s first novel, *The Moviegoer* (1961), has at its center the developing intersubjective relationship between Binx Bolling and his aunt’s stepdaughter, Kate Cutrer” (Howland 21). Asked by his Aunt to attempt to “get through” to Kate, whom he has not seen in years, Binx finds that they still have much in common. “You don’t fool me,” she tells him; “You’re like me, but worse. Much worse” (M 43). She too is living “underground” in a basement. More significant still is the fact that she too is on a search. Having been involved in a car accident in which her date was killed, friends and family believe she is depressed by the experience. Unlike Binx, though, she is “trapping herself” in various roles she chooses to play. Kate is living in “bad faith,” as she refuses to confront the circumstances which have led to her incapacitating fear of action, and therefore of life (M 63).⁵²

Although Bolling is moving towards authentic existence throughout the narrative, he does not realize the inauthenticity of most of his life stratagems until the end. He makes money, he goes to movies, and he has an endless series of uncommitted relationships with women. The money gives him little pleasure; he seems to live very simply in a basement apartment without attachment to material things that money can offer: “My apartment is as impersonal as a motel room. I have been careful not to accumulate possessions” (M 78). His daily life is dull: “In the evenings I usually watch television or go to the movies” (M 7). He experiences his life, as in the Platonic Cave: several degrees removed from reality:

⁵² As we have seen “bad faith” involves trying to define oneself through the eyes of others, thereby avoiding responsibility for one’s own freedom.

Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship, as they say in books. I too once met a girl in Central Park, but it is not much to remember. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Wells in the doorway in *The Third Man*. (M 7)

He has no real intimacy in his life; he reveals that he has not had a friend in eight years: "I spend my entire time working, making money, going to movies and seeking the company of women" (M 41). He avoids intimate relationships until he begins his search for the meaning of his life. With Kate, he begins to open the door to the real.

"Have you noticed", Kate asks, "that only in time of illness or disaster or death are people real?" (M 81). Discussing the accident with Binx, she tells him that "it gave me my life. That's my secret, just as the War is your secret" (M 56). She attempts to recreate this feeling of reality by causing herself physical pain: she constantly picks at the skin on her hands, causing them to bleed. This attempt to make use of physical pain is similar to the situation of the sadist and/or the masochist as described by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. Relations with the Other "presuppose facticity; that is, our existence as body in the midst of the world" (BN 471). Masochism is one response to the fear one feels in the presence of the Other's freedom as signified by the "gaze." The answer, for the masochist, is to make the self into an object which cannot arouse the Other's attempt to appropriate the freedom of the subject. As with sadism, masochism is doomed to fail at the task it intends: "The more he tries to taste his objectivity, the more he will be submerged by his subjectivity - hence his anguish" (BN 493).

This use of self-inflicted pain has a twofold result: first, it serves to force awareness of facticity, the flesh as the immediate real; second, it is simultaneously a means of escaping the responsibility of freedom. In her interesting work *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry points out that “in serious pain the claims of the body utterly nullify the claims of the world” (33). Pain destroys language, says Elana Gomel, and through this process “the body in pain emerges as absolutely, uncompromisingly *real*, real beyond the construction of language and discourse” (xxiv; my italics). Both Kate and Binx are obsessed with the lack of reality in their worlds. It follows logically that they both seek what is most solid and real: “the power over the body is the only real power there is” (Gomel xxvi). Kate approaches this reality through self-mutilation. For Binx, the approach to the real is made through sexual encounters with various objectified women.

In the midst of her therapy session, Kate comes to an epiphany concerning the inauthenticity of her life. She attempts to relate this extraordinary experience to Binx:

You see, there is nothing he can say. He can't tell me the secret even if he knew it. Do you know what I did? After a minute or so he asked me: what comes to mind? I sat up and rubbed my eyes and then it dawned on me. But I couldn't believe it. It was too simple. My God, can a person live twenty-five years, a life of crucifixion, through a *misunderstanding*? Yes! I stood up. I had discovered that a person does not have to *be* this or *be* that or be anything, not even oneself. One is free. (M 115)

Shortly after this announcement Kate groans, “I'm so afraid” (116) and she trembles in the face of the responsibility of that “terrible freedom.” Binx, fleeing his malaise in his little sports car accompanied by one of his women, finds that “a little tongue of hellfire licks at our heels” (M 123). The burden of freedom so assaults him that he envies his wheelchair constrained step-brother: “His life is a serene business” (M 137).

Kate and Binx make a choice directed towards the future: they decide to marry. The proposal begins almost as a joke for Binx. For Kate, it is another attempt to run from her existential freedom. With marriage, she believes, Binx will have to direct her life for her: "It may not be the noblest way of living, but it is one way" (196). Refusing her subjective responsibility, Kate sets Binx up as her god: "You are the unmoved mover [...]" I don't know whether I love you, but I believe in you and I will do what you tell me (197). Binx, who has secretly wished often for the world to end, now wonders "Is it possible that - it is not too late?" (231). He has moved from a detached objective outlook on life to a more involved subjective perspective. She acknowledges his essential solipsism and he recognizes her precarious emotional state. They do find some sort of intimacy together, because they each understand the other's alienation. Hazel Barnes expounds on Sartre's position that reflects this reality: "Out of the awareness of our mutual solitude is born a sense of human solidarity" (217). Thus Kate and Binx begin an authentic existence, which, by definition, must originate with meaningful human interaction. In this mutual recognition of the other's being as freedom, there is no sense of alienation. Percy's characters have found a way to bridge the gap between self and Other, individual and community. That bridge is the one that Morrison's Sethe begins to hesitantly cross at the conclusion of *Beloved*. Doctorow's Daniel rediscovers it, and even Ellison's invisible man stretches tentatively towards it. Love seems to be the answer after all.

From this platonic, universal and fraternal love, we turn now to its more specific form in relationships between the sexes. Prior to entering into sexual relationships,

individuals require a sense of themselves as sexual beings. In our society, that involves confronting a complex system of gender identity issues. Here, the threat to the individual's sense of self is often great, as he/she struggles to define the self as free subject.

Chapter Five

En-Gendering Violence: Pitfalls on Freedom Road

"You fit into me
Like a hook into an eye.
A fish hook,
An open eye."

Margaret Atwood

5.1 Male & Female Subjects: The Violence of Stereotyping

I cannot make my liberty my aim unless I make that of others equally
my aim.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre has finally begun to be recognized for his contributions to feminism, after years of being maligned by feminist theorists.⁵³ Feminist and philosopher Julien Murphy claims that, not only was Sartre always an advocate for the oppressed, "he was one of the first contemporary philosophers to make gender a philosophical issue" (Murphy 3). His famous relationship with Simone de Beauvoir, whose writings have influenced French feminists, offers testimony to Sartre's understanding of gender related difficulties. Beauvoir maintains that it was Sartre who suggested to her that gender was a legitimate category worthy of analysis (Murphy 4). Several sections of her famous work, *The Second Sex*, were initially published in Sartre's

⁵³ For a succinct and coherent account of these theorists see the article by Phyllis Sutton Morris, "Sartre on Objectification: A Feminist Perspective" in *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre*.

journal *Les Temps Modernes*. The second wave of the Women's Movement has been inarguably influenced by Beauvoir's text. The unconventional and egalitarian relationship between these two philosophers, Sartre and Beauvoir, speaks volumes about Sartre's personal gender politics. In her seminal book, *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre*, Murphy remarks:

Given all this, the silence from feminists about Sartre's value is perplexing, having more to do with the historical moment in which Sartre found himself in his later years than with substantive evaluations of his work. Though Sartre's influence looms large over the century he has been temporarily displaced over the past few decades by two trends in particular, poststructuralism and feminism. Only now is he being restored to his rightful position of prominence. (4)

Feminist philosophy has attempted to distance itself from existentialism largely in response to the latter's lack of favour in the intellectual community. Murphy, Judith Butler, and others assert that the time has finally come to reverse that trend.

The long established debate concerning established binary oppositions of gender/sex calls into question previously accepted theoretical models. Freud's account of the oedipal stage of development, with its controversial theory of penis-envy, depicts a female enslaved by her body's deficiencies. Even as feminists rejected Freudian premises in favour of other analytic positions, the tremendous influence of Jacques Lacan on critical theory found women as much enslaved by gender as did Freud's account of the Oedipal stage. Judith Butler explains the female's status under Lacan's Law of the Father:

In yet other words, the human subject only becomes a discrete "I" within the matrix of gender roles. Hence to exist as a subject is to exist as a gendered being, "subjected" to the Law of the Father which requires that sexual desire remains within the rules of gender; in fact

the subject's sexual desire is dictated, sanctioned, and punished by the rules of gender. (*Subjects of Desire* 202)⁵⁴

Even if one rejects the Lacanian position, one must still acknowledge and confront the import of gender in establishing the subject's identity. Human beings seek recognition, and "the terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable" (*Undoing Gender* 2).⁵⁵ Butler warns that some methods of recognition, such as those based on race or gender, can "undo" the person by conferring recognition, or "undo" the person by withholding recognition (*Ibid*). The socially constructed world in which the subject finds him/herself might, in fact, result in total undoing when this self "no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this 'I' fully recognizable" (U 3). Despite the individual's need for recognition by the Other, sometimes the terms of that recognition are intolerable to the self's sense of identity.

Butler maintains that the notion of gender is in fact performative rather than essential, that we *become* female by *acting* in a required way dictated by cultural norms. In her noteworthy text *Gender Trouble* Butler argues that gender is a *doing* rather than a *being*, a process rather than an existent.⁵⁶ This antinaturalist approach is sometimes interpreted as a rejection of the materialism of the self. Critical theorist Terry Eagleton addresses this dichotomy with his usual clarity: "we are not 'cultural' rather than 'natural' creatures, but cultural beings by virtue of our nature" (quoted in Alcoff 161). Recent

⁵⁴ Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. New York: Columbia U P, 1987. Hereafter cited in text as "SD."

⁵⁵ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*. Boca Raton, FLA: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2004. Hereafter cited in text as "U."

⁵⁶ For a complete discussion on the various feminist ideologies, see Linda Martin Alcoff's *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2006.

feminists Toril Moi and Nancy Bauer argue for combining gender and sex by making use of existential categories based primarily on the writings of Simone de Beauvoir (Alcoff 163). Regardless of theoretical approaches to gender no one can argue the significance of gender identity to the self-conscious subject, and to that subject's awareness that sometimes such role determinations "make life unlivable" (U 4). Basing her "feminism of freedom" on the work of Simone de Beauvoir and philosopher Merleau-Ponty, feminist theorist Toril Moi speaks, not of sex and gender, but of bodies and subjectivity. She affirms that, if one refuses the traditional terminology defining femininity, one is left free for self-definition:

To say that my subjectivity stands in a contingent relationship to my body is to acknowledge that my body will significantly influence both what society - others - make of me, and the kind of choices I will make in response to the Other's image of me, but it is also to acknowledge that no specific form of subjectivity is ever a necessary consequence of having a particular body. (Moi 114)

This self-definition is not for the faint of heart, however, and combating the socially prescribed conventions is not without consequences. The individual's struggle for freedom of identity, and the cost extracted, is explored in the following texts, Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Alison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*.

These two novels, both contemporary works of fiction, demonstrate the destruction and limitations inherent in a rigid gender structural system. The first narrative, *Fight Club*, centers on a dissociated subject whose masculine identity confusion engages him in a sado-masochistic struggle for identity. This work, and the film based on the novel, has had a significant influence on the young men of our culture. Self-termed

“Fight Clubs” have sprung up all over North America. The less-than-positive conclusion of the narrative does not bode well for the males who seek to emulate the experiences of its central character/narrator. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the narrator is a young girl whose femininity makes her prey to physical and sexual abuse by her step-father. She initially accepts the role of sexual masochist, but gradually learns to reject it as she struggles towards individuation. We begin the analysis of these novels with a necessarily brief grounding in Sartre’s concepts of sexual sadism and masochism, with their stereotypical gendered associations.

5.2 Sartre and Sadomasochism

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre affirms that all intersubjective relationships have sadism and masochism as permanent possibilities. This reflects the nature of human freedom, something both sought and feared by the individual subject. Butler explains Sartre’s position thus: “Sadomasochism is the paradox of determinate freedom revealed in sexual life” (SD 139). Consciousness is always individual and therefore separate from all Other forms of consciousness. In sexual desire the subject seeks to know the Other as *freedom* manifested by the *body*; in fact, desire is “consciousness making itself body” (BN 389). All sexual desire has at its base the demand for recognition by the Other; two forms that desire might take, sadism and masochism, differ only in the means each chooses to achieve such recognition. I come to realize the limits of my freedom when the Other looks at me, that is to say makes of me an object for himself. Simultaneously, the Other is revealed to me as a separate freedom that necessarily limits the possibilities of

my freedom. In the presence of the Other's "look," I am no longer master of the situation (BN 265). As such, the Other is a constant threat to me, and his freedom a reminder of the objectifying limits placed on my own freedom. Attempting to recover myself as free subject, then, involves absorbing the Other (BN 364). This *attempt*, for it is clearly doomed, involves various strategies. One such strategy is sadism: "The aim of sadism is to secure the freedom of the sadist at the expense of the freedom of the victim" (Martin 92). In Chuck Palahniuk's 2003 novel, *Fight Club*, we are introduced to a man "who must torture himself into manhood" (Ta 267).

5.3 Sadistic Masculine Stereotyping: *Fight Club*

By the end of the American Century, every outlet of the consumer world—magazines, ads, movies, sports, music videos—would deliver the message that manhood had become a performance game to be won in the marketplace, not the workplace, and that male anger was now part of the show.
Susan Faludi, *Stiffed*

Sadomasochism

The societal stereotype is that of the aggressive, even sadistic, male and the passive or masochistic female. Sartre's explanation of the sadism/masochism response is non-gender specific. Either might assume the role of sadist or masochist; in fact the roles are often interchangeable:

[T]he sadist's effort is to ensnare the Other in his flesh by means of violence and pain, by appropriating the Other's body in such a way that he treats it as flesh so as to cause flesh to be born. But this appropriation surpasses the body which it

appropriates, for its purpose is to possess the body only insofar as the Other's freedom has been ensnared within it (BN 403).

As with Doctorow's narrator in *The Book of Daniel*, the sadist is in flight from "facticity," which is to say from the human condition. Rejecting his position as object for the Other, he attempts to render it impossible for the Other to view him as such by "drowning" the victim in his/her own facticity as flesh. Severe pain commands all one's consciousness, or perhaps even destroys consciousness. It takes one beyond the world of discourse and into the world of being-in-itself where existence is simply that of a body mired in pain. As discussed in Chapter Two, the sadist's efforts are doomed to failure; he recognizes this failure in the gaze of the Other. As objectified as this Other appears, all he has enslaved is the Other as being-in-itself; the Other as being-for-itself, as a free and individual consciousness, still exists. "[T]he sadist experiences the absolute alienation of his being in the Other's freedom" (BN 405). Needing the free recognition of the victim, the sadist comes to realize that he needs the very freedom which he is attempting to destroy. Although Sartre makes no gender based distinction for sadism and masochism, there are compelling arguments that these behaviours are linked to masculine and feminine identities.

White Males: Violent Aggressors or Endangered Species?

The leading cause of violence is maleness.

Tanner

Susan Faludi's *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* offers some startling information for feminists and other gender theorists. Her central thesis follows the post

war (WWII) changes in the American economy and the resulting alterations in male roles. Faludi argues that as America moved from an essentially production-based to an information-based economy, middle-class working men became “feminine,” passive, consumers rather than active manufacturers. “The frontier, the enemy, the institutions of brotherhood, the women in need of protection - all the elements of the old formula for attaining manhood had vanished in short order” (Faludi 30). In an effort to counteract this loss of masculinity the media began to glamorize “bad boys” and rebels. The 1957 sci-fi film *The Incredible Shrinking Man* follows a character who loses everything and wonders if he is “the man of the future” (Faludi 31). As he becomes smaller, he begins to become aggressive towards those around him: “The tinier he gets, the greater his combativeness becomes—and his desire for a combatant to defeat” (Faludi 31). In the real world, those enemies range from Communists in the 1950s to Iraqis today; they may include gays, women in the work place, and illegal aliens at the border. Sometimes the aggression is controlled, as in video games, and other times it takes the form of anonymous attacks against elusive enemies, as with sniper killings. “And what act,” Faludi asks, “could be more crudely and stereotypically masculine than a show of violence?” (37).

What becomes of this directionless masculine aggression, of this “rebel without a cause”? With very little in his life remaining under his control, the male stereotype is still expected to dominate something or someone. “[W]hen mastery of a trade and mastery over one’s life fade as possibilities, all that may seem to be left is raw dominance. The urge to control, unharnessed and unmoored, soon spins out of control. Without a society, Daniel Boone would have been just a killer” (Faludi 38). Alternate masculine qualities are

reduced by the “culture of ornament,” says Faludi, to ‘props’ such as youth, money and aggression. Her portrayal of this infantilized version of masculinity is an accurate description of the narrator’s milieu in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*: “The gyms you go to are crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the way a sculptor or an art director says” (*Fight Club* 50).⁵⁷

Fight Club: The High Cost of Masculinity

In her article on *Fight Club*, published in *The Journal of American Culture*, Lynn M. Ta is chiefly concerned with the consumerism of the cultural milieu, and its effect on the characters in the text. She claims that “Jack’s melancholic sadomasochism is the product of what he perceives to be the feminization of late capitalism; as a corporate drone, he feels victimized by a culture that has stolen his manhood” (Ta 266). In fact, one might wonder if Palahniuk has read Susan Faludi, so closely does her assessment of the crisis in masculinity echo in the pages of his novel. Huddled in his apartment cocoon, filled with Ikea furniture and designer dishes, the narrator lives an emasculated and superficial existence. His only means of escape is through the deconstruction of the subject position which is fabricated on the cultural system he comes to abhor, Jameson’s “late capitalism.” This deconstruction involves the tearing down of his socially constructed identity; in its place he constructs a new alter-ego in the form of Tyler Durden. By definition, this character must, and does, reject all the values of the subject’s

⁵⁷ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*. London: Vintage, 2003. Hereafter cited in text as “FC.”

old identity. The difficulty lies in the fact that he has no role model to enable him to construct a viable masculine model.

Faludi deals extensively with a culture that has removed all the traditional societal domains where men used to prove themselves, leaving them no longer an important cog in the social wheel. Fathers, too, have failed their sons, bestowing them with “not the GI ethic but the GI Joe ‘action figure,’ a twelve-inch shrunken-man doll whose main feature was his ability to accessorize” (Faludi 36). *Fight Club*’s protagonist has no understanding of what it means to be male, and he realizes this. As one of many fatherless males, he frequently reminds us that he has had no real male model: “What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women” (FC 50). In true existential fashion he is burdened by his own freedom; he has no idea how to create the self he wishes to become. In fact, he has no conceptual model of what kind of self he *might* become. Turning away from the vacuity experienced by Patrick Bateman, so frighteningly portrayed in *American Psycho*, our character-narrator knows only what he does not want: “It’s nothing anymore to have a beautiful stock body” (FC 48). His sense of identity, such as it is, lies only in negation. His alter ego, Tyler, the opposite of everything he sees in himself, is the realization or actualization of this negation. The only freedom he can visualize is the freedom of what Heidegger calls “being-towards-death.” As the philosopher Nietzsche expresses it, “Chaos is the only order.”

As the novel opens, the nameless narrator, a chronic insomniac whose doctor is unable or unwilling to offer any help, initiates attending various support groups for those with terminal illnesses. “This is why I loved the support groups so much,” he says, “if

people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention” (FC 107). There he believes he finds the authenticity he has been seeking, and he is able to cry in the arms of a man dying of testicular cancer. It is significant that these men suffer from a disease of their sexual organs. Bob, the man into whose arms Jack cries, has had his testicles removed and the ultimate castration fear realized. Significantly, his emasculating cancer is the result of steroid use, taken to achieve the ultimate male physique.

Big Bob was a juicer, he said. All those salad days on Dianabol and then the racehorse steroid, Wistrol. His own gym, Big Bob owned a gym. He’d been married three times. He’s done product endorsements, and had I seen him on television, ever? The whole how-two program about expanding your chest was practically his own invention. (FC 21)

Symbolically, Big Bob is emasculated by the very culture whose stereotype of male perfection he has striven to achieve. It is the confrontation of this truth, as much as facing his mortality, which leads to the changes in the narrator. His castration fear, moreover, is somewhat relieved by being in the male cancer group. At least *he* still has his physiological ‘balls.’ When he leaves these disease victims he feels renewed:

Walking home after a support group, I felt more alive than I’d ever felt. I wasn’t host to cancer or blood parasites; I was the little warm center that the life of the world crowded around. And I slept well. Babies don’t sleep this well. Every evening I died, and every evening I was born. Resurrected. (FC 22)

The problem is that he is not authentic, unlike the group members. He manages to evade this knowledge until a woman enters the meeting of Remaining Men Together, the only group in which Jack has felt able to cry and feel release. In the presence of this observing gaze Jack is suddenly aware of his inauthenticity: “To Marla I’m a fake. Since the second night I saw her, I can’t sleep [...] In this one moment, Marla’s lie reflects my lie, and all I

can see are lies” (23). Following the first meeting, Marla turns up at all his support groups and he becomes angry, sleepless, and desperate. It is after this initial introduction to Marla that he meets Tyler Durden, his alter ego, for the first time. Seeing the superficiality of his masculine self reflected by this female presence, our narrator seeks something more tangible.

Tyler is not fully revealed as the narrator’s Other self until the end of the novel, but there are various indications throughout the text that they are one and the same. On the second page into the text, we find the narrator initially making an assertion which he frequently repeats: “I know this because Tyler knows this” (12). “Sometimes Tyler speaks for me,” he informs us. This splitting of the self allows the narrator to actualize both feminine/passive/masochistic characteristics, as well as those that are masculine/aggressive/sadistic. He can be both victim and victimizer, as he (narrator) and Tyler (his Other) engage in physical violence towards each other. In their fights they project the anger and frustration brought on by life. As he hits Tyler, the narrator explains the relief he feels:

Instead of Tyler, I felt finally I could get my hands on everything in the world that didn’t work, my cleaning that came back with the collar buttons broken, the bank says I’m hundreds of dollars overdrawn. My job where my boss got on my computer and fiddled with my DOS execute commands. And Marla Singer, who stole the support groups from me.[...] I asked Tyler what he’d been fighting. Tyler said his father. (53)

Most men, though, attend fight club “because of something they’re too scared to fight” (54). After a few months each man “trusts himself to handle anything” (51). As sadists/masochists, the fighters move into a world beyond words (51) where

consciousness is forced into flesh or facticity. Sartre affirms both sadism and masochism as “permanent possibilities of all sexual encounters” (SD 139). Since it is impossible to be both subject and object simultaneously, this determinate nature of freedom is revealed in sexual life and sadomasochism is one potential response. By splitting his subject, Palahniuk’s character has found a way to be subject and object, sadist and masochist concurrently. The price, of course, is his mental health; a split subject is one in the process of dissolution. In this case the cure is worse than the illness, and the narrator’s blood-thirsty games destroy both his body and his mind. In the words of Elana Gomel in describing a serial killer, he attempts to “glue together his fragmented self with blood” (Gomel 60).

Redemptive and Liberating Violence?

Palahniuk’s novel poses the question: how does one escape from an empty existence founded on material acquisition? The answer he provides is simultaneously confusing and disturbing. Are we all to engage in violence against ourselves? As the story progresses we learn that the hero, when engaged in physical fights with Tyler, is in fact fighting with himself. This echoes the episode in which the narrator beats himself up in front of his boss, as a means of blackmailing him. The fight scenes in both the novel and its film version, David Fincher’s *Fight Club*, are uncomfortably painful to read/watch. Leftist cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek directly addresses this issue in his text *Revolution at the Gates*. As we have previously discussed, Sartre presents masochism as a self-defeating attempt to gain one’s subjective freedom. Žižek contends, however, that self-

inflicted violence is not self-defeating; in fact, he describes it as one “direct way out of the closure of capitalistic subjectivity” (252). This, he argues, is the main point of the text:

The first lesson of *Fight Club* is thus that we cannot go *directly* from capitalist to revolutionary subjectivity: the abstraction, the foreclosure of others, the blindness to other’s suffering and pain, has first to be broken in a gesture of taking the risk and reaching directly out to the suffering other—a gesture which, since it shatters the very kernel of our identity, cannot fail to appear extremely violent. (252)

The narrator attempts to trigger some emotional release by misleadingly attending a testicular cancer support group. The compassion that he feels towards those genuinely afflicted is a “Thank God it’s not me” response, one that encourages the distance between subjects. Whatever bonding he feels there is clearly superficial, based as it is, on false premises. Soon after he begins to attend these groups, he meets Tyler and the fighting is initiated. Although he assaults himself, and eventually shoots himself, Zizek remarks that such self-torture is a necessary means of depriving the sadistic master of his dominion: “Sadism involves a relationship of domination, while masochism is the first step towards liberation” (253). It might be the first *attempt* at liberation, but it is difficult to agree with Zizek that this is an attempt that will succeed. From Sartre’s reading of the masochist/sadist dichotomy, there is a strong possibility that the masochist will then change roles and become a sadist. Perhaps such role reversal explains the previously humane revolutionaries who become monsters once they have overthrown their sadistic masters. As a case in point, the “Fight Club” organization in the text becomes a neo-fascist group called “Project Mayhem”. If major change from within capitalism depends

upon numbers of people *freeing* themselves through self-abuse, it seems an unlikely and untenable project.

5.3 Palahniuk's Existentialism

Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature devotes an entire volume (2005) to author Chuck Palahniuk. Writing in this journal, existentialist critics, such as Robert Bennett and Andrew Hock Soon Ng, also view *Fight Club* as an expression of existentialist philosophy. Ng asserts that the Palahniuk's novel "neatly packages existentialism for the scarcely uninitiated in both its thematic concerns and in adequate doses of rather 'hip' phrases that smack profoundly of the philosophy [of existentialism]" (116). There are, as Ng suggests, many such phrases: "This was *freedom*. Losing all hope was *freedom*" (Italics mine, FC 22); "It's only after you've lost everything," Tyler says, "that you're *free* to do anything" (Italics mine, 70). "[B]ut God's got this all wrong. We are not special. We are not crap or trash, either. We just are. *We just are* and what happens just happens" (Italics mine, 207). Each of these quotations might be said to allude to Sartre's position that *being* is essentially nothingness; we must create ourselves by our actions and our free choices. Ng's strange mixture of Freudian analysis, Sartrean concepts, and Rank's doppelganger theory, interferes with the clarity of Palahniuk's existentialism as expressed in the novel under discussion.

In contrast to this broad definition of the existentialism contained in *Fight Club*, “Freedom Fighters” has its focus primarily on Sartre’s philosophy of sado-masochism. Our reading of the protagonist’s circumstances in Palahniuk’s novel discovers far more than ‘hip’ phraseology. The narrator’s attempts to transcend his current situation, which Ng perceives as an effort towards existential transcendence, I reason to be the flight from facticity that is central to the sadist’s project. It is an act of bad faith in which the narrator, frightened by the emptiness of his existence, chooses to posit an alternate identity which is an “absolute.” In the same way that Walker Percy’s character, Kate, tries to escape her existential angst by marriage, *Fight Club*’s central character creates another self who will choose for him. Thus, he attempts to absolve himself of all responsibility for his life and his “terrible freedom.”

The narrator posits Tyler as a god figure, as surely as is Richard Wright’s Cross Damon. He is also the father figure: ““what you have to understand is your father was your model for God”” (FC 140). Jack doesn’t want real life; he wants “something better than real life” (FC 22) and he believes that Tyler can give him that. Reality is both too boring and too frightening. He creates Tyler to deal with the responsibility for both. When the novel concludes, the narrator has decided that he is in heaven and he doesn’t want to go back (207). He has escaped responsibility once again through a symbolic death, but this time he is able to acknowledge his bad faith. Sartre tells us that bad faith involves self-deception that is not necessarily unconscious. *Fight Club*’s central character/narrator, aware of his own self-deception, describes his new situation:

In my Father’s house there are many mansions.

Of course, when I pulled the trigger, I died.

Liar.

And Tyler died.

With the police helicopters thundering toward us, and Marla and all the support group people who couldn't save themselves, with all of them trying to save me, I had to pull the trigger.

This was better than real life.

And your one perfect moment won't last forever.

Everything in heaven is white on white.

Faker. (Italics are mine; Fight Club 206)

He is aware that he is attempting to escape, although he reveals that he remembers everything that has happened. "Marla's still on Earth, and she writes to me" our hero informs us. "Someday, she says, they'll bring me back. [...] But I don't want to go back. Not yet" (FC 207). Defining oneself as masculine in the 21st century is no easy task. Sometimes it is all a man can do to try and hang on to his sanity. Few men, though, would choose to assume the difficulties familiar to those persons of the opposite gender.

5.4 The Female Masochist: *Bastard Out of Carolina*

A 1990 Senate committee report indicates that three out of four women will be victims of violent crime during their lifetime.

Marilyn Maxwell

The dichotomy of victimized women and victimizing men is solidly established in literature, as it appears to be in life. In her text *Intimate Violence*, feminist and literary theorist Laura E. Tanner connects this polarity to differing senses of embodiment: "For the male violator, embodiment emerges as a source of strength rather than vulnerability [...] the male body, then, emerges as a tool that extends the power of subjectivity out into a larger universe that the violator can remake within the configurations of his own desire" (115). The female victim of sexual assault is violated as body and as subject; her body "becomes a text on which his will is inscribed, a form that bears the mark of his subjectivity even as she cannot divorce it from her own" (Tanner 115). The female narrator in Dorothy Allison's novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* must negotiate her identities as female, and as poor "white trash." These stereotypical gender and class distinctions must be overcome if she is to claim herself as free subject and reject the victim role that has been thrust upon her.

Allison's novel is sometimes criticized as one more salacious story of incest. It tells the story of a young Southern girl, nicknamed 'Bone,' who is born to a family defined by poverty, anti-social behaviour, and drunkenness. She does not know her father and when her mother finally marries, the girl is physically and sexually abused by her step-father, Daddy Glen. It begins while the mother is in hospital delivering a baby, and it becomes progressively more violent. Although the mother makes every effort to deny the seriousness of the abuse, in chapter eight she is finally confronted by an angry doctor who sees the signs of physical assault in Bone. After this, other family members become involved and Bone spends time with them to avoid the man whom her mother seems

unable to renounce. The story of the abusive relationship is uncharacteristically halted, and does not appear again until a horrific rape scene when the novel is almost at conclusion. Vincent King explains the significance of this change of focus in a positive article entitled "Hopeful Grief: The possibility of a Postmodernist Feminism in Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*." King's analysis supports the position of this current project, that Allison's novel presents a redemptive response to violence. Bone, unlike Palahniuk's hero, successfully resolves her gender-dictated, determined masochism and emerges as a stronger subject.

With Chapter Nine the novel moves from the story of abuse to the recounting of "Bone's efforts to survive, and even transmute these horrors. But to do so Bone must rewrite—and in some cases simply reject—the names and stories that make her vulnerable to violence" (King 124). In the process she comes to understand that her own identity is not something fixed, but something she must construct out of the material presented by her milieu. Although this knowledge of her own freedom threatens her initially, she comes to accept and value this liberation. Making use of it, she rewrites the narrative established for her by the rest of her family, the other Boatwrights. The chapters from eight until the final rape scene chronicle the young girl's experiments with differing identities, from sexual masochistic fantasies to born-again Christian. In order to establish a strong subject position she must explore the possibilities open to her. Not until she is finally able to fight Daddy Glen's subjectivity, which has been imposed upon her, does she finally begin to freely establish her sense of self as other than victim. Unlike

Palahniuk's protagonist, she does not need to hurt herself to resist the domination forced upon her by the patriarchal system in which she finds herself.

The novel informs the reader at once that identity is a central issue for the main character. The confusion with which she struggles appears in the opening line: "I've been called Bone all my life, but my name's Ruth Anne," the narrator states (*Bastard Out of Carolina* 1).⁵⁸ Her very introduction into the world is precipitated by violence, drunkenness, and confusion. While Bone's mother is asleep, in the car driven by her drunken brother and surrounded by her drunken sisters, the resulting car accident causes her to prematurely deliver a baby "'no bigger than a knucklebone'" (BC 2). The aunts give the baby the names Ann, after her mother, and Ruth, after her aunt. Not certain of the father's name, they give two conflicting ones; for this sin against the system the baby's birth certificate loudly pronounces her illegitimate. This stamp, even if not a visible one, represents a "mark on her and hers" (4) which the mother, Anne, is determined to alter. The facts of her daughter's identity, established by the courthouse, are not unalterable in her eyes. From her mother's determination, Bone begins to learn that you do not have to accept the identity that is thrust upon you.

Bone's name, then, marks her in various ways. Her legal first names bond her with her mother and aunt, the matriarchal lineage. With no legal connection to her biological father, she is certified a "bastard by the state of South Carolina" (3). Echoing the Book of Genesis, the nickname given to her is a reminder that she is a woman and

⁵⁸ Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. Hereafter cited in text as "BC."

therefore dependent upon, and inferior to, the male of the species. Once God has taken a rib from Adam to create Eve, Adam announces: "She is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23). Granny alludes to another metaphor when she complains that Glen Waddell, who later covets and abuses her grand-daughter, looks at her "like some old junkyard dog waiting to steal a bone" (37). Bone enters the world defined by the language that has already been applied to her family: they are poor, white, trash. Like her mother, who persistently works to have the stamp of illegitimacy removed from her daughter's birth certificate, Bone wishes to change the terms that classify her. Her first conscious effort occurs when she once again has to move to a new school, following the family's loss of yet another home. Enraged by the humiliation of their circumstances, Bone responds by creating a new identity:

The first day at the district school the teacher pursed her lips and asked me my name, and that anger came around and stomped on my belly and throat. I saw tired patience in her eyes, a little shine of pity, and a contempt as old as the red dust hills I could see through the windows of her classroom. I opened my lips but could not speak.

'What's your name, now, honey?' the woman asked me again, speaking slowly as if she suspected I was not quite bright. The anger lifted in me and became rage.

'Roseanne,' I answered as blithely as if I'd never been called anything else. I smiled at her like a Roseanne. 'Roseanne Carter. My family's from Atlanta, just moved up here.' (BC 67)

As a result of that lie, Bone "enjoys a brief popularity," confirming her instinctive belief that identity is fluid rather than static. In beginning to re-name herself, she initiates the long and painful process of creating a self-defining subject.

Bone's path to self-empowerment involves the central task of narrating her story of abuse. Allison's character struggles to use the strands of a language which has defined

her to weave together her own precarious sense of self. "The human subject," asserts Gomel, "is constructed by a life story" (Gomel xiv). Bone learns to narrate, and so to self-construct, from years of listening to the family stories told most often by the women. Not until the end of her story, when she feels safe with her Aunt Raylene, does the shattered young girl begin to heal. At twelve years old, betrayed by those who were supposed to protect her, Bone realizes that she is changed forever. Because she is writing this story, one where she begins to move past the hate and anger, the reader feels that she will be able to make her own life "out of pride, and stubbornness, and too much anger" (BC 263). She becomes, says Giles, "a very different kind of storyteller from the other Boatwright women" (*The Spaces of Violence* 82). She refuses to accept many of the notions which they do, including the heroism of the males, the insignificance of the females, and the powerlessness determined by their poverty and alcoholism.

Sexuality in *Bastard Out of Carolina*

This novel may be disturbing to readers because of the nature of the masturbatory fantasies described by the narrator, fantasies that are steeped in masochism.

The daydream was about struggling to get free while the fire burned hotter and closer. I am not sure if I came when the fire reached me or after I had imagined escaping it. But I came. (BC 63)

The sexual and physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her step-father, Glen, ensures that she confuses sexuality and violence. In the masturbation incident described above, Bone is erotically stimulated by watching Glen and her mother "hugging and rubbing on each other [...] Sex. Was that what Daddy Glen had been doing to me in the parking lot?"

(63). The motif of fire runs through all such scenes, a hell fire that burns and destroys

Bone because she sees herself as evil:

Sometimes when I looked into his red features and blazing eyes, I knew that it was nothing I had done that made him beat me. It was just me, the fact of my life, who I was in his eyes and mine. I was evil. Of course I was. I admitted it to myself, locked my fingers into fists, and shut my eyes to everything I did not understand. (110)

Meanwhile, her sexual fantasies become more violent, and she is “more ashamed of masturbating to the fantasy of being beaten than for being beaten in the first place. I lived in a world of shame” (113). At this stage, Bone is accepting the identity imposed by those around her. As a member of a dysfunctional family, she perceives herself as dysfunctional. As the object of her mother’s neglect and her step-father’s abuse, she accepts herself as hateful, shameful, and unlovable. How is she to move past this distorted sense of identity? Nevertheless, move past it she does.

Bone’s victim fantasies are evidence of her acceptance of the Other’s definition of her existence. The process of self-creation is a complex one, even given the least difficult of external circumstances. The desire to become oneself, what Judith Butler refers to as “existential desire” (SD 121), is an “existential project that structures the spontaneity of the for-itself” (121). For Sartre, as Butler interprets him, “desire is the mode through which the self comes to be, i.e., its mode of self-realization” (SD 123). One determines oneself in a particular world, of course, in a particular set of external circumstances. We are not, however, in the Sartrean view, the victims of our feelings or our desires in response to our external situation. “Under no circumstances can the past in any way by itself produce *an act*...we must recognize that the indispensable and fundamental

condition of all action is the freedom of the acting being” (BN 563). This is both the good and the bad news of existentialism. We can indeed change our lives, and if we do not do so, we must acknowledge that it is the result of our free choice. With our desires we make an existential choice of how we wish to be. Butler elucidates this understanding:

In Sartre’s view, desire is not a psychic irreducible, except as much as desire is understood as a manifestation of choice. Desire is not given, but, in an important sense, created and recreated; as such, it indicates a free agency prior to its own emergence. (SD 130)

In the context of our novel, this reveals to us the significance of the changing character of Bone’s desires as expressed primarily in her fantasies.

In an initiatory step she fantasizes saviors; a powerless child herself, she imagines that all the adults, who have failed her in reality, become her heroes. She creates a scene in which her repentant step-father begs forgiveness for abusing her:

Daddy Glen would weep tears of blood. Jesus, maybe, would come into his heart. He’d follow us out to Alma’s and get on his knees before the whole family. ‘I have sinned,’ he’d say, and hold out his hands to me, beg my forgiveness and cry my name. Mama would say no. My aunts would say no. My uncles, Reese, the minister, everyone in the world would stand up and say no. But I would pull myself up from my sickbed. I would look right into his eyes, into the lamps of his soul. Yes, I would say. Yes. I forgive you. Then probably I would die. (BC 116)

She imbues herself with the only power available to her, the power to forgive. However, despite this fantasy, her mother does forgive Glen and the abuse continues. Bone’s fantasies become more violent than ever, as she tells her younger cousins stories of “boys and girls gruesomely raped and murdered, babies cooked in pots of boiling beans, vampires and soldiers and long razor-sharp knives” (BC 119). This anger finds some

temporary resolution in the gospel music that begins to enthrall her. There, she begins to accept the binaries within herself:

That was what gospel music was meant to do —make you hate and love yourself at the same time, make you ashamed and glorified. It worked on me. It absolutely worked on me. (BC 136)

This inaugurates the integration of the pieces of her shattered self. Not until the final horrific rape scene does Bone actively reject the identity that has been thrust upon her: “I had always been afraid to scream, afraid to fight. I had always felt like it was my fault, but now it didn’t matter. I didn’t care anymore what might happen. I wouldn’t hold still anymore” (BC 282). At the end of the novel, with her mother’s symbolic gift of the blanked out birth certificate, Bone receives her life, her existential freedom. No longer defined by her past, she is now free to reinterpret her past and define herself.

“Sartre understands the struggle for recognition intrinsic to early childhood as the self’s dramatic evolution into existence. The desire to be at its earliest stages is the urge to exist for another—in other words, the need to be loved; this primary relation to the Other forms the pathic structure of every individual life” (SD 161). The original project of the child-self is to come to self-consciousness through the “look” of the Other, who is the parent. One’s immediate environment is a “thrownness,” to use Heidegger’s term, from which one never fully escapes. All future experiences are grounded in how one *responds* to that given situation, but Sartre asserts that this is in no way deterministic. In his biographical studies of Genet and Flaubert, explorations in existential analysis, Sartre investigates the process of coming to self-identity. The experiences of the unloved child mirror the basic existential human situation. In each case, the choices made in the struggle

to self-consciousness determine the way in which these experiences are lived. Sartre refers to the individual as both sign and signifier. Judith Butler explains it thus:

Although the early childhood struggle for recognition is surely definitive of adult life, it does not *determine* the texture of adult experience in a strict sense. The earliest dramas of desire establish the reigning motifs of a given life and circumscribe the domain of possible choices. Early childhood does not unilaterally produce adult life; its causality is less mechanical than dialectical. Childhood maintains its power in adult experience to the extent that its themes are appropriated and reinterpreted in contemporary terms. (SD 163)

Both Bone and Jack are engaged in the effort to come to terms with the implications of a socially prescribed gender.

Gender, as Butler asserts, is a *doing* rather than a *being*. The import of gender to the subject's sense of self will continue to raise important issues. Sartre's philosophy is in keeping with the words of the feminist critic, Toril Moi, that "no specific form of subjectivity is ever a necessary consequence of having a particular body" (114).⁵⁹

Nevertheless, until gender becomes a less rigid social determination, it will continue to provide the subject with an imposed identity that is difficult to subvert. The traditional association of the male subject with sadistic impulses, the female with masochistic, add to the general sexual confusion. The narrator of *Fight Club* attempts to know himself as male/female, sadist/masochist, and in the process becomes a dissociated subject.

However, the novel's conclusion leaves us with a suggestion that this subject is coming to the self-awareness that is essential to self-conscious freedom. He is not ready to go back to his environment *yet*, he offers, implying that he will come to be ready. Acknowledging that he is a "faker" and a "liar", he is now at least consciously aware that he has been

⁵⁹ For the complete quotation from Moi, see page four of this chapter.

living in *bad faith* (FC 206). One cannot be both subject and object; it is an impossibility of corporeal, finite existence. It reflects, in one sense, the desire to be God which represents “a coincidence of for-itself and in-itself such that *human freedom* would be at the origin of the in-itself” (SD 136; italics mine).⁶⁰ Life choices would certainly be made easier with the perspective of infinite knowledge and infinite freedom. This project, analogous to the sado-masochist’s efforts, is doomed to fail. Only the truly unbalanced can believe in such a possibility; the narrator’s new awareness at the conclusion of *Fight Club* discloses that he is no longer in this state of unreality. There might be hope for him yet!

As for Bone in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, she accepts the task of creating her own identity when she violently rejects, literally as well as figuratively, the subjectivity that is thrust upon her. The role of sexual masochist, which her step-father forces upon her, gradually becomes displaced as she learns to accept the varying aspects of her self. Gospel music, which Bone finds both glorifies and shames simultaneously, initiates the integration of self. Although her home life is abusive, she has her aunts as an alternate source of love and recognition:

We still wanted to go visiting at every chance. It was alive over at the aunts’ houses, warm, always humming with voices and laughter and children running around. The quiet in our own house was cold, no matter that we had a better furnace and didn’t leave our doors open for the wind to blow through. There was something icy in Daddy Glen’s houses that melted out of us when we were over at the aunts. (BC 80)

⁶⁰ This section of Butler’s *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* is an analysis of the Sartrean “project to be God”.

Bone is surrounded by those who live in bad faith, who run from their own facticity and freedom. All the men are held unaccountable for their actions. Speaking of Daddy Glen, Bone paraphrases her mother's attitude:

It seemed our unbelief was what made him fail. Our lack of faith made him the man he was, made him go out to work unable to avoid getting in a fight, made him sarcastic to his bosses and nasty to the shop owners he was supposed to be persuading to take his accounts. (BC 81)

At the conclusion of her story, she acknowledges the insidiousness of this perspective: "It wasn't God who made us like this, I thought. We'd gotten ourselves messed up on our own" (BC 306). She accepts from her mother the ownership of her own life, knowing it will be a life of painful freedom. Symbolically, both Bone and the character from *Fight Club* attempt to glue together fragments of their selves with the blood of the violence that surrounds them. The path to subjectivity and freedom can be a messy one, strewn with the bodies of half-realized selves.

Conclusion

Know then thyself; presume not God to scan.
The best study of mankind is man.
Pope's "Essay on Man"

I dwell in possibility.
Emily Dickinson

Taking up the Yoke of Freedom

It is a cliché to assert that with freedom comes responsibility. Yet, it is human to try to evade this responsibility, while still setting freedom as our goal. It is important to humanity, as well as to each individual, that this dichotomy be at least acknowledged. Centuries of great thinkers have turned their minds to the articulation of the problem and towards its solution. Nevertheless, as academics we cannot allow ourselves to be intimidated by the depth of the project. Any efforts in that direction can only assist in the development of the clarity and distinction of the relevant ideas. We begin, in this study, with narratives that combine motifs of violence and existential philosophy. As with most academic research, my thesis uncovers more questions and areas for exploration. It points to other narratives that would add to the strength of the project by their inclusion, and suggests many possible areas for future research. Despite this intellectual curiosity that beckons me onward, "Freedom Fighters" has proven that the philosophy of existentialism has much to teach about the meaning of violence both in our fiction, and in our world.

One significant aspect of existentialism, whether it is atheistic or deistic, is that it allows no place for rationalizations. There can be no claims that "the devil made me do

it,” nor that God is responsible for the evil in the world. This is simultaneously the awful truth about the philosophy, and its most optimistic moment. If I am not a slave to deterministic forces, I can make myself anew with every new action. As long as I am alive, I am in the process of self-creation. Life is experience, which can be destructive or celebratory. Writers and other artists realize this central truth better than anyone. They are practiced at living in the moment. They, unlike characters of Walker Percy or others, do not need to wait on a moment of catastrophe to shake them out of their everydayness. The lives which great authors will choose to examine will almost certainly be those lives that are authentic, or are striving to be so. The famous dictum of Socrates, that the unexamined life is not worth living, is an early expression of the tenets of existentialism. The inauthentic life is not worth examining, an author might assert. Writers strive to find that inner space, inside the cage or under the metaphoric bell jar. Mulder’s article on existential female poets reminds us that this self-reflection is not a narcissistic endeavour: “Paradoxically, a sense of community emerges from such an intensely private pursuit of self” (53). In existential terms, it is by understanding the nature of being that one begins to understand the world.

Sartre reminds us that we would all prefer to believe that the violent individual is determined by heredity, environment, temperament, etc. He will allow no such excuses for behaviour:

If people condemn our works of fiction, in which we describe characters that are base, weak, cowardly and sometimes even frankly evil, it is not only because these characters are base, cowardly, or evil. For suppose that, like Zola, we showed that the behaviour of these characters was caused by their Heredity, or by the action of their environment upon them, or by

determining factors, psychic or organic. People would be reassured, they would say, 'You see, that is what we are like, no one can do anything about it.' But the existentialist, when he portrays a coward, shows him as responsible for his cowardice. He is not like that on account of a cowardly heart or lungs or cerebrum, he is not like that through his physiological organism; he is like that because he has made himself into a coward by his actions. There are nervous temperaments...but what produces a coward is the act of giving up or giving way; and a temperament is not an action. (E&H 43)

Sartre argues for an understanding of environmental forces, for which we are all responsible, but each of us must accept his/her own responsibility for the self created in the face of these given factors.

All the novels in my study explore the efforts of the individual to assert his freedom in the face of a threatening world. From these subjective narratives emerge knowledge of the self, and of the milieu in which the self encounters the Other. The works in Chapter Two inform us about the injustices of the social system that permitted slavery, while allowing us to share the characters' efforts to escape it. Chapter Three considers the less visible chains that beset man in what Fredric Jameson refers to as the "culture of late capitalism." As a social critique, *American Psycho* could scarcely be more scathing. The last two chapters take us on different novelistic journeys towards existential enlightenment. Even at their most angst ridden, all these narratives glow with the light of the human spirit. They offer hope in the midst of whatever darkness they confront. As Sartre explains, "what is alarming in the doctrine that I am about to try to explain to you is – is it not? – that it confronts man with a possibility of choice" (E&H 25). This is both exciting and frightening simultaneously. It involves action, engagement in the world at all levels, and the willingness to accept responsibility to

institute personal, social, or political change, when we see that it is required. In Sartre's famous dictum: If I do not choose, that is still a choice. As existentialists we dwell, along with Emily Dickinson, in the realm of possibility. There, as Faust comes to understand through painful experience:

He only earns both freedom and existence
Who must reconquer them each day.

Goethe's *Faust*
Act V, Lines 11575-6

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